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A Critical History of 20th-Century Art

by Donald Kuspit

Introduction: Twentieth Century Art; An Overview of Critical Opinion

“The real problem of modernity is the problem of belief,” writes Daniel Bell, the sociologist and political theorist. “To use an unfashionable term, it is a spiritual crisis, since the new anchorages have proved illusory and the old ones have become submerged. It is a situation which brings us back to nihilism; lacking a past or a future, there is only a void.”¹ Modern art, in all its seemingless limitless variety, presents itself as one solution to the problem, indeed, as some think, the only important solution. As Bell says, it has become a “substitute for religion,”² a spiritual antidote to social poisons, the aesthetic alternative to moral nihilism. This view is seconded by the historian Jacques Barzun, who, discussing “the rise of art as religion” in the 19th century — initially the equation of art and religion, and finally the substitution of art for religion³ — remarks that “Art . . . became the gateway to the realm of spirit for all those over whom the old religions have lost their hold. Most romantic artists needed nothing higher. Art was sufficient and supreme.”⁴ The poet Wallace Stevens adds: “The paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art, is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost.”⁵

The question, of course, is whether these claims have any substance. Is belief in art really adequate compensation for loss of belief in God — to put the issue in the starkest terms? Is the religion of art — more particularly, avant-garde art, for many the most genuine modern art, that is, the only art of the 20th century that accurately reflects the tenor and ideas of modern times — as spiritual, morally concerned, and emotionally uplifting, supportive, and consoling as the old religion? Are avant-garde artists really our new prophets and saints? No doubt the new religion of avant-garde art is sometimes as dogmatic in its claims as traditional religion, but is it as reassuring and emotionally convincing? Does it sometimes also involve a failure of reality testing, if also offering in its stead more sublime and subtle pleasures — spiritual rather than grossly physical satisfactions — than are usually available in everyday life? For some, the “advances” of avant-garde art are inseparable from those of modern science and technology. Indeed, the critic Clement Greenberg believes

that Cubism is the first truly 20th-century art because it “was the first to accept the modern, industrializing world with enthusiasm.”⁶ While it was at the height of its influence just before the first world war — “1912. . . was the great year for Cubism”⁷ — it remains, for Greenberg, the quintessential modern art, not simply because of its industrial aura — Robert Delaunay’s “Eiffel Tower” paintings celebrate an engineering triumph, and Fernand Léger’s robot figures, with their “technological form,”⁸ seem like industrial inventions — but more broadly because of its positivism, its belief in facts, which for him is the core ideology of modernity. According to Greenberg, Cubism’s unique emphasis on “formal facts” is central to “modernist” art practice, that is, “autonomous, inward, self-referential and self-critical artistic practice.”⁹ If, as Greenberg thinks, self-criticality is the gist of the modern mentality, then the only art that is authentically modern is art that brings its own identity as art into question — “radically questions its essence as art,” to use the philosopher T. W. Adorno’s words¹⁰ — even as it does so, paradoxically, by purifying its means, that is, essentializing itself so that it seems self-identical.

Throughout this book I will use the term “avant-garde” to refer to any art that claims to establish a critical, questioning relationship — whatever the ironies and dialectical complexities of the relationship — with what it regards as the modern world or with existing, institutionalized art (traditional art, which includes new art that suddenly seems traditional because of newer art), or with both at once. Such a critique is invariably entangled with what it critiques, but it is nonetheless uncompromising in its pursuit of the “truth.” If, as Adorno writes, “criticism recognizes the truth content of works in their spirit, or alternatively denies that they have any truth content because they have no spirit,”¹¹ then avant-garde art — critical art — searches for the truth of the modern world and art, that is, their spiritual meaning.

I will argue that the irony of avant-garde art is that it transcends whatever it critiques, indicating that it is neither entirely of the modern world nor exactly art. The subliminal point of avant-garde innovation — and in the history of 20th-century art it is the avant-garde innovators who made the spiritual as well as artistic difference, that is, who showed that to take an artistic risk was also to take a spiritual risk, that one ventured into unknown artistic territory to make spiritual discoveries — is to express dissatisfaction with both, finally dismissing them as beside the larger spiritual point. Avant-garde innovation sheds social and artistic identity, working through them in a struggle to become self-identical — convey a sense of unique, hard won selfhood, fulfilling what Erik H. Erikson calls “the promise of an assured wholeness.”¹² It is the intimation of wholeness in a psychosocial situation in which wholeness seems impossible — in which the avant-garde work of art is itself a vulnerable fragment of an inconceivable whole, as Adorno suggests¹³ — that makes avant-garde art peculiarly tragic, that is, all too human and poignantly modern, how-

ever grand its spiritual and artistic aspiration.

At first glance, avant-garde art looks like the rebellious assertion of what Erikson calls “negative identity. . . the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or which his group had taught him to perceive as the mark of fatal ‘difference’.”¹⁴ But at second glance one realizes that it is an attempt to restate, in novel terms, “the language of the uncorrupted core of all spiritual tradition,” which holds that “‘the identity of knowing transcendence’ can only be discovered by man when the possibility for any social definition of identity is shattered beyond restoration.”¹⁵ Negative identity may seem like the root of the identity of knowing transcendence, but it is an antisocial identity, the shadow of a positive social identity — it is defined by its opposite — which is why it also must be shattered beyond restoration.

But is the art of radical critique a true religion, however much it aims at transcendence of the world and itself? Not exactly, Barzun remarks, for it is “the enemy within, bent on destroying the house.”¹⁶ It is its negative identity he notices, rather than its transcendental potential. Avant-garde art may be “the last hope for purpose and meaning,”¹⁷ but its “adversary position. . . toward society,”¹⁸ involving the use of “shock and insult. . . unsettles the self and destroys confidence and spontaneity in individual conduct.”¹⁹ As Barzun remarks, “to a godless age, the negative [is] potent. [It] perpetuates itself as a habit of thought — it becomes the highest form of self-consciousness — and it destroys everything in the most direct way, not by physical means, but by corrosion at the seat of faith and action, the human mind.”²⁰ Art in fact “ends by destroying itself.”²¹ “Destruction by novelty becomes an incessant function of art.”²² If avant-garde art cannot cure itself of its corrosive negativity, which it finally turns on itself, it certainly cannot “cure the [social] wound it sedulously kept open. Art is not a religion; it cannot make promises of grace, or fulfill them if it made them.”²³

The literary historian Renato Poggioli agrees, noting the “agonistic sacrifice” of avant-garde art, “an anonymous and collective sacrifice, but also. . . the self-immolation of the isolated creative personality” for the sake of “the art of the future.”²⁴ Poggioli calls agonism a “hyperbolic passion, a bow bent toward the impossible, a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism.”²⁵ It is an attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of self-defeat — “to transform the catastrophe into a miracle,” as Poggioli writes²⁶ — but it is the catastrophe that is more conspicuous than the miracle. As he says, agonism is failure’s attempt to justify and transcend itself, as though the result of failure was success — which is an absurdity, a perverse contradiction in terms, a pseudo-dialectical resolution of irreconcilable opposites. Agonism involves a fantastic blurring and obfuscation of the boundaries between failure and success, confusing a personal sense of creative failure — and, more deeply, the

unconscious conviction that the avant-garde self has no future, no appeal except to the avant-garde artist who must bear it — with the wish for social success after one's death, in the future. The agonistic belief is compensation for an overwhelming sense of spiritual inadequacy.

How can a "movement formed in part or in whole to agitate against something or someone,"²⁷ suggesting its "spirit of hostility and opposition" — the "antagonism" that becomes a "permanent tendency. . . of the avant-garde movement," and eventually a "transcendental antagonism," which "finds joy not merely in the inebriation of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way," finally driving itself "beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation, scruple or limit," and thus becoming a kind of totalitarian or tyrannical nihilism — be anything but self-defeating and spiritually and socially bankrupt, however much it may rationalize itself by a pseudo-pious attitude of agonism?²⁸ As Bell says, complete and total nihilism is "the end product of the cultural impulses to strike down all conventions."²⁹

"A major part of contemporary art declares itself on the side of chaos, gesticulates in a void, or tells the story of its own barren soul," the poet and playwright Zbigniew Herbert writes.³⁰ Agonism is nihilism — the sense of a void of belief, of spiritual barrenness, the confirmation of Barzun's idea, in his concluding chapter on "art in the vacuum of belief," that avant-garde art involves not only the "absence of faith," but "its studied rejection."³¹ How, then, can one have faith in it? Why should one have faith in it? From this point of view, it is clearly not the answer to the spiritual crisis and nihilism that Bell regards as characteristic of modernity.

"Modernism is exhausted and the various kinds of post-modernism. . . are simply the decomposition of the self in an effort to erase individual ego," Bell thinks.³² It is a decomposition that seemed foreordained — that Poggiolo describes: postmodernism ends what modernism began, according to this theory. For Bell, culture is "the arena of expressive symbolism: those efforts. . . to explore and express the meaning of human existence in imaginative form."³³ If "modernism as a cultural mode" is bankrupt, then its imaginative forms no longer have anything to tell us about the meaning of human existence. They no longer seem an apt response to "the existential situations which confront all human beings, through all times. . . : how one meets death, the nature of tragedy and the character of heroism, the definition of loyalty and obligation, the redemption of the soul, the meaning of love and of sacrifice, the understanding of compassion, the tension between an animal and a human nature, the claims of instinct and restraint."³⁴ In their different ways, Barzun and Bell are saying the same thing: that avant-garde art — art at its supposedly most "advanced" — does not speak to the problem of being human.

The philosopher José Ortega y Gasset makes the same point, how-

ever indirectly, when he remarks that the “dehumanization and disgust for living forms” evident in avant-garde art “is inspired by. . . an aversion against the traditional interpretation of realities.”³⁵ The question is: what is the new avant-garde interpretation? A second question: how valid and accurate is it? Above all, avant-garde art wants “candor,” he says, “that is, the absence of tradition.”³⁶ He notes that “to assail all previous art [means] to turn against Art itself”³⁷ — “the new art ridicules art itself,” “laugh[s] off everything, itself included,” reduces art to “farce”³⁸ — but he construes this “iconoclasm” in a positive way: it is “an attempt to instill youthfulness into an ancient world.”³⁹ This does not exactly make avant-garde art reassuring — it is not exactly a reason to have faith in art, although it does make it sound as though avant-garde art is the faith of youth, that is, youth’s expression of its own belief in itself — but it does give its destructiveness a positive purpose.

Like Poggioli and Ortega y Gasset, the critic Harold Rosenberg also puts a positive spin on the negativity — whether it be understood as spiritual defeatism in a vacuum of belief or the subversion of tradition, both equally nihilistic — of avant-garde art. For Rosenberg, the avant-garde work of art is an “anxious object,” which means that it “persists without a secure identity.”⁴⁰ Rosenberg argues that “the anxiety of art embodies the freedom of art to remake itself at will,” but he also notes that “it is an objective reflection of the indefiniteness of the function of art in present-day society and the possibility of the displacement of art by newer forms of expression, emotional stimulation and communication.”⁴¹ Nihilistic uncertainty — radical self-doubt, to the point of self-destruction — is built into this anxiety: the avant-garde work of art is forced to ask itself: “Am I a masterpiece. . . or an assemblage of junk?”⁴² The question can be re-phrased: “Am I really high art or non-art masquerading as art — calling myself art because I have convinced everybody else to call me art?” Rosenberg has written: “In the chaos of the 20th century, the metaphysical theme of identity has entered into art,”⁴³ but art for him does not have a clear identity as art — it has become a philosophical problem, that is, a problem with no solution, a problem with many theories few of which address practice, and thus remain naively speculative however intellectually sophisticated — even though he argues that becoming an “action painter” is a way of gaining a unique identity, that is, an authentic sense of self or “total personality.”⁴⁴

Even the art historian Hans Sedlmayr, who “diagnoses from the facts of [modern] art that the disrupted relationship with God is at the heart of the disturbance. . . in the condition of man” which avant-garde art reflects,⁴⁵ and who quotes with approval Nicholas Berdyaev’s assertion that “Picasso overcomes the human element within himself through the destruction of its original subjective center. . . . And so humanism dies,”⁴⁶ declares that “there are enormous possibilities even in despair.”⁴⁷ He writes: “There begins to exist in the

19th century an entirely new type of man, that of the suffering artist. . . . All suffer because God has become distant or, perhaps, dead — and because man is degraded. And greatest of all is the suffering of the West. That is why there is in the West still spiritual hope.”⁴⁸

All of this strongly suggests the paradoxical ambivalence toward avant-garde art that pervades the critical and theoretical literature of those who are its advocates. On the one hand they recognize its destructiveness, on the other hand they celebrate its creativity. It is innovative through negativity, but negativity takes a heavy toll on the self and society — even as it may reflect them. After all, as Barzun says, “Art is of this world, and though it is creative and formative in the exact sense of those words, it is also reflexive. In some fashion, crude or fine, it reenacts our lives — the hidden life, or the public life, or the collective life. As Henry James said: “art is our flounderings shown. And in the light of contemporary art one might even say: our flounderings shown up.”⁴⁹

There are two particularly striking examples of this contradictory attitude to art. “A picture used to be a sum of additions,” Pablo Picasso stated. “In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture — then I destroy it.” Nonetheless, says the avant-garde artist who for many is the greatest of the 20th century, “In the end, though, nothing is lost: the red I took away from one place turns up somewhere else,”⁵⁰ presumably all the better for the harrowing change of place it endured. Picasso destroys to re-create, but the value of the re-creation is not always clear. It seems to serve Picasso’s sense of power over his picture rather than any subtler perception of red. Nothing may be lost, but it is not clear what is gained, except perhaps for Picasso.

All one has to do is look at Picasso’s *Nude Woman* (1910) to realize the full import of his destructiveness. It as though “the material elements of industrial-culture,” changed into “volume, plane, color, space, and light,”⁵¹ have been brought to bear — rather heavily — on the ordinary appearance of a body. The ordinariness has been crushed out of it: what is left has a certain mysterious fabricated look, with elusive remnants of recognizable reality. It is not simply that the woman’s body has been reduced to a suggestion or transformed into a sign⁵² — a kind of linguistic mirage — or even transformed beyond recognition, so that it becomes an epistemological problem, but that its reality — reading it as in any way “real” — is no longer an issue. The nude woman is relevant as the starting point, even catalyst, of the picture, but irrelevant to its final effect. She has been consumed by the process of painting, or rather destroyed by it. What we have is not an image, but the dismantling of an image, the absurd dregs of an image, and finally the discrediting of the idea of imaging, and more broadly a demonstration of the naiveté of the idea of representation, indeed, of the impossibility of adequate representation. The search for artistic “equivalence” — the iconic in any form — is in effect abandoned.

We also have an irreparably ruined body, suggesting that it too must be abandoned, both as form and symbol, for human presence is beside the point of artistic presence, that is, it distracts from the presence of the work of art itself. The body is no longer the profane means to sacred art it often was in the past, but has become a stumbling block on the way to the self-sufficiency of art. Reference to reality — even in the diminished form of residual recognizability, suggesting a blurred memory of something that was once experienced as real — is an obstacle to artistic purity and perfection. Picasso has taken a woman's body — is it really naked? (certainly not the way I remember nakedness) — and reduced it to an anonymous, genderless cluster of forms which we can read as aesthetically pure, as though that was the saving grace of a picture that could otherwise be regarded as an artistic murder. Picasso's figure, nominally a nude woman — who are we to doubt his say so? — is a sort of Humpty Dumpty that has had a bad artistic fall and cannot be put back together again, at least the way we once knew her. The picture may be a Cubist masterpiece, but it is also a vision of the human body as a desert full of bones of form that do not exactly dance, however much they be choreographed to perform "aesthetically." Picasso's so-called female figure is macabre and grotesque, however brilliant an innovation the blur that is left of her appearance may be.

Greenberg once wrote that Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) looks like "a battle scene from a pediment that has been flattened under a defective steam-roller."⁵³ Cubist works in general look as though they had been flattened by some powerful force, and however much they may have what Greenberg calls a "conclusive unity,"⁵⁴ there is the sense of something amiss and something lost — of the sense of reality sacrificed for a novel sense of art, that seems less novel once one realizes that its organization has something "industrial" and constructed, that is, manufactured and invented, about it. The only reality is the picture's constructed look, with its ironical space and quixotic shapes. In Cubist pictures the raw material of perceptual experience seems to have been forced into a poorly constructed yet nonetheless procrustean geometrical — "conceptual" — template, like dough poured into a cracked mold. Whatever doesn't fit becomes a marginal aspect of what seems like a precariously built structure. Picasso is not exactly *The Constructor*, to refer to El Lissitzky's photographic self-portrait of 1924, that is, the "constructivist technician," as the Russian Productivist Group called the new, advanced artist.⁵⁵ But he is clearly influenced by technocratic thinking, even scientism — Barzun notes the huge influence of modern science on modern art, and the ironic parallels between them⁵⁶ — making Cubist pictures that at first glance seem as analytic and abstract as theoretical science, and seem to involve as much technical innovation as any modern invention. Indeed, like many avant-garde works, they share in the 20th century's extraordinary inventiveness. Many works of

avant-garde art in fact look as though they are new inventions, and many are machine-made rather than handmade. It is not always clear what human purpose they serve, but many have a technological look, as though they were fashioned by eccentric engineers. (The idea of the artist-engineer emerged with a vengeance, as though to sweep away the remnants of the traditional idea of the artist as a god-like creator, which seemed obsolete — not to say nonsensical — in an industrial age.)

Picasso's Analytic Cubist portraits have that look, even as they remain powerfully expressive, that is, emotionally evocative apart from their suppressed representation. But for Greenberg the "flattened forms" of Cubism are autonomous, whatever their expressive dimension — their preconscious and unconscious effect, as he called it. Extra-artistic reality, subjective and objective, doesn't matter: for him Picasso undermines any reference to them to assert art as such — the pure spirit and truth of art, as it were. And yet the ambiguity remains: there is art, but there is also the figure shipwrecked on it.

The second example relates to the first. The psychoanalyst Michael Balint points out that "'modern art' has made an immense contribution to human maturity by demonstrating that we need not repress the fact that in and around us. . . discordant features exist. Moreover it has taught us not only that such discordances can be resolved by artistic methods, but also that it can be learned to tolerate such unresolved discordances without pain," resulting in "less fear, greater emotional freedom."⁵⁷ However, modern art can involve "narcissistic withdrawal" from objects, bringing with it "the danger of regression." There can be a return to "immature pre-genital" forms of relationship. "The treatment of the object, or the artist's attitude to it, i.e., his phantasies, feelings, emotions, ideas, images, etc., when stimulated by his chosen object, are conspicuously on what psychoanalysis would describe as the anal-sadistic level. The objects are dismembered, split, cruelly twisted, deformed, messed about; the dirty, ugly qualities of the objects are 'realistically' and even 'surrealistically' revealed; some forms and methods of representation in 'modern art' are highly reminiscent of primitive 'anal' messing; less and less regard is paid to the object's feelings, interests and sensitivities; kind consideration for, and 'idealization' of, the object becomes less and less important."⁵⁸

Thus, on the one hand modern art is healing and enlightening, for it teaches us to recognize and accept the contradictions that abound in society and human beings, and to resolve them artistically, that is, sublimate them, as it were, to a higher plane of perception and conception, working them through in a medium other than life. But on the other hand modern art enslaves us to our most infantile, destructive, anti-social attitudes — our own negative tendencies — encouraging us to remain emotionally immature, or legitimating our emotional immaturity. It is simultaneously facilitating and debilitating. It makes us aware of violent contrast even as it seems permissive toward our

own inner violence. Like Picasso's love-hate relationship with the picture, Balint's analysis of modern art suggests a love-hate relationship with it. Both are symptomatic of modern art's own love-hate relationship with the modern world.

This ultimately has to do with its nihilism: the modern world, to maintain its modernity, must repeatedly shed its old skin, apparently becoming new — or at least looking new. As the philosopher Karl Löwith writes, "Nihilism, as such, can have two meanings: it can be a symptom of final and complete downfall and aversion to existence; but it can also be a first symptom of recovery and a new will for existence — a nihilism of weakness or of strength. This ambiguity of nihilism [is] the origin of modernity."⁵⁹ That is, nihilism can be the climax of decadence or it can be the beginning of rebirth. Modernity is always nihilistic in this double sense — always in decline, always in renewal, which is read as always changing — so-called "permanent revolution." Avant-garde art reenacts the nihilism of modernity — the tension between decline and advance in the modern world — in its own condition of permanent revolution. It is constantly changing, with one movement rapidly replacing the other, and no movement enduring. Indeed, some theorists have argued that avant-gardism, which they understand as the artistic correlate of entrepreneurial capitalism, is simply a matter of change for the sake of change, difference for the sake of difference, novelty for the sake of novelty (novelty not being exactly purposeful innovation), as though that was what drove capitalist enterprise. Each movement is by necessity short-lived — inherently short-lived, making its limited contribution then dying into academicism and mannerism, and quickly trampled by the movement that develops in its wake — that tries to outdo it in nihilistic modernity, indeed, nihilistic intensity. Thus the avant-garde perpetual motion machine seems to exist to mirror and confirm the momentum of the modern world, which becomes greater and greater — more and more pointlessly hectic. Presumably that is supposed to fill the existential void left by its lack of religion — its abandonment is built into the idea of being-modern — or what Bell calls the spiritual crisis caused by the inability to find convincing "modern" answers to the inescapable questions raised by life, indeed, haunting and stalking it.

In fact, avant-garde art and modernity do not believe in permanence, stability, eternity — in the "essential," durable nature of anything — but rather only in the exciting passing moment. Describing the inherent instability and lack of permanence in modernity, Marx wrote: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify."⁶⁰ He also wrote: "In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary," noting that "the victories of art seem bought by the loss of character,"⁶¹ presumably that failure of selfhood or loss of subjective center that Sedlmayr notes.

The protean character of avant-garde art, which seems to keep changing its identity, suggests that it has no core identity, but is all slippery quicksilver. Which is genuinely avant-garde: Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Purism, Orphism, Futurism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism, De Stijl, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Kinetic Art, Pop Art, Op Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Performance Art, Body Art, and onward to not yet known and named future movements? The abundance is certainly a vote of creative confidence in modernity, but there is no correct answer — no one avant-garde art that is more essentially avant-garde than any other avant-garde art. This implies that art as such has no identity in modernity, more particularly, that it has lost its identity because it is not securely centered in any enduring, stable sense of self and thus unable to secure a sense of self for either the artist who makes it or the audience who appreciates it.

I have suggested that this is because avant-garde art is essentially critique — a ceaseless whirlpool of destabilizing criticism, directed toward itself as well as the world. It involves, as Barzun says, a “deepening and spreading self-consciousness by analysis and corrosion” that destroys what it analyzes, and finally the self that does the analysis.⁶² It tells the truth about the modern self — modern self-consciousness — and the dynamic modern world, but it undermines the spirit of both in the process of doing so, no doubt because, as Bell and Barzun suggest, secular critique knows no higher truth. It leaves itself homeless, which is finally to lose its sense of purpose, although, as I have suggested, it can also lead, unpredictably, to a sense of unique identity, that is, ground a new sense of self, or at least suggest the possibility of being uniquely oneself — a radical subject for all one’s participation in and engagement with the objective world.

Avant-garde critique is both immanent and transcendent, to use the philosophical terms. That is, it is a search for what is inherent to art as such, and as such genuine art — even if that means, paradoxically, that genuine art sometimes seems to be extra-artistic or anti-artistic — as well as an attack on all socially administered definitions and conventionalized conceptions of art, all of which seem to conspire to crush or manipulate creativity, that is, to impede creative freedom or what Meyer Schapiro calls the artist’s “inner freedom,” for him the only kind of freedom possible in the modern world.⁶³

Immanent critique is typically carried out in the terms of a particular art — for Greenberg, painting. Artists are the best immanent critics, as the poet T. S. Eliot suggests when he remarks that “so large a part of creation is really criticism,”⁶⁴ although he was not thinking specifically of immanent criticism, that is, the critique of art that arises from within art itself in order to “revitalize the creative spirit of the medium” and thus “to return the art to itself,” in the words of the philosopher and poet William Gass.⁶⁵ In contrast, transcendent critique brings into question conventional understandings of art as such and

particular categories of art, a questioning which dead-ends in an unresolvable antinomy. For example, is Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) a urinal or a fountain, a useful object or an abstract sculpture? It is part of the institution of art, so it must be the latter, but it also clearly has a practical use. Both/and seems a better approach than either/or, although the latter leads to clarity and single-mindedness while the former leads to double vision. Duchamp's "work" is an ambiguous, paradoxical object, steeped in irony yet physically simple.

Immanent and transcendent critique are clearly linked: once the genuine has been determined by immanent critique, it is used to browbeat the non-genuine — view it from a transcendent perspective, as it were — which is what Greenberg did when he elevated the avant-garde at the expense of kitsch in his famous 1939 essay on them. In short, immanent critique co-opts authenticity for the avant-garde, while transcendent critique dismisses whatever is not avant-garde as inauthentic. Once one accepts Duchamp's *Fountain* as authentic art, all other art becomes peculiarly inauthentic. For by accepting the authenticity of the *Fountain* — an immanent critique of the work of art as well as the institutional conventions of art, more pointedly, a nihilistic and thus modern criticism of the assumption that only art made in an institutionally acceptable medium is real art — one "transcendentally" relegates all art made in the conventional way to tradition, which is beside the point of modern self-consciousness and self-criticality.

But Duchamp's work fails in its critique, or rather its critique is short-lived, for the *Fountain* has been institutionalized, and as such become traditional — part of the tradition of the new, as Rosenberg called it. Duchamp himself realized that it was a failure — realized that it is impossible in modernity to make an art that can resist institutionalization, that is inherently uninstitutionalizable (such an art would not be art, and avant-garde art keeps provocatively pushing the borders of art further and further into non-art) — and he railed against his failure, but there was nothing he could do about it. "I threw the urinoir into their faces," he wrote, "and now they come and admire it for its beauty," which is to treat it as art. "The choice of these Ready-mades was never dictated by any aesthetic delectation. Such choice was always based on a reflection of visual indifference and at the same time total absence of good taste."⁶⁶ But the *Fountain* has become tasteful and delectable — an aesthetic phenomenon — because it has become a celebrated, normative part of the institution of art, indeed, a precious relic of St. Duchamp.

In a sense, the history of 20th-century avant-garde art is the story of the conflict between art struggling to achieve spirit by purifying itself to the point of radical immanence — one might call this the fundamentalist/formalist tendency in avant-garde art — and art struggling to radicalize spirit by resisting and finally nihilistically rebelling against the social world, including the world of administered art, in the name of the self. It is thus doubly self-preser-

vative, however much its struggle with itself and society may make it self-destructive. Immanent critique measures art against its own normative ideal, celebrating its autonomy and independent logic — I am using the language with which Andrew Arato describes “the uneasy, antinomic synthesis of immanent and transcendent critique” in Adorno’s “dialectical critique of culture or ideology”⁶⁷ — while transcendent critique struggles against the reification, social integration, and administration of creativity, which is symbolized by art. It does this despite the fact that it is indifferent to the independent logic of art — unlike immanent critique, which examines “the particular ‘in its difference’” — and thus ironically “reproduces. . . the reified totality” of the institution of art.

Avant-garde art only comes into its own through this nihilistic dialectic of immanent and transcendent critique — this pushing to artistic and social extremes to find a spiritual center that does not exist. It only seems convincing when the two critiques converge: when art that reads like “formalist theology,” to use Rosenberg’s felicitous phrase,⁶⁸ and art fraught with “the tension of the private myth,” involving a “mysticism that avoids ritualizing itself,” to use his language again,⁶⁹ come together. They do so in defiance of the ritualization, banalization, reification and administration of spontaneous life (in postmodernism by reducing it to spectacle and fashion, that is, recasting it as social conformity).

The moments of genuinely critical avant-garde consciousness are few if not always far between. The year 1914 was one such particularly special if “somewhat disconcerting” time, as Rosenberg writes. “[T]he advanced art of 1914 was far advanced indeed. Art history holds that, looking forward from 1914, the following art movements were still to come: Dada, Surrealism, Social Realism, Abstract Expressionism. None of these modes, however, made any startling contribution to the formal repertory of 1914, in which Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism were already in full bloom. Besides, some of the effects of Dada (and of later neo-Dada street art) were anticipated . . . in Malevich’s *An Englishman in Moscow* and by Picabia’s paranoiac mathematics. Surrealism and art brut were present in Chagall’s *The Acrobat* and in Picasso’s pencil sketch of a seated man, which combines Cubist plane construction with automatic drawing, much as Gorky was to do hesitantly 20 years later. The thesis of Abstract Expressionism was stated by Kandinsky (*Painting No. 199*) and with somewhat less assurance by Marin.”⁷⁰ Rosenberg calls “1914 the last year before the Age of Doubt. The subsequent breach of continuity occurs not in the manner of the art, but in the attitude of art to itself.”⁷¹ There is indeed “a difference of spirit” between the seminal avant-garde art of 1914 and the later avant-garde art that stretches its logic to the limits. Nonetheless, both remain intransigent in their attitude to the making of art and the institution of art. That is, both involve immanent and transcendent critique, however

much the institution of art put up less — indeed, little or no — resistance to later avant-garde art, for all its efforts to resist and mock that institution. They seemed to reach a desperate, futile crescendo of sorts in “The Museum as Muse” exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1998.

This book is an attempt to give the reader some sense of the dialectical spirit that motivated the creation of avant-garde works, which have become reified with the passage of time — which seems to move ever more quickly and greedily — into stylish, expensive commodities, falsifying their meaning. It is a fate that seems to await every genuinely avant-garde work, as Hans Haacke’s study of the rising cost of Seurat’s *Les Poseurs* suggests.

Notes

¹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 28-29.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 170-71.

⁶ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1965), 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸ Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” *Modernism and Modernity*, eds. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, David Solkin (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 216.

⁹ A. Toporkov, “Technological and Artistic Form” (1921), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Viking, 1974), 26. Toporkov remarks that “technological form is dictated by expediency alone.” He yearns for the rapprochement of technological and artistic form — it is the utopian dream of the Constructivist art he advocates — even as he repeatedly states that it is impossible. This contradiction haunts a good deal of technologically oriented avant-garde art.

¹⁰ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 417. Adorno ironically adds that it “may yet posthumously become art.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹² Erik H. Erikson, “‘Identity Crisis’ in Autobiographic Perspective,” *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975), 20.

¹³ Adorno argues that modern “art of the highest caliber pushes beyond totality towards a state of fragmentation.” 12.

¹⁴ Erikson, 20.

¹⁵ Quoted in Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Dilemma of Human Identity* (New York and London: Jason Aronson, 1983), 158.

¹⁶ Barzun, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ Ibid., 51.

²¹ Ibid., 73.

²² Ibid., 51.

²³ Ibid., 126.

²⁴ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 67-68.

²⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶ Ibid., 65-66.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 26. It should be noted that some theorists think there is a "radical difference between the strategies of negation within modernism and within the avant-garde. Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional [artistic] techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art." Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde," the introduction to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xv. Schulte-Sass thinks Poggioli is concerned with modernism rather than avant-gardism (unlike Bürger), but it seems to me that when Poggioli writes that the "avant-garde looks and works like a culture of negation" (quoted on page xv), he was arguing for their convergence. That is, an attack on traditional artistic techniques — and implicitly the traditional use and meaning of art — is also an attack on the institution of art that traditionalizes whatever it assimilates, according it a status it would not otherwise have. If, as Schulte-Sass suggests, the avant-garde confirms the "precarious status of art in modern societies" (xv), then it also confirms the precarious position of the work of art. It is modern uncertainty about the best way to make art that leads to so-called experimentation and innovation. Avant-garde experimentation with new techniques reflects modern experimentation with new techniques, and with them a better way to make a more convincing product. Modernity has taught us that "we are only as good as our instruments," to paraphrase the philosopher John Dewey, and part of being avant-garde is to try out new instruments for making art, even if the result does not at first look like art. Greenberg (125) has said that "every fresh and productive impulse in painting since Manet. . . has manhandled into art what seemed until then too intractable, raw and accidental, to be brought within the scope of aesthetic purpose." One might add that every fresh and productive impulse in avant-garde art involved the use of new techniques, for example, dripping paint on a canvas in a seemingly random way or assembling familiar objects to make an unfamiliar sculpture. This does not just involve the pursuit of the unexpected, but the recognition that in the modern world every technique sooner or later seems inadequate and old, which is why new techniques must be found.

²⁹ Bell, 7.

³⁰ Zbigniew Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1991), 36.

³¹ Barzun, 125.

³² Bell, 29.

- ³³ Bell, 12.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 41.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 42.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 44-45.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 47.
- ⁴⁰ Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Horizon Press, 1966), 17.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Harold Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 230.
- ⁴⁴ Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 31.
- ⁴⁵ Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Centre* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), 261.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 153.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 255.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Barzun, 126.
- ⁵⁰ Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (New York: Viking, 1972), 38.
- ⁵¹ "Program of the Constructivist Group" (1920), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Viking, 1974), 19.
- ⁵² Rosalind E. Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 34, regards the Cubist collage as "the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability-entailed by the sign." For a more elaborate, complete discussion of the Cubist picture as a composite of signs see Francis Francina, "Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism," *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early 20th Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and the Open University, 1993), 87-183.
- ⁵³ Greenberg, 65.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.
- ⁵⁵ "Program of the Constructivist Group," 20.
- ⁵⁶ Calling science the "tempter" of modern art, Barzun, (p. 100) writes that the avant-garde artist "seized upon, assimilated, or sometimes simply plagiarized [science] in decorative words." He used science "to bolster up [his] art's claim to cognitive value" by calling his artistic work "research" and his artistic objects "findings." The avant-garde artist's "defense against the imperialism of science" — its attempt to "displace the artist as it had the divine and the philosopher" — was to declare that "he too ran a laboratory and made discoveries" (p. 101). Thus, when "science became mathematical, statistical, abstract, invisible," art could claim that the abstract turn it took was also somehow "scientific" and thus "progressive." The object disappeared — "imitation was forbidden under pain of indictment for philistinism and academicism" — "exactly as in science."

suggesting not only that they were "parallel" activities, but somehow the same, at least in underlying purpose.

- ⁵⁷ Michael Balint, "Dissolution of Object Representation in Modern Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 5 (1951):326.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 326-27.
- ⁵⁹ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in 19th Century Thought* (London: Constable, 1965), 190.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 21.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.
- ⁶² Barzun, 126.
- ⁶³ Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art" (1937), *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries, Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), Vol. 2, 222, writes that abstract art reflects "the pathos of the reduction or fragility of the self within a culture that [is] increasingly organized through industry, economy and the state." It "intensifies the desire of the artist to create forms that will manifest his liberty."
- ⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism" (1923), *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 19.
- ⁶⁵ William Gass, "The Vicissitudes of the Avant-Garde," *Finding a Form* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 205.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), ix.
- ⁶⁷ Andrew Arato in the section on "The Concept of Critique" in his essay on "Aesthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism," *The Essential Frankfurt School Readers*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1985), 203.
- ⁶⁸ Harold Rosenberg, "Miró," *Art on the Edge* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 29.
- ⁶⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 31-32.
- ⁷⁰ Harold Rosenberg, "1914," *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 89-90.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

Chapter 1: New Forms For Old Feelings; The First Decade

I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have about life and my way of translating it.

Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," 1908¹

Cézanne would never have interested me a bit if he had lived and thought like Jacques Émile Blanche, even if the apple he painted had been ten times as beautiful. What forces our interest is Cézanne's anxiety — that's Cézanne's lesson; the torments of van Gogh — that is the actual drama of the man. The rest is a sham.

Pablo Picasso²

That is my goal too — a calm, decorative effect; yet on the other hand everything pushes toward spontaneity and passion. . . . [Seurat] I found unsympathetic; for me, personal passion was missing. It was too academically calm. . . [but] I admire Gauguin very much.

Erich Heckel, Letter to Cuno Amiet, Jan. 20, 1908³

Part 1

In 1999, in an effort to break down the conventional way of thinking of modern art in terms of an evolutionary sequence of movements — this "ism" followed by that "ism," as though in lockstep — the Museum of Modern Art organized an exhibition which cut across stylistic categories by presenting works thematically. Dealing retrospectively with the inventive new art made between 1880 and 1920 — the originary period when modern art came into being, or the era of "Modern Starts," as the exhibition was called — works of art dealing with "People, Places, Things" were presented to the public.⁴ No doubt this was an effort to show that modern art, which had been so often described as obscure and difficult, dealt with familiar reality, however "differently." In fact, by the end of the 20th century the modern art produced between 1880 and 1920 no longer seemed strange nor particularly modern. It not only had become familiar, but looked old and even stale, at least to seasoned eyes ever on the lookout for avant-garde originality, or at least novelty. It had withstood the test of time, losing its obscurity and unusualness in the process, and the cutting edge of difference and difficulty that made it seem "advanced." Indeed, it seemed like a spent tradition, long since academically codified.

Marcel Duchamp once said that “after 40 or 50 years a picture dies, because its freshness disappears. Sculpture also dies. . . . I think a picture dies after a few years like the man who painted it. Afterwards it’s called the history of art.”⁵ The painting and sculpture that seemed so outrageous — surprising, even shocking — at the beginning of the 20th century was almost a century old by its end, and had long since become part of art history. Indeed, it no longer seemed so unprecedented, so discontinuous with the rest of art history. Critics and historians traced its line of descent, showing that it sometimes reached back into the distant past for its method — the patchwork of gestures in Paul Cézanne’s paintings, for example, were said to have a mosaic-like quality that produces primitive effects, as the German historian-critic Julius Maier-Graefe argued (and after him the critics Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg) — however forward-looking it appeared to be.

Thus the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition seemed like a good strategy for renewing interest in the works that inaugurated modern art. “Make it new,” said Ezra Pound, and the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition seemed to restore their aura and emanation by presenting those works in a new way. But is it really new? Doesn’t it banalize them, missing what is expressively and conceptually unique in them, implicitly regarding them as intriguing re-takes of the everyday world, as though to make it seem more enigmatic than it is? In the section of the catalogue devoted to “People,” we are told that “the figural images that are among the most provocative are those that fragment, dissolve or otherwise ‘distort’ the figure, or those that show it in postures that seem incomprehensible, or in groupings or environments the reasons for which seem annoyingly obscure.”⁶ Such images are abundant in modern art — distortion and fragmentation are the clichés that dominate understanding of the modern figure — but the reasons why they have become epidemic are not examined in depth. We are told that the modern figural artist means to generate perceptual ambiguities and uncertainties, affording new sensations rather than telling old stories, even if the perplexing contradictions — visual antimonies, as it were — are composed into a kind of narrative. This formal, indeed, technical explanation of their illogic hardly does justice to the conspicuously “abnormal” character of the figure, which often seems disrupted to the point of absurdity, and sometimes seems on the verge of total disintegration. We have become accustomed to them, but from an everyday perspective they are strange indeed.

The figures that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque painted at the height of Analytic Cubism (1910-11) seem completely disintegrated, and as such only nominally figures. Indeed, they have a mosaic quality, being a patchwork of tessera-like gestures, each an expressive end in itself. They look like fragments of a shattered whole, as though Picasso and Braque were archaeologists who had pieced together shards of some murky ancient figures they dug

up from the depths within themselves, even if the peculiarly archetypal result seems incomplete, indeed, a kind of chaotic construction of fragments that does not quite add up to a harmonious figural whole, however memorable. The conventional art historical explanation of them as rendering the figure simultaneously in two and three dimensions — as both flat and rounded — misses the motive for this simultaneity. When, later, Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932) splits her face in two, with each side clearly suggesting a different emotional state — her profile is pale mauve, the rest of the face bright yellow, with a splotch of red marking the cheek — he is surely doing more than showing his cleverness.

My point is that the innovations of modern art, for which it is justly famous, cannot be explained exclusively on formal grounds. Indeed, their formal appearance is a consequence of deeper issues. "ModernStarts" goes far in changing our ideas about what started in modern art, but not far enough. Let me make my point by examining in detail Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), perhaps the most famous, sensational work of art produced in the first decade of the 20th century. Indeed, it has been called the first truly 20th-century painting. Picasso's painting was so avant-garde — so unpredictable, unprecedented — that it made the avant-garde art that preceded it seem quaint, indeed, obsolete. Paradoxically, Picasso was almost excommunicated from the avant-garde for painting it. Henri Matisse initially thought it was a hoax or joke, ridiculing modern art. No doubt he felt threatened by it. Georges Braque, who had just met Picasso, and who was soon to develop Cubism with him — Picasso remarked that they were tied together like two mountaineers or a married couple — said to him that he "wanted to make us eat tow or drink kerosene." In other words, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was in bad taste, even to those ready and eager to accept anything avant-garde.

And that is part of its point: the disavowal of what had hitherto been regarded as good taste, as though that is what art is ultimately about. The undermining, overthrow and dismissal of the whole idea of tasteful art is central to its message. Its lack of taste — its contradiction and refusal of taste, as though to deny that the value of a work of art resides only in its tastefulness, that only the consensus of taste, which is a social measure, makes it significant — is what makes the *Les Femmes d'Alger* revolutionary. In a sense, it is truly avant-garde because it refuses to be pleasing, because it disaffiliates itself from the usual measure of artistic success — to give pleasure, or to represent pleasure in a pleasurable way, the way, for example, Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (The Joy of Life) (1905-06) does. A somewhat more tempting, very different grouping of naked young women, it was painted only a short time before, but suddenly seemed passé, both in its attitude and forms. It was the anti-sociality — it was much deeper than a matter of being "tasteless" — of *Les Femmes d'Alger* that Picasso's colleagues intuitively recognized and found offen-

sive. And that anti-sociality was rooted in the expression of painful feelings. Stripping the veneer of taste from art, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* plunged into the depths of existence, showing that art could be an exploratory expression of the most inescapable, urgent issues of human life: sexuality, sickness and health, and the nature of reality, all interconnected, however subterraneanly. It is the content of *Les Femmes d'Alger* that counts — Picasso's effort to make a certain emotional content manifest — and that is responsible for its form, which has been adulated and analyzed as though the content was simply an occasion for its novelty. But it is the other way around: it was Picasso's attempt to render an all too human content that generated his formal innovations, which do not exist in and for themselves but serve an expressive and dramatic purpose. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is innovative because it is one of the first 20th-century paintings to give modern form to human pain — to find means to convey suffering that seemed true to the modern sense of the problematic character of existence.

It is anguish — rage and hysterical fear, one writer has said — that is responsible for the primitivized, grotesque female figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, not Picasso's eagerness to be different, to be formally contrarian. It is Picasso's discovery and use of what were then alien, bizarre forms, derived from African sources, to express and suggest his personal sense of alienation, and the experience of the bizarreness of reality — female reality — that follows from and accompanies it, that makes *Les Femmes d'Alger* the expressive and conceptual model for all subsequent 20th-century art that dares call itself avant-garde. Paradoxically, the qualities of depersonalization and derealization that inform *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and that are responsible for its aura of abstractness, make it one of the most personal, emotionally realistic paintings of the 20th century. The trauma it caused Matisse and Braque reflected its own traumatic character. When Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler remarked that *Les Femmes d'Alger* seemed "mad or monstrous" to those who saw it, they were unwittingly registering its traumatic content, which was in bad taste. Thus the collector Sergei Shchukin mourned the work as a "loss to French art," which had always been tasteful. But then Picasso was Spanish, and there was a longstanding fascination with the mad and monstrous — the grotesque — in Spanish art, as Diego Velazquez's portraits of dwarfs and Francisco de Goya's "Quinta del Sordo" paintings indicate, not to mention many Spanish paintings of religious martyrdom.

The fear of woman, which haunts Picasso's art, and leads him to distort them into grotesque, dangerous monsters — the psychoanalyst Wolfgang Lederer suggests that this is a standard apotropaic defense against them — makes its first serious, sustained appearance in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, as does the grotesque as such, which also recurs again and again. Even when Picasso presents woman as the object of tender love, rather than simply as a sex object,

fear remains, signaled by distortion, if not to the point of grotesqueness, as in *Les Demoiselles*, where woman is exclusively an object of sexual lust. The women in *Les Demoiselles* are all prostitutes, and the artist — and implicitly the male spectator — is surveying them, trying to choose one to have sexual relations with. The spectator of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) is put in the same position; one can't help wondering whether *Les Demoiselles* is competing with this equally notorious painting. (Picasso in fact saw it in the 1905 Salon d'Automne, where Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres's *The Turkish Bath* (1862), a picture of a harem, was also exhibited.) The strategy makes for instant engagement with the figures, who nonetheless are kept at a distance by their abstractness, even as their primitive character is a projective expression of Picasso's own primitive lust. Picasso is drawn to them, but phobic about them. He is famous for his sexual prowess, so what is he afraid of?

In fact, there was a kind of spectator-protagonist in the initial sketches for *Les Demoiselles*: Picasso himself, making a double appearance, as sailor and medical student. These male figures, expunged in the final version, show that the painting was originally more of a narrative — a moral narrative — than it appears to be in its final version, which looks like an exhibitionistic spectacle. (It is as though the parade of prostitutes were a chorus line in the Folies Bergères, except that their faces are weirdly made up, as though they were freaks in a sideshow.) The sailor was at the center of the picture, surrounded by the prostitutes — rather savage-looking whores, as Mary Matthews Gedo says — while the medical student appears at the far left margin of the work, lifting a curtain to display the scene. He would be a kind of impresario or pimp if he were not holding, in his right hand, a skull, as though in warning of the unhealthy consequences of sexual indulgence with anonymous prostitutes. Picasso is a libertine who has become aware of the disaster that he might bring upon himself, which is what has taken the pleasure out of the scene and destroyed the allure of the prostitutes.

We know that in the autumn of 1901, at the start of his Blue Period — *Les Demoiselles* is the decisive stylistic break with it — Picasso observed prostitutes being treated for venereal disease at the St. Lazare Hospital in Paris. We also know that he was a regular patron of houses of prostitution in both Barcelona and Paris: the skull, a memento mori, makes it clear that Picasso was aware of the mortal danger of sexually transmitted disease. Picasso may have had such an infection, acquired from a prostitute: thus the medical student represents the reality that has caught up with the pleasure-seeking sailor. The women in the final version of *Les Demoiselles* are mad and monstrous because they are an allegorical personification of sexual disease, which can cause madness and death, as Picasso knew. We are indeed a long way from the sexually benign women in Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre*.

Les Demoiselles is an unhappy picture, for it is about the possibility

of sickness and death, and conveys an age-old identification of woman and death, derived from the depletion and dejection (as Aristotle thought) that follows sexual excitement and pleasure. Unlike Matisse's painting, *Les Demoiselles* is not about sexual fulfillment — sexual letting go in orgasmic intimacy — but an individual's deliberate sexual inhibition, the worried restraint of an anxious man who has suddenly realized that sex, which is life-affirming, might lead to death. Picasso's picture struggles with the complexities of this paradox — the peculiar relationship between sex, as the deepest expression of life, and death, which ends it — even as it suggests Picasso's conflict about women and sexuality. The contrast between the foreground still life of fruit and porrón, a Spanish wine vessel, and the women — the death symbolized by the suppressed skull has passed into them, giving them an oddly predatory look, like vampires — epitomizes this conflict. *Les Demoiselles* is a cautionary parable, and, in a sense, Picasso's first truly mature as well as truly original work: it is not all gloom and doom, like the fatalistic pictures of his Blue Period, nor subliminally tender, like the subtly erotic Pink or Circus Period works, but rather a synthesis of the two, conveying ambivalence: *Les Demoiselles* is fatalistically erotic. It is about the terror of raw, unempathic sexuality, life-threatening sickness and elusive health, and the realization that what looks seductively real is in fact an illusion created by one's own desire. It seems no accident that it was painted in the same decade in which Sigmund Freud wrote *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

That the picture has a pornographic dimension seems clear from the fact that it was originally titled *The Philosophical Brothel*, an allusion to the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). This title was conferred by Apollinaire, who admired Sade, and who wrote pornography himself. Picasso in fact made a number of unphilosophical drawings of his early brothel experiences, the beginning of a lifelong series of Picasso erotica. It was given its present title by the poet André Salmon, on the occasion of its first public exhibition in July 1916. Picasso apparently thought the title somewhat puritan, and declared it nonsense. It was also nicknamed *Les Filles de Avignon* (The Girls of Avignon). "Fille de joie" is a French term for prostitute and "Avignon" is the name of a street in Barcelona on which there was a brothel that Picasso frequented. One wonders if Apollinaire and Picasso thought of sexual intercourse as sadistic rape — a common enough male fantasy — expressing indifference to the identity of the woman involved, and misogyny in general. One certainly doesn't expect to have an intimate, personal — let alone durable — relationship with a prostitute. She is there to be used and disposed of. But those in Picasso's pictures remain fixed in his memory, because of their menace.

I am suggesting that the distorted appearance of the women in *Les Demoiselles* — the famous formal innovations, which range from the flatten-

ing of their round breasts, the general schematic treatment of their bodies, reducing them to a kind of two-dimensional mannequin, and, most conspicuously, the transformation of their faces into static, affectless masks, climaxing in the bizarre appearance of the two women on the right, whose faces are no longer simply mask-like but have become monstrous masks, barbarically expressive but nonetheless inhuman — expresses Picasso's complex attitude toward women. It is a mix of desire and disillusionment, which ever after informs his attitude to life and art. Sometimes the desire is more aggressive and angry — hardhearted — as in *Les Demoiselles*, sometimes it is tender and caring, as in a softer *Nude* of 1905, but the disillusionment seems consistent, and, I will argue, informs Picasso's greatest formal invention, Cubism.

The epistemological problems it raises — the suspicion of representation and reality it embodies — are the direct expression of Picasso's disillusionment, more particularly, his sense that things are not what they seem to be in the everyday world, however much they are the case. He dissects them to discover they are hollow at the core — a flurry of insubstantial facets with no inner reality, which is the point his Cubist sculptures make with particular clarity, as *Guitar* (1912) indicates. Picasso shows the hollowness of the everyday objects in his world because he disbelieves in them, even as he acknowledges their existence. Disillusionment has turned reality into a theatrical construction, as though it was willed make-believe, a mastered dream — like the nightmarish *Les Demoiselles* — which is one way of defending against it. Picasso attempted to turn life into art — experience into performance — as completely as possible, so that he would not feel vulnerable to it, especially to the women with whom he lived his life. Indeed, women had caused him great suffering, he said when he was old — Gedo thinks this is because he always picked women whose personalities resembled that of his mother — which seems confirmed by his stormy relationships with them. Distancing himself from life by staging it, as though he was a spectator watching a sporting event, Picasso attempted to master what he could never completely master. Cubism is an attempt to control uncontrollable reality even while acknowledging that it is traumatically out of control — disjointed and dissonant, like *Les Demoiselles* — and thus a source of anxiety. It is no accident that Picasso, who thought of his art as autobiography — pages of a diary, as he said — was drawn to Cézanne's expression of anxiety, no doubt because anxiety, as Freud said, signals danger to the self.

Picasso was fascinated with Cézanne's *Temptation of St. Anthony*, with its perversely posturing nudes, and made numerous studies of Cézanne's paintings of bathers, which influenced *Les Demoiselles*. But to think of this influence as purely formal is to miss its emotional underpinning, just as it is to reduce Picasso's painting to an innovative rendering of a traditional harem, with the harem now a barren modern brothel for commoners rather than a

luxurious preserve for aristocratic customers, and thus more sordid than exotic. Indeed, it is a mistake to separate form from emotion; all form is the symbolic expression of emotion, as the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer argue. Picasso's problem in *Les Femmes d'Alger* was to find forms adequate to the intensity of his emotion — his sexual anxiety. He probably had doubts whether he could sexually perform with the prostitutes, now that he was aware that he could become sexually diseased — one can't help wondering whether he began to think of all sexual desire as a disease — and perhaps die. What makes *Les Femmes d'Alger* unique is that Picasso found new, convincing forms to express an old, deep emotion — indeed, an archetypal anxious response to woman, ultimately fear of symbiotic engulfment.

In fact *Les Femmes d'Alger* threaten to overwhelm the male spectator — implicitly the missing sailor — absorbing him into their brothel space, making him a slave to his desires, all the more so when they are perverse: there is always the danger that one may not be able to leave — certainly not unscathed — the sexual hell one dared enter. The prostitutes are in fact ritualistically arranged, as though preparing to sacrifice the male victim in their center on the small table on which the still life rests. Indeed, the drapery the second figure on the left holds in her left hand ends in the sharp point of a knife. It touches the altar-like table — the fruit on it can in fact be regarded as a kind of offering — its menace amplified by the scimitar-like wedge of melon. Thus the prostitutes haughtily lure Picasso with his own desire, and he had to break the hold of their siren song by making their bodies ugly and unsavory, thus exorcising them.

In the 1930s, reflecting on the tribal masks he first saw in the Trocadéro Ethnographical Museum in 1907, Picasso stated:

The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. There were magic things. . . . The Negro pieces were intercesseurs, mediators. . . . They were against everything — against unknown, threatening spirits. . . . I understood; I too am against everything. I too believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! . . . They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious (people still weren't talking about that very much) emotion — they're all the same thing. . . . *Les Femmes d'Alger* must have come to me that very day, but not because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting — yes absolutely!⁷

This statement was made under the influence of Freud-inspired Surrealism, but it nonetheless conveys a disturbed attitude to woman, perhaps informed by a wish for perverse, experimental practices — the illicit, “irrational.”

nal," "irresponsible" sex symbolized by the prostitutes. In fact, the mouth on the mask of the lower right hand woman has been interpreted as an anus or vagina, so that her merger with the woman above her implies anal intercourse or fellatio. Picasso apparently owned forty postcards of African women made by the photographer Edmond Fortier, suggesting his erotic fantasies of what has been euphemistically called primitive sex — certainly his interest in having "different" sexual adventures. My point is that *Les Demoiselles* conveys Picasso's interest in "alternative," "liberated" sexuality, in which woman is an instrument of desire — a sexual machine, an idea which reappears, with a vengeance, in Dadaism and Surrealism. Picasso's *Demoiselles* in fact have a brittle mechanical look, their bodily parts awkwardly synchronized to form a primitive machine, made to carry out primitive functions.

When Braque said that he wanted to "translate [the] emotion" that woman aroused in him "in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight," he was rationalizing in formal terms what in Picasso was stark irrationality, showing that he understood next to nothing about Picasso's true feelings and expressive power. *Les Demoiselles* made a strong impression on Braque, but it was the wrong one — he experienced it as "anti-aesthetic," rather than anti-woman. He did not understand the intensity and depth of Picasso's response to woman — his raw sexual hunger — or else had a more shallow, everyday response to her, as suggested by his appreciation of her "natural loveliness." Certainly this is a long way from the evil spirit Picasso experienced her to be in *Les Demoiselles*. "Woman is the most powerful instrument of pain that is given to us," wrote J. K. Huysmans,⁸ the author of *A Rebours* (Against Nature), the quintessential decadent work of the fin de siècle. Picasso agrees; *Les Demoiselles* is decadent in spirit, however much its primitivizing style represents an ironic new birth for Western art, even as it suggests the decadent sexuality of the brothel. In fact, Braque was unconsciously trying to repress and contain Picasso's decadent irrationality — sexual madness and terror — by theorizing it away in a rationalistic French manner, without realizing that no amount of pseudo-enlightened formal analysis could ever make rational sense of it.

Part 2

Fauvism, German Expressionism and Cubism were the three major movements that emerged between 1900 and 1910, and they all happened more or less at once, indicating the outburst of creative originality that marked the new century. Fauvism and German Expressionism were preoccupied with sickness and health, filtered through sexual anxiety and hope — the desperate search for health through erotic happiness, regarded as the only salvation in a sick world — while Cubism grappled with the new sense of reality. The sense

of it as relative rather than absolute — that it had no fixed identity, but was a cluster of changing relationships or, as Salmon said, that it was “cinematic” rather than static, uncertain rather than self-certain, in endless process rather than finalized by God — informed the subjective representations of sexuality and health in Fauvism and Expressionism, but not to the extent it informed the representation of objects in Cubism. This is perhaps why it is more radical than them.

Objectivity was already up for grabs in the 19th century, when various mathematicians had questioned the mathematical adequacy of Euclidean geometry, as well as its accuracy as a representation of reality. In 1887 Henri Poincaré argued that the principles of geometry, and of science in general, were not absolute truths, but relative conventions, of heuristic value but otherwise inconclusive. In a sense, the modern frame of mind can be said to begin with this idea, which unavoidably informed art — made it truly modern. The popular if confusing notion of the fourth dimension emerged; it was supposedly perpendicular to the three dimensions of everyday space. E. A. Abbott’s 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, by a Square*, known in France, told the story of a square elevated by a circle above the plane of the Flatland. The square surveys it from above, seeing through all the geometrical shapes residing on it, hypothesizing that they have more dimensions inside them, a mad notion which leads to the square’s downfall and confinement to a madhouse. The fourth dimension thus afforded what Jean Metzinger called a “free and mobile perspective” on the other three, and implied that there may even be more, suggesting that reality was more mysterious than it looked, and that our knowledge of it was uncertain. It became an unknown terrain. In Cubism, art ventured into this terrain; it also did in Fauvism and Expressionism, which found it in the subject rather than object.

Fauvist and Expressionist distortions acknowledge the relativity and uncertainty of subjective reality, just as Cubist distortions acknowledge the relativity and uncertainty of objective reality. The subjectively distorted appearances of Fauvism and Expressionism have objective implications, just as the objectively distorted appearances of Cubism have subjective implications. The avant-garde artist is pressured by the dizzying uncertainty of the world of feelings within him as well as the world of objects outside, which make great demands on him. The fourth dimension became his way of dealing with them, and of privileging himself. The philosopher Charles Hinton compared the special mental powers one needed to become conscious of the fourth dimension to the special mental powers the artist needed to become conscious of the ordinarily unconscious process of making art. Presumably this would make for a more profound art. Thus, putting himself in the position of the fourth dimension — a kind of mystical coign of vantage that afforded an overview of reality and ecstatic insight into all its dimensions — the artist regained control

of reality, however uncanny it had become. The Theosophist Charles Leadbeater thought that the higher consciousness to be gained from viewing the world through the lens of the fourth dimension and in "astral vision" were essentially the same. Identification with the fourth dimension gave the artist a new kind of omniscience and omnipotence, all the more so when the fourth dimension became associated with duration — H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895) made the connection — which suggested to the avant-garde artist that he could view the world from the perspective of time, just as traditional artists once thought they could see it sub specie aeternitatis, in emulation of God.

The ephemerality of avant-garde movements has been much noted, suggesting that time was indeed of their essence. Perhaps this is because it is hard to sustain the freedom, spontaneity and intensity of expression that they valued. The vital moment mattered; the effort was to convey what the philosopher John Dewey called "an experience." This attitude seems far from the traditional effort to immortalize appearances, giving them a grander-than-life reality. It was hard, after all, to continue to be a wild beast (fauve), or to sustain subjective expression — the eruption of an image from the unconscious depths, which was the German Expressionist ideal — or to hold the transient dynamics of an appearance in steady focus, as the Cubists realized. Exciting freshness is what mattered for the early avant-gardists, countering their self-doubt. For the Fauves the immediate sensation of luminous color epitomized freshness; color was also important for the German Expressionists, but it was conceived of as more spiritual than natural. Color becomes muted in the Analytic phase of Cubism — but it remains alive and well in the Orphic Cubism of Robert Delaunay — and a vector-like line comes to the fore as a carrier of energy, if not exclusively.

Whatever the means, there was a struggle to maintain the sense of the timely and lively, even though it eventually had to give way to more stable forms, conducive to a more contemplative relation to the image. The difference between Matisse's *Le Luxe I* (1907) and *Le Luxe II* (1907-08) makes the point succinctly. The sketchiness of the former is replaced by the clarity of the latter. The female figures acquire clear contours and flatten, their bodies reduced to a schematic, streamlined minimum. Sky, sea, land, and drapery are no longer agitated blurs, but smooth planes, with a touch of texture to suggest movement. Everything freezes in place; the three figures — studio nudes in a variety of contrasting positions — form a right-angle triangle, rather than a loose arrangement of interacting forms. Composition is imposed, integrating forms that tended to disperse. Fauvism ends with *Le Luxe II*, however much the Fauvist appreciation of color remains intact. But color is now no longer a moving stream of sensations, sometimes abruptly changing course, but a static plane, a gently modulated surface.

Fauvism officially begins with Matisse's *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1904-05), which has been described as the movement's manifesto. Its title is the second line of the refrain in Charles Baudelaire's poem *L'Invitation au Voyage* (1854). Baudelaire and his beloved will arrive at a place where they can "love to our hearts' content," and "everything is harmony and beauty, luxury, tranquillity, and delight." The painting is clearly about pleasure, as the assemblage of female nudes suggests, but, noteworthy, the figure of the artist himself remains fully clothed, and at a loveless remove from the scene. One can't help thinking of an elder looking at so many young Susannas. His emotional separateness is confirmed by the fact that the darker handling of his figure puts him in a different space than the nudes, who are all more luminous, however now and then flecked with dark strokes, suggestive of shadow. Thus even in paradise there is conflict, tension.

The handling is clearly pointillist in character — the stippling of primary colors forms an optical tension reminiscent of Georges Seurat — and the painting was in fact purchased by Paul Signac, Seurat's disciple, who brought it with him to St. Tropez. But where Seurat's work was grounded in color theory, Matisse's choice and arrangement of colors was not, which is why, already in 1905, he painted such fluid works as *The Open Window, Interior at Collioure* and *The Roofs of Collioure*. Located on the French Riviera, like St. Tropez, Collioure is also a Mediterranean world of fresh, luminous color and open space, inviting Matisse to abandon the Pointillist preoccupation with systematically applied and scientifically understood color. The Pointillist "theory of complementaries. . . is not absolute," he declared. Instead, he relied upon "upon instinct and feeling, and on a constant analogy [of colors] with. . . sensations."⁹ "Instinct and feeling" became the catchwords — battle cries — of Fauvism.

Any and seemingly every means were used to convey them. André Derain used seemingly arbitrary, harsh colors — red, green, and yellow — to render landscape, and Maurice Vlaminck used crude, dense impasto, perhaps most noteworthy in his 1905 *Self-Portrait*, where the wild handling and lack of finish seem meant to grate on one's visual nerves. Indeed, Vlaminck, enamored of what he regarded as the primitive impulsiveness of Vincent van Gogh, and, along with his friend Derain aware of African sculpture — he claimed he was the first artist to "discover" its potential, in 1904 — stated: "I heightened all my tone values and transposed into an orchestration of pure color every single thing I felt. I was a tenderhearted savage, filled with violence. I translated what I saw instinctively, without any method, and conveyed truth, not so much artistically, as humanely."¹⁰ Fauvism seemed full of what was experienced as visual violence, savagery and instinct, recalling Paul Gauguin's art: Vlaminck wanted to carry Gauguin's pursuit of the primitive — the primordially human, uncluttered by the trappings of civilization and thus

presumably more authentic (a romantic return to natural fundamentals familiar since Jean-Jacques Rousseau) — into 20th-century painting, giving it a revolutionary new edge.

Not only did he “not want to follow a conventional way of painting,” but “to revolutionize habits and contemporary life — to liberate nature, to free it from the authority of old theories and classicism.”¹¹ As he said, he hated artistic uniforms and discipline — he compared Cubism to a military regimen, and thought museums were places of funereal monotony, not to say mausoleums — and adored children. “I try to paint with my heart and my loins, not bothering with style.”¹² Fauvism marks the beginning of the avant-garde repudiation of the museum and style, signifying the historically given and presumably true and tried rules and regulations for making art — André Breton was also skeptical of museums, and Willem de Kooning’s art has been called “styleless” — in an impossible search for total personal liberty and complete originality. This repudiation of governing principles and prescriptive orders — “no rules exist, and examples are simply life-savers answering the appeal of rules making vain attempts to exist,” Breton wrote in 1928¹³ — continued to motivate avant-garde artists until postmodernism, when it was realized that codes were inescapable — that one’s originality and freedom always had a style, and for that matter a precedent.

Fauvism is the full-fledged beginning of what is in fact the most free-wheeling style in 20th-century painting, namely, direct, instinctive, self-reflexive painting. Ironically, it is the century’s most durable painting style, perhaps because it was felt to be the most inwardly necessary, to use Wassily Kandinsky’s term. It involves a paradox: seemingly unconditional surrender to the material medium with the hope of finding one’s True Self in it, to use D. W. Winnicott’s term. Direct painting attempts to articulate what Anton Ehrenzweig calls the inarticulate hidden order of inchoate, volatile, protean impulse that is the fundament of art and the self, conveying the idea that there is a certain mercurial art to being oneself. Perhaps the ultimate goal of instinctive painting is the uncompromisingly original expression of feeling, which is itself regarded as the origin of expression. As Matisse wrote, “expression. . . does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture,” but rather “the whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. . . . Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter’s disposal for the expression of his feelings.”¹⁴ Intuitively direct painting does not simply mean squeezing paint directly from the tube onto the canvas (this was already no longer novel when Vlaminck did it, with all the vehemence he could muster), but the exploitation of painterly texture as an expressive end in itself — independently of whatever image it might catalyze (supposedly always secondary) — in a total, so-called all-over painting. Direct painting reached a grand climax in the “oceanic” Abstract Express-

sionist paintings of Jackson Pollock, which are at once consummately decorative and emotionally engulfing. They climbed all the way to the painterly peak that was first consciously glimpsed in Fauvism.

Matisse was the most important of the Fauves because his paintings were the most aggressive. He did the most violence to observed reality — distorted, or rather exaggerated certain aspects of its appearance — to make his own latent violence manifest. Above all, he generated a sense of conflict, just barely resolved, at least on a technical level. The collector Leo Stein, the first owner of Matisse's 1905 *Portrait of Mme Matisse*, with its infamous green line splitting her face in half, called it "the nastiest smear of painting I had ever seen," noting "the unpleasantness of the putting on of the paint." This provocative, daring painting, which defies the ordinary perception of reality, is a long way from Raoul Dufy's *Street Decked with Flags, Le Havre* and Derain's *London Bridge*, both 1906, which are far more conventional, both in structure and color, however intense the color. Color is used to fill in preordained structure, that is, an outlined existing scene. It remains familiar — loses the estranged quality of Matisse's portrait, generated by the de-familiarizing effect of the unexpected green line. They had not yet understood its lesson, that color should function as structure — that a stable picture could be convincingly constructed of planes of excited, seemingly unstable color. The merger of color and structure made the portrait seem unpredictable, which had a vitalizing effect, even as it demonstrated that lyric color could have an epic effect. It is as though one suddenly came upon Mme Matisse, and was startled by the unexpected line of luminous green on her face, which seemed to distill the reflection of a plant that had caught the light. One had a new sense of the dynamic immediacy of perception, and of the uncanniness of reality.

Color and structure are seamlessly merged — experienced as indistinguishable, in a kind of epiphany — in *Harmony in Red/La Desserte* (1908), *Dance I* (1909), *Dance II* and *Music* (both 1909-10), post-Fauve works that intensify the colors of Matisse's Fauvist paintings while extending them in broad planes. The difference between the colors becomes more emphatic than ever — the tension between the greens, blues, and reds seems excruciating, and each seems more provocatively explosive in itself — even as they are pulled together in a magnificent, mythic reconciliation and simultaneity. The brilliance of Matisse is that he could create a sense of grand harmony with no lessening of tension and intimacy. Colors are raised to fever pitch, making harmony an unexpected revelation, subliminally felt but emotionally inexplicable.

Matisse has monumentalized his wife's head, even as he has dramatized it. Despite his assertion that human passion and violent gestures are not what artistic expression is about, the fact of the matter is that his wife's face has a passionate expression, which is intensified by the violent green gesture

that suggests his contradictory attitude to her. The striking gesture is expressive in itself, so much so that it stands out of the composition, disrupting it — all the more so because it sharply contrasts with the blue helmet that his wife's hair has become — however ingeniously integrated into its play of greens and reds. The unconventional green gesture in fact drops from the helmet — it seems to seep from the eccentric little triangle in it, a brooch that has become a symbol of her psyche — like the perpendicular of the fourth dimension, conveying duration in what otherwise is a relatively immobilized, mask-like face. Because of this unique green line, which is like a knife that cuts through the center of the picture — without it both picture and face lose their expressive edge and emotional distinctiveness — Mme Matisse's face seems more overtly impassioned than Matisse's own in his *Self-Portrait* of 1906, wearing a sailor shirt as though to emphasize the primitive underside of his personality — the instinctive aggression and dark passion evident in his face — as well as the seemingly unsophisticated, crude character of the painting.

But both faces have undergone an expressive transformation, indeed, a kind of hysterical conversion into masks. They retain the semblance of familiar human appearance, but it is as though they are flat stones that have been turned over, revealing an unfamiliar emotional terrain underneath. Oscar Wilde, and the decadents in general, argued that one can express with a mask feelings that a face dare not express socially. The use of masks, African or otherwise, is a heritage of decadence — a way of achieving perverse expressive effects. Indeed, the faces of Matisse and his wife are not only powerfully expressive masks but textural Rorschach tests. One can find one's own strong feelings in the seemingly spontaneous texture, which stimulates one's own expressive spontaneity, in part because one can't make intellectual sense of it. One has to bypass the repression barrier, and the defensive tendency to intellectualize — to invent or find or impose cognitive form — that keeps it in place, in order to be creatively expressive, that is, express the creativity of one's unconscious. Seemingly formless textural gesture — the signature of primary process, as it were — becomes the way to do so. Indeed, Matisse's brilliance has to do with this ability to synthesize, in a singularly concentrated image, the primary process fluidity of textural indefiniteness and the secondary process definiteness of the fixed mask.

Matisse's brooding portraits seem to prepare the way for what Picasso's hysteria achieved in *Les Femmes d'Alger*: the conversion of the female face into what is in effect a death mask — a demonic mask that reeks of death, if death involves the destruction of individuality and intimacy. Replacing a European face with an African mask, Picasso has in effect deprived his prostitutes of any identity of their own, as well as suggested that they are beyond the pale, which is to double the death sentence on them. He has also found a way of breaking the taboo surrounding death: he suggests its

effect without showing its reality. Picasso's African masks convey more subtly what the skull he eliminated from his original composition bluntly stated, suggesting that what is at stake in *Les Femmes d'Alger* is not just the threat of physical death from sexual disease but of psychic death from associating with the living dead — the prostitutes who, without feeling or reservation, have sex with desperate men, for money rather than love. It is their inner apathy — the peculiar emotional heaviness, dead weight feeling and lack of expressive tone of Picasso's prostitutes — that is their real immodesty. Their impassive faces externalize it by becoming motionless masks.

But Matisse cannot go as far as Picasso did: he cannot convert the whole female body into a grotesque, dead thing, as his *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* (1907) makes clear. Painted in the same year as *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Matisse's female nude retains a certain natural presence. Indeed, she is not in a desolate brothel, but surrounded by a flourishing nature, whose abundance her voluptuous body symbolizes. She is the healthy antidote to the poisonous Olympia and the monstrous Femmes d'Alger. She has not been dehumanized, turned into fossilized wood — Picasso's punishment for her lack of love, which he needs more than sex (is this the subliminally human point of the story of Apollo's pursuit of Daphne?) — however distorted her appearance. But we do not read Matisse's nude as abnormal, however deformed she may seem — however much her sexual desire not only makes her restless body glow from within, but seems to be expressed through the projection of her buttocks, exaggerating them into prominence. Indeed, they have a phallic quality which anticipates the phallic nose of *Jeanette V* (1916) and the phallic braid of *The Back III* (1916), both of which concretize in three dimensions the extended green line that decisively marks his wife's nose in her 1905 portrait.

All his life Matisse was a connoisseur of woman's body, and she was sometimes — conspicuously — the phallic woman, as I have argued elsewhere. It was Matisse's mother that lifted his spirit and liberated his creativity during a youthful sickness — it seemed implicitly mental, however physical it also was — by giving him a box of colors during his long convalescence. He used this gift of art to explore Mother Nature's body, devoting his life to it, in search of the mystery of its creativity — the mother's and nature's generative power, which he experienced as healing — and its even more mysterious self-sufficiency. It had to be because her body was simultaneously feminine and masculine, passive and active, receptive and productive — consummately whole — that she was so creative, spontaneously, vigorously, yet without apparent effort, which is the way Matisse wanted his art to seem.

On one level, Matisse consciously brings together the front and back views of a woman's body — it is their convergence that creates the effect of deformation — which are traditionally kept separate, as in *Carmelina* (ca. 1903-04). Her back is reflected in the mirror, which shows Matisse painting her,

while she faces us with a kind of confrontational arrogance. On another level, Matisse unwittingly conveys woman's potency by twisting her body so that the buttocks confront us. Indeed, they are unshadowed, unlike the thigh that is their pedestal. The thrust of their curve is so great that the blue earth bends to accommodate and echo it. The earth rises a bit, forming a more gently rolling curve, which itself is echoed by the grand curve of a branch above it. Thus the strong shape of the buttocks ripples through the upper half of the picture, creating a kind of halo of curves that suggests the sacredness of the nude, and shelters her from the world beyond her natural paradise. Or is she the snake in paradise, as her twisting shape suggests? Like the green line on Mme Matisse's face, the perpendicularity of her buttocks suggests the fourth dimension. Indeed, a sense of movement is conveyed, implying time. But to be perpendicular is also to be erect — to be in the upright position, which is to defy gravity and thus establish one's autonomy, as Erwin Straus argues. Matisse is not so much subjecting woman to what the feminists call the male gaze — it has been said to be especially evident in expressionist imagery — as acknowledging woman's sexual autonomy and, more broadly, self-assertion. Already in *Carmelina*, which is an indoor studio scene, we sense a certain autonomy and assertiveness — the sense that she will do with her body what she wants to, and that she is inherently independent. I think Mme Matisse's green stripe, making her nose emphatic, also signals her independence and individuality.

Matisse does not so much dominate his female subjects, as admire them, out of need for the creativity hidden in their bodies. Albert Elsen notes "the almost complete departure of the male model from Matisse's figural work" after 1906. *The Serf* (1900-04), a Rodinesque sculpture, is his most famous image of a male, and it is not a happy one. He is a downtrodden, melancholy figure, for all his muscularity, implicitly helpless and passive — unconsciously castrated — as his armlessness suggests. Is he Matisse's surrogate, the emotionally inept, oppressed side of the vital, vigorous figure in the 1906 self-portrait? Was his Fauvism an attempt to break the mood embodied in *The Serf*? Was it an attempt to once and for all assert the vitality he felt he was losing, all the more so because he was aging? (He was in fact the oldest of the Fauves, born in 1869, and already in his 30s when the Fauves — Vlaminck (b. 1876) and Derain (b. 1880) were in their 20s — exhibited together for the first time in 1905.) Matisse gave up on the male model because he needed woman to save him from the "inner conflict" — his own words — that plagued him all his life. Identifying with her by expressing her body, he could absorb the wholeness of her being. That identification seems all but explicit in the drawing *Artist and Model Reflected in a Mirror* (1937), where the artist's sober figure — he's wearing tie and jacket — seems to emerge from the doubled body of the female nude, who takes up most of the picture's space, suggesting how all-encompassing she was for Matisse.

Matisse eventually consolidated his understanding of her body's inherent expressiveness by abstracting it into a calligraphic arabesque, a "plastic sign" of the body's material plasticity as he said in his 1939 *Notes of a Painter on His Drawing*. The arabesque conveys movement in an intricate hermetic whole, turning it into a kind of abstract script. Two small sculptures, *Reclining Figure in a Chemise* (1906) and *Reclining Nude I/Aurora* (1906-07) seem to begin the process of converting vital body into abstract sign — static mass into dynamic emblem. Matisse often used sculpture to experiment with new expressive possibilities. Elsen thinks he felt freer in the medium than in paint. Working in the round, he could test the limits of bodily expression, distorting the nude until it seemed unusually expressive — conveyed the inner urgency of instinct — while appearing natural. It was a fine line he was walking, and in the best of his works he walked over it, as it were, taking expressive leaps that made little natural sense. Their irrationality could no longer be rationalized as a demonstration of nature at its most surprising. They came to exist in and for themselves, as a manifestation of the artist's own irrationality. As Matisse wrote in a 1938 letter, "nature — or rather, my nature — remains mysterious," and it was through his irrational expressive leaps, overthrowing nature, that he conveyed his own mysterious nature.

However many extreme, risky, non-natural expressions appear in his sculptures, it was in his paintings that their drama was most realized, perhaps because the spatial complexity that made them weirdly awkward was more striking on a flat surface. Thus, while the small sculptures may be on the way to the *Blue Nude*, they show little trace of its irrationality and daring: it was only when Matisse abruptly elevated the buttocks of the nude, so that they were on the same level as her breasts, thus conveying the extreme plasticity of her body, that he achieved a startling new expressive effect — the first new feat of true expressive daring he was able to perform after the green line in his portrait of his wife. It is in fact the sculptural plasticity and projective power of the jutting buttocks — they are a kind of grand sculptural gesture, a piece of sculptural bravado — that makes them seem especially expressive on the flat surface of the painting. They would lose a good deal of their drama and tension in the round, where they would seem a misguided exaggeration of nature, losing their emotional meaning. Their uncanniness is clearer in two rather than three dimensions, where it is more likely to be read as an arbitrary, however playful, distortion than a visual parapaxis — an unpredictable expression of the unconscious. The nude would thus lose the inner depth the unrealistic "outwardness" of the buttocks gives it. It is because they are so "out of it" — break the line of the figure so forcefully — that they are so deeply of it. For Matisse, sculpture was a point of departure not a climactic expressive statement. His "Jeannette" series (1910-11?) and "Back" series (1909-29) are didactic statements of a transformative process that was worked out, with great labor as

well as spontaneity, in Matisse's early paintings, where it seems more consummate and vital. Neither sculptural series has the epitomizing clarity of Matisse's "Blue Nude" series of 1952, nor the calligraphic succinctness and primitive intensity of the cutouts — sculpted paintings, as it were — in *Jazz* (1947).

Matisse's complexity — the highly differentiated character of his Fauvist works — elevates him above all the other Fauves, who faded into conservative inconsequence and redundancy after their Fauvist surge. Matisse had staying power, not because he trimmed his sails, as they did, and regressed to pre-Fauvist style, however loosely "modernized," but because he put his expressive color and gestural dexterity to new, post-instinctive use. Matisse's more sensational, irrational paintings — one can add *The Woman with the Hat* (1905) and *Interior with a Young Girl/Girl Reading* (1905-06) to the list — are not really representative of what became his ultimate ambition: to create a new kind of reflective, meditative, decorative art, modern in its energy and drama, traditional in its contemplative clarity, intimacy, and scope. It would have a new integrity and wholeness without sacrificing vibrancy and expressive power. It would be broadly planar with no loss of sensation. On the contrary, the fleeting sensations diffused in stippling and broken gesture would be concentrated in a dense plane of single and singular color, like the red plane in Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* (1888). Primitivism would be stylized, forming the basis for a new sophistication of line and composition, with no sacrifice of the "charm, lightness, freshness" of sensation, as Matisse said. Drama would not be forfeited but absorbed into a larger harmony

Already in 1906 we see works — *Still Life with a Geranium*, *Still Life with a Rug*, *Marguerite Reading*, *Pink Onions* — that suggest this new ideal. It is even more evident in *Marguerite*, *Still Life with Asphodels*, *La Coiffure*, all 1907. The transition to it is clear in the difference between *The Young Sailor I* and *The Young Sailor II*, both 1906, as well as between *Le luxe I* and *Le luxe II*. *Still Life with a Rug* and *Marguerite Reading* deftly mix the gestural and planar modes. It was in these new works that Matisse struggled toward his true vocation: to create "an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue."¹⁵ Matisse's ambition was remarkable, and remains virtually unique in 20th-century art: to invent a new art of harmony, at once cognitively and emotionally satisfying, a visual art that would overcome the dissociation of sensibility — the split between reason and feeling — that T. S. Eliot regarded as the disease of modernity. It would be an art of healing and reconciliation, in which opposites merge to synergistic aesthetic effect. His is the only 20th-century art that deliberately sets out to do emotional good. It has a calming effect, with no sacrifice of

cognitive and perceptual complexity, and vitality.

Remarkably, Matisse's ambition bears its first fruits in the first decade of the century — between 1908 and 1910, in such works as *Harmony in Red/La Desserte*, *Dance I*, *Dance II*, and *Music*, as well as *Bathers with a Turtle*, *Game of Bowls* (both 1908), *Nymph and Satyr* (1908-09) and *Bather* (1909). The high color and energy of Fauvism has ripened into a new sense of decorative drama. It is at its most subtly intense in *Still Life with Blue Tablecloth* (1909) and *Still Life with a Pewter Jug and Pink Statuette* (1910), as well as his portraits of his son, *Pierre* (1909) and *Jeanne Vaderin* (1910). Matisse is at his most relaxed and harmonious — deceptively simple — with a domestic subject matter, although not always, as the jarring contradictions — between family and environment, and between the members of the family — in *The Painter's Family* (1911) indicate. His color contrasts tend to be more stark and his handling more impulsive in his pictures of exotic women, such as *Spanish Woman with a Tambourine* and *Algerian Woman* (both 1909). Their colorful flair appealed to his externalizing Fauve side, while the domestic scenes appealed to his more introspective reflective side. They represent the poles of his emotional world. Indeed, for all their balance of perception and feeling, it is the autonomy of interior life that Matisse is after in his pictures. Despite their careful observation, they remain unapologetically subjective.

A picture by Matisse is a kind of hortus conclusus or inner sanctum — indeed, his studio was his sanctuary from the world — in which the emotional flavor of sensation-saturated things and people, all seen many times but still offering something new to be seen — Matisse is ever-alert to a new visual surprise — unfolds like a flower. Each picture conveys, with seeming immediacy, what it means to cultivate one's own garden — one's own perceptual and emotional garden. Matisse's paintings are slower and harder perceptual going than they seem, however quickly one gets — or thinks one does — their overall expressive point. They are not easy to see, all the more so because they do not lend themselves to piecemeal seeing, like Cubist works. When Matisse said that he wanted to condense his sensations into a total composition, he implied that he also want to distill them into a stimulating, seductive perfume that would resonate in every part of it. Thus Matisse returns to taste, but it is not foreordained, but rather the result of a mingling and compressing of incommensurate sensations in a pictorial alembic. It is intense compositional and emotional pressure that gives Matisse's pictures their peculiar pungency and disarming innocence — their aura of virginal perception and elegant immediacy. Of all 20th-century works they are most against what Breton called "miserabilism," that is, the depreciation of reality instead of its exaltation.

Part 3

Is there an emotional content to Cubism? Does its origin and meaning have anything to do with Picasso's emotional problems, so evident in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. version O)? Is this the reason that Braque's early Cubist works, however technically extraordinary, are of less expressive consequence?

There's no question that they're a new kind of picture — a new mode of representation — but they lack the emotional complexity and intensity of Picasso's early Cubist works. Braque "expresses a beauty full of tenderness," Apollinaire wrote in 1908, "his compositions have the harmony and plenitude we were waiting for."¹⁶ Beauty, harmony, plenitude — these are classical ideals, however new the formal terms in which Braque realizes them. Cézanne declared that he wanted "to redo Poussin after nature," and Cubism has been understood as completing the redoing that Cézanne began, and as such classical in spirit, if not in form. This hardly seems true of Picasso's Cubism, however much it may be indebted to Cézanne. As early as 1905, Apollinaire observed that Picasso "blends the delightful with the horrible, the abject with the refined," and associated his art with Spanish mysticism and fantasy, concluding that he "comes from far away, from the richness of composition and brutal decoration of the Spaniards of the 17th century."¹⁷ Brutal decoration is a long way from tenderness, and from French classical beauty, whether in the manner of Poussin, Cézanne or Braque.

Braque's early Cubist compositions are more obviously unified, serene and balanced than those of Picasso. Several writers have compared Braque's *Houses at L'Estaque* and Picasso's *Cottage and Trees*, both painted in August 1908. The Picasso is a much more risky, daring painting than the Braque.

They have a family resemblance, but the tensions in the Picasso are greater than those in the Braque, and less securely resolved. The Picasso has an aura of aggression that the Braque lacks. Its dynamics seem superficial and labored compared to the briskness of the Picasso. Braque is like a tame, well-intentioned, respectable Abel compared to the violent Picasso, who resembles a kind of angry Cain. Braque's picture suggests that a revolution involves nothing more than a change of aesthetic clothing, while Picasso's picture makes it clear that a revolution overturns everything, leaving no assumption standing. In Braque's picture the old order of representation is still clearly standing, its noble idealism visible behind the facade of its new realism, which is less stark — and more quixotic, fanciful — than it pretends to be, while Picasso's picture is busy destroying the old order, or at least determined to undermine it, showing how shaky it has become. Braque's picture looks conservative and ineffectual next to Picasso's assertive picture, which seems to tear the traditional image to shreds, leaving a tangle of fragmentary perspectives where there was once a crystallized consciousness of reality.

The space in both the Braque and Picasso seems more constructed

than observed. The geometry of the buildings is conspicuous, but they are no more than abstract boxes, stripped of all detail. It is the general idea of a building that is pictured, rather than a particular building, although each building is made particular by its covering of chiaroscuro, which adds an ironical nuance of sensation — for the chiaroscuro is as generalized and abstract as the building — to its mute planes. The whole scene seems eccentrically symbolic, a kind of Potemkin village — the buildings are insular, windowless shells, the vegetation has a ragged, tattered look — rather than materially substantive and carefully scrutinized. There is a thrown together, gratuitous look to both pictures, for all their primitive geometry and natural coloration. In other words, it is not clear whether Braque and Picasso have seen the landscape in a new way or invented it, if not out of whole cloth, then using its elements to reconstruct it on their own theatrical terms. It seems like an artificial rather than a natural landscape, demonstrating the triumph of art over nature, as though to illustrate the decadent belief in the superiority of the artificial over the natural.

What adds to the sense that the image is a deliberate fabrication — indeed, pure fiction — is the self-contradictory space. Both pictures have a strong vertical accent, marked by the steep angle of the roof on the highest house and the upward sweep of the tree, but they are horizontally split. Our eye oscillates between the upper and lower sections of the picture, for there is nothing that makes one more striking than the other, drawing us to it. There is no preferred place for the eye to rest, to drop anchor, putting everything else in the picture into its proper place and perspective. Indeed, there is no proper perspective — no dominant perspective — no one way of orienting oneself in the picture. The space of the pictures is unsettled and unsettling.

The clash between the perspectives, which remain unreconciled — only their simultaneity brings them together, as though to suggest that their reconciliation can never be more than nominal, for it is always time-bound — implies that perception is unstable. The conventional idea that whatever we see is seen clearly from one perspective is challenged. There is no one correct, universal, consistent perspective, to which all perception must adapt or seem inadequate. Thus, the appearance of reality is destabilized in both paintings, bringing reality itself into question, and giving them an air of uncanniness, nonconformity and uncertainty. They rebel against the accepted norms of representation, however much they seem to inaugurate a new pictorial discipline. With a peculiarly ascetic, even astringent zeal, they clean the Augean stables of traditional representation, purging its visual excesses. Only the barest residue of essentials — a kind of minimum marker of reality — remains, thus undermining the traditional belief that a representation is an exact mirror image of a reality that can be readily known in comprehensive and clear detail. Braque and Picasso threaten the age-old ideal of mimesis, which assumes that immediate perception, informed by memory, can afford a sense of the immor-

tal givenness of the thing represented. They do not entirely dispense with it, but they are not convinced by it. They are representational agnostics, perhaps even atheists — skeptics, perhaps disbelievers in the literal truth of reality — even if they use its trappings.

But for all the epistemological similarity between the two paintings, their expressive effect is totally different. In the Braque, the tumble of lower houses is separated from the higher houses — both are as brown as the earth on which they are built — by a thin barrier of green trees and foliage. In the Picasso, the garden wall is seen from above while the house is seen from below. There is a wide gap between them — one writer compares it to an open jaw (its opposed halves seem about to clamp down on the tangle of tongue-like trees in the garden) — that threatens to break the picture in two. While the sweep of the tree in the Braque brings the two groups of houses together, suggesting their continuity — its lines echo those of the houses and the general movement up the hill (and from near to far) — it does nothing to unite the house and wall in the Picasso. Instead, Picasso's tree, which is quite different from Braque's — even its placement is different, so that it does not so much stand in relief against the space behind it, serving as its measure, as become part of the space — complicates their angularity with its own angle, formed by the gnarled finger-like branches hanging over the garden space. Without the frame formed by the tree and the building on the right, the tension between the house and the wall would be unbearable and uncontainable.

(One hesitates to describe the wall as closer to the viewer than the house. The angle at which it projects toward the viewer forms a vertical line that exists on the same plane of perception as the line formed by the nearest angle of the wall. Thus, the lines seem to be the same distance from the viewer, however much the structures of which they are a part are not. This perceptual illusion endures, even though it is contradicted by the disjunctive displacement of the lines. The upward and leftward placement of the house angle and the downward and rightward placement of the wall angle clearly differentiate and separate them. But both have the same luminous edge, a highlight that links them subliminally.)

Braque's picture is nowhere near as dramatic as Picasso's. It is emotionally neutral compared to Picasso's picture, and more conventionally descriptive. Braque's brown and green belong to nature, while Picasso's dark picture seems eerie and unnatural, its colors all but lost in a kind of twilight. It resonates with interior life, while Braque's picture reflects the exterior world. Apollinaire celebrated Picasso as "a new man," adding that, for this new man, "the world is as he newly represents it. He has enumerated its elements, its details, with a brutality that knows, on occasion, how to be gracious."¹⁸ Picasso's landscape seems at once brutal, ironically gracious and weirdly figural. With its pincer-like "jaws" and melancholy, dreamlike atmosphere, it seems to al-

lude to a skull. That is, Picasso's landscape has an anamorphic dimension, however inexact the anamorphosis (in contrast, for example, to the floating skull in Holbein's *The French Ambassadors*, 1533). In contrast, Braque's landscape remains unequivocally what it is, however equivocal its space. But even spatially Picasso's picture is more equivocating, adding to its nightmarish quality, its general morbid tenor and pallor. Can we read the foliage as cartilage and the buildings as gray bone, bleached by darkness? Both have a ghostly, "supernatural," enigmatic presence.

Such strange associations are not impossible nor arbitrary, but stimulated by the work itself; Picasso's early Cubist works are haunted by Symbolism, a hangover from his Blue and Rose periods. Some interpreters think that they owe a debt to Mallarmé, in their playful, elusive character: things are suggested, but not exactly stated. Certainly *Cottage and Trees* is a sum of perceptual approximations that add up to a powerful emotional whole. The threshold of perception has become flexible, allowing for the influence of subliminal perception. Speculative intuitions of another reality arise — the interior dimension of real things, such as the insane Square in Flatland imagined. Strange as it may seem to say so, there is a bizarre poetry in Picasso's Cubist planes, however prosaic and matter of fact they seem at first glance.

Referring to one of Picasso's Analytic Cubist portraits, Apollinaire wrote: "Picasso conceived the project of dying when he looked at the face of his best friend and saw his circumflex eyebrows galloping in anxiety. . . . And besides, anatomy, for example, really no longer existed in art; it had to be reinvented, and everyone had to perform his own assassination with the methodical skill of a great surgeon." Picasso has performed an assassination on the landscape, a surgical dissection of its anatomy, which reinvents the anatomy of the picture. He dissects the still living landscape, in effect murdering it to paint it. *Cottage and Trees* shows, in different terms than *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso's very Spanish awareness of death, and his death instinct, as it were — his feeling that he must annihilate or be annihilated, a feeling he acknowledged in his remark about his discovery of African masks in the Trocadero.

Otto Fenichel writes that "the idea of death may be fear of punishment for death wishes against other persons" or "may represent a fear of one's own excitement." Where there is "hope for sexual excitement, death may be feared." Sometimes awareness of death oscillates with rage, defending against it. Fenichel also writes that "The fear of being infected is, first of all, a rationalized fear of castration. Venereal infection as a real danger connected to sexual activity may serve as a rationalization of unreal dangers unconsciously believed in. And on a still deeper level, the fear of infection represents a defense against feminine wishes, infection standing for impregnation."¹⁹ All these ideas are relevant to the morbid *Les Demoiselles*, which shows Picasso and his vulgar muses, who in effect impregnate — inspire — him, so that he can paint

his wonderfully original picture of them, his first creation of an artistic child that is all his own. The landscape in *Cottage and Trees* shows that morbid originality has become second nature to him.

For Picasso Cubism was a new way of expressing aggression, indeed, destructiveness. He said as much when he declared that “in my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture, then I destroy it.” Nothing may be lost in the end, as he said, but the transformation is brutal and irreversible — the uncompromising brutality that Apollinaire admired.

The effect on the object rendered is disastrous. Gedo associates the catastrophic air of Picasso’s early pictures — and many later ones — with his childhood experience of an earthquake, all the more disturbing because it occurred at the moment his mother was giving birth to his sister. Thus the moment of creation — the birth of new life (artistic as well as human) — became associated with the threat to life or the possibility of death. Picasso responded with distrust and hostility, which mobilized his ego in the face of the enemy: the sense of helplessness in the face of forces greater than himself. In fact, Picasso seemed to need negative emotions to produce something artistically positive. He needed to externalize his negative emotions in art in order to avoid being overwhelmed by them. He tended to become overstimulated by life as well as by the threat of death, as Roland Penrose suggests in his account of Picasso’s manic response to “la belle Chelito,” a Barcelona beauty whom Picasso relentlessly portrayed in drawings the first time he saw her perform in a cabaret, in effect consuming her with his art.²⁰

Picasso’s belief in the inner connection of life and death was reinforced by Spanish culture. The bullfight became an exemplary demonstration of it for Picasso. Life and death are opposed but inseparable: It is their paradoxical relationship that informs Picasso’s representation of reality. His figures, still lifes and landscapes always seem simultaneously dead and alive, and, as such, fraught with suffering, which does violence to life and heralds death, thus embodying the paradox.

His most famous painting, *Guernica* (1937), makes the point explicitly. “I want nothing but emotion to be given off by [a picture],” Picasso stated, and the emotion that his pictures give off is saturated with suffering, subliminally or explicitly. It is a corrosive death wish against the reality depicted: to represent reality is to extract the life from it, leaving an artistic corpse in its place. “There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There’s no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work.” But the point is that their reality exists at the expense of the reality of the object that catalyzed them. The object itself has been completely negated — dissolved into a suggestion, its expres-

sive residue alone evident in the picture — so that the artist's ideas and emotions can be represented. What Michael Balint calls the dissolution of object representation that occurs in modern art, largely in favor of radically subjective expression, makes a decisive beginning in Picasso's Cubist works.

It is the power of negation in Picasso's art that Apollinaire admired, and that Picasso's ruthless brutality signals — the sadism, and more broadly emotional primitivism, made overt in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. It was an expressive release from conventional decorum — an act of daring that was criminal and inhumane in civilized life, but that could be carried out in the safety of art, where it seemed innovative and creative. (Less than a decade later, in Dadaism, the boundaries between life and art blur, to the extent that Breton could regard shooting a pistol in a crowd, which the boxer-poet Arthur Cravan did in lieu of giving a lecture, as an artistic act — indeed, the supreme “surrealist” act, rather than a pathological acting out — thus opening the way to what much later would be called happenings and performance art, already anticipated in Dadaism's antisocial “happenings,” which became its trademark.) Where Matisse's art is erotic, Picasso's art is thanatopic. Braque, who began as a Fauve and became a Cubist, understood neither the instinctively affirmative force of Fauvism nor the instinctively negative force of Cubism very well. For all the technical sophistication and ingenuity of his work, it lacks the intensity and determination of both Matisse's and Picasso's paintings. *Les Demoiselles* shocked and inspired him — he modeled his art on Picasso's after seeing it — but its violence was not innate to him. From the beginning, Braque was too balanced to be passionately positive or negative, which is why his Cubist works have been regarded as classical in spirit, however modern in appearance.

Cubism in fact began in emotional reaction to Fauvism — Braque deliberately moved away from its “paroxysm” (a code word for “orgasm”; Fauvism's color orgasms were as socially inappropriate and “barbaric” as Picasso's later orgies of destruction) while Picasso reacted to the sentimentalism and humanism of his own earlier Symbolism, exemplified by *La Vie* (1903) and *Les Saltimbanques* (1905), the masterpieces of his Blue and Rose periods, respectively. However suppressed, the Symbolism lingers on in the haunting quality of his first Cubist works, as has been suggested. They can be understood as an ironic response to his own development, hitherto dependent on traditional representation — a brutal irony intended to negate it and assert his independence. In the prehistory of Cubism, objects and figures are solid, durable and conventionally intelligible; in Cubism, their solidity, permanence and intelligibility are trivialized and mocked.

Disillusionment with reality is already evident in Picasso's Symbolist works; in his Cubist works, disillusionment becomes sadistically skeptical, and finally ironically malevolent. These feelings are directly reflected in the

destructive license he takes with the representation of reality.

The fact that no consensus of perception is possible on the basis of his Cubist representations indicates their anti-sociality and insecurity. Indeed, their skepticism and irony mask their insecurity, even as they express it. The result is a kind of caricature of reality. The critic Felix Fénéon had noted Picasso's tendency toward caricature. He in effect began his career as a caricaturist. "Friends and enemies were pilloried with equal vigour" in the "pitiless sketches" he made in Barcelona, Roland Penrose writes, stating — in what became the standard rationalization of Picasso's destructive contempt — that their "obvious cynicism" hid "a deeper research into the meaning beneath the external expression of the human face." In other words, Picasso was presumably interested in physiognomy, Johann Kaspar Lavater's idea that inner life revealed itself in human features — ironically confirmed by the bumpy features of the *Head of Fernande* (1909), a sculpture of the woman with whom Picasso was living at the time. Picasso once said that "all good portraits are in some degree caricatures," an idea that can be extended to his Cubist representations in general. They have been said to involve a dialectic of appearance and reality, but to reduce reality to constantly shifting appearance is to equivocate about its existence. Cubism shrouds reality in a hallucinatory haze that threatens our conviction in its givenness, which is an act of ironical aggression against it.

The subversive irony of Picasso's Cubism is especially evident in his brutal dismissal of woman's reality, which seems paranoid in import. The development from the *Head of Fernande* and *Woman with Pears (Fernande)* (1909) to *Young Woman* and *Nude Woman* (both 1910), traces the erosion of woman's appearance. She becomes completely unrecognizable, indeed, barely a figure — nothing but an agglomeration of abstract forms. It is not clear that they signify her; their significance seems to lie entirely in themselves. Her curves have become straight lines in *Nude Woman* — a token few are left over, untransformed but isolated in space. Her body has been deconstructed, as it were — "de-represented," I would prefer to say — and its parts disposed of.

She has, in fact, become disembodied, not to say disemboweled. Indeed, her eros has been erased. There is no longer woman's libidinous presence, but her ironical absence. She has in effect been liquidated — burned at an artistic stake. Where there was once woman there are now aesthetic ashes, aesthetic relics -- a residue of abstract forms. She has been completely undone, although her being survives nominally — that is, in the title of the painting. And perhaps as a "metaphysical" principle, having lost all her voluptuous physicality. The traditional nude has been dismantled into an anonymous modern ghost. Having worked his violence on woman, Picasso takes on his friends and supporters — the dealers Daniel Henry-Kahnweiler, Wilhelm Uhde, and Ambroise Vollard — in other Analytic Cubist portraits painted the same year,

1910. These works complete the destructive process begun with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

Nude Woman has been associated with the first x-ray of the whole body -- of a living woman, as it happens — made in 1907 by William Morton, as though Picasso also had “scientific insight” into the body, but the association only confirms his ambivalence about it, if not his destructive desire for it. (Or does the association unwittingly acknowledge his predatory sexual curiosity, eager to devour her — his wish to see inside woman, to understand the mystery of her sexuality and allure?) It has also been said that Cubism shows things in temporal becoming rather than as finished beings. In practice this means that *Nude Woman* can never be regarded as a being in her own right.

She is quite different from the women — and the figures in general — from the Blue and Rose periods. What these are about is perhaps most clearly expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke, whose *Fifth Duino Elegy* was inspired by *Les Saltimbanques*. It opens with the words: “But tell me, who are they, these acrobats, even a little more fleeting than we ourselves.” What becomes “acrobats” in English is “Fahrenden” in German, that is, “travellers.” Picasso’s “saltimbanques” are en route and rootless: a metaphor for existence.

Indeed, Rilke supposedly saw the letter “D” in their arrangement, signaling the German word “Dasein” — existence or “being-there.” The existential dimension of both the Blue and Rose period paintings is transparent. The figures are invariably lonely, isolated and melancholy, the space they inhabit invariably desolate and grim. Most of the Blue period paintings were made in Barcelona, before Picasso finally left it for permanent “exile” in Paris. They tend to be filled with “Gothic” mannerisms, and show the influence of El Greco in the elongated figures, who often have elongated fingers. While the Rose period works were made in Paris, and supposedly more “classical” and serene in character, reflecting Picasso’s happiness with his mistress Fernande — their relationship lasted for six years (1904-10) — the figures remain isolated and insular, even when they form family clusters, as in *Les Saltimbanques* and *Acrobat's Family with Ape*, also from 1905.

A baby is the focus of attention in the latter, and two children (and one adolescent) appear in the former, suggesting Picasso’s wish for a child (although, as Penrose notes, he was always interested in children, and engaged them readily). However, the adults are alienated — subtly at odds with one another. In *Harlequin's Family With an Ape* (1905) they relate to each through the child, and the ape steals the show, suggesting the fundamentally “animal” — largely sexual — character of their relationship. In *Les Saltimbanques*, each figure exists in a space of its own, and the woman exists in a space apart. (She wears a Majorcan hat and resembles a Tangara statuette, suggesting yet another influence on Picasso, who was as predatory and dependent on past art — the more offbeat the better, in line with his iconoclasm — as he was on

woman.) Even in the group formed by Picasso, the figure dressed as a harlequin, the obese jester and the little girl look past or away from each other.

The two boys try to bridge the distance between themselves and the woman — a mother and fertility symbol, as the flowers in her hat and vase at her side suggest (fertility is the subliminal issue of the work, as the little girl's basket of flowers, with its feminine shape — it evokes a vagina — suggests), but she looks away from them.

Thus the “tenderness” of the handling is undermined by the alienation of the figures — by the general air of solitude, suffering and indifference. *Les Saltimbanques* integrates the issue of the Blue period — the feeling of being an outcast — and of the Rose period — the struggle for intimacy, and with it tenderness. If *Les Saltimbanques* is evidence, Picasso seemed to have failed at the latter, or been clumsy at it — if he completely succeeded, he would have been letting down his guard, and giving his all to love rather than art (he seems a classic example of what Freud called the inability to integrate lust and care) — which confirmed his feeling of being an outcast, that is, alienated and an alien.

It may be that their air of alienation saves the Rose period paintings from sentimentality, but it is part of their sentimentality, for it is not ironical enough. They embellish the cliché of the unhappy family rather than convey the conflicts that make it unhappy. They start with a conventional assumption, and do not question it — examine the intricate dynamics of the family in intimate depth the way, for example, Edgar Degas's *Bellelli Family* (1858-67) does — the way Cubism later questioned the assumption that conventional representation was adequate to reality, exposing the fissures that revealed its inner dynamics. Certainly *The Soler Family* (1903) is psychologically inadequate. The point of the saltimbanques is not their unhappiness — they perform and stay together to survive economically, but they are otherwise rather detached from each other, suggesting that they are only a family in name, “technically” — but its embodiment in the desert that surrounds them and is between them, the emptiness of which they are a part. The members of the family have their differences — they seem largely to do with gender, age and power as *Acrobat on a Ball* (1905) suggests (along with *Meditation* (1904); it introduces what became the recurrent theme of a man reflecting on a woman, more particularly a conscious and self-conscious male figure, “experienced” in life, and an unself-conscious and often unconscious [sleeping] female figure, who remains innocent whatever her experience) — but they never erupt into open conflict, as the different planes and spaces do in Cubism.

The Blue period paintings are more conspicuously sentimental and forced in their mysteriousness, and sometimes in their subject matter, as the strange gesture of the young man in *La Vie* indicates — it seems out of character — unexpectedly assertive — for such an otherwise listless figure. The

meaning of his pointing figure is unclear, although it seems derived from the upward pointing finger of one of the apostles in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495-97) and, more probably, from the bizarre *St. John the Baptist* (finished ca. 1516), suggesting that the mother and child to whom the young man points are sacred. The image is probably a depiction of sacred and profane love, with the sexually intimate young couple symbolizing the latter. The same contrast is represented by *The Two Sisters* (1902), which Picasso himself described as "a picture . . . of a whore of St. Lazare and a nun," the latter consoling the former.

The pictures of both the Blue and Rose periods are allegorical, however much Picasso found his pathetic subject matter — especially for the Blue period — in the streets. *The Old Jew* and *The Old Guitarist* (both 1903) were beggars hoping for a handout, and the scenes pictured in *The Blind Man's Meal*, (also 1903) (the old Jew was also blind) and *the Frugal Repast* (1904), Picasso probably saw every day in the cheap restaurants in which he ate. The one-eyed madam *Celestine* (1903) probably also ate in them. (Picasso's preoccupation with blindness suggests anxiety about his perceptiveness, as though he is saying "there but for the grace of God go I." A similar ambivalent identification with the hungry suggests his fear that he will go hungry, at a time when he was not successful enough to eat well, and sometimes went hungry.)

But the point is that the blue atmosphere that surrounds and informs these figures turns them into symbols of an instantly readable emotion. The social context falls away — it is barely suggested — leaving an emblem behind, one not as enigmatic as it might seem at first glance, although Picasso may be calling attention to the enigma of emotion. But exaggerated sentimentalism is not the same as the sense of uncanniness accompanying unconscious emotion.

The physiology of virtually all the figures in the Blue and Rose periods works is distorted to physiognomic effect. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in *The Actor* (1904-5), the most dramatically elongated of all of Picasso's figures from either period. It is not simply that El Greco influenced Picasso, or that his work has a Gothic flavor, as the drapery of the female figures and the angularity of the male figures suggests, but that Picasso is heavily dependent on tradition for his expressive tropes. The conservative character of the Blue and Rose periods is confirmed not only by their reliance on conventional perspective, however residual and tenuous, but on their conventional iconography. Their meaning is straightforward — indeed, all too obvious — which is why they are easy to read. Picasso still has a long way to go to arrive at the much more complex narrative of *Minotaurmachie* (1935) or, for that matter, *Three Musicians* (1921).

Their scrambled meanings — meaning overload — and compositional intricacy gives them an expressive density that the one-dimensional Blue

and Rose period works never approach, however moving they may be. The figure resting its head on a hand in *Portrait of Jaime Sabartès* (1901) and *Meditation* is a long-standing, somewhat familiar sign of melancholy. The 1905 *Nude* with her hands over her genital is a traditionally modest Venus. (Even *Les Demoiselles* modestly covers their genital area, with drapery if not hands.) Influences and appropriations abound — Toulouse-Lautrec in *The Courtesan with a Jeweled Necklace* and Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas in *The Blue Room*, (both 1901) — suggesting how derivative the Blue and Rose period works are, beneath their monochromatic veneer. Their uniformity of color imposes a dramatic unity on the works, making them more noticeable than they would otherwise be.

Nonetheless, there is an uncommunicativeness and muteness about Picasso's figures that makes them uncanny. Perhaps it involves resignation to their fates, perhaps it comes from knowing their place, perhaps it is meant to please and propitiate the public on whose mercy they depend — but it gives them interiority and true selfhood. Blue and rose are mantles confirming the authenticity of their existence. This uncommunicativeness — a certain silent presence, at once stolid and stoic — achieves a new presence in Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (1906). Her mask-like face — the very embodiment of muteness, now become aggressive, assertive, confrontational (as though in preparation for *Les Demoiselles*) — marks Picasso's break with the sentimentalism of his Blue and Rose works. Blue and rose are abandoned for a more sober, symbolically neutral brown — but then it is the color of earth, and Stein was one of Picasso's first serious collectors, thus making her a kind of supportive mother — which adds to the sense of the bulkiness and silence of the figure.

Picasso's portrait introduces the sculptural element that became so important in Cubism. The objects in Braque's first Cubist paintings reminded the critic Charles Morice of statues, and Picasso was able to finalize the head of Gertrude Stein — he apparently had great difficulty “getting it right” — when he “modeled” it on pre-Roman Iberian sculpture, which had been exhibited in Paris, as well as bronze works found at a site near Malaga, which is where he was born in 1881. The flared nose, the incisive eyes, with their dark pupils intensely focused on something unseen by the viewer, and the general severity of the head, convey the same elemental emotion as the Blue and Rose period works. But the lithic impenetrability of the head is new, along with the robust body. Gertrude Stein clearly took up space; she was not an emaciated phantom, like many of the figures in the Blue and Rose period paintings. She was not a mirage that would evaporate but a substance that one could touch.

Her substantialness is a prelude to what Braque called the “manual space” of Cubism — space that appealed to touch rather than vision alone. The point was to bring the objects in a picture “within . . . reach,” creating the

illusion of taking “full possession” of them, thus conveying “a full experience of space.” This was the revolutionary hands-on alternative to the “eye-fooling illusionism” of “scientific perspective,” which “forces the objects in a picture to disappear away from the beholder.” Braque’s repudiation of Renaissance perspective has been thought to involve a return to the medieval idea of flattened space, which nonetheless creates the illusion of being in relief. Braque’s early Cubist objects have been associated with such objects as the tables in Robert Campin’s *Mérode Altarpiece* (ca. 1425-28), which tilt upward toward the viewer, so that they seem to be glimpsed from above, while their bases are seen in profile. From one perspective the table seems precariously constructed, but the side view shows it to be firmly placed on the ground.

More generally, painted Cubist objects resemble the grisaille illusions of sculpture in the works of the Flemish primitives (as they were called at the time), for example, the two saints on the outer panels of the closed *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432) by Hubert and Jan van Eyck. The Cubist paintings are brown and green rather than gray, but they have the same muted tone, and gray comes to play a larger and larger part in them, virtually taking them over in Picasso’s two paintings of *Woman with a Mandolin*, *Girl with a Mandolin* (*Fanny Tellier*) and *Nude*, as well as Braque’s *Violin and Candlestick* (all 1910). The planes in these works overlap and interlock, creating a sculptural effect: the figures seem to be freestanding abstract constructions in three-dimensional space. The vigorously painted chiaroscuro adds to their density — their ironical solidity. But they have the pallor of death, and the shakiness of their construction makes them seem like skeletons in a dance of death. Indeed, the dramatizing of the emptiness — negative space — that surrounds them, and which they sometimes merge with, confirms their negative aura — their strange hollowness.

Negative color, negative space, negated figures — all this extends the aura of vulnerability, suffering and bleakness evident in the Blue and Rose periods to a morbidly grand climax. Death is personified in these weirdly monumental female figures.

The blocky buildings in Picasso’s *Reservoir at Horta* (1909) — many of the planes are gray, to the extent that grayness seems to be creeping over the picture like some sort of incurable infection — have a sculptural quality, but *Three Women* (1907-8) and *Dryad* (1908) are more aggressively sculptural.

This derives directly from a number of deliberately crude, “savage” sculptures — all of female nudes — that Picasso executed in 1907. Picasso’s primitivism is clearly sculptural in origin and import, that is, it is an attempt to make the figure more forcefully present, and as such more urgent with instinct. But I think it is in the still life (“nature morte”) that Picasso and Braque make the meaning of their use of sculptural form transparently clear: not just to add the resonance of reality that things in three-dimensional space have to the rep-

resentation of them on the flat space of the canvas, but rather to turn them into stone. The objects in Picasso's *Still Life with Hat (Cézanne's Hat)* and *Bread and Fruit Disk on a Table*, and Braque's *Fruit Dish* (all 1908-9), are like petrified wood: nature is, indeed, completely dead. It has been silenced. Picasso's use of sculpture confirms his destructive tendency — his death wish toward things, his wish to annihilate in a show of power over them — however much Braque may rationalize that destructiveness in formal terms, because he neither shares nor understands it. (I will later argue that they try to resurrect things — just as Christ resurrected Lazarus from the dead — in their Synthetic Cubist works.)

At the same time, the anti-naturalism of the still lifes confirms the decadence of Cubism. That is, it shares the decadent belief in the superiority of art to nature and, more crucially, the wish to replace nature with art. A sculpture is a direct replacement, whatever its symbolic fidelity to the nature displaced. It is also silent and static as nature never is.

Landscapes increasingly tend to look like still lifes, as in Braque's *Harbor* (1908-9) and his four paintings of the *Castle at La Roche-Guyon* (all 1909). The building is for all pictorial purposes a still life, as it is in Picasso's *Houses on the Hill, Horta del Ebro* (1909). Braque's *Violin and Palette* (1909) is famous for the introduction of the illusion of a realistic nail (it casts a shadow) into an otherwise unrealistic picture. But the nail is a foil for the violin at the bottom of the picture. They are contrasting kinds of space: the nail and its shadow create the illusion of depth, while the fragmented violin, with its planes jutting into space, is more literally three-dimensional — truly "sculptural." Even when the musical instrument seems to diffuse into space, as in Braque's *Mandola* (1909-10), it has a sculptural presence that suggests that the space in which it rests is three-dimensional, however ironically (as its crystallization into planar fragments suggests.) Sometimes the object seems to disperse in space, as in Braque's *Piano and Mandola* and *Le Sacré-Coeur* (both 1909-10), and sometimes it seems more concentrated in itself, as in Braque's *Violin and Pitcher* and *Woman with a Mandolin* (both 1910).

In either case it remains peculiarly three-dimensional by reason of the density of its planes, giving them a relief-like character (as in primitive medieval art). In general, the interplay of planes throughout the pictures make them seem like relief sculptures, creating the illusion that they are autonomous objects that project into actual space, thus adding an aura of tangibility to their silent presence.

Part 4

Like Matisse and Picasso, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Heckel were obsessed with the female nude, as a symbol of their own intense sexuality

as well as a seductive return to primitive nature. But the Southern landscapes of Matisse and Picasso are a long way from the Northern woods surrounding Kirchner's *Bathers at Moritzburg* (1909) and those in Heckel's *Forest Pond* (1910).

In the cold North, one could only strip naked and bathe during the summer; otherwise one is restricted to the urban studio. The imagery of Kirchner and Heckel oscillates between indoor and outdoor scenes, sometimes with an attempt to make the indoors seem like the healthier outdoors, as in Kirchner's *Fränzi with Bow and Arrow* (1909-11), *Girl with Cat, Fränzi* (1910) and *Nude Behind a Curtain; Fränzi* (1910-26), where exotic nature motifs, derived from the warm tropics, form the background. The female nude fits right in, as the forest green and sky blue contours of her flattened body indicate. In *Self-Portrait with Model* (ca. 1910), Kirchner is implicitly naked — the natural man — under his robe, which is as colorful and fresh as the landscapes in his outdoor paintings. Thus the studio is an exotic and erotic world apart — a kind of “second nature,” as it were.

For Kirchner and Heckel, woman's naked body was always primal, rather than simply a studio prop, as it often seemed to be for Matisse and Picasso, however much they used it for their own expressive purpose. Woman's naked presence was healing, as well as emblematic of sexual freedom and pleasure. To strip naked was a socially revolutionary act as well as a revolutionary return to origins.

For the German Expressionists, the former entailed the latter: one didn't rebel against existing society to make a better society, but to escape society altogether by returning to nature. One felt more alive and healthy in it than one ever could in society. Kirchner's *Striding into the Sea* (1912) shows the existentially ideal situation: a man and woman, unashamed of their nakedness, fearlessly walking into the ocean together. Forgetting that they ever wore clothes, they have become natural creatures in a natural environment. They are lovers, rather than at odds, at peace with one another rather than antagonists in the battle between the sexes. They are emotional equals, sharing the redemptive freshness of the sea, renewing themselves by entering the element in which life originated.

Utopia is still possible, the picture suggests: one can escape society and recover one's authenticity in nature — escape the modern world and recover one's sense of inhabiting the body given to one by nature, which is fundamental to one's sense of being.

Kirchner's new Adam and Eve are a long way from the properly dressed men and women — their bodies are censored by their clothes — he observed on a *Dresden Street* (1908), a *Berlin Street* (1913) and Berlin's *Friedrichstrasse* (1914), just as his lush *Landscape in Spring* (1909) is a long way from the desolate man-made space depicted in *The Red Tower in Halle*

(1915). The women in the two Berlin paintings are prostitutes, emotionally stunted women renting their bodies to whomever can pay the price. They are urban necessities — socially sanctioned outlets for sexually uptight, lonely men.

In sharp contrast, the emotionally healthy nature nudes give themselves freely to the lover of their choice, without worrying about social conventions and constraints. The men they love are as comfortable with their own bodies as the women are with their naked bodies. For both, love-making is a spontaneous, natural, guiltless act rather than a compulsive rebellion against social repression, which as such is likely to be fraught with emotional problems. We see such natural lovers in a series of drawings that Kirchner made in 1909. They are daring drawings, not so much because they show naked people making love — the quickness of the lines suggests the spontaneity with which they do so — but because they show them smiling happily as they do so.

Kirchner and Heckel were the leading figures in “Die Brücke” (“The Bridge”), an organization of artists that originated in Dresden in 1905, and disbanded in 1913. (In 1911 Kirchner, Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, the other major figure, moved to Berlin.) They are the seminal German Expressionists, along with “Der Blaue Reiter” (“The Blue Rider”).

This latter was a more informal group of artists, loosely associated with Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc around 1912, the year they produced their so-called almanac (it appeared only once). Their purpose was different: Brücke imagery oscillates between urban society and natural paradise — the studio is an intermediate zone, a kind of limbo in which both can meet — while Blaue Reiter imagery is mystical. Both groups were emotional revolutionaries — emotional freedom mattered to them above all — but the Blaue Reiter artists were more aesthetically revolutionary than the Brücke artists. The former carried Expressionism to an abstract extreme — they were in pursuit of complete aesthetic freedom, which meant freedom from representation — that the latter never approached, however free their handling. For both, aesthetic freedom was a symbol of emotional freedom — the therapeutic freedom to express one’s emotions, leading one to discover that one had emotions one didn’t know one had. But the Blaue Reiter artists were freer than the Brücke artists because they also wanted spiritual freedom — the freedom that came with having a higher consciousness, giving one a sense of being a completely integrated self. They are less concerned with the difference between the unhealthy urban environment and the health-giving landscape than they are with the transcendence of both.

Because of this, Blaue Reiter Expressionism is different in kind from Brücke Expressionism, both in its visual dynamics and idealism. This is why it will be considered in the next chapter, along with the work of other abstract artists — the first to emerge in the twentieth century — with a similar interest

in conveying transcendental experience by abstract means.

However much conflict there is in Blaue Reiter art, it is about resolving conflict rather than displaying it, as Brücke art does when taken as a whole. There may be moments of conflict-resolution in nature, but then nature is always at odds with society in Brücke art. Sexual intimacy is a short-lived triumph over society. In Blaue Reiter art, on the other hand, there are neither life-redeeming natural nudes nor life-threatened prostitutes, which clearly sets it apart.

Presumably the absence of the female factor shows its higher purpose. It is an art of sublimation — it strives to be sublime, and to represent the sublime — rather than of sexual anxiety. Indeed, it assumes that one can escape anxiety — Cézanne's anxiety, countered by Matisse's hedonism and escalating into Picasso's destructiveness (the fork in the road of early twentieth century art) — by becoming abstract, that is, detached from external reality (if not entirely removed from subjective reality).

As Kirchner's *Nude in a Blooming Meadow* (1909) makes clear, the Brücke artists were influenced by Fauvism, and as *Still Life with Mask* and the emphatic features of the mask-like face of the *Nude on a Blue Ground* (both 1911) show, they were also influenced by African masks, like Matisse and Picasso, as well as Oceanic art. (Indeed, Gauguin was more important to them than Cézanne.) But these masks meant different things to the French and German artists. For the latter, they were the instruments of an investigation into the origin of creativity, not only a dramatic expressive device, socially and aesthetically rebellious. The masks symbolized the law of the jungle, and the law of the jungle was a breath of creative life, freedom and originality for the Brücke Expressionists, not only an aesthetic opportunity. In Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, the mask is a startling representational novelty, substituting for the natural appearance of the all-too-familiar human face, and thus socially disturbing. But in Kirchner the mask is the direct expression of inner life, and as such inherently creative rather than a superimposed idea.

Wilhelm Uhde's advocacy of naive painting and Paul Klee's fascination with children's art — already in 1912 he praised it — were part of the same attempt to understand the nature of creativity. To be creative meant to return to primordial nature — the implicit goal was to be as creative as nature. More particularly, it meant the recovery of primordial human nature from its social encrustations, which is what naive painting, children's art and African masks — and later, in the 1920s, psychotic art — was thought to accomplish. Primitivism is peculiarly archaeological, in that it is an attempt to dig up what has been buried alive by society; only the spiritually innocent can succeed in doing so. Kirchner's own primitive sculptures, like *Male Nude — Adam* and *Female Nude — Eve* (both 1923), are magnificent examples of his wood carving, more convincing in their primitivism than Picasso's earlier primitivist sculp-

tures (as is Heckel's *Crouching Woman* (1914)) — seem to have been excavated from the depths of the earth, as though from a forgotten layer of archaic time. They seem to have been made by someone who never knew classical sculpture — certainly not at its most refined. Indeed, someone who was completely untrained in the making of fine art — some anonymous person from a primitive civilization, if it can be called that.

The works of untrained artists were presumably natural, innocent expressions — spontaneous, original creations, free of unnecessary civilized refinements. The Brücke artists struggled to achieve the untrained, primitive, naively expressive look of innocent emotionality — Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh were also their models in this — as their nudes and landscapes show. They wanted no Cubist irony — no Cubist spatial sophistication: Cubist ambiguity was artificial and manufactured, and as such pseudo-expressive, rather than natural and spontaneous, and thus authentically expressive and experiential. From a German Expressionist point of view, Cubism (Kirchner repudiated it as inhuman, “far from the real soil of art”) is an intellectual fabrication rather than an emotional response to nature that captures its originality, thereby making itself original, that is, an expression of primordial being. Cubism has a supercilious attitude to nature, and as such is blind to its elemental originality — out of touch with what is most alive, visceral and existentially significant in it.

The critic Clement Greenberg argued that Cubism was the aesthetic high road of twentieth century art, and for this reason more authentically avant-garde than Expressionism. For Cubism pointed the way to pure, autonomous art — art that is about nothing other than itself, in an endless process of self-criticism, purging itself of everything that is beside the point of its material medium, especially what Greenberg called “human interest” (painting is not story-telling or picture-making, but rather about surface, space and color as such). Nonetheless, Expressionism remains the most influential twentieth century art because of its emphasis on self-expression in a society in which the self is at risk, as the Brücke artists recognized.

Expressionism is also far from indifferent to the medium, as Brücke woodcuts, and the general expressionist emphasis on texture and facture, indicate. In fact, Expressionism involves a constant search for new material and imagistic means to express the self, for it realizes that none are ever quite adequate to its depth and subtlety. The self quickly outgrows its medium, requiring a fresh investment of it in a new medium of expression. To an Expressionist, every medium seems limited — the German Expressionists worked in all of them — because self-expression is limitless, and more complex than any material.

(The woodcuts are the most dramatically primitivist and expressive work produced by the Brücke, especially because of the extremes of black and

white that define their space. They have an air of precarious spontaneity that is quintessentially Brücke, all the more so because it recapitulates the awkwardness of medieval German woodcuts. They also liked working in wood — their wood sculptures are another example — because it was a natural material. In general, the Brücke artists were influenced by German medieval art, which they experienced as primitive, if not in the same manner as African and Oceanic art. But both had nothing to do with classical art, particularly in its Renaissance reincarnation.)

Cubism has become obsolete, but Expressionism has survived, constantly reinventing itself, as shown by the American Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s, and the Berlin New Fauves (“Neue Wilden”) and more broadly the New German Expressionism that emerged in the 1980s. This suggests that the self remains under siege in the modern world — that emotional freedom, or what the historian Meyer Shapiro called “inner freedom,” remains rare — and that art must serve it with every means at its disposal. This gives art a sense of inner purpose — what Kandinsky referred to as “inner necessity” — which it loses once it has become totally pure. Purity dead-ends in sterility, as is clear from the Post-Painterly Abstraction — really Post-Expressionistic Abstraction — that Greenberg advocated in the 1960s, as the next “real” avant-garde step.

The Expressionist nude in the Expressionist landscape conveys the seamless merger of human nature and the nature in which it was originally at home — the nature that is the most authentic expression of being. The difference between the Brücke representation of nature and of urban reality parallels the distinction between the creative state of being that comes from being natural and the uncreative result of an unnatural way of life. The return to nature in Brücke imagery is a return to creative originality, which the individual loses in the crowded modern city. What was necessary was a re-naturing of the denatured individual, who could then passionately express his or her natural creativity. In short, the therapeutic goal of Brücke Expressionism was the recovery of innate creativity, more particularly, the spontaneously creative, emotionally resonant artistic expression natural to human nature.

The issue of a creative cure for emotional ailments haunts Brücke art. Heckel’s triptych *Convalescence* (1913) is the consummate example. In the center is an urbane, sickly woman. Her angular chin and elbows suggest the unnatural, indoor way of life that made her sick, and her agitated fingers convey her anxiety. She is clearly not at ease in her person, as her pained, tense expression confirms. Her suffering seems more mental than physical. Deliberately holding herself upright, she nonetheless is unable to lift herself off her bed, despite the fact that she has no physical disability. The weakness of her body is an expression of her mental suffering. The right panel shows giant sunflowers, turned toward her with their life-giving luminosity and radiance

— their glorious warmth. Compared to them, she seems small and irrelevant. The natural, expansive curves of the sunflowers form a startling contrast with the unnatural angles of the woman's cramped body. The right panel shows another plant and a peasant girl — a kind of primitive, who seems carved out of wood. She is a sturdy creature — the antithesis of the emotional invalid she is attending. The flourishing plants have all the *joie de vivre* that the convalescent woman lacks. They have the healing power of nature in full bloom. Their natural presence should help her recover her health — the good mental health that comes from being natural.

Heckel's dramatic juxtaposition of the living, growing, healthy, extroverted plants and the sickly, city-bred, sophisticated, introverted woman — the tension between them is unresolved, for it is not clear that she is receptive to their vitality, not clear that she has the will to recover — epitomizes Brücke art. Heckel's convalescent could be a patient in the sanatorium that Thomas Mann described in his novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924). Like many of the patients there, she may be a chronic case. She has come for the cure, but she may be incurable — a permanent invalid.

The contest between sickness and health — the "sickness unto death," as Soren Kierkegaard called depression, and nature, which represents health and happiness — has ended in a tie in Heckel's masterpiece. Sometimes Brücke pictures are entirely about excruciating suffering — Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as Soldier* and *Artillery Men* (both 1915) are famous examples (in the former, Kirchner has lost his painting arm, suggesting his feeling of castration, while the latter are herded together in a claustrophobic space and victimized by an authority figure) — and sometimes they are exclusively about health, especially when they depict nature. Indeed, the Brücke artists sought health in untouched nature, the more untouched — uncivilized — the better. Schmidt-Rottluff traveled to the remotest reaches of Norway to find raw terrain; Emile Nolde, who briefly joined the Brücke in 1905, found inspiration "in the brisk air of the North Sea," as Kirchner said; and Heckel and Kirchner found it in the area around the Moritzburg lakes, where they were able to paint the female nude outdoors, as though she was a part of the landscape, her body an expression of unadulterated nature. In general, for the Brücke artists, the female body registered every nuance of nature, and the mood in which the artist expressed his nature.

Brücke landscapes are sometimes allegories of sickness and health, like Heckel's *Convalescence*. Heckel's *Landscape in Thunderstorm* (1913), with its burst of light from dark clouds, suggests that radiant health might come from great suffering — from a depression that brings one to the door of psychic death. Mental suffering and physical sickness were paradoxical for the Brücke painters: they were tests of strength, will power and endurance. If one had the courage to survive them, they showed themselves to be rites of

passage to a more wholesome, vigorous, natural state of being than is ever possible in society.

Sometimes sickness is explicitly mental, and incurable, as Heckel's *The Madman* (1914) makes clear. The Brücke artists in general were interested in extreme mental states, just as they used extreme colors. But the disturbed person is often a young woman, as Heckel's *Sick Girl* (1912) and *Suffering Girl* (1914) indicate, although, as Kirchner's *Sick Woman; Woman with Hat* (1913) as well as Heckel's *Convalescence* show, she can be older. It is to their credit that the Brücke artists do not present woman simply as a sex object — nothing but a desirable body — but give women an inner life, and with that autonomy. They in fact see women as all too human in a way that Matisse and Picasso rarely do. Even earlier, in woodcuts made between 1905-10, woman is presented, by both Heckel and Kirchner, as a somewhat troubled, introverted being, except when she is extrovertedly at play in nature. The problem was to feel more alive than dead in a society that made one feel more dead than alive. Woman was the symbol of life, but she too had become tainted by death, almost losing her will to live, becoming listless and depressed — except when she represented life in nature. For Heckel and Kirchner, woman became the battleground on which the struggle between sickness and health — depression and vitality — was fought.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in their fascination with the immature, unwholesome body of the adolescent Fränzi, whom both portrayed. Breastless and thin, she hardly seems a woman, even as her erotic allure — she wears bright red lipstick — suggests that she is a grown one. She is an unsavory mix of femme fatale and innocent child, neither exactly true to who she is. She is in fact an indifferent girl who has no identity, and as such is the perfect instrument for the artists' fantasies. She is a blank screen on which they can project their own confused identities. Kirchner's *Girl with Cat*, *Fränzi* and Heckel's *Fränzi with Doll* (1910) are strangely sick pictures, all the more so because they turn her into an exotic native. She looks as though she's been carved of wood, and as such theatrically contrived and crudely natural at once — a fake primitive. In both works, Fränzi seems depressed by the role she plays, even as her bright coloration suggests her vitality. She remains unmoved by all the attention she receives, inert despite the animated color that covers her like tattoos. They eroticize her body into a fantastic mirage, but the blink of an eye shows it to be a farcical illusion. They try to make her into pure, eager, hot-blooded instinct — which is what they felt themselves to be, for all their emotional troubles — but underneath she remains as cold as society. Fränzi epitomizes their ambivalence about woman — and themselves.

Uncertain as to whether she is a naive girl or a knowing woman — uncertain about her body and state of mind — she represents their own uncertainty about their psychosomatic state. The manic color of their paintings, and

the often depressed figures they paint, show their effort to transform sickness into health. Or else the possibility of health proposed through the color is a defense against the melancholy mood of the figures, which lifts only when they leave society for nature. Heckel's *Two Friends* (1912) are a long way from the naked couple *Striding into the Sea*. They have to escape from society, or they will be scorned and mocked by it, like Kirchner's *Couple before the People* (1924). Kirchner's couple are free spirits, as their nakedness shows, and like Christ in many medieval pictures – Kirchner's painting is consciously composed like one — they are spat upon by the crowd.

“Art as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life,” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in one of the fragments that came to be collected after his death in *The Will To Power* (1901), and the art of the Brücke seems concentrated in their luminous color, which is full of life, and thus triumphs over the disease of denying life that so many of their figures seem to suffer from. Nietzsche was an important influence on the Brücke artists and Expressionism in general, particularly because he believed that the artist was — or should be — that most healthy and heroic of human beings, the *Übermensch*. Indeed, Heckel made a 1905 woodcut portrait of him looking like one — it is worth comparing to the more demented looking 1912 portrait by Otto Dix — suggesting just how great an inspiration he was to the Brücke artists. (Nietzsche thought of himself as an artist, although he was far from healthy physically and mentally, and had little insight into himself, however grand a conception of himself he had.) For Nietzsche “art and nothing but art... is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.... Art as the redemption of the sufferer — as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a great delight.”

It was not exactly that for the Brücke artists, nor do they seem to have willed their suffering, but suffered involuntarily, like other victims of life. Moreover, while they regarded primitive life in nature and primitive art as healthy, they sometimes found that even primitive people suffered, as Kirchner's crude *Old Peasant* (1919-20), Paula Modersohn-Becker's pious *Old Peasant Woman* (ca. 1905-7) and grim *Old Poorhouse Woman with Glass Bottle and Poppy* (1906) indicate. The Expressionists never lived up to Nietzsche's extravagant ideal of the artist. And art didn't always work to redeem life for them, especially when life became exceptionally difficult, as Kirchner's post-war mental breakdown and later suicide (1938), in the wake of being labeled a degenerate artist by the Hitler regime, suggests. Nor is it clear that they had Nietzsche's fanatical belief in the life-giving power of art — however much they wanted to be true believers — as the persistent morbid undertone to their art indicates.

Max Pechstein understood that suffering was also sometimes present in pleasure, as his 1920 *Self-Portrait with Death* and a lurid nude suggests. (It

is a work in the Germanic Triumph of Death tradition, relating particularly to Hans Baldung-Grien's pictures of beautiful women and Death.) He has clearly come a long way from *Evening in the Dunes* (1911), with its voluptuous female nudes, made all the more seductive by the red of the setting sun. Unlike Pechstein, Modersohn-Becker was not a member of the Brücke, but she understood that suffering could last a lifetime — right to death — and she knew that flowers were hardly the consolation that Heckel seemed to think they were in *Convalescence*. She also knew that art was better at representing suffering than redeeming it — better at representing the denial of life than its affirmation, as Nolde's famous gloomy, somewhat demented *Prophet* (1912) suggests. Even Nolde's primitively painted images of the life of a rather primitive Christ (1909-12) were morbid, for all their brilliant, in-your-face color. It is worth noting that they were begun after a serious illness, and seem designed to recuperate his emotional losses — to lift him out of depression — as their bizarre, somewhat disturbed, compulsive (certainly headlong) expression of "spirituality, religion and inwardness" (his words) suggests. They, in fact, seem to have more to do with madness than spirituality. Certainly, their grotesquely distorted figures and harsh, manic texture — their general air of vehemence and violence — have little to do with the usual idea of spiritual aspiration, although there is perhaps a relationship to the kind of spirituality visible in Louis Corinth's *Dancing Dervish* (1904), an influential proto-Expressionist painting.

Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait with Camellia* (1907) and Ludwig Meidner's *My Night Visage* (1913) are the extremes of Expressionist self-portraiture. To my mind's eye, the portrait of the madman wins out over the portrait of the gently smiling woman. Meidner's portrait seems truer to his inner life than Modersohn-Becker's seems to her inner life. His weird expression and staring eyes — his general confrontational demeanor — seem more psychologically authentic than her tranquil smile, which seems posed — all too deliberate — however genuine the feeling of well-being it conveys may be. But even Modersohn-Becker has a dark side, as the black inner frame and her mask-life face — it has a certain resemblance to that of Picasso's Gertrude Stein — suggests. Her fixed smile seems to hide something more ominous in her personality — something evident in her imposing, primitive figure.

The German Expressionists were more attuned to dementia than happiness — more afraid of going mad than determined to enjoy life and nature. The fear of madness poisoned their feeling for life and nature, which was an escapist antidote for it that did not always work. Apart from the fact that Meidner's turbulent handling and dark background, broken by his illuminated figure and the lurid contrast of red and green (the blood red neck suggests that he might just be crazy enough to slash his neck, and the flash of whiteness on his forehead suggests the explosive electricity in his brain) make for a more

dramatic, intense picture than Modersohn-Becker's use of subdued tones, muted contrasts and a generally pious atmosphere, Modersohn-Becker's picture lacks the hallucinatory quality and visionary power of Meidner's. In 1912, in an essay "On the Nature of Visions," the Austrian Expressionist Oskar Kokoschka declared that art involves reaching "a level of consciousness at which we experience visions within ourselves." These visions impart "a power to the mind," and "can be evoked but never defined." Modersohn-Becker's self-portrait is all too defined, and lacks the disruptive — and eruptive — dreamlike quality that Kokoschka regards as essential to a vision. Modersohn-Becker's portrait does not "RELEASE CONTROL" — Kokoschka capitalizes the words that epitomize the Germanic idea of expression — but rather suggests an all too controlled person, rather than one whose "self and personal existence" have been "fused into a larger experience" — the experience of the unconscious. It is an experience of what the Neo-Expressionist Georg Baselitz calls "pandemonium," the sign of madness.

In short, Modersohn-Becker's self-portrait does not show the release of conscious control — the madness in both handling and image — that Meidner's does. Her face is not beside itself with unconsciousness. It has not surrendered itself to unconscious expression, to forces beyond her control: Modersohn-Becker's face is not distorted by the urgent, uncontainable unconscious forces that have wrecked Meidner's face, suggesting that he has almost lost his conscious sense of himself. Her self-portrait thus lacks visionary intensity: she keeps a straight face. She has a secure sense of herself. The difference between inner and outer selves — emotional reality and outer appearance — has not been blurred, as it has in Meidner's self-portrait. We understand and empathize with her, but we do not understand and empathize with Meidner. It is too dangerous to do so — to enter into the spirit of his picture is to become mad ourselves. The conflict between conscious control and loss of control because of the explosive unconscious is what makes Meidner's visage so terrifying. Thus Modersohn-Becker's self-portrait does not arise from the depths of her unconscious as his does.

Hers is not an unconscious self-expression, that is, an expression of her unconscious sense of herself. Her picture is not marked by the dynamics and drama of the unconscious the way genuine (self-) expression is for the German Expressionists. Instead, it reveals her self-consciousness, self-possession, self-control, however deeply moved she seems to be. But happiness is not as deep as madness, as Meidner's genuinely expressionist self-portrait indicates.

Notes

¹ Jack D. Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 36.

- ² Dore Ashton, ed., *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (New York: Viking, 1972), 45.
- ³ Quoted in Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 72.
- ⁴ *ModernStarts: People, Places, Things* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
- ⁵ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Viking, 1971), 67.
- ⁶ John Elderfield, "Representing People: The Story and the Sensation," *ModernStarts*, 39.
- ⁷ Quoted in Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 81.
- ⁸ Barbara Beaumont, ed., *The Road from Decadence, From Brothel to Cloister: Selected Letters of J. K. Huysmans* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 131.
- ⁹ Flam, 38.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Sarah Whitfield, "Fauvism," *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 21.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹² Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 144.
- ¹³ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 35.
- ¹⁴ Flam, 36.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹⁶ LeRoy C. Breunig, ed., *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews 1902-1918* (New York: Viking, 1972), 51.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-16.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.
- ¹⁹ Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), 209.
- ²⁰ Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 84.

Chapter 2: Spiritualism And Nihilism; The Second Decade

A general interest in abstraction is being reborn, both in the superficial form of the movement towards the spiritual, and in the forms of occultism, spiritualism, monism, the "new" Christianity, theosophy and religion in the broadest sense....

Finally, science itself, in its most positive branches — physics and chemistry — is reaching a threshold whereon is inscribed the Great Question: Is there such a thing as matter?

Wassily Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?," 1911¹

We wish to glorify War — the only health giver of the world — militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful Ideas that kill, the contempt for woman.

We wish to destroy the museums, the libraries, to fight against moralism, feminism and all opportunistic and utilitarian meanesses.

F. T. Marinetti, "Initial Manifesto of Futurism," February 20, 1909

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with "literature." It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a state of mind — to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés — to get free. The "blank" force of Dada was very salutary. It told you "don't forget you are not quite so blank as you think you are!"...Dada was very serviceable as a purgative.

Marcel Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in this Country," 1946²

Part 1

There's an intimate connection between the spiritualism and the nihilism that emerged in the avant-garde art of the second decade of the twentieth century — that's the thesis I want to propound in this chapter. The two great innovations of the decade are abstract art and Dadaism, which hardly seem to have anything to do with each other. The former is fraught with spiritual aspirations that make it seem more than art, while the latter is nihilistic to the extent that it doesn't seem to be art, or else is art only in an ironic sense, or, as

it came to be thought of, “Novelty Art” and, finally, “anti-art.” But there is a strong streak of nihilism — anarchistic alienation — in spiritual abstract art. And there is a certain reluctant, ironic — one might say unsentimental — spirituality in Dadaism, underneath its belligerence, which often seems like a pose, a calculated acting out.

In *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911) — the bible of abstraction, as it were — Kandinsky declared that pure abstract art is “one of the most powerful agents of [the] spiritual life” in its protest and struggle against “the long reign of materialism... the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude.” In “Dadaist Disgust,” in the final section of his *Dada Manifesto* (1918) (the argument begins with a section titled “Dada Means Nothing”), the poet Tristan Tzara stated that Dada is “a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action.” “Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation... is Dada,” he declared. Tzara’s rabid negativism reappeared two years later in Francis Picabia’s *Dada Manifesto*, which, after trashing Cubism — “cubed paintings of the primitives, cubed Negro sculptures, cubed violins, cubed guitars, cubed the illustrated papers, cubed shit,” all designed to “cube money” — declared that “Dada itself wants nothing, nothing, nothing, it’s doing something so that the public can say: ‘We understand nothing, nothing, nothing.’” Picabia, who said he “knows nothing, nothing, nothing,” declared that “the Dadaists... will come to nothing, nothing, nothing.” It is “farce, farce, farce, farce, farce.” It is hard to find a more consummate statement of nihilism — what Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the first Dadaists, called Dada’s “nihilism and its love of paradox”³ — in the history of avant-garde art.

Apart from nothing, what did Dada offer? The “abolition of logic,” as Tzara said, and its replacement by “spontaneity.” Dadaism officially began in February 1916 with the founding in Zürich of the Cabaret Voltaire by Hugo Ball, a poet and philosopher, and Emily Hennings, a nightclub entertainer.

They were in neutral Switzerland, and undisturbed by the war. Is that why they could be spontaneous? Here is an example of their spontaneity: Ball played the piano, Huelsenbeck beat on a drum, and Tzara wiggled his bottom, presumably in the audience’s face. “We want to shit in different colors to adorn the zoo of art,” he wrote; presumably this was his way of doing so.

Sometimes Huelsenbeck would “roar my lungs out, more like a side-show barker than a reciter of verse, and wave my cane about in the air. The spectators saw me as an arrogant and utterly belligerent young man,” he wrote. “Other performances featured raucous noises, simultaneous readings of poems in several languages (or no known language), African chants, jazz songs, dances, shouts and anything else that would outrage public opinion. Dada painter and historian Hans Richter put it this way: ‘The devising and raising of public hell was an essential function of any Dada movement, whether its goal was pro-art, non-art, or anti-art. And when the public, like insects or bacteria, had

developed immunity to one kind of poison, we had to think of another.... It seemed to me the Swiss authorities were much more suspicious of Dadaists, who were all capable of performing some new enormity at any moment, than of [the] quiet, studious Russians"⁴ — Vladimir Lenin lived near the Cabaret Voltaire — who were soon to lead the Russian Revolution.

Spontaneity, then, meant offending the public and disturbing the peace — the peculiarly artificial, stilted peace of a neutral country surrounded by countries vigorously at war. But it also meant rebellion against social, political and artistic propriety and authority: Decorum was replaced by confrontation, entertainment meant transgression. All that was cherished as civilized was now mocked and challenged. Indeed, nothing sacred was out of bounds; all that European civilization held sacred was fair game, because European countries had betrayed the social contract — a sacred trust — by going to war.

It is worth noting that the Cabaret Voltaire was named after the great Enlightenment thinker and social critic, a symbol of unrepentant, uncensored, unpretentious free speech. Voltaire also found refuge from life-threatening oppression in Switzerland (in a town on the French-Swiss border). In a sense, the meeting of high-mindedness and popular culture in the persons of Ball and Hennings suggests that Dadaism was a kind of ironic intellectual entertainment — a travesty of art with a serious philosophical and critical point to make, presumably like Mary Wigman's "special performance for us Dadaists" in which she "danced Nietzsche," as Huelsenbeck said, "waving Zarathustra about." More urgently, it symbolized the freedom of speech — the freedom to protest — that did not exist in war-torn Europe. In carrying to an absurd extreme the lack of restraint and censorship typical in cabarets, the Dadaists suggested the absurdity of the violent world that surrounded them, and offered a solution to it.

Huelsenbeck wrote that "Dada, mainly at the outset at the Cabaret Voltaire and then later in Berlin, was a violently moral reaction," more particularly, "a humanitarian reaction against mass murder in Europe, the political abuse of technology, and especially against the kaiser, on whom we, particularly the Germans, blamed the war." Huelsenbeck even goes so far as to say that "dada developed into an artistic reaction after starting as a moral revolution and remaining one." This is in sharp contrast to the Cubists, who "expressed themselves in art alone, they saw only their canvases and brushes, they never left their studios, they abided by Picasso's rule that a painter should be nothing but a painter." "They sensed the fact that in our age of technology, the human personality has been led to the verge of destruction." This made them "subjectivists." But "they were not morally concerned about the disintegration of the world; they knew the laws of painting but were indifferent to whatever laws obtain in our world." The Cubists were not interested in politics and sociology, as Huelsenbeck says.

“The Dadaists were different,” he writes — and so were the first abstract artists. They were imbued with the same moral fervor, humanitarian concern, and awareness of social disintegration and the threat to the self it brought with it. While society seemed beyond the pale — while they felt helpless to do anything about its disintegration — they did feel that art could save the individual from it. They had a kind of rescue fantasy about art’s possibilities: The Dadaists thought that it could renew the self — indeed, sustain the subject — by liberating spontaneity, while the abstract artists thought that it could do the same thing by spiritual means. Modern scientific-technological society had repressed the individual’s spontaneity and spirituality, and the Dadaists and abstract artists thought that art should and could express them, in defiance of society. They saw art as an antidote to what the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen calls psychic deadness — for the abstractionists, the emotionally stultifying effect of materialism; for the Dadaists, the annihilation anxiety induced by universal war. This was more than the consolation of art; it was art as an active therapeutic agent in a pathological society. Art could resurrect a psyche that had been traumatized by the world. By using art to restore spontaneity and spirituality to importance, they made it important beyond the academy — even the new avant-garde academy that Cubism seemed to establish. Dadaism and abstraction found a way to give art consequence in a society that regarded it as inconsequential in comparison to science and technology.

In fact, as Huelsenbeck wrote, Dadaism tried to answer the question: “Could a man live and create as an artist in the industrial revolution?” Abstract art was an answer to the same question. As Kandinsky wrote, “A turbulent flood of technological inventions has poured forth,” which is why “the artists of true art work in silence and are unseen,” trying to answer the questions “Where is the meaning of life? Where lies the aim of life?” A man could live and create as an artist in an industrial society, could find the meaning and aim of life in a technological materialistic world, if he was spiritual or spontaneous. Indeed, spiritual revelation occurred spontaneously, like a conversion, and a spontaneous expression seemed like a spiritual revelation from the psychic depths. To “convert” to Dadaism or abstract art was to find a meaning and value in art that one could not find in industrial society.

But the artist’s concerns about the meaningfulness and value of his existence in a technological world were the concerns of everyone else as well. Was it possible to survive as an autonomous, creative individual in a world where machines seemed to mean more than human beings? Dadaism and abstraction addressed the central human issue of modern society — the death of the subject, as it has been called; more particularly, what the Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer calls “the decline of individuality.”²⁵ “The theme of this time is self-preservation, while there is no self to preserve.” This is because reason, which was “the instrument of the self... has

become irrational and stultified ... at the moment of its consummation" in technology, "the machine has dropped the driver: it is racing blindly into space." Reason has become pure instrumentality, and discarded the self, or else made the self its instrument. As the sociologist Jacques Ellul writes, in technological society "the human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice... He is a device for recording effects and results obtained by various techniques."⁶ In the technological society individuals have meaning and value only to the extent they service instruments.

"The crisis of reason is manifested in the crisis of the individual," Horkheimer writes, and in the crisis of art that is evident in Dadaism and abstraction. They reject representation, which symbolizes impersonal reason, in favor of spontaneity and spirituality, which symbolize intimate individuality. Spontaneity and spirituality are usually thought of as irrational, but they suddenly seemed rational and human in a world in which reason had become irrational and inhuman — soulless technique, technique without a conscience. Indeed, it was a matter of conscience to be spontaneous and spiritual — soulful, as it were — in a technological society.

Reason had become aggressively materialistic in this society, dehumanizing people and permitting the inhumanity that ran rampant in the first world war. Dadaism and abstraction meant to counteract this dehumanization, the latter by dematerializing — spontaneously dissolving — the materialistic world in which it arose, the former by making a mockery of technique — the artistic technique traditionally necessary to represent the world. Indeed, both made the world "unrepresentable," Dadaism by denying that there was any technical skill necessary to be an artist — which also made art "unrepresentable" — and abstraction by suggesting that the world was not what it seemed to be — not solid and substantial, but a mirage. Both the world and art were subverted in the act of subverting representation, where they were correlate. In both attitude and method, Dadaism and abstraction went one giant step further than Cubism and Expressionism, which still attempted to represent the world, rendering an homage to appearances, as it were, however much they rejected the status quo of artistic representation and everyday appearances alike.

Dadaism and abstraction no longer stood on appearances, but went for the jugular of social reality. One cannot overemphasize the effect of the barbarism and violence of the first world war — the first total war — on Dadaism. Dadaism ironically reflected them — it was perversely barbaric and violent, a fight to the death — even as it repudiated them. As Huelsenbeck said, Dadaism was chaos — the chaos of the war in quasi-artistic clothing. The war discredited European civilization, indeed, seemed to signal its end. The time was ripe for a rebellion against the old order of culture, with its upper class associations, just as the time was ripe for the Russian Revolution's rebellion against the old aristocratic order of government and the old class structure

of society. Representation belonged to the traditional "Kultur that led us into World War One," as Huelsenbeck wrote, which is why it had to be overthrown. Dada was "a struggle for individual rights," he declared, "a revolt-plea... for a new humanism," and traditional representation, with its obsolete humanism, symbolized their repression.

The Dadaists were too violent and negative to be new humanists, and they rationalized their knee-jerk anti-establishmentarianism as an individual right, but they were clearly opposed to the old humanism and the old totalitarianism of representation. The war released a tide of barbarism and violence into the 20th century that has still not retreated, and Dadaism was part of that tide. The war aroused contempt for the values and rules of civilization, and Dadaism shared that contempt. It introduced the idea that being uncivilized made one creative — that barbaric transgression was artistic. These ideas remain enormously influential in art: The Dadaist attitude remains alive and well to the present day. If, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm writes, barbarism means "the disruption and breakdown of the systems of rules and moral behaviour by which all societies regulate the relations among their members,"⁷ then Dadaism represents the complete breakdown of the system of rules that had prevailed in art, and its new amorality. Dadaist spontaneity eventually became a tyranny in Abstract Expressionism, Dadaist individuality a joke in amoral Pop art, and Dadaist irony fashionably *de rigueur* in Conceptual Art. All three have a certain element of barbarism about them, and do violence to the traditional idea of art.

The traditionalists — the believers in representation — could not help but regard both abstract art and Dadaism as a betrayal of art — pseudo-art in comparison to real art, or abnormal art in comparison to normal (and normative) art. They were even greater shams than Cubism and Expressionism, which, however distorted their representations of the world, still struggled to represent it, even as they became increasingly concerned with formal issues — with plasticity as such, not simply with pictoriality. Both remained stuck on the borderline between them, still clinging, however insecurely, to the idea that the task of art was to render and preserve familiar appearances, that is, to establish memory. They were tentative about their commitment to familiarity, but they remained committed to appearances. They challenged the conventional idea of art as a kind of window on the world without denying its validity, however much they brought it into a certain disrepute.

Cubism and Expressionism cracked the window, as it were, rather than smashed it to pieces that could never be put back together again. In fact, Synthetic Cubism tried to do so — tried to reconstitute the conventional vision of reality, however ironic and unreliable the result, however much it looked like an ironic construction of a quasi-reality. One can regard Cubism and Expressionism as a kind of internal critique of representation rather than a

decisive revolution against it — an extension and deepening of it rather than a demonstration of its irrelevance and, ultimately, epistemological impossibility. Some theorists regard Cubism and Expressionism as experimental proof, as it were, that reality cannot be clearly and distinctly known — not only that no representation of it can be privileged over any other, but that it cannot be decisively represented. But they continued to represent it, however strange their representations may seem. There is a certain skepticism about the conventional sense of reality in Cubism and Expressionism — they seem to bring it into question and even turn reality into a kind of perceptual puzzle — but they remain committed to the idea of reality, however absurd and cryptic the idea.

In sharp contrast, abstract art overthrew the old idea of art as the representation of what is conventionally experienced as materially objective reality by introducing the idea that art could be the representation of subjective spiritual reality. It was a paradoxical idea, for spiritual reality cannot be directly represented — the problem of making invisible spiritual reality artistically visible seems insurmountable, especially when the traditional symbols for it look like throwbacks to a world of faith that no longer exists, and are thus no longer convincing in the modern world. As Kandinsky noted, the modern materialistic world does not believe in the human spirit. He quotes “Virchow, the great scientist of international renown, [who] once said, ‘I have opened up thousands of corpses, but I never managed to see a soul’.... In this era of the deification of matter, only the physical, that which can be seen by the physical ‘eye,’ is given recognition. The soul has been abolished as a matter of course... But the spirit... can only be recognized through feeling,” and Kandinsky conveys it through what he calls the “moving electricity” of his abstract art — the idiosyncratic current that runs through his fluid, amorphous forms. The soul exists in the “presentational immediacy” of their energy, to use Alfred North Whitehead’s term.

Similarly, Dadaism undermined the idea of art as representation of reality by presenting real objects as art — Duchamp’s so-called readymades (conceived in 1913), objects untransformed by any effort that could be conventionally called artistic, or transformed in a way that made them seem ridiculous and absurd. As Breton said, Duchamp’s Dadaism consisted in promoting to the dignity and status of art manufactured objects that were not ordinarily understood as art — indeed, promoting and exhibiting as art industrial objects that ostensibly had nothing to do with aesthetics and taste, as Duchamp himself said. Paradoxically, abstract art and Dadaism changed the definition of art — it was already up for grabs in Cubism and Expressionism — by not looking like art, that is, not mirroring the world the way art was supposed to. They reached beyond the usual understanding of art to give it a new understanding of itself.

Pure abstract art officially came into being with a large abstract watercolor Kandinsky made in 1910. But it was in his "impressions," "improvisations," and "compositions" (1909-14) that he fully entered and explored "virgin [artistic] territory," as the art historian Wieland Schmied wrote. He notes that they are not strictly speaking pure abstractions but rather "cosmic landscapes." But then landscape cosmically conceived is otherworldly — liberated from the dross of the earth, whose matter has been transformed into pure energy. Whatever "objective reminiscences" of nature may remain in Kandinsky's pre-World War One works, it has been thoroughly subjectified and transcended. Kandinsky does not simply abstract forms from nature, as Schmied and others have said, but asserts forms because they resonate with "inner necessity," as he himself said, rather than external natural necessity.

Kandinsky combined such forms in what Franz Marc — they co-edited *The Blue Rider Almanac* (1912), in which the principles of abstraction first stated in *On The Spiritual in Art* are amplified — famously called a "mystical inner construction." Such a spiritual construction is driven exclusively by inner necessity. And, it may seem strange to say so, but Dadaism also has its mystical dimension. It too is informed by inner necessity. Mysticism is evident in Picabia's suggestion that the machine may be "the very soul... of human life," because, as Huelsenbeck said, it "was the true symbol of man's new contact with the automatic forces." The many Dadaist machine figures have mystical import, however ironically. Mysticism is implicit in Dadaism's acceptance of "Freud's psychoanalysis because it was an attempt to reveal and free the unconscious automatic forces in the self." For the Dadaists, submission to the unconscious was mystical union with the new god. In a sense, the mysticism of the machine and the mysticism of the unconscious are the basis of Dadaism, and of the Surrealism that appropriated and superseded it.

Abstract art and Dadaism are undoubtedly different, but they were opposite sides of the same artistic coin. Both brought "decadent" 19th-century Symbolism into the twentieth century — modernized it, as it were. Abstract art apotheosized its aesthetic mysticism, extending it to a sublime extreme, while Dadaism carried Symbolism's nihilistic disgust with the modern world to an aggressive extreme, in effect subverting it by doing intellectual and artistic violence to it — baiting it with its own violence, as I have suggested. Symbolism was socially passive and artistically adventurous, while abstract art and Dadaism were socially active as well as artistically innovative. Where Symbolism withdrew from a world it disliked into an artistic world of its own making, abstract art and Dadaism, in their different ways, tried to come to grips with the materialism and barbarism of modern society. In a sense, both realized Tzara's project of negation by disgust. Disgusted by modern materialism, abstract art articulated the spirituality it didn't believe in. Disgusted by modern barbarism, Dadaism turned it back, in the form of nihilistic irony, on

the Europe that wallowed in it, as the first world war indicated. In a sense, Dadaism's black humor turned the tragic nihilism — the stupid self-destructiveness — of the so-called Great War inside out. The disgust of abstract art and Dadaism was meant to call European society's attention to its own disgusting, pathological character while denouncing and trouncing it.

In driving a wedge between art and the world — in declaring that the former was not a passive reflection or record of the latter — Dadaism and abstraction restored agency to art, turning it into a critical intervention in the world. Art was a way of contending with it, based on critical consciousness of it. Art could no longer be based on unquestioning acceptance of society — unconscious complicity with it — which meant submission and capitulation to it. This different attitude to the world — a different way of being in the world — is what distinguishes authentic avant-garde art from traditional art. Dadaism and abstraction separated the individual from the world, supporting the former and attacking the latter.

They wanted to change the world for the better, but, unable to do so, they helped the individual survive in the world by awakening the spontaneity and spirituality latent in the self, thus strengthening it. There is a deeper meaning to “non-objective art,” as pure abstract art was initially called, than making art that does not represent the objectively given world: It means that art becomes radically subjective — taps the deepest resources of the subject. It suggests that only by becoming radically subjective can the individual withstand the pressures of the objective social world and remain human. Social revolution against what Horkheimer calls “the terroristic annihilation [we] undergo unconsciously through the social process” seems impossible, but personal revolution remains possible: This is the message of the first Dadaists and abstract artists. Both were moral and social rebels, pro-life existentialists who had a realistic assessment of the anti-life atmosphere of European society.

It is premature to say so, but it is worth noting that when abstract art migrated to New York after the second world war, particularly in the person of Piet Mondrian — it had its American practitioners before, but they were not taken seriously — it was slowly but surely stripped of its spiritual import. It became dogmatically empirical, materialistic and “objective” — a technocratic manipulation of the “formal facts” of art, to use the critic Clement Greenberg's term. That is, abstract art lost its subjective *raison d'être* — although the wish to be subjectively indifferent, that is, to make formally objective, expressively neutral art, is itself a subjective stance.

Similarly, when Dadaism arrived shortly afterwards, via Pop art — Duchamp, who lived in New York, gave it a rationale (the proto-Pop artist Jasper Johns wrote an appreciation of his art) — it was no longer a moral revolution, but an artistic ploy. It was artistic combat, rather than combat with society. It retained a certain emotional vigor, but lost its moral rigor. Dadaism

was no longer a moral reaction to a destructive society, but became a kind of tongue-in-cheek cleverness — a facile knowingness — about its signs and symbols. Pop art was a tame travesty of Dadaism: Cheekiness replaced nihilism.

In the United States, the moral and spiritual nonconformity of Dadaism and abstraction dissipated into ironic social conformity — Horkheimer notes that “abstract pictures are now simply one element in a purposive arrangement,” that is, “pure wall decoration” with no mystery to them⁸ — even as their methods became more refined. The overt destructiveness of world war bypassed the United States, but the subtle destructiveness of materialism remained alive and well in it. There was no Kandinsky to protest it — although there were artists, such as Mark Rothko, who withdrew from it into the hermetic cocoon of their abstraction. He, along with Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still, can be regarded as the majestic climax of spiritualist abstraction — Newman’s abstract encapsulation of the suffering of the *Stations of the Cross* (1958) makes the point decisively — even as they indicate the cul de sac it has worked itself into, and prefigure empirical-materialistic abstraction, that is, the de-subjectification and radical objectification of abstract art into a purely formal endeavor. Their work has been understood in strictly formal-aesthetic terms — the next step after Abstract Expressionism — but also as sublime and transcendental. As one critic said, it is hard to tell whether Rothko is simply a brilliant technician of color or an authentic mystic — a painter of color fields or a painter moved by great faith in the mystery residing in the beyond.

The irony of Pop art, which is inherently anti-subjective, seems to reinforce American materialism. For Pop art was largely a play on commercial images, especially those that represented people as commodities — and commodities (Coca Cola bottles, Campbell soup cans, Brillo boxes) as personages — stereotyping them into a consumer culture spectacle. Andy Warhol’s work is the case par excellence. Its irony amounts to an endorsement of the consumer culture it seems to criticize. It may be a hollow construction, as Warhol’s images suggest, but there is no alternative to hollowness. Its demonstration — the hollowing out of all appearances, indicating that they are socially manufactured myths, valueless in themselves, rather than refining them to suggest that there is something real and humanly valuable within and behind them — became the be-all and end-all of Warhol’s cynical art. There seems to a critical consciousness in this, but the relentless harping on hollowness suggests the unconscious terror of annihilation through the social process that Horkheimer spoke of.

Warhol’s own dramatically superficial self-portraits say it all: There is no self behind his appearance, he stated, suggesting that he realized he was a hollow man. Like empirical-materialistic abstract painting, Warhol’s self-negating work exalts “the collectivity over the person,” to use Horkheimer’s

words, rather than the person over the collectivity, as both Dadaism and abstraction once did.

Part 2

Just as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907 made Matisse's *Portrait of Mme Matisse* of 1905 seem passé, so Kandinsky's *First Abstract Watercolor* of 1910 made Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* seem outmoded.

What was innovative and unique just a few years earlier — the trend-setting last word in advanced art — instantly became an old idea of art, indeed, that fatally ironic thing, a cliché of radicalism. Kandinsky's *First Abstract Watercolor* was much more daring and imaginative than Matisse's bold use of a green gesture to define the line of his wife's nose — it made her face radiantly fresh — and Picasso's schematized abstract figures and African masks, with their own peculiar kind of freshness and "greenness." Both were strident, triumphant invasions of barbarism into high art — the brutal takeover of civilized culture by uncivilized expression. But Kandinsky's *First Abstract Watercolor* was not simply another avant-garde shock administered to a reluctant public, another deliberate production of avant-garde difference, another mischievous manipulation of the known: It was an artistic leap into the unknown, inviting the public to a new kind of experience. (Whether made in 1910 or 1913, as some scholars think, it carries Kandinsky's ideas about art to a consummate extreme.)

It was not so much yet another avant-garde novelty within an established mode of picture making but a new departure for art. Indeed, Kandinsky's watercolor is not strictly speaking a picture: It does not depict anything, but offers what seems like a playful accumulation of abstract elements. They serve no discernible descriptive purpose, but rather seem to express directly that "purposiveness without purpose" that Immanuel Kant thought was the gist of aesthetic disinterestedness. They did more than add a certain dissonance to what was otherwise a conventionally composed picture, which is what Matisse and Picasso did: Kandinsky's watercolor seems uncomposed, or "decomposed" — seems to lack formal unity and coherence, even as it suggests a new kind of harmony — a rhapsodic consonance of abstract elements. Each seems to embody a unique sense experience; orchestrated together, they become almost overwhelming in their sensuous, expressive impact. Each is a kind of sensuous leitmotif, their apparent disarray a complex dance across the surface of the work. Kandinsky's watercolor seems delirious compared to Matisse's and Picasso's paintings, and endlessly fresh and alive with sensation and feeling in a way that makes their effect seem limited. Kandinsky's abstraction is much more authentically Dionysian than Matisse's Fauvism or Picasso's kind of savagery. There is an excitement about Kandinsky's watercolor that makes

Matisse's and Picasso's paintings seem reserved, for all their intensity.

Kandinsky's watercolor was an act of faith in abstract art, not simply the latest negation of representation. What makes it extraordinary — as distinct from merely novel — is its structurelessness. It is important not only because it is totally abstract — as distinct from rendering familiar appearances in an abstract way, distorting them so they become unfamiliar and thus fresh, which was what Matisse and Picasso did with the figure, landscape and still life — but because it seems formless and unfinished.

There is no binding gestalt that subsumes the details, and they themselves seem inarticulate. On both macro and micro level Kandinsky's watercolor defies expectations. It is about as removed from the classical ideals of clarity, cohesiveness and comprehension as it seems possible to be. It is an uncanny visual experience, full of unexpected sensations evoking unnamable feelings.

If one studies the *First Abstract Watercolor* carefully, one realizes that there is little or no continuity between its forms — if bits and pieces of line and color, sometimes interacting, sometimes isolated, can be called "forms." Instead, what one has is a discontinuous panorama of amorphous elements, each charged with energy and movement. There is no center to the watercolor, but a large number of competing elements, all of which seem to be going off in all directions at once. Each is engaging in its own right, all the more so because it seems fleeting. There is a sense of unbounded flow — indeed, some of the elements appear to flow right off the surface of the work into the space beyond — and relentless force. The abandonment of subject matter is a prelude to what seems like a loss of control and containment.

Nothing in Kandinsky's watercolor is predictable — every color, line and shape seems spontaneously made. There are dense, opaque passages, usually of black, and thinner, more transparent passages, more typical of watercolor, each equally haphazard in appearance. Patterns do emerge, but they are primitive, and seem provisional: lines and gestures — some merge into squiggles — eccentrically repeat, and are bunched together, and there are recurrent reds and greens — the former bright, the latter more subdued — as well as a sprinkling of blue. These colors are of course characteristic of nature, but they do not clearly refer to it. If the work is a landscape it is one that has become apocalyptic: color has separated from line, and shape has become molten. The terrain is disjointed, alarming and ecstatic all at once.

In fact, it is more of what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls an "inscape" than a landscape. It has the urgency of prereflective experience rather than the detachment necessary for accurate observation. There is something unguarded about Kandinsky's inscape that makes Matisse's Fauvist landscapes and Picasso's Cubist landscapes seem cautious in comparison. No doubt one can find the remnants of a landscape in Kandinsky's watercolor: The mind cannot

help seeing the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, interpreting what it sees in terms of its assumptions of what it should see. But what is important is not the afterimage of reality that seems to exist in Kandinsky's watercolor, but his attempt to eradicate it. It is the tension between what seems familiar but is in fact unfamiliar that is in part responsible for the "spiritual" effect of his works. But it is only when one discovers an alternative reality in the dregs of hallucinated reality — when what seems like an insubstantial illusion is experienced as an autonomous realm of abstract elements — that the work becomes truly spiritual.

For Kandinsky, the abstract elements are in and of themselves spiritual — a separate spiritual substance that, however fluid and formless, is the bedrock of observed physical reality, which only seems solid, and finalized in its form. It is this paradox that one experiences when one "finds" a disintegrated landscape in Kandinsky's dynamic abstraction. It is Kandinsky who made it clear that art is not a substitution for reality, but a reality in its own right. Nonetheless, one invariably imagines the familiar — or at least emotionally familiar — in the abstraction, as though it was a Rorschach test. And in a sense it is. As I hope to show, it was so even for Kandinsky, who projected his emotions into it. It is as though the abstract elements are congealed emotions. Just as physical reality was an expression of spiritual reality, so abstract art was an expression of unconscious feeling.

It is not only the outer frame or boundary of the "picture" that is shattered or overrun, but the inner frame that is usually composed of the boundaries between things. Kandinsky's abstract elements in fact lack clear boundaries — although there are eccentric circles, they are often unclosed, as though unraveling — adding to the sense of the limitlessness of the space. All the elements seem isolated from one another, even as they randomly interact. Thus, because the work lacks obvious organization, there is no way of orienting oneself in it, no clear path leading one through it. There is also no ideal coign of vantage from which to view it — no perspective leading one's eye into its distance and giving it coherence. Indeed, there is no clear way of deciding which element is near, which is far, which is approaching, which is receding. Is the yellow blur in the lower right hand corner or the blue squiggle in the upper left hand corner closer? Both seem to swim on the surface, finessing its flatness with their own. The Albertian eye has lost its anchor, or rather no longer anchors the picture: It has been destroyed. It was apex of the pyramid of perspective, which crumbles without it. One is left with a sense of vertigo. It is as though we are in a huge centrifuge, spinning out of control, scattering its contents. They are strewn through infinite space like stepping stones to nowhere.

It is because there is no perspective to ground and organize the abstract elements that they seem to float in the infinite. With the dissolution of perspective — the loss of belief in its power to rationalize space into a se-

quence of objective elements — the first all-over painting, as Greenberg calls it, became possible. Kandinsky is a great artist not only because he restored art to the spiritual function it had in a more religious world than the modern one — indeed, created a spiritual effect with purely aesthetic means, rather than traditional iconographic means — but because he realized that the collapse of perspective meant the collapse of pictorial space. It became a sublime field in which the elements of art could exist in their own sensuous and expressive right, uncontrolled and unassembled into some image. The picture became an open system of abstract elements, each with an idiosyncratic edge of its own, rather than a closed system of representation in which every idiosyncratic detail found its proper place in a preordained whole. It was the beginning of a new indeterminacy in art, and a new sense of immediacy. It was the beginning of a new sense of presence, a new sense of energy and emotional release. In short, liberation from the control of perspective ended the necessity of representation. The feelings that had been associated with objects could now be freely expressed.

More crucially, the loss of all imposed controls meant that the so-called picture became a groundless space in which the basic elements of visuality seemed to be randomly thrown. It is as though Kandinsky's watercolor illustrates, in visual rather than verbal terms, Stéphane Mallarmé's famous poem *A dice-throw never even cast in eternal circumstances from the depth of a shipwreck* (ca. 1897). The poem itself looks shipwrecked: Its phrases drift across the page, forming a variety of tentative constellations in its cosmic emptiness. Thus the poem illustrates itself. Kandinsky's watercolor also has as much absence as presence. Its positive space — the eccentric constellations of abstract elements — also activates its negative space, the cosmic emptiness of its surface. Like Mallarmé's phrases, they also seem to be in free fall. But what looks like free fall is what Kant called "the free and unimpeded interplay of imagination and understanding."

There are, then, no continuities, no priority of elements, no foreground, middleground or background, only a certain sense of aliveness and momentum — a certain magnificent restlessness. There's a kind of beat, a peculiar rhythm, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but never consistent. It's as though we are looking at magma that has erupted from some temperamental depth. Some of it seems to be cooling, some of it remains hot, some of it looks like smoke or ash. Kandinsky has not only given us the first all-over painting, but the first process painting, or action painting, as Harold Rosenberg called it. It is a process and action with no beginning and end. Fire and smoke are entangled, as the red that surrounds several black patches, like an aura, suggests. They are the fire and smoke of Kandinsky's alchemy: The *First Abstract Watercolor* transforms the *prima materia* of representation into the *ultima materia* of abstraction, refines the dross of reality into the gold of transcendence.

The creation of the *First Abstract Watercolor* — abstraction was blessed by beginning with a consummate work — is a truly momentous event in the history of 20th century, even more momentous than the creation of Matisse's *Portrait of Mme Matisse* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. For Kandinsky's work decisively breaks with tradition in a way that Matisse's and Picasso's works do not, however untraditional they are. At the time of its making, Kandinsky's work was more inconceivable than any work Matisse and Picasso had made. Pure abstraction was a threat to them — Picasso denied that it was actually possible — perhaps because it implied that however much they developed and refined their art, it belonged to an obsolescent tradition, and thus could never be absolutely original, as Kandinsky's watercolor seemed to be. If abstract art quintessentialized art — revealed art at its most uncompromising and pure, purging it of everything that was not art (Matisse's dramatized likeness, Picasso's storytelling) — neither Matisse nor Picasso was the quintessential 20th century artist. Kandinsky was, along with Kasimir Malevich and Mondrian. Their innovative art makes radical sense in a century full of radical innovations.

But is Kandinsky's art completely unprecedented — entirely unconditioned by the past? No, but its heritage is as much literary as visual. It can be understood as the final stage in the liberation of the personal gesture from the impersonal representation. This began with Delacroix and Manet, accelerated in Impressionism, and was almost achieved in van Gogh, where the expressive gesture seems to jump out of the representation and stand on its own, as though it was an independent mood. From being an accent in a representation, and then its dynamic substance, it became an abstract end in itself in Kandinsky. But his own explanation of his move toward abstraction makes it clear that much more is involved than a consciousness of painterly precedents. Four events converged to influence him: the experience of music, especially Wagner's *Lohengrin*; the revelation that "objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture," which he had realized when he first saw a *Haystack* by Monet, which also taught him "the unsuspected power of the palette"; "a scientific event. . . the collapse of the atom," which he "equated. . . with the collapse of the whole world," which suddenly became "uncertain, precarious and insubstantial"; and recognition of the power of inner necessity as distinct from the inevitabilities of external reality. (All the quotations are from *Reminiscences/Three Paintings* [1913].) It is as though Kandinsky had come under the spell of Walter Pater without knowing it.

Let me make my point — that Kandinsky's abstraction is rooted in the so-called decadent aestheticism of Pater — by quoting Kandinsky on his musical experience, and then quoting Pater's famous words on music. Hearing Wagner, Kandinsky "saw all my colors in my mind; they stood before my eyes. Wild, almost crazy lines were sketched in front of me. . . . It became. . . quite

clear to me. . . that painting could develop such powers as music possesses." Here is Pater, in his essay on *The School of Giorgione* (1877) in *The Renaissance*: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. . . . It is the art of music which most completely realizes this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form." For Kandinsky, abstract art is quintessentially musical: The colors and crazy lines he saw in his mind's eye are so many notes of a music spontaneously composing itself.

Fugue (1914) makes the point decisively: A fugue is a polyphonic composition in which one or more melodic lines or themes (motifs) are stated successively and developed contrapuntally, finally harmonizing without losing their individuality. The counterpoint in *Fugue* is visual rather than aural, although, as *The Yellow Sound*, the "stage composition" that appeared in the 1912 *Blue Rider Almanac*, indicates, Kandinsky thought they could be reconciled (he was apparently a synesthete, as his Lohengrin experience suggests). The hatches are one kind of visual motif, the curves another, the atmospheric squiggles yet another, the little triangles and circular fragments still other "melodic lines." Their polyphonic interplay is transparent: Parallel hatches of different colors form curves, there is a white crosshatching near the center of the painting, and a crosshatching of the complementary colors red and green in the upper right corner. It seems a pale ghost of the counterpoint of the more prominent red and green curves seemingly far below it — a transcendental reflection of a solid reality, as it were. But there is little that is solid in Kandinsky's *Fugue*: All seems molten — highly malleable and indeterminate. Every motif seems to be in the process of metamorphosizing into some other motif, with none dominant and most unfamiliar, unnamable.

Kandinsky's painting is what he himself called a "chorus of colors," and while some color shapes seem to derive from landscape and others converge in a still life, there is no clearly identifiable scene, only an unstable, ceaselessly moving atmosphere. The Postimpressionist Paul Gauguin had already stated that "art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature" (1888). *Fugue* is the next step: It seems to be derived from nature — seems to be a mystic's dream of nature — but it is an abstraction created independently of nature. Nature is not its point of departure — no longer the benchmark of art — but rather art itself: Kandinsky's work signals the autonomy of art, that is, art's reflection on its own musical nature. It is not only art that has "rid [itself] of its responsibilities to its subject or material" and "become a matter of pure perception," as Pater said, but art that has become a meditation on the essentials of art, and a deification of them.

What makes Kandinsky's painterly *Fugue* different from the usual

musical fugue is that the motifs appear all at once rather than successively, so that there is no sense of any narrative development, however much the motifs seem to be engaged in an abstract drama. Paul Gauguin thought this was an advantage — thought that it made painting superior to music. He had already formulated the idea of musical painting in his *Notes Synthétiques* (ca. 1888)—of painting that, “like music, . . . acts on the soul through the intermediary of the senses: harmonious colors correspond to the harmonies of sound.” He added: “But in painting a unity is obtained which is not possible in music, where the accords follow one another, so that the judgment experiences a continuous fatigue if it wants to reunite the end with the beginning. The ear is actually a sense inferior to the eye. The hearing can only grasp a single sound at a time, whereas the sight takes in everything and simultaneously simplifies it at will.” Before Kandinsky, Gauguin already thought of colors as “vibrating tones,” whose “combinations are unlimited,” and like Kandinsky, he sought to integrate line, which seems to give form, and color, which seems formless.

Kandinsky regarded his abstract paintings not only as musical compositions, but as poems — tone poems, as it were. According to Pater, after music, poetry and painting are “the ideal examples” in which “form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason’, that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol.” For Kandinsky, it was all one: The rhythms of music and poetry, and the colorful feelings they evoked — like Gauguin, Kandinsky associated each color with a particular feeling — were fused and distilled in abstract painting. He in fact wrote poetry, and in 1912 published an album called *Sounds* with thirty-eight prose poems (1909-11) and twelve color as well as twenty-three black-and-white woodcuts (1907-12). He thought of *Sounds* as a “musical” publication; the juxtaposition of woodcuts and poems supposedly formed a ‘synthetic’ unity. It didn’t exactly work, as Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo note, but the album was unusual for its time, and had enormous influence.

Kandinsky was fascinated “with the sounds of words and the gulf between sounds and sense. . . . He also uses frequent repetition to divorce words from their meanings. . . . Layout, typography and punctuation, as well as more specifically poetic devices like assonance and ellipsis, are all exploited in quite unconventional ways.” Crucially, the poems were greeted enthusiastically by the Dadaists. Hugo Ball was a friend of Kandinsky, and read extracts from *Sounds* at the Cabaret Voltaire. One poem was published in the only issue of the cabaret’s review (June 1916). Arp thought that “Kandinsky’s poetry lays bare the vacuousness of phenomena and of reason,” exposing “the pulse, the becoming and decay, the transformation of this world.” In both poems and woodcuts “anthropomorphic shapes dissolve into teasing phantasms,” inspiring those Arp produced.

In other words, for the Dadaists, Kandinsky's forms were not simply aesthetically fundamental, but dream products of the unconscious, and as such doubly alienated from nature.

Part 3

The gist of Dadaism was the "gratuitous act," and the most gratuitous Dadaist act of all was Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade. One can regard them as experiments in art, or mock works of art, or critiques of handmade works of art, or demonstrations of Dadaist disgust with the very idea of art — a nihilistic debunking or demystification of art — but the important thing is that they led to a whole new idea of art: Objects took second place to ideas, to the extent that they became illustrations of them. Duchamp is, in effect, the first conceptual artist, and the readymades are the first conceptual works of art. As he said in 1946, he "wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important." He finally abandoned painting for readymade objects. The question is what ideas they recreated. He wanted art to be an "intellectual expression" rather than an "animal expression," but his very physical readymades — in a sense, they are more physical than a painted picture, for they occupy real space rather than create the illusion of it — may be an animal expression in intellectual disguise.

When in 1913, Duchamp "put a bicycle wheel on a stool, the fork down," to use his own words, "there was no idea of a 'readymade,' or anything else."⁹ Nonetheless, both the bicycle and the kitchen stool were readymade, that is, they were manufactured, functional, everyday objects readily available in stores, just like the 1914 *Bottlerack*, which was officially the first readymade. This was followed in 1915 — the year Duchamp came to New York — by the snow shovel titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (written in white paint on the lower edge of the back of the shovel). In 1916 Duchamp made a number of what he called "assisted readymades": *Comb, With Hidden Noise* and *Traveler's Folding Item*.

Like *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, all three incorporated language. That is, they were familiar physical objects that became unfamiliar intellectual expressions with the assistance of language — often a peculiar kind of language. *Comb* is "an ordinary metal dog comb on which I inscribed a nonsensical phrase: *trois ou quatre gouttes de hauteur n'ont rien à voir avec la sauvagerie*, which might be translated as follows: three or four drops of height have nothing to do with savagery." Duchamp adds: "During the 48 years since it was chosen as a readymade this little iron comb has kept the characteristics of a true readymade: no beauty, no ugliness, nothing particularly aesthetic about it. . . It was not even stolen in all these 48 years!" The precise date and hour of its

choice are also inscribed on the *Comb*, “as information,” confirming Duchamp’s idea that the “timing,” the “snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour,” was “the important thing.” *With Hidden Noise* is “a ball of twine between two brass plates joined by four long screws. Inside the ball of twine Walter Arensberg [Duchamp’s friend and supporter] added secretly a small object that makes a noise when you shake it. And to this day I don’t know what it is, nor, I imagine does anyone else. On the brass plaques I wrote three short sentences in which letters were occasionally missing like in a neon sign when one letter is not lit and makes the word unintelligible.” *Traveler’s Folding Item* was a black typewriter cover with the word “Underwood” conspicuously printed in white on it.

In 1916-17 Duchamp made *Apolinère Enameled*, in which he “changed the lettering in an advertisement for ‘Sapolin Paints,’ misspelling intentionally the name of Guillaume Apollinaire and also adding the reflection of the little girl’s hair in the mirror.” In 1917 he made *Fountain*, a urinal purchased from “Mott Works,” a New York plumbing company, and signed “R. Mutt” (not only an ironical misspelling, suggesting that the artist is a mongrel dog or stupid person, but, as has also been thought, a play on the German word “Armut,” meaning poverty). That same year he made *Trébuchet (Trap)*, in chess a term for a pawn placed to ‘trip’ an opponent’s piece. (Duchamp supposedly retired from art making in 1923 to devote himself entirely to chess, becoming a champion.) The work was a coat hanger which Duchamp nailed to the floor of his New York studio, where visitors could trip over it. His readymades are in effect throw away pawns — many in fact were literally discarded, and reproduced after Duchamp became famous and there was museum demand for them — designed to trip or trap the spectator. He also suspended a *Hat Rack* from the ceiling of his studio. Perhaps the most famous of Duchamp’s language-assisted readymades is *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a cheap chromo reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* on which Duchamp penciled a moustache and goatee. Below it he “inscribed. . . letters which pronounced like initials in French, made a very risqué joke on the *Gioconda*,” namely, “she has a hot cunt.” Duchamp thought of the work as “a combination readymade and iconoclastic Dadaism.”

What, exactly, are the ideas that these readymades recreate? They are sexual and aggressive: animal expressions given an intellectual edge — made ironical — by being displaced onto objects and into language. *L.H.O.O.Q.* deidealizes a woman into a sex object in the act of vandalizing a world famous masterpiece — certainly one way of gaining notoriety — and the phallic spoke of the bicycle wheel aggressively penetrates the female kitchen stool. It is a chance sexual encounter resembling that of Lautréamont’s sewing machine and umbrella, Surrealism’s model for perverse incongruity. Duchamp’s language is “a game of ‘delirium metaphor,’” “a strictly scaled game of nonsense

arrayed against the vastness of a dreamlike transparency.”¹⁰ Texts become aggressively ambiguous, and sometimes seem altogether obscure, however evocative. Duchamp may have believed in the “precision and beauty of indifference,”¹¹ but his Dadaism is far from emotionally indifferent.

It tends to combine hauteur and sauvagerie, as in *Comb*. Duchamp’s phrase is not as nonsensical as he says it is: “hauteur” means height, but it also means haughtiness or arrogance — presenting oneself as superior to other human beings, as though standing on a height above them, and thus dismissing them contemptuously as inherently inferior and below one. Haughtiness and savagery are not exactly opposites: arrogance is a kind of attack on people from above, as it were, while savagery attacks them from below — instinctively rather than intellectually. Duchamp’s assertion that they have nothing to do with each other is meant to throw us off the track that leads to their inner connection. It is a deliberate deception, like the assertion that his phrase is nonsensical. The dissimulation quickly wears thin once one examines Duchamp’s language closely.

The perverse incongruity of linking haughtiness and savagery is an example of what Duchamp calls the “ironism of affirmation,” as distinct “from negative ironism which always depends solely on laughter.” In other words, instead of one term canceling out the other, leaving a vacuum of meaning behind, they are perversely linked or ironically reconciled, deepening their meaning, however incongruous they look together. Ostensibly different, haughtiness and savagery are dialectically one and the same, for they have the same underlying purpose — destructive dominance over others. Duchamp’s Dadaism is no laughing matter. His works in general have a certain “haughty savagery” — an ironical savagery. Presumably his devious irony makes his savagery superior to the straightforward savagery of the world. It also suggests that he is superior to his own savagery — that he is haughtily sneering at it. In fact, his irony is an insidious way of mediating his savagery, indeed, a form of intellectual savagery.

The haughty, ironical savagery of the readymades is already apparent in the famous *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912). This “static representation of movement,” as Duchamp called it, cinematically dissects a female figure. It is filled with a good deal of Cubist irony — Duchamp said it was “a very loose interpretation of the Cubist theories” (so loose, I would suggest, as to amount to a mockery of them) — as well as pseudo-scientific quasi-precision. But the expressive point is that the figure is sadistically obliterated — reduced to emotional absurdity. Duchamp’s painting extends the negative, destructive attitude evident in *Yvonne and Magdeleine Torn in Tatters* (1911) to woman in general. He violently “tore up [the] profiles” of his two younger sisters and “placed them at random on the canvas,” which is not as humorous as he claims it is. Duchamp’s destructive sexuality — his penchant for violat-

ing the female body (even as he ironically identifies with woman, as his alter ego Rose Sélavy, photographed by Man Ray, ca. 1920-21, suggests) — reaches a kind of grand climax in his last work, *Given: 1. The Waterfall. 2. The Illuminating Gas* (1944-46). Here Duchamp reveals the Peeping Tom — the sexually curious child — he always has been. Looking through the peep holes, one sees a diorama whose centerpiece is a female mannequin, passively reclining while raising a gas lamp (in his youth he made a drawing by gas light). Her vaginal opening is quite explicit, and in fact exaggerated, as though to suggest that she has been slit open. Is she the expression of the young boy's fear of being castrated, and thus becoming a woman — the recognition that woman is terrifyingly different because she lacks a penis? Duchamp may not really have been happy as Rose Sélavy. The irony of the name, a pun for Eros, "C'est la vie" (That's life), seems to be a reluctant, defensive acceptance of the idea of woman.

Duchamp is a kind of ironical Symbolist poet, using objects and language suggestively. Like the Symbolists, he thought of art as a play of associations and allusions, conveying what the critic Félix Fénéon called "the extreme motility of the idea."¹² His readymades are in effect symbols, in that they are "the interpretation [rather than descriptive representation] of a subject," as the poet Gustave Kahn said a symbol should be.¹³ They have "esoteric affinities with primordial ideas," to use the words of the poet Jean Moréas.¹⁴ Duchamp admired the works of Odilon Redon, an important Symbolist artist, famous for his portfolio of prints *In the Dream* (1879), and his influential idea of "suggestive art." Duchamp especially admired the prose poems of Jules Laforgue, one of which he illustrated in 1911. He planned to illustrate others. Laforgue invented "free verse" more or less simultaneously with Kahn. Duchamp's readymades can be understood as a kind of "free visual verse" — free because they fuse the visual and the verbal, and wildly free because of the reciprocity between object and idea they establish. Free visual verse began with Mallarmé's "Un Coup des Dés" — the first shaped poem, as it were — and came into its own with Apollinaire's *Alcools* (1913) and *Calligrammes* (1918), ingenious typographical designs as well as complex poems, often with unusual verbal associations. By inscribing his ingenious poetical statements on objects Duchamp in effect three-dimensionalized free verse. The literal objects become ironical emblems of the idea suggested by the poem, which in turn is ironically "objectified."

Ezra Pound admired "the dance of the intellect among words" in Laforgue's poetry. Duchamp wants us to admire the dance of the intellect among the words in his assisted readymades, and above all between the words and the object on which they are written. Laforgue was also Duchamp's model in the use of language. He invented new words, and ironically juxtaposed "low" and "high" language in his poetry, creating an effect of incongruity. Terms from

everyday speech and popular culture were given equal billing with terms from scientific and philosophical language, making for a certain linguistic perversity and excitement. Bored and lonely, and obsessed with death, Laforgue admired Schopenhauer's pessimism. It was transmuted into Duchamp's ironical pessimism. T. S. Eliot once said he wanted to "work out the implications of Laforgue." Duchamp seems to have done so. The writers J.-K. Huysmans, Lautréamont, Arthur Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Jean-Pierre Brisset and Mallarmé also "composed the literary microcosm of Marcel Duchamp,"¹⁵ but Laforgue seemed to have been the most important one for Duchamp.

Laforgue justified his word play — his apparently free verbal associations, combining seemingly incommensurate ideas — by appealing to Edward von Hartmann's theory of the unconscious. Like Redon, he thought that it was governed by a universal law of harmony, so that all its manifestations made common cause, however different and novel they seemed. "My aim was turning inward," Duchamp declared¹⁶ — implicitly toward the unconscious. As he said, watching his bicycle wheel turn, or "looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace" (one appears in his last work), created "a sort of opening of avenues on other things than the material life of every day." They were devices for inducing a dreamlike, hallucinatory state in which he could free associate according to what Redon called the "secret laws" or "imaginative logic" of the unconscious. Thus Duchamp's works justified themselves in terms of their inner necessity, like Kandinsky's, however much more ironical and destructive Duchamp's "spirituality" was. It is also worth noting that Walter Arensberg was a Symbolist of sorts. In 1921 he published *The Cryptography of Dante*, "a quasi-psychoanalytic, crypto-linguistic exegesis of *The Divine Comedy* claiming to have discovered the method for decoding the work's secret meanings. . . . Most significant, however, is Arensberg's engagement with wordplay and the sometimes sexual underbelly of cryptic structures — a preoccupation shared by his friend Duchamp, among others. The cryptographic structures Arensberg decoded include the simple pun, the acrostic, the anagram and the anagrammatic acrostic,"¹⁷ all of which were used by Duchamp.

Before inventing the readymade, Duchamp was a minor painter. His best works were quasi-Fauvist, and he continued to admire Matisse even after repudiating him as the emblematic physical or instinctive painter. *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel* (1910), with its "violent coloring" and "touch of deliberate distortion" — Duchamp's words — is an important example. The Cubist *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2*, Duchamp's most notorious work — it was described as an "explosion in a shingle factory" when it was exhibited in the New York Armory Show in 1913 — was even more distorted and violent. By 1918 he had turned completely against what he called "the zoo of painting," as *Tum*, his final painting, indicated. The title, short for "tu m'emmerdes" ["you're

shitting me,” or “you make me angry”] makes the negative point succinctly. *Tu m'* may be a dictionary of Duchamp's ideas, as he said it was, but it is also a dissection of painting — a kind of anatomy lesson performed on the corpse of painting. He in effect dismembers painting, not only doing it violence, but carrying modernist distortion to an ironical extreme.

Tu m' has all the ingredients of a painting, but they are strewn randomly across the frieze-like surface, and reduced to signs of themselves. “Reduce, reduce, reduce was my thought,” Duchamp said with respect to the *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, and in *Tu m'* he reduces painting to its essentials, giving them ironical form: color, evident in a series of color samples; illusion, evident in the shadows of several readymades, which hung from the ceiling of his studio; and line, evident in the curved lines of *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14), “an experiment. . . made. . . to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance.” The clue to the meaning of *Tu m'* is at its center: the trompe l'oeil illusion of a hand, with a pointing index finger (painted by a sign painter named A. Klang, German for “sound”), that emerges from the handle of the shadow of the *Corkscrew*. This ironical sign of the painter's hand — it appears at the convergence of two diagonals, the corkscrew's shadow and a shadowy, lightning-like rip in the canvas (another trompe-l'oeil illusion, held together by actual safety pins, with an actual bottle brush inserted in it, making it even more ironical and “intellectual”) — is a kind of punctuation mark in the middle of the sentence which *Tu m'* is. Duchamp has transformed a standard painting into a syntactically distorted sentence-picture-painting. He has verbalized the visual, as it were, creating a cryptographic calligramme — a poetic design of “prosaic” signifiers. Simply put, he has made a picture poem — a poem that is a composite of seemingly incongruous pictorial fragments, each a ghostly shadow, that nonetheless hang together in the big intellectual picture that *Tu m'* subliminally is.

All this is part of Duchamp's effort — successful, I think — to “pataphysicalize” painting. *Tu m'* may be full of what look like accidents — may seem to be the result of invisible chance, made visible through ghostly, accidental appearances — but it is no accident that the shadow of *Three Standard Stoppages* appears in it. In fact, along with the hand, it makes the strongest, most memorable appearance. It was apparently of special importance for Duchamp. He made *Three Standard Stoppages* by dropping a one meter long piece of thread from a one meter height “without controlling the distortion of the thread during the fall.” Three different threads were used, resulting in three different shapes. Each was attached to a canvas, and the one meter unit of length “was changed from a straight line to a curved line without actually losing its identity [as] the meter, and yet casting a pataphysical doubt on the concept of a straight line as being the shortest route from one point to another.” *Tu m'* is Duchamp's attempt to cast pataphysical doubt on painting —

to render it absurd.

Pataphysics is the ironical pseudo-science invented by Alfred Jarry — the logic of the absurd he described in *Gestures and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911). Jarry, who rode around Paris on a bicycle, often with a revolver — one wonders if Duchamp's mounted bicycle wheel was an unconscious homage to him (he died in 1907) — was famous for the play *Ubu Roi* (1896), a parody usually regarded as the first work in what later came to be called the Theater of the Absurd. The sadistic King Ubu is a symbol of bourgeois stupidity and cupidity. Duchamp's *Tu m'* is a parody of painting, indeed, a sadistic attack on painting, the bourgeois art par excellence. Duchamp uses all his intellect to suggest that it is absurd and stupid. *Tu m'* is an absurd, stupid painting, all the more because of its (ironically) "torn" condition, which made it unsaleable — truly "stupid" from a bourgeois point of view. As he proudly said about *Comb*, it was a true readymade because it had never even been stolen — unlike the *Mona Lisa*, for example — suggesting that it had no commercial value. It was just a cheap comb made of cheap material, which Duchamp completely ruined — rendered useless, and thus ironically "immaterial" — by writing upon it. Duchamp's works were ironically "priceless" — no price could be put on them because they lacked aesthetic value. Indeed, *Tu m'*, like the readymades it ironically incorporates, is deliberately anti-aesthetic. They are, after all, not really art in the conventional sense of the term — just banal objects that had been given intellectual value, which stripped them of economic value. (Ironically, Duchamp earned his living selling other artist's works, especially paintings, rather than his own.) *Tu m'*, then, is an illusion of a painting full of illusions, including real objects that function in an illusory way, that is, simply as part of the picture. The absurdity of *Tu m'* makes it clear that Duchamp is a Pataphysician. Indeed, he combines in his person the alchemical talents of Doctor Faustroll — he turns conventional physical painting into unconventional intellectual gold — with the sadism of King Ubu. Sometimes he seems more Faustroll, sometimes more Ubu — he thought of himself as an alchemist as well as prankster ("wise guy") — which is why it is hard to say whether *Tu m'* turns physical painting into intellectual gold or the aesthetic gold of painting into heavy-handed nonsense.

The pataphysical *Tu m'* would have fitted right in the 1883 Paris exhibition called "Les Arts Incohérents" ("The Incoherent Arts"), which featured bizarre experiments, such as a work composed of a live, carrot-munching caged rabbit with a real cord around its neck that ended up in the mouth of a man painted on a canvas; and a landscape in which the moon was made of real bread and the trees of real goose feathers.¹⁸ But Duchamp's greatest pataphysical painting — the painting which casts the greatest pataphysical doubt on painting, indeed, which is the ultimate Anti-Painting or negation of painting, all the more so because it ironically resembles a painting — is *The*

Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, otherwise known as the *Large Glass*. It was started in 1915 and completed by accident, as it were — or “incompleted,” as Duchamp said — in 1923. On one level it stands to a conventional painting the way a negative stands to a photograph, only one cannot develop a positive image from it — reproduce it — which in part is why it is a conceptual painting. It has the format of a painting — indeed, an ironical diptych, for one half is above rather than beside the other half — but its two panels are made of glass and framed in metal, and its imagery made of wire as well as paint. Unlike a conventional painting, which is a flat, opaque surface on which an illusion is created, the *Large Glass* is a see-through painting, creating the illusion of incorporating the surrounding world by way of its transparency. Seen through the *Large Glass* — ironically appearing in it as though in a perverse mirror — the surrounding world seems like a mirage. The scene it depicts is also a kind of a mirage — a hallucinatory vision of “autistic intercourse,” as Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr. calls it,¹⁹ or, as Duchamp himself said (in the *Green Box* notes), the “love operation” of two machines. It is a futile, ungratifying romance: the Bride machine in the upper panel never hooks up with the Bachelor machine in the lower panel. It should have received the “love gasoline” produced by the Bride’s “sexual glands” in its “malic” cylinders, where it would have mixed with the “chocolate” the Bachelor “grinds,” forming a greasy “lubricity” that the “electric sparks of the undressing” should ignite, but the tube descending from the realm of the Bride dangles uselessly, never reaching into the realm of the Bachelors. (“Lubricity” is a wonderful double entendre: it means both slipperiness and lewdness. A lubricant reduces friction even as it suggests discharge.)

Duchamp’s *Bachelor* party is a failure: the Bachelors and the Bride don’t connect, or else the connection they had is broken, never to be reestablished. Lucky for the Bride: The result would have been a gang rape. Perhaps it was a fantasy to begin with: The whole picture is a kind of dream. If a dream is a wish fulfillment, as Freud said, then the wish fulfilled is not to relate to the Bride. She is, after all, much larger and more intimidating than the Bachelors. The bachelor Duchamp dreams of her, but he doesn’t really want to marry her. The Bachelors in fact may be incapable of consummating the relationship, so busy are they masturbating — so absorbed are they in making their own chocolate. Duchamp once described painting as “olfactory masturbation,” and his painting *Sad Young Man on a Train* (1911) shows him secretly masturbating. The Bachelors in the *Large Glass* are too busy producing and spending their seed to pay attention to the Bride, as suggested by the fact that they never bother to construct a tube — get an erection, as it were — that could reach and fit the Bride’s tube. She is simply the pornographic fantasy to which they pay the homage of masturbation.

André Breton called the *Large Glass* “a mechanistic and cynical in-

terpretation of the phenomenon of love." It is indeed a kind of altarpiece, as its huge size (8 feet 11 inches by 5 feet 7 inches) suggests, but to sexuality not love, which involves the relationship of persons not simply bodies. Even sexuality is negated by being presented as an absurd, somewhat labored mechanical rather than spontaneous organic event, just as the body is negated by being represented as a clumsy machine — a kind of malfunctioning, even useless robot. Steefel says that the *Large Glass* is Duchamp's "final commitment to full suppression of all 'human' affect in his work" — a deadening of affect that confirms the determination to dehumanize the human that pervades Duchamp's work.

The *Large Glass* brings together the machine and sexual iconography of Duchamp's earlier works, for example, *Glider Containing a Water Mill in Neighboring Metals* (1913) and *Chocolate Grinder No. 1* (1913) and *No. 2* (1914) as well as *Virgin and Bride*, and above all *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*, all 1912, also machine figures. The *Large Glass* is ostensibly about the sexual initiation of a virgin that occurs when she becomes a bride. But of course she never is sexually initiated — never makes the passage from virgin to bride. I want to suggest that this is because the *Large Glass* is not about marriage in the conventional sense: It is an occult depiction of Magna Mater — the goddess Cybele — and her male worshippers, who become her priests by castrating themselves. William Rubin notes that Duchamp's masterpiece is "one of the most obscure and hermetic works ever produced," all the more so because it uses all kinds of defunct religious and mythological symbols.²⁰ But they remain emotionally alive, and bespeak universal feelings, and Duchamp's obscurantism and "mystification," as Rubin calls it, is a way of defending against these feelings in the act of symbolizing them.

The religious myth at the root of the *Large Glass* is that of Magna Mater: Duchamp's work is a fantasy of submission to the mother — an unconscious expression of male devotion to the most fundamental, sacred woman in a man's life, a devotion that is sometimes so complete that it prevents him from consummating a relationship with another woman. The mother, after all, was one's bride at the beginning of one's life, and remains the ideal bride, for both man and woman.

The looming, isolated, complex figure in the upper panel of the *Large Glass* is clearly not of the same order of being as the simpler figures in the lower panel, who huddle together in a crowd, awestruck by her appearance. They are directly below the grandiose goddess, in effect worshipping her — humbling themselves before her. They are earthbound, she floats in heaven. Her awesome, magnanimous discharge, in effect a display of power and universality — it is at once organic and geometrical (square eggs in an amorphous body?) — confirms her grandeur. The realms of the Bride and Bachelors can never meet, because they are incommensurate and irreconcilable, but the Bach-

elors can pay homage to the Bride, with their own inadequate product. But in fact they have none: the chocolate may be grinding, but we don't see any sign of it, unless it is in the brown color of the machinery and figures. It seems no accident that chocolate is the color of shit — let us recall that Duchamp reduced painting to shit in *Tu m'*, and note that, “during the course of the Second World War” he became interested “in the preparation of shit, of which small excretions from the navel are ‘de luxe’ editions”²¹ — suggesting that the “love gasoline” of the Bachelors is in fact so much shit — glorified grease, as it were. *Magna Mater* is cloud-gray, luminous and clean-looking in comparison.

The Bachelors are in fact so many neutered pawns of *Magna Mater* — the Queen. The game of love is a game of chess — a game in which the Queen has more power than the King. They can both move in all directions, but he can only move a step at a time, while she can leap as far as possible within the limits of the game. The game is lost when he is captured, but she plays a bigger role in it. In other words, the traditional roles and conceptions of man and woman are reversed: In chess, the male figure is passive, unimposing and impotent, the female figure dynamic, all-powerful and inspiring. She is supposed to use her power to protect her King, but she can also use it to destroy the opposing King, and undertake adventures of her own against his forces. *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* (1912) makes it clear that the *Large Glass* is an ironic chess game — a war that has ended in a stalemate. “The chess figures of the King and Queen” are surrounded by “swift nudes,” ostensibly “a flight of imagination introduced to satisfy my preoccupation of movement.” But they are also a disruptive sexual distraction, suggesting that the marriage of the King and Queen is in trouble. That trouble becomes evident in the *Large Glass*, which separates them. The Queen is supreme in her domain; the little Kings — the King goes to pieces, a Humpty Dumpty who has had a fall from power — are ineffective in their domain. Her machinery clearly works, while theirs doesn't.

Duchamp once said: “A chess game is very plastic. You construct it. It's mechanical sculpture and with chess one creates beautiful problems and that beauty is made with the head and the hands.” He also said: “Beauty in chess does not seem to be a visual experience. Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry.”²² As the *Large Glass* makes clear, the beauty of both chess and poetry is a matter of the position of the pieces or words, which can be intellectually manipulated to all kinds of plastic effect. It is a mechanical sculpture and giant chess game, full of many beautiful problems, both intellectual and physical. It reduces love to pataphysical absurdity — conveyed by the contradictory perspectives of the upper and lower domains — even as it ironically proclaims its triumph and inevitability.

The pataphysical character of the *Large Glass* was confirmed by the way it was “finished.” Duchamp stopped working on it in 1923, and it was first

exhibited in 1926 in the Brooklyn Museum. On its way back to Katherine Dreier, its owner, the two sheets of glass, which had been placed face to face in a crate, shattered when the truck carrying it bounced. This was not discovered until the crate was opened several years later. Duchamp welcomed this act of chance, and reassembled the fragments — the sheets had broken into symmetrical arcs — in 1936. The work had acquired an accidental grace, making it more lively — the cracks in the glass are the dynamic element in what is otherwise a static representation (the machines had stopped working)— ironically finishing it. The cracks of chance are the real “liquid elemental scattering” — the orgasm of the Bachelors — that the work is about.

Duchamp’s enormous success has to do with his ironical language, perverse sexuality and obsession with machines — the symbol of modernity. He projected his “troubling obsessions” and “personal passions” into them, as Steefel wrote. Duchamp once said to him: “I did not really love the machine. It was better to do it to machines than to people, or doing it to me.” The first machine Duchamp pictured, the *Coffee Mill* (1911), was an ironical wedding present to his brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon. “Every kitchen needs a coffee grinder, so here is one from me” — one that was useless, thus suggesting his dislike of marriage. The *Chocolate Grinder* (1913) is also a domestic machine, and thus also tainted. The *Bicycle Wheel, With Hidden Noise* and *Traveler’s Folding Item* are private, enigmatic machines, and the readymades are industrial artifacts put to ironic personal use — artistic use. Again and again Duchamp uses irony to strip everyday, domestic objects, associated with intimacy, of their sentimental meaning.

Jules Laforgue, Duchamp’s model, tried to do the same thing, as Remy de Gourmont remarks: “[H]e sought to free himself from his youthful sentimentalism. Irony was the instrument he used; but his sentimentalism resisted and he never succeeded in vanquishing it. . . . Love, at the first blow, vanquished irony.”²³ Duchamp was more successful: Irony vanquished love, after repeatedly abusing it. Laforgue was a master of “sentimental irony,” but in Duchamp sentimentality — any show of affection — is inhibited by irony. Sentimentality is systematically mocked by being reduced to sexuality, and sexuality is mocked by being reduced to a mechanical event. It turns into an ironical joke on those who engage in it. Nonetheless, for all their ironical indifference, Duchamp’s readymades are peculiarly intimate, indeed, as subliminally sentimental as his imagery in general: the mysterious intimacy of love — of which sexuality is the physical token — has been displaced onto them, and is responsible for their air of mystery. They are resonant “with hidden noise” — the noise of love-making. Or else they whisper words of love — haughty words of savagery, as the *Comb* the artist uses to make his toilet suggests. This is of course the poetic foreplay that occurs *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, a metaphor for the problematic penis. It may be too indifferent to

perform, even with mechanical indifference — indifference may be a rationalization of impotence, a masquerade for inhibition. But perhaps Duchamp is referring to the fate of all penises — to collapse into detumescence after performing, a depressing detumescence if the performance was merely mechanical, that is, loveless.

Duchamp once said there were two poles in art, the object and the subject who viewed it. It was the subject who made the object into art, that is, gave it aesthetic and expressive value, however ironically. The subject is implicitly a male voyeur projecting his erotic and aggressive fantasies onto the object — a Peeping Tom, as it were. Both *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even and Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas* incorporate the Peeping Tom. The precedent for the peepholes of the latter was established by the magnifying lens in the former — or rather what had been a series of three magnifying lenses in *To Be Looked at with One Eye [From the Other Side of the Glass], Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918). One was at the center of a standard oculist chart. In the *Large Glass* there are three of them (but no magnifying lens), forming the group Duchamp called the “Oculist Witnesses” to the sexual scene.

“Oculist” suggests “occult”: the *Large Glass* is an occult scene — a dream picture. To look closely at something with one eye for almost an hour is to put oneself into a trance — to hypnotize oneself, and thus to be susceptible to suggestion. As Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud said, it is a hysterical state, in which one is in touch with one’s unconscious — with the hidden or dissociated part of one’s psyche, that is, one’s occult self. A work of art is an occult phenomenon created in a hysterical state of mind: It is a phenomenon created by autosuggestion — a “vision” suggested to one by one’s occult self. All looking is occult, Duchamp suggests, that is, it draws on the unconscious of the viewer. The readymades are occult objects — objects that hypnotize the viewer into believing that they have a secret or occult meaning. They hypnotize the viewer into believing they are works of art. The *Large Glass* does the same, partly by the hypnotic character of the chess pieces and machines, partly by the way it has to be seen: up close, to avoid the distraction of the environment seen through it. Seen this way, it draws on the viewer’s unconscious, more particularly, his sexual fears and fantasies.

Thus Duchamp’s famous optical devices are not simply experimental art, but experiments in hypnotism. Duchamp’s first motorized machine, the *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)* (1920), is meant to hypnotize the viewer, putting him in contact with his unconscious. It is an occult device — an occult work of art. Similarly, the *Frames from an Incompleted Stereoscopic Film* (1920) by Duchamp and Man Ray — they attempted to film an object from two slightly different points of view simultaneously — suggests the doubleness of the mind, that is, the difference between conscious and unconscious

seeing. It is like a watch swung in front of someone's eyes to hypnotize him. The subtly moving object cannot help but become hypnotic, suggesting that Duchamp's studies in movement — including the *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* — are meant to have hypnotic effect. Man Ray's 1920 photograph of dust on the lower half of the *Large Glass*, seen on its face in Duchamp's studio, suggests its hysterical-hallucinatory character. The amorphous dust and the geometrical design forms a hypnotic terrain — a stimulant to incoherent feelings, seemingly aroused by chance, that is, in the unconscious.

Part 4

However ironical Duchamp's *Large Glass*, it has many of the trappings of an old-fashioned, conventional picture: It is figurative, it tells a story, and it creates the illusion of space. In fact, it aspires to the condition of literature, as all the notes accompanying it suggest. It is not simply the illustration of an idea, but of a rather elaborate text. It is also a mannerist picture: Its absurd space, sexual meaning and general tone of alienation are standard mannerist features. Francis Picabia's *Nature Morte: Portrait of Cézanne/Portrait of Renoir/Portrait of Rembrandt* (1920) makes a much cleaner break with the past. It is the archetypal Dadaist work of anti-art. It is explicitly offensive — a rather nasty attack on painting: Cézanne, Renoir and Rembrandt are stuffed monkeys, and painting is dead. The stuffed monkey — a found object — in the center of the panel illustrates the text of the title that surrounds it. The monkey is a kind of exclamation point in what is essentially a verbal performance. The crude lettering of the title and the shabby look of the monkey make the subversive point bluntly. Picabia makes a monkey of painting, and its use of the model from nature.

The work makes no pretense to aesthetic merit or artistic authority, though the use of stuffed animals was picked up by Robert Rauschenberg more than a half century later. Also, it survives only in photographic form, like so many later conceptual performances. In fact, it may have been made to be photographed, as Picabia's *Ici, C'est Ici Stieglitz* (1915) — the pioneer photographer Alfred Stieglitz symbolized by a folding camera — suggests. The photograph had come of age in the 20th century, and Picabia realized that it would become the major means of promulgating and legitimating ideas. Its ironic originality — it could be reproduced but it was one of a kind — gave it a peculiarly Dadaist character. The photograph was a new kind of document, all the more so because it had the authority of a machine behind it, and machines had more authority than people, as Picabia's substitution of machines for people implies. The substitution has something decadent about it: Like Huysmans' decadent hero Des Esseintes, Picabia prefers artificial machines to natural people — although people who act like machines and natural phenom-

ena that look artificial are acceptable.²⁴

Picabia was “a negator. . . . Whatever you said, he contradicted,” said Duchamp, his close friend,²⁵ and he used the machine to negate and contradict the human. Indeed, he monumentalized the machine, as *Very Rare Picture on the Earth* (1915) and *Machine Tournez Vite* (ca. 1916-17) indicate, at the expense of the human. It is not clear that Picabia’s machine imagery — his hallucinatory technology — is as ironical as it is supposed to be, although it is clearly provocative for its time. Picabia idolizes the machine, worshipping it as the new deity: It is the godlike imperturbability and impassivity of the machine — its profound indifference to human affairs — that he identifies with. It may also be what has been called an “influencing machine” — a symbol of his paranoia, a projection of his sense that he was being controlled by forces beyond his control — social as well as unconscious forces that threatened to turn him into an obedient automaton.

In fact, the machine is an objectification of his inner life — a self-portrait. Painting should picture “not things, but emotions produced in our minds by things,” he said — a decadent idea, found in Mallarmé and Pater, and confirmed by Picabia’s *Edtaonisl* (1913) and *I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie* (1914), his two most notorious paintings. The former supposedly pictures the heart of a Dominican friar, palpitating as it watches a young dance star rehearse with her troupe, while in the latter, spark plugs and coil springs represent sexual organs (Picabia was an automobile fanatic). Not only is the implication of perverse sexuality typically decadent, but, more crucially, Picabia’s skewed pictorial syntax — the general sense of rupture and disorientation that informs his visual language — is quintessentially decadent.

Art should show “the objectivity of a subjectivity,” he declared, stating what later became a dogma of Surrealism, and Picabia’s fractured objects convey his subjective sense of himself as a disturbed machine. His obsession with the machine does not simply convey his “mania for change” and search for “scandal,” as Duchamp said it did. If it was a means of “revolt,” the revolt consisted in using the objective subjectively. Picabia’s crazy machines convey his feeling of going crazy in a crazy world. The “rancor against men and events” which he expressed in a seemingly “inexhaustible” barrage of “plastic and poetic sarcasms”²⁶ was justified by the social disintegration of the first world war, the objective correlative of his own fear of disintegration, which such rage invariably signals. The machine also signals the feeling of depersonalization that pervades the modern world, a depersonalization that it helps create. Indeed, Picabia’s machines dramatize the depersonalization, if only because they suggest that people are really machines in disguise.

Attitude, then, is absolutely crucial for understanding Dadaism, and the Dada attitude is invariably hostile and anxious. Duchamp’s use of ordinary objects and Picabia’s use of mechanical drawings have been understood as

liberating and enlivening — not to say cunning and witty — but they are also sardonic and unsettling. Picabia, visiting the Armory Show in 1913, found the Queensboro Bridge fantastic, and in 1915 Duchamp said America's bridges and plumbing were the best art it had produced. But while this expanded the boundaries of art, it also deprecated it. The cynical violence of Dadaism is epitomized by Man Ray's *Gift* (1921) — a row of metal tacks down the center of a flat iron — and Morton Schamberg's *God* (ca. 1918), a plumbing trap turned upside down, like Duchamp's bicycle wheel. It is the ultimate Dadaist statement of nihilism — a conceptual "construction" suggesting that God is full of shit — the world's shit. The innovative use of everyday objects and imagery and the destructive attitude towards art went hand in hand in Dadaism, suggesting a deep conflict about the relevance of art in the modern world of machines and war — war that depended on the efficiency and "intelligence" of machines rather than on the natural strength of the human body.

But for all their black humor about art as well as life, Dadaist anti-paintings were heavily dependent on avant-garde painting, as the Synthetic Cubism of Man Ray's *The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself with Her Shadows* (1916) makes clear. The figure is constructed of intersecting planes, and while the rope appears six times, suggesting its movement, its chance shape is turned into an eccentric Cubist plane, like the rope in Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*. Similarly, Ray's 1919 *Aerograph*, made entirely with a spray gun and stencil, is a distinctly Cubist construction. So is his innovative *Rayograph* (1927), made by exposing objects placed on or near photographic paper to light. This automatic, camera-less process produced stylishly abstract, uncanny images, which distill Cubism to its planar fundamentals, even more than the flat figures of Duchamp's *Large Glass*. Even *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920), an assisted readymade, is oddly Cubist. Ray wrapped a sewing machine — the female symbol in Lautréamont's famous metaphor of sexual intercourse (Isidore Ducasse was his non-pen name) — in cloth and tied it with rope, suggesting both female mystery and bondage. At the least, it suggests a sexual secret, like Duchamp's Underwood typewriter cover — something obscene must be hidden under it. The work is a kind of intellectual pornography, as it were, like Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which presents sex as a mechanical activity performed by unfeeling automatons, as in pornographic imagery. (Duchamp's female figures are sex machines, and such later works as *Pleasure Touch* (1947) [a foam rubber breast], *Female Fig Leaf* (1950), *Objet-Dard* (1951) and *Wedge of Chastity* (1954) are ironically pornographic.) Another throwaway Dadaist work, Ray's enigmatic object survives only in a photograph — it was probably made to be photographed, like many Dadaist "performances" — making it even more enigmatic. In the photograph, the construction loses much of its three-dimensionality, and the lines formed by the rope fragment the cloth into curved planes, which seem to overlap in a Cubist

manner.

Like Duchamp's readymades, Ray's wrapped object depends on Picasso's invention of collage for its artistic credentials, however indirectly. Indeed, one can't help wondering whether Ray was inspired by the first collage, Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), an oval painting with a rope frame. Picasso's paradoxical incorporation of an actual object into a work of art prepared the way for Duchamp's ironical presentation of the actual object as a work of art. The painting was dispensed with and the object was imaginatively conceptualized as art. Art still involved an "imaginative logic," but it was less dependent on the artist's hand, and more on his unconscious mind, which no doubt made it seem absurd. Nonetheless, Duchamp's *Tum'* — a painting in which every element, whether collaged object or shadowy image, has more conceptual than physical significance, so that it seems self-contradictory (the work is one of the first "conceptual paintings," as they came to be called) — still has the human hand at its center. Prestidigitation — if not as brilliant as Picasso's — still has a place in art, that is, art is still a matter of putting things together by hand, to conceptual and emotional effect. Even physicality mattered: The striking physical presence of Ray's wrapped object came to seem more important than its ironic sexual associations. It came to be respected as a sculptural innovation — one of the first assemblages.

Still Life with Chair Caning seems to break down the boundary between art and the world and, more tentatively, the boundary between painting and sculpture: Ordinary materials — a rope and a piece of oilcloth — are incorporated into a painting of a rather disjointed, murky still-life, making it seem like a kind of relief. The effect is startling and estranging at once, confirming the strangeness and intricacy of the picture. Much has been made of the irony of the oilcloth, which simulates chair caning. Such oilcloth was actually used to cover café chairs and tables, so that they could be easily cleaned. The streaks of black and gray paint that cross it are like dirt to be wiped away, even as they serve to embed the oilcloth in the picture. Thus the oilcloth is a kind of joke, even as it represents something real, and is itself materially real. Incongruities abound: Everything in Picasso's picture seems feigned and real, farcical and serious, symbolic and material at once, even the rope. It is a useful everyday material that makes a mockery of the traditional ornamental frame. Its unfamiliar use for an aesthetic purpose makes it exotic. The rope ironically represents the unity the work lacks: It holds together a picture that has fallen apart — a representation that has become "unrepresentative." Picasso's Herculean rope is yet another inventive duplicity: an interface that suggests that his picture is like any other object in the world while setting it apart in a world of its own. The rope cordons the picture off from the world, the way works of art may be separated from the public by a rope in a museum, in effect privileging them as unique objects in a realm of their own. Art can use such

commonplace materials as rope — but only if they confirm its extraordinary autonomy. There is a boundary between us and the work of art that is unbridgeable, however many familiar things it refers to and even literally contains.

It was Picasso's collage rather than Duchamp's readymade that first made clear the ironical doubleness of art, as though to objectify Baudelaire's description of the artist as an "homo duplex." That is, it was Picasso's collage that first established the idea that visual art could be a kind of conceptual nonsense poetry. Full of unresolvable ambiguities, and thus inherently uncertain, it became speculative, perceptually as well as intellectually. Picasso's collage is physically nihilistic, which seems to make it "metaphysical." It is an epistemological, "spiritual" problem even as it seems to be disintegrating in front of our eyes. Is it an illusion of art, just as the oilcloth is a piece of real material that is at the same time an illusion of another kind of material? The eye is fooled, even as the flatness of the canvas is asserted by the flatness of the oilcloth. There is a further referencing of painting here: An oil painting is a kind of "oilcloth." Because it is an illusion within the illusion of the picture, and physically and perceptually like a painting, the deceptive oilcloth forces us to reflect on the nature of painting. Picasso uses the pun of the oilcloth to deconstruct painting, that is, to show us that it is not what it conventionally seems to be, even the opposite of what it supposedly is: *Still Life with Chair Caning* is the presentation of a certain kind of surface — a strange textural and visual terrain — rather than the representation of everyday reality.

Like the two-dimensional oilcloth, the three-dimensional rope is a kind of surface. Its texture is as twisted as that of paint, and seems to magnify the texture of the caning. But the rope seems more uncompromising — blaspheming painting — than the oilcloth, which is, after all, a kind of art — kitsch art, by reason of the illustration of chair caning printed on it. Picasso perversely spatters the cloth with paint, ironically assimilating it into the painting, as though it was high art. But the rope is unmarked by paint and simply presents itself. Its color is close to that of the caning, which seems to make it a formal part of the picture, but it also remains conspicuously real. It is a lasso thrown around the picture, as though to bring it under control. The rope contradicts the picture — an abstract composition, which can be understood as an ironic conceptualization of ordinary objects (despite the gratuitous gestures on the oilcloth) — with its raw, intransigent physical presence. The rope is practical and truly objective — unmistakably itself — whereas the picture is absurd and subjective. Thus, the non-artistic margin is as important as the artistic center. The difference between the rope and the oilcloth increases the tension — standoff? — between literalness and deception. It is as though Picasso has made painting conscious of itself by making its doubleness or "duplicity" transparent.

Braque's *Homage to J. S. Bach* (1911-12), with its illusory wood graining, created by using a decorator's comb, prepared the way for Picasso's illusory chair caning, but Picasso's collage is much more aggressive and deceptive. Braque's wood graining is clearly an illusion — a trick of the painting trade — while Picasso's chair caning looks real, and the rope is real. But Braque's painting, with its repetitive verticals, and general aura of geometrical regularity, prepared the way for Synthetic Cubism, while Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* still belongs to Analytic Cubism, as its upper half indicates. Braque seems to be rebuilding the musical instrument — it makes a hallucinatory appearance in the center of his picture, as though precipitated out of the surrounding geometry — rather than tearing it down. Instead of dissecting objects into their formal components, as in Analytic Cubism, the formal components are used to reconstruct objects, however incompletely and awkwardly, in Synthetic Cubism. It also involves a return to color, which now competes with line to convey space. While Braque's painting is generally colorless, the wood graining is relatively colorful. It not only introduces color as a kind of abstract idea or "concept," but vividly projects out of the picture's corner, its mustard color adding an ironic bit of detached light to the intimate indoor scene.

In general, instead of "dead," if at times biting color — mostly browns and grays, with provocative traces of black — there is a return to bright, lively color in Synthetic Cubism. The tendency to obscurity evident in Analytic Cubism is reversed: Things are easily recognized, if still not conventionally intelligible. This is certainly the case in Picasso's first papier collé (pasted paper) work, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass* (1912), with its sky blue centerpiece, recognizable guitar and glass shapes (the former flat, the latter intricately faceted), white floral pattern and readable musical score and newspaper print (the ironical headline: "the battle is engaged"). It is also the case in Juan Gris' blue *Homage to Pablo Picasso*, comic *Man at the Café*, and *The Watch* (all 1912). In these paintings the planes are arranged more systematically than in Analytic Cubist paintings, and "synthesize" to form a relatively clear, sedate scene. The spatial coordinates remain intact, and the scene is seen from an everyday point of view. Also Spanish, Gris became a follower of Picasso, developing what Apollinaire called "Integral Cubism." The term suggests the new sense of integration and calculation — compactness and control — in Cubism. Gris' tightly constructed paintings are the consummate example of Synthetic Cubism.

Nonetheless, at this stage, for all the order and measure in Synthetic Cubist works, they remain fundamentally fragmented and precariously balanced. Formal and expressive issues continue to be more important than the representation of objects. Irreconcilable abstract forms bring the picture to expressive life. There is a change of expressive pace, but that hardly means

Synthetic Cubism is visually tamer than Analytic Cubism. There is no return to old-fashioned static representation, but rather the development of a new pictorial dynamics. Just as the obvious difference between the grid pattern on the flat oilcloth and the oval shape of the canvas, vividly accentuated by the round rope, activates the surface of *Still Life with Chair Caning*, so the subtle differences in texture and tone between the wallpaper, music paper and newspaper activate the surface of *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*. Spatial contradictions make Gris' paintings "moving," however passive his figures. The turgid jumble of abstract shapes in Analytic Cubism has been replaced by a grid-like structure, making for a greater if forced sense of overall harmony — but the sense of instability remains. Gris' paintings are houses of cards that can collapse at any moment. Thus, his objects exist more in name than presence — more as text than as substance. Indeed, text plays a much more conspicuous part in Synthetic Cubism than in Analytic Cubism.

Flatness is more emphatic in Synthetic Cubism than in Analytic Cubism, but the real difference between them has to do with mood: Analytic Cubist pictures have a tragic aura and epic look, while Synthetic Cubist pictures are more lyric and lighthearted. Brutality has been replaced by elegance. Synthetic Cubism is still sober, as Braque's *Still Life with Guitar* (1912) makes clear, but it has lost the harshness of Analytic Cubism. Indeed, the exquisite series of still-lives of pasted paper and charcoal that are Braque's major contribution to Synthetic Cubism are perhaps his most restrained, graceful works. Synthetic Cubist objects are less weighty and burdensome than Analytic Cubist objects, and in fact seem to float in space, like Braque's guitar. Physical gravity has been overcome, with no loss of emotional gravity.

The sense of floating in space is particularly strong in Robert Delaunay's *Simultaneous Windows on the City* (1912). It is an "audacious. . . dramatization of colored volumes," as Apollinaire said. He called Cubism an "art of conception" as distinct from the traditional "art of imitation," and labeled Delaunay's brand of Cubism "Orphic," referring to Orpheus, a legendary Greek figure whose music was able to move inanimate objects. Delaunay was in fact influenced by Kandinsky's theory of musical painting, and his *Windows* series was especially musical, in that it involved the rhythmic repetition of colorful planes, creating what Apollinaire called a "harmony with unequal lights." A "pure art. . . created entirely by the artist himself," rather than "borrowed from the visual sphere," it "give[s] a pure aesthetic pleasure." Such rhythmic repetitions were already evident in Delaunay's apocalyptic "Eiffel Tower" series (1911) — the modern wonder looks like a crumbling tower of Babel, even as it suggests the triumph of technology, for it dominates the city of Paris — but they become systematic in Delaunay's *Circular Forms* series (1913), which also have an engineered look. Like the more choppy Eiffel Tower pictures, the music of the *Windows* and *Circular Forms* pictures is unequivocal.

cally modern: Dissonances and discontinuities — unresolved chords of color notes, as it were — abound within the geometrical continuity imposed by the pattern.

Disc (The First Disc) — a color or solar wheel, perhaps mystical in import, and certainly hypnotic — is unequivocally abstract compared to *Simultaneous Windows on the City*, which has vestigial, fairytale imagery in it. But the important thing about the *Eiffel Tower*, *Windows* and *Circular Forms* series as well as Fernand Léger's *Contrast of Forms* (1913) and Frantisek Kupka's *Amorpha: Fugue in Two Colors* (1912) — also among the first Cubist-derived abstract paintings — is their emphasis on motion. They may distill the "pure essence of painting," as Delaunay said, but they also show a fascination with the mechanics of motion, like Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. It was painted in the same year as Kupka's painting, which ostensibly tracks a moving ball and the movement of the girl playing with it. Similarly, the important thing about the circular forms in Leger's colorful painting is that they are in motion. He has in effect broken his earlier machine figures — *Three Nudes in the Forest* (1909-10) is a noteworthy example — into tubular sections, transforming each one into a rolling cylinder.

Geometrical abstraction emerged from Cubism, but it is not as pure as it is supposed to have been. It is an attempt to represent movement in quasi-mathematical terms, as though to show that artists could be as scientifically precise as engineers. To be modern means to be on the move, and avant-garde art showed that it was on the move by suggesting that even the most static objects were in motion — this is the underlying point of Impressionism, which rendered their vibrations, and the Pointillist optics which codified them — and finally by focusing on movement as such, as the most absolute reality. It was a complete reversal of traditional art, which represented objects in a static way, confirming its preference for stillness over motion. Indeed, the traditional artist tried to find the static, enduring form in a moving, changing object. Such form was more essential or "eternal" than the motion that "existentialized" and exemplified it, as though by accident. But in the avant-garde picture, motion had a certain logic, however apparently contingent and circumstantial. The picture was reconceived as a dynamic balance of forces instead of a static harmony of forms. Force took priority over form, which became its expression.

It is impossible to understand the fascination with motion as a phenomenon in itself without referring to Futurism. Its first manifesto was published on the front page of *Le Figaro* in February 1909. The author was Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian poet and intellectual. A year later, *The Manifestos of Futurist Painters* was published, and in April 1910, *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto* appeared, signed by a number of painters. The ideas in these manifestos were widely circulated, no doubt because of the sensational,

bombastic way in which they were presented, but also because they seemed to be quintessentially modern. For the first time, “a style of motion” was explicitly advocated. “The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself (made eternal). Indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing.”

These ideas, propagated in Paris, London and Milan, had to have influenced Delaunay, Duchamp, Kupka and Léger: They were all in search of the right style for motion. Film may have influenced them — although Léger’s 1925 film *Ballet mécanique* and Duchamp’s 1926 film *Anémic Cinéma* suggest that it was only fully appreciated later, when it became trendy and technically sophisticated (Duchamp thought of film as “a more practical way of achieving my optical results”) — but the Futurist celebration of motion influenced them as much if not more. Futurism offered a way out of Cubism, which began to seem conservative and redundant by 1912. It had, in fact, become a widespread orthodoxy, as Apollinaire’s history of it, published that year, suggested. It was the new conformism: Apollinaire classified every artist worth anything — and some not worth much in historical retrospect (nor regarded as Cubist) — under the rubric of either Scientific Cubism (Picasso, Braque, Gris, Albert Gleizes, Marie Laurencin), Physical Cubism (Le Fauconnier), Orphic Cubism (Delaunay, Léger, Picabia, Duchamp) or Instinctive Cubism, which seems to be Expressionism (“Born of French Impressionism, this movement has now spread all over Europe”). Is that why Picasso, ever the nonconformist, reinvigorated Cubism with collage the same year? Certainly Synthetic Cubism is an attempt to reinvent it.

But the Futurists revitalized it even more: Many of the artists whom Apollinaire appropriates for the cause of Cubism are in fact Cubo-Futurists. Duchamp’s various machine figures show him to be one. Even his readymades can be understood as Cubo-Futurist in import: His bottlerack, shovel, urinal and hat rack, as well as the bicycle wheel, embody or suggest motion, in a very original “style” — an anti-style. This great debt to Futurism has been downplayed because, after the first world war, Marinetti became associated with Fascism. No doubt the French chauvinism evident in Apollinaire’s remarks about Instinctive Cubism is also responsible. (He missed the important Lithuanian painter M. K. Ciurlionis (d. 1911), whose “abstract expressionist” pictures were directly inspired by music, including his own.) But the fact remains that the various abstract styles of motion that emerged during the heyday of Futurism were inspired by it — the critic Roger Allard thought that Delaunay’s *Eiffel Tower* series was directly derived from it — which is why they look much more modern than Synthetic Cubism, which seems quaint in comparison.

Giacomo Balla’s *Streetlight* (1909) has been understood in relation

to Seurat's Pointillism, an influence that Balla supposedly derived from Giovanni Segantini. But the Futurist element in the painting is not its technique, but its subject matter: The electric light — a kind of mechanical torch — that stands at its center, symbolizing the technological future of mankind. Technology is benign: It miraculously creates light in the midst of darkness. Indeed, the streetlight, with its dynamic Pointillist aura, is literally cut out of a wall of darkness, which surrounds it and threatens to overwhelm it. It is as though the artist has broken through the gloom of the past and arrived at the bright future. Balla's picture is about the power of technology — a power for the good. It is a Promethean picture: Technology has stolen fire from the gods, making humanity independent of nature. Balla's artificial light shines more brightly and radiates more broadly than natural light. The streetlight is a monumental presence compared to the small, insignificant crescent moon trapped in its aura. There is a certain reciprocity between Balla's pointillist technique and his technological subject matter. Pointillism, which attempts to represent light scientifically, is used to represent light created by technology, the practical application of science. Thus, the artistic revolution serves the scientific and technological revolution, and is inspired by it. In Balla's painting, art has become the advocate of technology, and in fact seems submissive to it. At the same time, his painting conveys the thrill of technology: The agitated aura of the streetlight registers the excitement aroused by the new inventions that transformed everyday life at the beginning of the 20th century.

Marinetti seemed to have had a special, very intimate relationship with the automobile — “I stretched out on my machine like a corpse on a bier; but I revived at once under the steering wheel, a guillotine that menaced my stomach” — but the Futurists were ready to romanticize motion wherever they found it. The automobile was the new centaur, as Marinetti called it, but *The Swimmers* (1910) of Carlo Carrà, the dancers in Gino Severini's *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912), and the bicycle in Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist* (1913) were also capable of “mad speed.” In fact, the Futurists painted many if not more images of human beings in motion than of machines in motion. It was the intoxicating dynamics of movement that fascinated them, not the mundane object that did the moving. In 1912, Balla paints *Dynamics of a Dog on Leash (Leash in Motion)* and in 1913, he paints *Abstract Speed — Wake of a Speeding Automobile*. The former may seem amusing, the latter may look chaotic, but both are attempts to render motion as precisely as possible, and above all to abstract it from the object that does the moving. Indeed, the Futurists became increasingly abstract, as Balla's *Mercury Passing Before the Sun as Seen Through a Telescope* (1914) makes clear. In this remarkable work science and art find common ground in abstraction. This occurred even earlier, in Balla's *Iridescent Interpenetration* (1912), where the flow of light is broken down, in a quasi-scientific “analysis,” into exquis-

itely elongated, elastic, repetitive geometrical structures, which at the same time suggest that it is a mystical-aesthetic enigma. This prescient, hypnotic work, which is part of a series, and was painted in the same year as Delaunay's *Window* series, but is much more abstract — unequivocally abstract — heralds the interest in literal, autonomous light that emerged later in the 20th century, reaching a climax in the work of James Turrell. There is an ongoing attempt in the 20th century to bring the light of the sky, emblematic of spirituality and transcendence, down to earth, and to scientifically understand it, not in order to demystify it, but to appreciate its mystery and life-giving power more completely. Balla seems to unite Newton's mechanical and Goethe's mystical ideas of light, suggesting that a scientific analysis of light may be a consummate "cosmic" experience, as well as high art.

The more dynamic or accelerated the motion, the more it seems to be an autonomous, rhythmic fluid force or force field — a field of energy composed of repetitive lines of force — which suggests the complete malleability or elasticity of matter, which Boccioni demonstrated in *Elasticity, Materia* and the sculpture *Anti-Graceful* (all 1912). (The last two works are portraits of his mother.) One can't help thinking that the Futurists took their idea of "physical lines of magnetic force" from Michael Faraday — those are his words — and their idea of dynamism from James Clerk Maxwell's *Dynamical Theory of the Electromagnetic Field*. In 1865 Maxwell wrote: "The theory I propose may therefore be called a theory of the Electromagnetic Field, because it has to do with the space in the neighborhood of the electric or magnetic bodies, and it may be called a Dynamical Theory because it assumes that in that space there is matter in motion, by which the observed electromagnetic phenomena are produced."²⁷ Faraday thought of the magnet as "a system of forces perfect in itself and able therefore to exist by its own mutual relations," which sounds like the Futurist conception of an object, and like their idea of an abstract painting.

In a belated effort to link science and art, or else to force art to catch up to science, the Futurists displayed lines of force everywhere in their work, initially loosely associated with objects, as in Boccioni's *The City Rises* (1910-11), officially the first Futurist painting, and finally independently of them, as in Severini's *Spherical Expansion of Light (Centrifugal)* (1914). Often the object was reduced to lines of force, or incorporated in a force field, as in Balla's *Flight of Swifts* and *Swifts: Paths of Movement + Dynamic Sequences* (both 1913). It had in effect become a magnet, rhythmically radiating electricity, sometimes in an irregular way, as in Carrà's *Rhythms of Objects* (ca. 1912), sometimes with a regularity bordering on the routine, as in Luigi Russolo's *Plastic Synthesis of the Actions of a Woman* (1911). The sense of redundancy, not to say ritual, gives a certain look of order — emerging or explicit — to the picture, even as it resonates with limitless energy.

The result is meant to be scientific, not just aesthetic, however much science becomes the source of a new aesthetics. Science and art had been closely connected before — in the Renaissance, when art was empirical, and dependent upon perspective theory — and they became so once again in Futurism. But there is a decisive difference: Where the truth of science was adjunct to and instrument of ideal beauty in the Renaissance, it displaces beauty in Futurism. Science has also become more conspicuously abstract and theoretical, if also more empirically precise. There is a more basic difference: What had been done in the Renaissance was undone by Futurism. The Futurist idea of the picture as a hermetic system of forces marks the end of the Renaissance idea of the picture as a window affording a certain perspective on the world. The scene no longer originates in the eye, as it were; instead, its movements must follow those of the dynamic scene. That is, the active scene no longer obeys the passive eye, but rather the eye must flow with the scene — let itself be activated by the scene — or be lost in it, indeed, remain permanently disoriented.

Moreover, instead of dealing with “the matter of which our senses are aware,” as the traditional artist did, the Futurist artist will try to render “another kind of matter — the only true matter, in his opinion — which will no longer have anything but geometrical qualities, and the atoms of which will be mathematical points subject to the laws of dynamics alone,” to use the words with which Henri Poincaré differentiated the traditional physicist from Maxwell, the physicist of the future.²⁸ The problem, as Poincaré says, is how to render these “invisible and colorless atoms” — this purely conceptual matter, as it were — without making it seem like “ordinary matter.” The traditionalist renders ordinary matter, the Futurist renders conceptual matter, suggesting their radically different senses of reality.

Futurist lines of force replace the orthogonal lines of perspective just as invisible modern matter replaces traditional visible matter. Futurism is as concerned with the structure of matter as traditional art, but the structure and the matter are different. The cracking and collapse of the perspectival container that structures matter in traditional art occurs in Futurism — not in Cubism, which uses perspective to ironical spatial effect. (Cubism transforms tradition rather than cancels it. The transformation is radical — perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Picasso’s Cubist “redoing” of traditional masterpieces — but the ideas of tradition are preserved.) The orthogonal pillars of perspective buckle, shake and crumble in Carrà’s *Jolts of a Cab* and *What the Streetcar Said to Me* (both 1911), and matter begins to dissolve into its dynamic fundament. One reality is being destroyed, and a new one coming into view. Perspective and matter are not even afterthoughts in the rather flat, immaterial looking abstractions of Balla and Severini. They are beside their point, although one often sees their hallucinatory afterimage in more conservative Fu-

turist pictures, as might be expected of concepts that were regarded as realities — natural and normal — for centuries.

The difference between Balla's realistic painting *The Staircase of Farewells* (1908) and his abstract sculpture *Boccioni's Fist — Lines of Force* (1915) shows the enormous aesthetic distance Futurism traveled. A placid human scene, painted in a subdued manner, has been replaced by a wildly dynamic construction, painted in glaring red. The rhythmic repetitions of the winding staircase have been replaced by the staccato performance of fragmentary shapes. The staircase descends into the depths of the picture, the fist explodes outward. Regularity has been replaced by irregularity. Lovely smiling women have been replaced by belligerence. Violence has been done to art and to life.

But, however physically inflammatory, most Futurist works are introspective and melancholy. Severini's *Dynamic Hieroglyph of the Bal Tabarin* is the famous exception. Its collage of sequins and bright colors adds to its lightheartedness, although the scissors the naked woman rides suggests that the work, after all, is a triumph of violence: Presumably they have been used to cut the scene to Cubo-Futurist pieces. It is not just ceaseless movement — the swirling waltz, as the sign suggests — that is conveyed, but chaos. The joyous dancehall is a free-for-all — anarchic and menacing. The Futurists were drawn to anarchic crowd scenes, for political as well as aesthetic reasons. They liked the violence of the crowd, for it suggested rebellion against the common lot as well as authority, and because it showed human action at its most dynamic. But there is a melancholy, brooding dimension to Boccioni's *Riot in the Galleria* (1910), Carrà's *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (1910-11) and Russolo's *The Revolt* (1911). The general atmosphere is luminous, but the figures tend to be dark. (It is worth noting that Carrà's picture is modeled on Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (ca. 1445), although the action is greatly intensified by the lines of force -- Uccello's spears in motion. (Similarly, Boccioni's sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) looks like a Renaissance warrior whose armor has been set in motion.)

The Futurists were not only interested in the expression of motion, but of emotion, as Boccioni's marvelous *States of Mind* triptych (1911) makes clear. Indeed, the representation of motion serves to convey the intensity of emotion. The lines of physical force are also lines of emotional force. There are two states of mind, that of *Those Who Go* and of *Those Who Stay*, and a third state, that of *The Farewells*, in which those who go and those who stay are indistinguishable. For they share the same state of mind: That of the sadness that accompanies separation. Boccioni wanted to express the difference in feeling between departure and arrival, as he remarked, but, as the grim, dark, cramped character of all three paintings suggests, there is no essential difference. It is worth noting that it is the same "morbid state of sensitivity"

that another melancholy Italian painter, the proto-Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico, described in his 1912 *Meditations of a Painter*, and expressed in the deserted spaces of such works as *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (1914). Like Boccioni's *The Farewells*, it pictures a railroad station and locomotive. There are only two tiny figures in de Chirico's picture, and they are much more isolated than those of Boccioni, who huddle together in a crowd. Unlike Boccioni's looming locomotive, de Chirico's locomotive is a remote shape — barely a signifier — on the distant horizon. De Chirico's depression seems deeper than that of Boccioni.

In a sense, Boccioni's trilogy is an elaboration of the situation pictured in Balla's *The Staircase of Farewells*. Balla is taking leave of the women on the stairs below him. A sense of loss pervades the pictures, conveyed by the abyss of the spiral staircase. The sense of loss is in fact the emotional basis of Boccioni's work. It is signaled as early as *Bankrupt* (1902), self-evident in *Mourning* (1910) and implicit in *The Laugh* (1911), as the diminutive male figures surrounding the giant female laughing at them — they cannot have this jolly goddess — indicates. Again, the dynamics of apparently different states of mind turn out to be the same at bottom, however differently "colored." (Similarly, Duchamp's equally small, subordinate Bachelors cannot reach and possess the divine Bride — also an inaccessible idol — that towers over them. It should be remembered that all these male avant-garde artists were hardly more than adolescents at the time they made their "breakthrough" works, and had sexual and, more broadly, romantic problems — problems relating to women, whom they regarded ambivalently as desirable monsters. They are clearly working through their problems in their art. Making original art was their solution to their otherwise unoriginal, all too human problems.)

Thus the movement we see in Futurist works is not simply abstract but anxious. The figures are moving away from us — sometimes fleeing. They convey loss as well as manic energy. It is as though the Futurist will to dynamism is a defense against the sense of helplessness that comes with loss. There is even something sad about Futurist aggression — it is a protest against abandonment. The fog in Russolo's *The Solidity of Fog* (1912) is a fog of sadness — an emotional, not simply physical, atmosphere. Thus, the Futurists are Symbolists in 20th century disguise.

"*The Farewells* was constructed of flame-like lines in which embracing couples were wafted like Paolo and Francesca," writes Joshua C. Taylor, signaling the theme of love that subliminally informs the work, as it does Balla's *The Staircase of Farewells*. "In *Those Who Stay*, persistent depressing vertical lines engulfed the vague forms of figures slumping off into the distance. In contrast, *Those Who Go* was marked by the clacking rhythm of a moving train; glimpses of fleeting houses and anxious faces barely escaped the mad rush of diagonal lines."²⁹ It is as though Boccioni had illustrated the swerving path of

the atoms — the deviation from the vertical, in effect a loss of balance, caused by Venus — that Lucretius described in *De rerum natura*. *Those Who Go* pictures a manic state of mind, *Those Who Stay* pictures a depressive state of mind, and both states are pictured in *The Farewells*, the depressive state to the left of the locomotive, the manic state to its right. But it is not simply lovelorn human beings who suffer from bipolar disorder — matter itself is manic-depressive. It oscillates between depressing vertical lines, forming a harmonious electromagnetic field, and rushing diagonal lines, disrupting the field. Matter is at war with itself — the war that Marinetti glorified in the first Futurist manifesto (1909).

In *Those Who Stay*, there are parallel lines — a formation or regiment of forceful lines waiting for marching orders, as it were. The figures that appear through their curtain are intact. On the other hand, in *Those Who Go*, the lines are out of control. They have broken formation, and charge through the crowd of figures (in 1914 this became *The Cavalry Charge*) destroying them. *Those Who Go* is the image of a disintegrating field, *Those Who Stay* is the image of an integrated field. As the Futurist riot pictures indicate, the Futurists were as interested in the disintegration of the electromagnetic field of forces as they were in its integration.

Paradoxically, it is the machine that is responsible for both in the *States of Mind* series, suggesting that the Futurists were more ambivalent about it than they cared to admit in their manifestos. The locomotive is the center of attention in *The Farewells*. With its golden number and “red-hot belly,” to use Marinetti’s phrase, it symbolizes the triumph of modern technology. But it is also responsible for the emotional catastrophe the series pictures. And the physical catastrophe: Like so many Futurist machines — Boccioni’s bicycle, Carrà’s cab and streetcar, the lamp in Ardengo Soffici’s *Displacement of the Planes of a Lamp* (1912), the propeller in Mario Sironi’s *Composition with Propeller* (1915) — it seems to be simultaneously a magnet generating a field of forces and a disruptive element in the field. It at once composes and decomposes the field — holds it together and tears it apart. That is, it is simultaneously origina-tive and entropic — a paradoxical machine that signals the Futurists’ awareness of the contradictory character of matter in motion and the perverse character of modernity, which destroys in the very act of creating, fragments in the very act of proposing a new unity. It is the two-faced machine that is responsible for the ironical cohesiveness of the Futurist picture.

Boccioni’s locomotive seems to move through a landscape, but it remains the unmoved mover of the deeply moving *States of Mind*. In *The Farewells* the locomotive is at the center of the stormy emotions it has aroused. It has stripped matter of its illusory stillness, revealing the storm of motion within it. It is also erotic — more regressively erotic than the automobile was for Picabia and chess was for Duchamp. In the fantasy of Des Esseintes, Huysmans’

decadent hero, the locomotive was a phallic woman. In Boccioni's fantasy, it is Priapus — a symbol of phallic grandiosity. All the passion in the picture, symbolized by the lava-like red flow, seems to erupt from it, or else streams towards it. What we are witnessing is the eroticization of technology. This is more than a matter of projecting one's erotic fantasies onto the machine, which is what Picabia and Duchamp seem to do. It's a matter of experiencing the machine as inherently erotic, which is what Marinetti and Boccioni seem to do. The Futurists disclosed the erotic dynamic in modern movement — the erotic dynamic that seemed to inform everything in modernity, even the still life, as Boccioni's sculpture of the *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912) indicates. Boccioni's erotic bottle has a family resemblance to Duchamp's ironically erotic *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2* (also 1912) — the moving figure has been understood to symbolize masturbation — but the bottle's rhythmic movement is inherent rather than imposed.

The Futurists, then, are a kind of advance on Cubism, in that they bring modern technology into art. Their idea of the eros of movement and celebration of the machine — emblems of the magnetism of modernity, as it were — influenced Duchamp as well as Delaunay. In a sense, they were more modern than both — more aware of the drama and complexity of the modern world, as Carrà's brilliant "*Free Word*" *Painting (Patriotic Celebration)* (1914) indicates. Word play — as distinct from the appearance of words — occurs in Picasso, but in Carrà's collage it has taken over the work. In Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning, Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass* and *The Scallop Shell: 'Notre Avenir est dans l'Air'* (all 1912), "jou" is not only shorthand for "journal" but for "jouer," the French word for play and the slang term for sexual play. Thus "jou" may also refer to "jouet," a toy or laughing-stock, and "jouissance" or pleasure. (In other works, the suggestive "urnal" appears. One wonders if it inspired Duchamp's *Fountain*.) The word play is self-referential and ironical: The Cubist picture is playful — an aesthetic toy or artistic game — as well as a laughing-stock from the point of view of conventional taste. Similarly, the French word for musical score is "partition," a reference to the divisions or partitions that proliferate in a Cubist picture. In *Landscape with Posters* (1912), the cube of Kub Bouillon — the French product used the German word for cube — is also self-referential. That same year, Louis Vauxcelles called Picasso "a kind of Père Ubu — KUB," suggesting that he was as anarchic and destructive as Père Ubu and as alien and brutal as a German. As Wilhelm Uhde said, Picasso's art was "Gothic."

The tension between the forms in a Cubist picture is sexually suggestive: They are as incommensurate or "asymmetrical" as man and woman, but forced together — literally glued together in the pasted paper works — and made "symmetrical." They are incongruous yet harmonize, for all the friction between them. They form a tense intimacy: The Cubist picture wittily turns in

on itself, in ironical self-praise. But in Carrà's work the forms explode outward in a centrifugal whirlwind, and language is as exciting as color. Indeed, the work is a colorful image of colorful language. Carrà's innovative word painting is much more free, abstract, conceptual and lively — much more of a physical and intellectual process — than Picasso's Cubist pictures. There are make-believe words — composites of letters that imaginatively propose a word — not simply suggestive fragments of familiar words. And the words are presented as speech in progress — they have the freshness of spoken words — rather than as a written text to be contemplated at aesthetic leisure. The contrasts in Carrà's picture are more abrupt, and its dark core more pointedly aggressive than the murky, intimidating atmosphere of the Analytic Cubist portraits. It is a hymn to Italian aviation, as the words "Italia aviatore" — implicitly the Futurists themselves — in the center suggest, and violent death is in the air: We are being bombarded by language. The overall effect is chaotic, however concentrically organized the picture.

But they are the concentric circles of modern hell, viewed from an airplane in rapid flight. Indeed, the picture moves like an airplane propeller (as though in anticipation of Duchamp's rotary discs). Severini's *Flying Over Reims* (ca. 1915) — which brings to mind Gertrude Stein's remark that she finally understood Cubism when she saw the earth from an airplane — makes the same aggressive point. But Carrà's picture is an urban landscape of signs rather than a rural landscape of houses and hills. It is a kind of riot picture — words substitute for people — as well as a target: Patriotic fervor has become combative. The picture, in fact, appeared in the avant-garde review *Lacerba* on Aug. 1, 1914, as though heralding the first world war, which broke out that month. The outcry of EVVIVAAA L'ESERCITO and EEVVIIIIVAAA IL REEE ("Long live the Army" and "Long live the King") changes into the sound of terror and hysteria, as TRRRRRR and the redundant HU suggest.

Carrà's work is more performative than declarative, and in fact is not only a demonstration of what Marinetti called the "free words" of "the wireless imagination," which was an even more liberating, modernizing step than free verse, but of what he called Total Theater — a theater of words not only instantly communicating but engulfing the audience. Wave after wave of words roll over us, with no end in sight. It is in fact the infinite stream of modern media and mass consciousness — the same consciousness evident in the newspaper clippings that Picasso and Braque incorporated into their work, now forming a steady, relentless, confusing flow, indeed, an overflow of information and ideas. Their collages tried to master the flow by appropriating bits and pieces of it, but in Carrà's picture it has become uncontrollable. We no longer fish in the stream, but are swept along by its strong current, and finally drown in it, the victims of a journalistic Juggernaut. If the Cubist collage is an attempt to subsume collective consciousness in the individual consciousness

of the artist, then Carrà's collage shows individual consciousness swamped by collective consciousness, represented by journalism.

Indeed, Carrà's work is a testimony to its power in the modern world. He pictures what Friedrich Nietzsche deplored: The big mental and social change that occurred when people began the day with a newspaper rather than a prayer. They were no longer concerned with the eternal, but the topical — no longer oriented to the absolute, but to the contingent. Believing in a manufactured timeliness, they lost all sense of the timeless. The human figure has been replaced by manufactured words, suggesting the irrelevance of the individual in a world of mass communication — the modern world of banner headlines and ever-changing news — of more information that any individual can possibly digest. The information glut, and the conflicting variety of languages — Carrà's turbulent work is a kind of tower of Babel — was already evident. Words came to have a reality of their own, and evoked a reality that came to seem more abstract than real. Indeed, Carrà's words, displayed as though on a billboard or in an advertisement, form an abstractly expressive map of Italy, as fragmented and eccentric as Italy itself. (The dialectic of collective and individual consciousness is a recurrent feature of 20th century art, with the balance sometimes tilting in favor of the collective, as in Pop art, sometimes in favor of the individual, as in Surrealism.)

Taylor has compared Carrà's painting to a strident siren, and in fact, before the Dadaists, the Futurists were making dissonant sound works. Russolo's *The Art of Noise*, "one of the most significant of all Futurist manifestos" according to Michael Kirby,³⁰ appeared in 1913. "Russolo wanted all sound to be possible for music" — this long before the neo-Dadaist composer John Cage — rather than the "small part of [the] infinite field of sound . . . acceptable in Western culture as 'music'."³¹ Russolo had heard F. Balilla Pratella's Futurist music shortly before — Kirby thinks his manifesto was inspired by it — and carried it one step further in his own Futurist music, which used new musical instruments he called "intonarumori" or "noise-intoners." Wooden boxes with megaphones or funnel-shaped acoustical amplifiers, "they were 'played' by means of a protruding handle that moved in a slot on the top or side of the instrument." These music-making machines producing the "exploding, crackling, humming and rubbing" that Russolo celebrated in *The Art of Noise*. Russolo's two "noise spirals," *The Awakening of a Great City* and *A Meeting of Motorcars and Aeroplanes*, were played in London in 1914 by what the *Times* called "noisicians." The excited audience shouted "no more" after the first work, but stayed to hear the second. Russolo went on to develop new musical instruments, including his "psofarmoni," a keyboard that "foreshadow[s] John Cage's 'prepared piano'," as Kirby suggests. "Some of these new sounds imitate nature: wind, water, etc. Others the voices of animals: frogs, cicadas. . . ." These artificial natural sounds would no doubt have

pleased Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*.

Futurist music may sound like a passing novelty, but it signals the new openness and freedom of 20th century art in general. This new open and free format, in which words from every kind of discourse seemed welcome, also appeared in typography — Carrà's work is the most conspicuous example of it. Again before the Dadaists, who have been given credit for so much that the Futurists did, the Futurists splayed words across the page in an extravagant example of the shaped poem, only it was more everyday prose than obscure poem. Similarly, Carrà's work can be understood as an example of what Enrico Prampolini called "scenic dynamism, the essence of theatrical action."³² It involves the "projection, refraction and diffusion" meant "to give spiritual life to the environment . . . while measuring time in scenic space" that became so important in Prampolini's later proposal for a Magnetic Theatre. In general, Carrà's "*Free Word*" *Painting (Patriotic Celebration)* epitomizes the Futurist obsession with kinetics, wherever it was to be found (which was everywhere). Carrà's work is also a crystal-clear demonstration of the Futurist idea of the work of art as an electromagnetic field — a self-contained system of forces, however much they derive from the world beyond the work, and whether they are man-made or natural. For the Futurists, the *Fireworks of Sacred Speed* (to refer to the titles of non-objective performances by Balla and Prampolini) were the substance of art and life, which were commensurate — however incommensurate they looked on the surface.

The influence of Picasso was enormous, as Paul Klee's *Homage to Picasso* (1914) makes clear. But it owes more to Delaunay's colorful, abstract Orphic Cubism than Picasso's somber, figural Cubism, as Klee himself realized. Picasso was beginning to look old-fashioned because he was not sufficiently abstract, however technically innovative and imaginative such sculptures as his various *Guitar* constructions of 1912-13 and *Glass of Absinthe* (1914) were. The former are made of sheet metal or cardboard, the latter is a painted bronze incorporating a silver-plated spoon — a found object. It is in effect a three-dimensional collage, on the way to becoming what later came to be called an assemblage. Even such subtle sculptures as Constantin Brancusi's abstract portraits of Mademoiselle Pogany (1912-13) and Princess X (1915 and 1915-16) — Matisse's *Jeanette V* (1916) has a similar phallic head — seemed like dated avant-garde work. For they remained, however equivocally, descriptive, figural, and "classical." When finally Brancusi produced his abstract, totemic *Endless Column* in 1918 — its repeated rhomboid modules later influenced the Minimalism of Carl Andre — it seemed like a non sequitur in his oeuvre.

Just as truly unequivocally abstract gestural art was developed by a Russian outside of Paris — Kandinsky in Munich — so truly unequivocal abstract geometrical art was developed by a Russian outside of Paris: Kazimir

Malevich in Moscow. Malevich was influenced by French avant-garde art, which was exhibited in Moscow as early as 1907, but it is for his revolutionary Suprematism, as he called it, that he is famous. Like many young would-be advanced Russian artists (for example, Natalya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov), he rapidly assimilated Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism and Cubo-Futurism — *The Gardner* (1911), *The Woodcutter* (1912-13), *Life in the Grand Hotel* (1913-14) and *Aviator* (1914) are examples — but unlike them, he truly came into his own when he renounced representation to produce completely non-objective works. Octavio Paz regards Picasso as the “wisest” as well as the “most vital of modern artists” because he realized that “we cannot escape nature,” only “disfigure it” and “destroy it,” operations which are themselves “a new homage to nature.” But Malevich showed that one could in artistic and emotional fact escape it. One could move beyond Picasso’s sadistic crimes against nature, as Paz called them — Picasso’s angry, futile struggle to escape it by violating it — into a transcendental realm beyond it. Malevich made more than his fair share of works that emulated “the mutilations, the deformations, the furious stylizations that Picasso delights in,” but he finally gave them up to make works of geometrical wholeness, symbolizing a new spiritual integrity in defiance of the modern secular world. Geometrical fragments are integrated in a dynamically equilibrated unity, as in the *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Football Player, Color Masses of the Fourth Dimension* (1915), or else geometrical gestalts take over the canvas, and even seem to merge with it, even as the gestalt finesses its flatness, as in *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions* and *Black Square* (both 1915) and the subtly white *Suprematism* (1918).

Malevich’s Suprematism showed that it was possible to maintain the revolutionary momentum of avant-garde art at a time when Picasso began to turn away from Cubism — without abandoning it, as its consolidation in the refinements of Synthetic Cubism indicates — toward realism. In 1914, Picasso began an exquisite series of portraits in the manner of Ingres, virtually all of people important to his sense of self — people who supported him, such as the dealer Ambroise Vollard and the poet Max Jacob (both depicted in 1915), as well as Apollinaire (depicted in 1916). This seemingly regressive turn to tradition and with it to stability and clarity after the excesses of instability and obscurity in Analytic Cubism was an attempt to avoid imitating himself. “To copy others is necessary, to copy oneself is pathetic,” he said. But in fact he copied — indeed, institutionalized — himself in the Cubist costumes and stage sets he made for *Parade*, a 1917 production by the Russian Ballet of Serge Diaghilev (whom he also portrayed). The writer Jean Cocteau, the choreographer Léonide Massine, and the composer Erik Satie — all avant-garde figures — were also involved. A “parade” was a sideshow performed outside a theater to lure the public inside, but *Parade* was performed inside — it was the main

show. It signaled the institutionalization of the avant-garde: It became a public performance rather than a private reverie. Taken out of the studio and staged, it showed that avant-garde art could be as entertaining and popular as the movies or vaudeville — as any mass entertainment.

But the 39 non-objective paintings that Malevich exhibited in December, 1915 in “O, 10 (Zero-Ten),” the second “Last Futurist Exhibition,” were not at all entertaining or theatrical. Where the works he exhibited earlier that year in “Tramway V: First Futurist Exhibition” — for example, *An Englishman in Moscow* and *Lady at the Poster Column* (both 1914) — were standard avant-garde fare for the time, the later works were not only completely abstract but sacred icons in all but name. (Both exhibitions were held in Petrograd.) They represented a “new painterly realism,” as Malevich called them — his 1916 statement, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism, The New Painterly Realism” made it clear that they were the next avant-garde step into the future of art — but they were also spiritual in import. The idea of a new spiritual or transcendental art was already implicit in the so-called “transrational” (zaum) texts of *Victory over the Sun*, the 1913 performance of the “First Futurist Opera,” for which Malevich made Cubo-Futurist costumes and stage sets. (Like Futurist performance, it was a precursor of the more vulgar, socially and artistically subversive Dadaist performance.) Overthrowing “logic and philistine meaning and prejudice” in his 1913-14 Transrational Realist style, as he called it, he finally reached the high sacred ground of eternal geometry in 1914, freeing art, as he said, “from the burden of the object,” that is, the representation of conventional reality. It was replaced by the representation of a higher reality — a reality represented, as it was for Plato, by geometry, whose forms were liberated from the dross of ordinary temporal appearances, and seemed to be autonomous, self-sufficient objects — absolute, as the sculptor Naum Gabo said, not just abstract.

Interestingly enough, as Malevich wrote in *The Non-Objective World*, a collection of essays published in 1927 by the Bauhaus, these forms are emblematic of feeling as such: Non-objective or pure forms symbolized non-objective or pure feelings. “Under Suprematism I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art,” Malevich wrote. “Hence, to the Suprematist, the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects.” We are back in Symbolist territory — like Mallarmé, Malevich differentiates between everyday practical language and evocative artistic language — but with a difference: Feelings are no longer evoked by objects, but transcend them. They are as autonomous as geometrical forms, and also seem to exist in a realm of their own. Suprematism is thus a new emotional fundamentalism as well as a new artistic fundamentalism. “The emotions which are kindled in the human being are stronger than the human being himself.” “The

true essence of art" is their expression, Malevich declared. Just as the emotions human beings experience are "stronger" than the person who experiences them — the very essence of the person, independent of the person's environment, as Malevich suggested — so geometrical forms are "stronger" and more essential than any environment in which they become evident. Like the Futurists, to whom he acknowledged a debt, Malevich was inspired "by the latest achievements of technology, and especially of aviation" — a symbol of transcendence — which is why he said "one could refer to Suprematism as 'aeronautical'" — but he found a new way to represent the flight of the feelings, not only of the airplane.

Piet Mondrian's transition from representation to abstraction — evident in the shift from his naturalistic to abstract landscapes and finally to such seemingly "free-standing" grid abstractions as *Painting No. 1* (1914) — seems more laborious and agonizing than Malevich's apparently sudden, high-spirited leap, but the transition was also spiritual in import, and Mondrian's geometrical works, like those of Malevich, are religious icons. Indeed, they are as abstract as religious icons, even if non-figural — although Malevich's square can be understood as a kind of figure, and Mondrian's grid can be understood as integrating figure and ground without completely merging them. Indeed, the tension between them is heightened by having the same plane function simultaneously as figure and ground. The transition was not just a matter of achieving a new "dynamic equilibrium" or a new "plastic expression" of "the new reality," but the fact that, like Malevich's "new painterly realism," it was a spiritual reality, and the issue was articulating it in as convincing and strong a way as possible.

In fact, the right angle that came to structure Mondrian's paintings can be understood as an abbreviated cross, and his grid can be understood as a series of interlocking crosses. The cross is embedded and hidden in Mondrian's grid, like the *deus absconditus*. The cross is even implicit in such works as *Composition in Color A* (1917) — a ghostly presence evoked by the play of the verticals and horizontals. They form a kind of aura around the free-floating Suprematist squares — perhaps symbols of resurrection, as their primary colors of red and blue suggest. (They are also the Virgin Mary's colors. Color in general is used to charge geometry with emotion — make it expressive — in both Malevich and Mondrian.) It is as though Mondrian broke the tragic cross into black dashes in the process of suggesting the more optimistic and transcendent Suprematist square. Neither Mondrian nor Malevich were capable of separating art and spirituality, abstract art being the only medium of spiritual experience for them, indeed, the only medium in which religiosity could authentically and articulately survive in the modern world. For them abstract art was a new spiritual realism — a new religious art independent of religious institutions.

In fact, later in life (ca. 1938-40), Mondrian wrote of the need for a "new religion," all the more so because "the new Nazi and Soviet religion is oppressive, just like the old traditional religion,"³³ arguing that "the new religion is for those capable of abstraction." He drew an explicit parallel between the new religion and the new art: "The new religion without churches is the old religion free of all oppression. The new art is the old art free of all oppression." It is "Life's purest expression." "Faith in life. . . grows out of inner life and no longer comes to us from outside. It is what it was in the 'fond' [depth] of all religion," "the great inner power that strengthens us where reason cannot see." Faith in life, preserved in all its purity, is what Mondrian expressed in his new spiritual abstraction. Malevich's Suprematist square embodies the same faith in life — the same fundamental feeling for life. Both Malevich and Mondrian worked through the vestiges of secular representation in Cubism and Futurism, finally purging them to create an ascetic new spiritual art. Indeed, as Malevich suggests, they turned art into a desert, which they entered like ascetics hoping for revelation. Again and again he describes the experience of being in "a 'desert' in which nothing can be perceived but feeling. . . nothing is real except feeling." It was in this state of mind that the revelation of a new art came, which it embodied. "Suprematism . . . will build up a new world — the world of feeling." More particularly, it will show the "'true objectivity' [of] spiritual feeling." It was in the emotional desert that they converted from the old religion of representation to the new religion of abstraction — purged themselves of the old art to crusade for the new art. But it was not simply a matter of art, it was a matter of emotional life and death. Only abstract forms made them feel psychically alive in a world they experienced as emotionally dead or, at best, mechanically alive.

Figuration was still alive and well, particularly in sculpture, whether in the conservative figures of Ernst Barlach and Wilhelm Lehmbruck, which gingerly used the new abstract planarity (simplifying it in the process), or in the resolutely avant-gardized figures of Aleksander Archipenko, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Jacques Lipchitz. The issue was whether to Cubo-Futurize or not — more particularly, whether to signal the old emotional depth and suffering, as Lehmbruck's isolated, depressed *Seated Youth* (1917) does, or to leave all that behind and become optimistically and naively modern, which sometimes meant ingeniously superficial, as Archipenko's colorful, dancing *Médrano II* (1913) — a Cubo-Futurist maenad — suggests. But Lehmbruck's figure suggests the nether side of modern life, which remained visible in German Expressionism, and would become all the more conspicuously visible in the German art of the 1920s and later in the German Neo-Expressionism that emerged after the second world war.

Duchamp-Villon's Futuristically twisted *The Horse* (1914) seems to epitomize the tension between the two sides of modern life — the ground for

objective hope and optimism embodied in its technology, and the emotionally realistic despair that also permeates it, that is, sense of the devaluation of individual life that follows in the wake of its increasingly sophisticated machines, which bespeak the general mechanization and standardization of the modern world. The horse, clearly an old-fashioned, doomed means of transportation by 1914, is modernized into a dynamic machine, even as its spiraling form turns inward, as though reflecting on its unhappy fate — its impending obsolescence. The more one looks at it, the more human it seems.

The issue comes to a head, and remains unresolved, in the fate of Jacob Epstein's *The Rock Drill*, made between 1913 and 1915, and changed in 1916, under the impact of the first world war. A perverse Cubo-Futurist mixture of the organic and mechanical, like Duchamp-Villon's horse — all the more so because of the phallic, aggressive, American-made pneumatic drill that was initially part of Epstein's sculpture — it was a daring avant-garde innovation for its time. As Richard Cork writes, "Epstein was almost alone in proposing that a machine could play a legitimate part in a work of art,"³⁴ although he was not so extreme as to call a machine a work of art, as Duchamp did. Epstein's work "seemed like a bold sculptural expression of the Vorticists' theoretical insistence on 'the point of maximum energy,'" but he did not join the aggressive Vorticist group, although Wyndham Lewis, one of its leaders, praised the robot-like sculpture for its "dreamlike strangeness." In the first issue of *Blast* (June 1914), Lewis declared that the Vorticists were "proud, handsome and predatory" — like modern machines. In a way reminiscent of Marinetti, he celebrated the machine, and suggested that works of art were good only to the extent they were like it. No doubt Lewis found the qualities he admired in Epstein's ruthless, oddly heroic, even Promethean sculpture.

But in 1916 *The Rock Drill* changed — it lost its drill and legs, and one arm, and became a crippled robot. Re-exhibited as *Torso in Metal* from "*The Rock Drill*", it looked "melancholy and defenseless," as Cork says. Plaster had changed to metal, but the figure remains "pitifully vulnerable" — unexpectedly human. It is no longer an invincible, ruthless, predatory creature — a kind of grotesque humanoid insect. It has been castrated, and turned into a hollow shell of its former belligerent self. Epstein has stripped the figure of its weapon, as it were, changing it from a strong to a weak figure. Also, brilliantly, he has turned a whole figure into a fragment, suggesting that, however ominously masked, its spirit was broken. *Torso in Metal* from "*The Rock Drill*" was Epstein's "mortified response to the war." From being an "agent of construction," the machine became "the instrument of wholesale obliteration." The mechanical was used to destroy the organic — human life — and, implicitly, to replace it. In fact, *The Rock Drill*'s machine seems ambiguously constructive and destructive. Construction of the new requires a good deal of destruction of the old. To be modern, it must be ruthlessly replaced. Epstein

turned away from avant-garde art, "telling his New York patron John Quinn that 'you are inclined to overrate what you call advanced work; not all advanced work is good, some of it is damn bad'." That is, some of it is nihilistic, in both intention and form.

Risen Christ (1917-19) signaled Epstein's return to traditional figuration and spiritual themes, like the primitivist *Sun God* (1910) and the allegorical figure on *The Tomb of Oscar Wilde* (1909-12), both pre-war. *Risen Christ* negates all that Epstein accomplished in *The Rock Drill*, emotionally and technically. He restores the old religion of transcendental figuration, with its acknowledgment of the vicissitudes of life and its generally tragic sense of life. It replaces the new religion of avant-garde art, and, implicitly, of machine and spiritual abstraction, which now seem tarnished by history. Is it a regressive or progressive step? The tragedy of existence had returned by way of history, after a short-lived period of faith in technological progress and spiritual sublimation. But of course tragedy never left. This paradigm or oscillation, in which now technology and abstraction, now melancholy figuration seem important, were to be repeated again and again in twentieth century art.

With tragedy came the human body, in all its expressive fullness. It also had never left. Brancusi told Epstein that Michelangelo's figures had too much flesh on them — but the body's flesh is the vehicle of its tragic vulnerability, and a symbol of human tragedy in general. "The human spirit, which is expressed by the aesthetic-plastic, seeks a visual manifestation that is free of the tragic," Mondrian wrote. "When line is tensed to straightness . . . the tragic can be destroyed." It is as though straightness is transcendence and immortality for Mondrian. But the body's lines cannot be tensed to straightness without destroying it, or turning it into a machine — which is the same as destroying it — without waiting for it to show its mortality. Epstein's transformation of *The Rock Drill* is a parable of modern art. It attempts to transcend the body — which is what abstraction is ultimately about — and achieve a new spiritual and technological art. But the result can be a new nihilism. Thus, it has to deal with the tragedy of the body, and with it the predicament of human existence, whether it wants to or not, as Epstein realized.

Modern art never lost religion, which, as Daniel Bell says, "is not an ideology, or a regulative or integrative feature of society," but "a constitutive aspect of human experience because it is a response to the existential predicaments which are the *ricorsi* of human culture."³⁵ However, modern art found religion in unexpected aesthetic places sometimes despite itself.

Notes

¹ Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 101. All subsequent quotations from Kandinsky are from this source, unless otherwise noted.

- ¹ Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1988), 125. All subsequent quotations from Duchamp are from this source unless otherwise noted.
- ² Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (New York: Viking, 1974), 160. All subsequent quotations from Huelsenbeck are from this source unless otherwise noted.
- ³ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straux and Giroux, 1995), 47.
- ⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 128.
- ⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 80.
- ⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, "Barbarism: A User's Guide," *On History* (New York: New Press, 1977), 253.
- ⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974), 99.
- ⁹ All quotations from articles about Duchamp are from "The Works of Marcel Duchamp: A Catalog," *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973) unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁰ Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr., "Marcel Duchamp and the Machine," *ibid.*, 75.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Richard Hamilton, "The Large Glass," *ibid.*, 67.
- ¹² Quoted in Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 126.
- ¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 174.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 151.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Michel Sanouillet, "Marcel Duchamp and the French Intellectual Tradition," *Marcel Duchamp*, 49.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 16.
- ¹⁷ Francis M. Nauman and Beth Venn, eds., *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 153.
- ¹⁸ Robert Rosenblum, *19th-Century Art* (New York: Abrams, 1984), 419-20.
- ¹⁹ Steefel, 75.
- ²⁰ Rubin, 20.
- ²¹ "Preface by Salvador Dali, L'échecs, c'est moi (Chess, it's me.)," *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp by Pierre Cabanne* (New York: Viking, 1971), 13.
- ²² Quoted in Anne d'Harnoncourt, "Introduction," *Marcel Duchamp*, 39.
- ²³ Remy de Gourmont, *Selected Writings*, ed. Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 199-200.
- ²⁴ The influence of Huysmans on Duchamp and Picabia cannot be overestimated. It was probably as great on the Futurists, suggesting that their art also had deep Symbolist roots. In an 1880 article Huysmans describes Degas dancers "in a mixture of animal and mechanical vocabulary," as Annette Kahn notes in *J.K. Huysmans: Novelist, Poet and Art Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 36. Huysmans describes the "clownlike dislocations" of their bodies, "whose hinges refuse to bend." This image-concept of the body probably influenced Duchamp's Cubo-Futurist *Nude Descending A Staircase* as well as Cubism in general. It can be understood as a deliberate dislocation of the body, whether of a figure, a landscape, or a still life. In Huysmans' *A Rebours*

(*Against the Grain*) (1884), Miss Urania, one of des Esseintes' mistresses, is described as "an American girl . . . with muscles of steel and arms of iron." In an 1887 article, he describes Dutch women as "beautiful machines . . . equipped with steel biceps and iron hams." In *Là-Bas (Down Under)* (1891) Huysmans' hero Des Hermies asserts: "The heart, which is supposed to be the noble part of man, has the same form as the penis, which is the so-called ignoble part of man. There's symbolism in that similarity, because every love which is of the heart soon extends to the organ resembling it. The moment the human imagination tries to create artificially animated beings, it involuntarily reproduces in them the movements of animal propagating. Look at machines, the action of pistons in cylinders: Romeos of steel and Juliets of cast iron. Human expression does not differ at all from the back-and-forth motion of our machines." (All quotations from Kahn, 36-37.) The profound influence of Huysmans and other Symbolists suggests the literary basis of avant-garde visual art. It also suggests that there can never be such a thing as pure art, visual or literary. Indeed, Huysmans was inspired by Degas and Redon — among many other visual artists, almost all his contemporaries, as his art criticism makes clear — however much he interpreted them in his own inimitable creative way.

²⁵ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Viking, 1977), 32. All subsequent quotations from Duchamp are from this source unless otherwise noted.

²⁶ Picabia's wife, quoted in Rubin, 27.

²⁷ Quoted in W. P. D. Wightman, *The Growth of Scientific Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University, 1953), 307.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁹ Joshua C. Taylor, *Futurism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 48.

³⁰ Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 33.

³¹ Quoted in Kirby, 86.

³² Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current* (New York: Viking, 1973), 28.

³³ Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, eds., *The New Art — The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 318-19.

³⁴ Richard Cork, *Jacob Epstein* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 37.

³⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys, 1960-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 347.

Chapter 3: Subjectivity and Society; The Third Decade

From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of having gone astray, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's "real life"; childhood beyond which man has at his disposal, aside from his laissez-passer, only a few complimentary tickets; childhood where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself. Thanks to Surrealism, it seems that opportunity knocks a second time.

André Breton, *The First Surrealist Manifesto*, 1924

It is in fact from the disgusting cauldron of these meaningless mental images that the desire to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd, distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil, is born and sustained. And, as it is the degree of resistance that this choice idea meets with which determines the more or less certain flight of the mind toward a world at last inhabitable, one can understand why Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence.

André Breton, *The Second Surrealist Manifesto*, 1929

I am "filled with inner images." Is that no longer right, no longer permissible? Or should the "inner image" be transformed into reality? Forsake the idea of "image" and make tables, boxes, jugs for the sake of a principle, a demand, existential necessity. Existential necessity in the sense that I proffer a favorite glass in order to repair a window. . . . Was art ever as much free play as it is now? So aimless? Art always used to serve an idea, everything was simply a vehicle for the idea.

Oskar Schlemmer, *Diary*, Oct. 25, 1922

There is objectivity in the air.

Refrain of a 1920s Berlin cabaret song

. . . the fact that so much is pre-ordained means that one's originality is noticeably restricted.

Otto Dix, reflecting on his Verist paintings of the 1920s, 1965

Art has always been employed by the different social classes who hold the balance of power as one instrument of domination — hence, as a political Instrument. . . . What is it then that we really need? An art extremely pure, precise, profoundly human. . . . An art with revolution as its subject: because the principal interest in the worker's life has to be touched first.

Diego Rivera, 1929

Part 1

For me, two of the most pungent, original works of the 1920s — if one has to single out works that epitomize its contradictory artistic concerns — are Max Ernst's *Oedipus Rex* (1922) and Otto Dix's 1924 portfolio of 50 engravings dealing with *War* in all its stunning terror. On the one hand, we have a painting whose meaning is somewhat obscure — but not entirely, for *Oedipus Rex* is the hero of Sophocles' tragedy — and on the other hand we have an avalanche of images whose meaning is horrifically clear. Dix surrounds us with the violence of war — the trench warfare of the First World War, in which he served, and whose brutality he witnessed firsthand. His images are as fantastic as they are factual — expressionistically fierce and journalisticly precise — making them all the more nightmarish. There is an air of uncanniness to Dix's pictures that makes them more than records of an inhumane event. He takes us behind the scene of war — the parades and speeches and rationalizations — putting us right in the trenches, where the obscene ugliness of battle becomes self-evident. We are attacked by storm troopers wearing gas masks, encounter corpses, almost become entangled in barbed wire, and sit knee-deep in mud and filth: "you are there, whether or not you want to be," Dix's confrontational, morbid images shout. They document a highly contagious social pathology, which can claim us as its victim at any moment. The gloom of his scenes — they are marvels of black and white, and above all acid gray — conveys a hopeless state of mind as well as the atmosphere of a society bent on destroying itself.

Ernst's less immediately intelligible painting is also violent, as the pierced fingers and walnut indicate. The fingers are penetrated by a bow-like device used to puncture the feet of birds — there is one in the box — so that they cannot fly. Was it also used to shoot the arrow stuck in the walnut? The fingers do not bleed, but their wound must be painful. It is as though they stoically accept their suffering. Ernst's violence is more subtle than Dix's, just as his picture is more cryptic than the images in Dix's series, but it is equally bitter and relentless. The sense of ruin is as irreparable as it is in Dix's work, though more of a puzzle: A casual pinprick turns into permanent mutilation for no apparent reason. But the point is that a clever game has become self-destructive — masochistic as well as sadistic.

Dix's soldiers may be sadistic, and sometimes seem masochistically resigned to their fate, but the point is that they are trapped in a situation beyond their control, making it all the more traumatic. His anguished skulls convey their excruciating pain, a suffering so great it does not end even with death. His *War* is a traditional German Triumph of Death with a modern content, like its predecessor *The Trench* (1923). That famous painting toured Germany in an exhibition to protest war, and was apparently destroyed by the Nazis at the end of the Second World War, as though to deny that they had committed the atrocities Dix depicted. Yet, the individuality of Dix's soldier is submerged in his social role, and his suffering is caused and sanctioned by a public reality, suggesting that it is not innate and inevitable. That is, his suffering, however intense, is not the result of inner conflict inseparable from psychic development — the hermetic situation that Ernst represents — but rather a matter of politics and history.

One may recall that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is about violence — not the impersonal, anonymous violence of war, but the equally traumatic and much more intimate and intricate emotional violence of the family. It is just as stark and devastating as war, and, unlike it, impossible to escape. It eventually erupts into physical violence — *Oedipus Rex* ends with death and destruction. (Dix shows that the physical violence of war does emotional violence, and may cause permanent emotional as well as physical damage, as suggested by his notorious portraits of its wrecked survivors, such as the 1920 *Beggar* and the 1923 *Two Sacrifices of Capitalism*.) One may also recall that Sophocles' Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, and blinded himself out of guilt when he realized what he had done — violated the prohibition against incest that is basic to society and sanity — gave his name to Sigmund Freud's "Oedipus Complex." Ernst's picture stages the Complex, using a cast of strange symbols, each with many meanings. To understand the picture one must excavate layer upon layer of hidden meaning, the way Freud said one must excavate the unconscious to find the meanings hidden in the psyche.

Ernst's bizarre painting — it certainly doesn't conform to ordinary standards of rationality — is a "portrait of Oedipus," as Elizabeth Legge notes. Or, as I would say, it is an artistically manufactured dream of Oedipus. "Each motif . . . sets up lines of association that all lead, ultimately, to different aspects of the oedipal predicament."¹ The picture is a riddle, resembling a rebus — the Sphinx's riddle, the answer of which Oedipus correctly guessed to be "man," ironically turns out to refer to Oedipus himself, as Legge points out. She notes the abundance of literary as well as personal references in Ernst's painting, giving it a conceptual depth and richness. For example, the nut alludes to Hamlet's statement "O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams"

(*Hamlet*, II.2.247). Hamlet is not only Oedipus' social twin — equally royal (Freud notes that the infant acts in an "imperial" manner) — but his "psychological twin," for he had similar unconscious incestuous wishes. The bird refers to the pet cockatoo Ernst had when he was a child. It happened to die the same night his sister was born, confirming the treachery of woman and leading him to identify with his lost bird in the allegorical person of Loplop the Bird Superior, the omnipotent subject of many paintings. Thus *Oedipus Rex* is also Ernst's self-portrait, that is, a portrait of the Oedipal child in Ernst's psyche — the child that remains alive in his unconscious and whose conflicts he has encoded in his dream picture. It is also necessarily a portrait of the Oedipal child in every person, for the complex is universal.

Legge concludes by noting that Ernst's uncanny work is not only an "enactment of Freudian descriptions of the dream mechanism" — it certainly involves displacement and condensation — but becomes a "picture-manifesto dealing with image-creation itself." It was born of "the uterus of methodical madness" that Ernst regarded as the unfailing source of creativity, and is itself a visual statement in which Ernst feigns madness, the way Hamlet did in one of his speeches (II.2.247). The picture is as absurd and mad as a dream's manifest content, to use Freud's language, the latent content of which is a forbidden but quite natural wish. The punishment for this wish is castration, which is what both Oedipus's blindness and Ernst's bird-clipper symbolize. This is a very bad dream indeed — an arrow shot through one's brain, as it were (the walnut is also a symbol of the brain, for its irregular surface resembles that of the brain). Ernst's painting is a private dream that mocks the spectator with its incomprehensibility and incoherence, even as it tantalizes him with hidden meanings that imply it could be his own.

Whatever else it may be, Ernst's picture deals with personal tragedy — the Oedipal tragedy — while Dix's images deal with social tragedy — the tragedy of Germany in the First World War. The former is part of every individual's history, and as such universal; the latter is rooted in a particular social history, although war also is universal. Both works are nightmares, but Ernst depicts a personal nightmare, while Dix renders a social nightmare. Both works deal with the atrocity that is life — emotional life in the case of Ernst, social life in the case of Dix. Both works are also didactic and illustrative, however different the lessons to be drawn from them and the reality illustrated. Ernst's work portends the fascination with subjectivity that became dominant in Surrealism — in fact, as Legge points out, André Breton, the so-called Pope of Surrealism, was close friends with Ernst, and discussed Freud with him while on holiday in 1921, the same year the painting was begun and that Breton visited Freud in Vienna — while Dix's work is the climax of the German New Objectivity, which traced all evil and suffering back to society. Both take an equally hard look at what they regard as the "master reality." They seem to

have little to do with one another: They have different ideas of human nature — their common subject matter — and of art. There seems no way to reconcile Ernst's Freudianism and Dix's Marxism. (He was a member of the Communist Party.)

But there is a certain relationship between them. Ernst served in the First World War, as did Dix, noting that he "died" the day it was begun (Aug. 1, 1914), and "was resuscitated" the day it ended (Nov. 11, 1918), when he aspired "to find the myth of his time." This could describe Dix as well, but Dix had no wish to become a "magician," as Ernst did — the magic of art promised Ernst personal salvation and the illusion of omnipotence (magical thinking being wish fulfillment, as Freud said, like dream thinking) — but only to record what was preordained by history. Art had to submit to what was objectively the case rather than go off on a subjective tangent, deluding itself with fantasies of originality. More crucially, Ernst and Dix meet in their radicality, and in fact share the same dialectical outlook: Surrealism was as responsive to society as the New Objectivity was sensitive to the subjective suffering it caused. Despite himself, Dix was psychologically minded — he made it clear that the First World War was as much a personal as social disaster, a terrible waste of life as well as a colossal act of social stupidity — just as, despite himself, Ernst became a sociologist of the modern apocalypse, a myth which acquired substance in the First World War.

These ideas were seamlessly united in the psychosocial art of Max Beckmann, which has as many surreal as realistic features, and mythologizes the socially observed. That is, it conveys the unconscious forces that put their indelible stamp on human life as well as the competing social forces that shape it.

In the first Surrealist manifesto Breton defined Surrealism, "once and for all," as "[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."

Liberated from reason, aesthetics and morality, Surrealism seemed consummately free expression. But it was a perverse kind of freedom, as Breton made clear in a further elaboration: "Surrealism is based on the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought." This language is straight out of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), if with an added literary flair and, more important, a certain difference in emphasis, from which more decisive differences derive. Where the dream is "regressive, asocial and autistic," for Freud, as well as a universal expression that has certain typical features — even if no two dreams are exactly the same — for Breton, the dream was artistically atypical and unusual, indeed, the ultimate artistic marvel. The most

commonplace dream is artistically unique, indeed, inherently novel. Where Freud emphasized the resemblance between dreams, Breton emphasized the difference between them — their individuality rather than their likeness. For Breton, the dream became the cutting-edge and frontier of avant-garde progress, even the climax — the idea that all art was essentially a waking dream — toward which the avant-garde had been heading since Romanticism: Ironically, to regress emotionally was the means of progressing artistically — a necessary means of renewal and survival in the situation of artistic stagnation and uncertainty that existed in the period after the First World War. The dream was the motor to restart the School of Paris, which seemed passé after its prewar heyday. Thus, the disinterested play of thought in free association — which Freud showed is neither disinterested nor free, but, as he said, emotionally determined in every detail — is for Breton the fountainhead and catalyst of artistic creativity as such and avant-garde innovation in particular. In short, while for Freud the dream was, as he famously said, “the royal road to the unconscious,” for Breton it was the royal road to art — in fact, to especially ingenious and authentic art.

Freud doesn't entirely disagree. As he famously wrote in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1907), which Breton probably read, as his remarks about childhood suggest,

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child's ‘play’ from ‘phantasizing.’ The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously — that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion — while separating it sharply from reality.²

But Breton doesn't want to make this sharp separation. He wants, as he declares, the “resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality.” The task of art is to effect the resolution — to synthesize phantasizing and the tangible and visible things of the real world, to use Freud's words.

Breton's rather ambitious program for Surrealism led him to diverge from Freud, and finally led Freud to break with Breton, and reject Surrealism

as a gross misunderstanding — not to say misappropriation — of his ideas. For Freud, the dream made no sense without the dreamer's associations and the circumstances under which these occurred, as he wrote in a letter to Breton, who had asked him to contribute an introduction to a book of dreams by Surrealists. Freud refused to do so; the dream, however important, was not "omnipotent" for him — not an absolute. As he wrote to Breton, he couldn't imagine what meaning a dream would have to anyone without its interpretation. Interpretation breaks its spell by clarifying its meaning, and thus destroys its mystery and dissolves it, showing it to be transient — for Freud, the dream was simply a delivery system for an unconscious content, not a goal in itself — and, above all, Breton wanted mystery and the elusiveness it entailed, embodied in a permanent work of intriguing art. Later, in a similar vein of skepticism about Surrealism, Freud remarked to Salvador Dalí, who had come to visit him — and who made some marvelous drawings of a surreal-looking Freud on the occasion — that he was more interested in Dalí's conscious and brilliant craft or artistic control than in his unconscious fantasies.

There was another difference in the use Breton wanted to make of the dream and the use Freud made of it — another difference in their attitudes towards dreams. Breton claimed to share Freud's view that the dream was aesthetically indifferent, that is, beyond considerations of beauty and ugliness. But he in fact thought it was inherently beautiful, for "the marvelous is always beautiful," as Breton declared, and there is nothing more marvelous than a dream, especially compared to ordinary reality, that is, the world as it exists in the "waking state," as he said. For Breton, the Surreal work of art, verbal or visual, is essentially a dream made in rebellion against ordinary reality and consciousness. He thus contradicted himself, that is, contradicted his conception of surreality: He elevated the dream over reality. He did so in the name of the familiar romantic idea that art, rooted in the innate creativity of the unconscious, was extraordinary and profound compared to reality as it was consciously perceived and conceived. Consciousness was shallow compared to the unconscious, which is why it tends to banalize reality into everyday familiarity rather than appreciate its strangeness, realizing how unfamiliar with it we are. In short, for Breton, the unconscious, and the Surreal work of art that is its instrument, is another weapon in the ongoing romantic war against the so-called "bourgeois" view of reality, which standardizes and sanitizes life.

According to Breton, Surrealism, the modern standard-bearer of the romantic vision of reality, was always about to win the battle against the conventional bourgeois version of reality. It never quite did. The Surreal work of art was a representation of a dream state, but it never completely triumphed over the waking state, which defended itself by interpreting the dream. This was a sign of what Freud later called ego strength, an expression of what he had called the instinct of self-preservation. Breton wanted to abolish the ego

— despite the egotism, not to say egomania, of his own writings. The Surreal work of art was supposed to abolish the audience's ego — drive it insane, as it were, or “entrance” it — and thus afford a certain measure of relief from wakefulness and the misery and stupidity of ordinary reality. Surrealism was presumably helped by the fact that, as Breton argued, the “balance” of consciousness was somewhat shaky or “relative.” (This was an exaggeration, not to say distortion, of Freud's early view of its limited and vulnerable character.) Consciousness was always in danger of becoming unbalanced — of being invaded, undermined and finally overwhelmed by “suggestions” from the unconscious. Breton was a male nurse during the First World War, and had seen this occur in shell-shocked soldiers, whose apparent insanity he never forgot. He seemed to regard their psychotic break with reality as a rebellion against it, and, indeed, there was good reason to rebel against the traumatic reality of war, and a society that accepted it as “normal.”

Throughout his career, Breton remained fascinated with the idea of the mad artist — the shell-shocked artist, as it were, traumatized by everyday social reality, from Arthur Rimbaud to Lautremont to Alfred Jarry to Arthur Craven — whom he turned into an avant-garde hero. For Breton, the most exemplary mad avant-garde artist was his friend Jacques Vaché, who died of an overdose of opium in January 1919, a “victim of modern inevitability. . . attached to nothing.” “He became convinced that Vaché had willfully orchestrated his own suicide,” and “in a sense, Breton never stopped writing Vaché's obituary,” citing his “superb indifference” and “humor,” that is, black humor, as models for Surrealism.³ Vaché was the model Surrealist en avant Surrealism.

Just as Freud seemed to think that psychoanalysis could solve all “the principal problems of life,” to use Breton's words, so he thought that Surrealism could do so. The parallels between psychoanalysis and Surrealism are striking, but it is the differences, outlined above, that seemed especially influential on Surrealist art. Most decisively, Surrealism came to regard the dream as prophetic of the future — a kind of Delphic oracle, as it were, if also a Cassandra — a Jungian idea which Freud dismissed as “mystic mud.” Even further, as Breton's *Second Surrealist Manifesto* suggests, Surrealism came to regard the dream as an incitement to political revolution, or at least tried to enlist its particular dream of art in the service of social revolutionary forces, such as the Communist Party. Breton applied for membership in the party (1927), but eventually became disaffected with it, after realizing that its version of socially realistic art to educate the proletariat was inimical to, not to say suppressive of, the Surrealist ideal of an art that takes its cues from the dream — an aristocratic, cryptic, hyper-individualistic idea of art from the point of view of a revolutionary cause determined to make the masses conscious of their oppression with the help of schematic, not to say simplistic and

stereotyped, images of social reality. The Communists, in fact, regarded the Surrealists as anarchists, incapable of submitting to party discipline and obedience — a not-altogether incorrect perception. Surrealist art, after all, was not social action, nor exactly a social cause, and Communism, after all, was just another orthodoxy — not bourgeois, but just as banal. Surrealism was addressed to the individual, not the collective. It sought to liberate the individual, not society as a whole.

Indeed, Surrealism sought to help the individual hold his own against society — to sidestep the collective — by going underground, as it were. While Breton never entirely lost his belief that Surrealism, like Communism, was a matter of “moral commitment,” and while he tried to give the Surrealist Revolution a future by attaching it to the Communist Revolution, which claimed to know the future (inevitably Communist), the deepest motivation — probably completely unconscious — for his flirtation with Communism was the seductiveness of its sweeping, pretentious claims, as grandiose as those of Surrealism. Breton was drawn to Communism for emotional reasons, and he eventually had a rude awakening when Communism itself disowned him.

While Breton officially began Surrealism with his 1924 manifesto, he in fact found many anticipations of what might be called the Surrealist mentality or attitude in remote as well as recent visual art. The “metaphysical” painter Giorgio de Chirico, the Dadaists Duchamp and Picabia, and Picasso — not the Picasso who became conspicuously Surrealist in the 1920s and 1930s, but the Picasso who, “towards the end of 1909,” was suddenly inspired “to give materiality to what had hitherto remained in the domain of pure fantasy . . . advancing deep into unknown territory”⁴ — all fit comfortably under the Surrealist umbrella. So did Piero di Cosimo and Leonardo da Vinci. Breton was fascinated by their recommendation that, in Breton’s words, “one should allow one’s attention to become absorbed in the contemplation of streaks of dried spittle or the surface of an old wall until the eye is able to distinguish an alternative world which painting is capable of revealing.”⁵ “Leonardo’s paranoiac ancient wall” is an “ideal field of interpretation,” as Breton said, for it has “extraordinary power of suggestion.”⁶ Surrealist painting is “this wall perfected. All you need do now is study the resulting image long enough for you to find a title that conveys the reality you have discovered in it, and you can be quite sure of having expressed yourself in the most completely personal and valid manner.”⁷

An obscure, formless, very material — and “dirty” — surface unexpectedly becomes a source of inspiration. The dirt on the wall — and it is important for Breton and the Surrealists that the wall be “dirty,” covered with spittle or decaying, that is, peculiarly obscene — is the catalyst of creativity, much as a grain of sand or other foreign matter stimulates or “provokes” an oyster to grow a pearl. According to Breton, the wall is “a recipe” for creativ-

ity that is “within everybody’s grasp,” even as it is “among the ‘Secrets of the magical surrealist art’,” suggesting that everyone is secretly a Surrealist.⁸ Everyone is potentially a “seer,” able to spontaneously “see” in the surface of the wall what otherwise remains unseen and hidden in the self. The surface of the wall becomes a screen on which one projects, with a kind of involuntary wisdom, one’s innermost feelings in the form of fantastic images, which may be meaningful to no one else but which are as emotionally seductive or evocative.

(It is worth noting that Leonardo says nothing about spittle or the wall’s age, which Breton, with typical Surrealist extravagance and provocativeness, added to Leonardo’s statement. For Leonardo, “[g]azing fixedly at the spot on the wall, the coals in the grate, the clouds, the flowing stream” were equally stimulating of the imagination. However, it is the case, as Vasari relates, that Piero sometimes intensely studied a wall on which sick people regularly spat, finding in the spit stains all kinds of fantastic scenes, including beautiful landscapes. Breton no doubt appreciated the irony of this, that is, the fact that creativity was inspired by pathology, however indirectly. Piero’s “alchemical” transformation of putrid matter into refined art shows that he was a Surrealist, and understood the basic imaginative task and uncanniness of art.)

This whole imaginative process, the core of creativity, is what Breton called “automatism,” a term “inherited from the mediums,”⁹ that is, people who can make contact with the “alternative world” and even sometimes seem to live in it — the other world of unconscious fantasy. Automatism involves self-hypnosis and hallucinatory “revelation,” as the Surrealists sometimes called it. Breton thought it was involuntary — nature’s gift — but he knew it also had to be willed. That is, one had to deliberately alter one’s consciousness by attending to something that one ordinarily is unconscious of — such as a dirty and decaying wall, which one barely notices in passing, and never looks at twice, let alone carefully — in order to discover the visionary in oneself. The point is to get oneself into an unfocused, indeterminate state of mind — Leonardo’s mysterious wall symbolized the state — in which “surreal” things begin to happen, as though by chance, that is, involuntarily. Automatism is in effect a surefire way of becoming an artist, whether or not one’s art conformed to conventional, socially approved ideas of what art should be. Clearly, the result is not consciously made art, but an overflow of unconscious images, as in a dream. For Breton, it involved “total spontaneity of expression” — a difficult but not impossible goal, which he believed was the only one worthy of life as well as art. What he neglected to note was the compulsive element in automatist spontaneity.

Automatism “almost literally gave wings to the artist’s hand,” Breton wrote. “This hand” became “enamored of its own movement and of that alone. . . . Indeed, the essential discovery of surrealism is that, without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write and the pencil that runs in order

to draw spin an infinitely precious substance which, even if not always possessing an exchange value, none the less appears charged with all the emotional intensity stored up within the poet or painter at a given moment.”¹⁰ In automatist art, there is no differentiation “between sympathetic and formal qualities” and “between sensory and intellectual functions,” which is also the case in the mind, which is why “automatism is uniquely able to satisfy [its] demands. . . . In the field of art, a work can be considered surrealist only in proportion to the efforts the artist has made to encompass the whole psycho-physical field (in which the field of consciousness constitutes only a very small segment). Freud has demonstrated that at these unfathomable depths there reigns the absence of contradiction, the relaxation of emotional tensions due to repression, a lack of the sense of time, and the replacement of external reality by a psychic reality obeying the pleasure principle alone. Automatism leads us in a straight line to this region.”¹¹

It is worth noting that there is nothing new about Breton’s technique of automatism; what is new is Freud’s therapeutic use of it and understanding of its regressive character — and even that is not completely new, but rather simply the fruit of a more thorough and systematic understanding — which Breton accepted and appropriated for Surrealism. Automatism, which involves articulating one’s random thinking, that is, communicating one’s “associated ideas,” as Francis Galton called them, was in fact familiar to the ancients, as Aristophanes’s comedy *The Clouds* makes clear. Socrates, consulted by a farmer on the best way of cheating his creditors, asks the farmer to recline on a couch and speak his thoughts as they occurred to him, in order to better understand himself, with Socrates’ interpretive aid. Both Plotinus and Leibniz acknowledged the existence of an unconscious stream of thoughts. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), remarked on a “Trayn of Thoughts” that is “Unguided, without Design, and inconstant . . . the thoughts are said to wander, and seem impertinent one to another, as in a Dream.” Even before Freud, as Freud himself noted, thinkers realized that creativity was rooted in free association. Thus, he cites a 1788 letter by the poet Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Boerne’s 1823 article “The Art of Becoming an Original Writer in Three Days” and Dr. J. J. Garth Wilkinson’s 1857 publication “A New Method” of writing poetry, all of which describe and recommend the use of free association to achieve poetic originality and “conviction.” I mention all this to indicate that Surrealism is a revival and continuation of age-old ideas of creativity — now called “romantic,” as distinct from the “classical” idea that creativity is conscious invention and construction — rather than an altogether unheard of innovation. In a sense, Surrealism is a romantic rebellion against the “classicism” of Cubism, which Breton in fact suggests was, for its greatest practitioners, Picasso and Braque, not at all classical in import, but a romantic “adventure.” In fact, Braque’s idea that Cubism is “perpetual revelation,” in which “objects don’t exist. . . except

insofar as a rapport exists between them and myself,"¹² is quintessentially romantic.

For Breton, automatism is "one of surrealism's two great directions." Max Ernst and André Masson were visual Surrealism's most exemplary automatists, although Breton also acknowledged the innovative automatism of Oscar Dominguez, and seemed to have respected Kandinsky as one of the first automatists, and thus "one of the most exceptional, one of the greatest, revolutionaries of vision."¹³ It was Ernst who particularly counted, because his technique of frottage (rubbing) resurrected Leonardo's visionary wall. In his 1936 essay "On Frottage," which in fact begins with Leonardo's remarks about the wall (from his *Treatise on Painting*), Ernst notes his rediscovery of it, as it were, on Aug. 10, 1925, in the well-worn floorboards of a seaside inn. "I made from the boards a series of drawings by placing on them, at random, sheets of paper which I undertook to rub with black lead. In gazing attentively at the drawings thus obtained, 'the dark passages and those of a gently lighted penumbra,' I was surprised by the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities and by the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other, with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories."¹⁴ Leonardo mentions nothing about "amorous memories"; this derives from Freud's idea of the dream as a wish-fulfillment, often a forbidden or repressed or denied sexual wish. Frottage, which has the connotation of rubbing up against an object or person for the purpose of sexual discharge, is Ernst's witty, ironical way of building perverse sexuality into the automatist process.

Ernst, who was as much if not more of an intellectual than Breton, first read Freud in 1911, when he was a student at the University of Bonn, where he studied psychology and psychiatry, including criminal, experimental and speech psychology, as well as mental illness in children and the etiology and meaning of psychosis. All of these went into his conception of what it meant to be an artist: The archetypal artist was part criminal, part child, part psychotic, someone who, like all of these types, transgressively enacted unconscious reality — the deepest subjectivity — with no comprehension of it and no regard for polite society. Like all of them, he was a self-obsessed deviant — his self-obsession made him a deviant. And like all of them, the artist was constantly experimenting with uninhibited self-expression, realizing "through a series of suggestions and transmutations that offered themselves spontaneously — in the manner of that which passes for hypnagogic visions — the character of the material interrogated."

Ernst, in fact, "began to experiment indifferently and to question, utilizing the same [automatist] means, all sorts of materials to be found in my visual field: leaves and their veins, the ragged edges of a bit of linen, the brushstrokes of a 'modern' painting, the unwound thread from a spool, etc.

There my eyes discovered human heads, animals, a battle that ended with a kiss (the bride of the wind), rocks, the sea and the rain, earthquakes, the sphinx in her stable, the little tables around the earth, the palette of Caesar, false positions, a shawl of frost flowers, the pampas. . . ." Ernst was quite explicit about the fact that "the role of the painter is to pick out and project that which sees itself in him," just as "the role of the poet, since the celebrated *lettre de voyage* of Rimbaud, consists in writing according to the dictates of that which articulates itself in him." Notice that the painter and poet disown the contents of their own psyche, as though it was impersonal and universal rather than historical and personal, that is, primordial rather than particular to an individual's life. One only knows the contents of one's psyche after the fact of their projection into an alien material — their ironic objectification, as it were. The author of the work of art is no more than a spectator at its birth, or at best an experimental midwife, Ernst declared. Whether "indifferent or passionate," he simply "watches the phases of its development." It emerges magically, as it were, from the marriage of the unconscious and matter. The less interference by its apparent author — who should remain a curious witness — the more convincing the result.

The work of art's magical character goes hand in hand with its mythical status. It is more of a clue to the times, Ernst insists, than to the person who dreams and "makes" it. On one level, this shows Ernst's wish to make an art that is generally valid, not simply personally poignant — an art that is intellectually cosmopolitan rather than emotionally provincial. On another level, it is somewhat defensive; by rationalizing himself, in a schizoid fashion, as a detached observer of irrational processes deeper than himself, he doesn't have to face his own irrationality and deal with his own feelings. The processes are no doubt deeper than himself, but he ignores the fact that they are also particular to his life. He can't escape their effect on his feelings by pretending to stand above them. Freud compared psychoanalysis to archaeology, with free association the digging tool; Ernst seems to have thought of his psychoanalytically oriented art the same way, with automatism the digging tool. But where Freud tried to understand the personal as well as general relevance of the shards of psyche excavated in dreaming, Ernst thought their significance was essentially archetypal, however personal the dream which uncovered them.

But even as he deceived himself by intellectualizing his art as offering insight into his life-world, he acknowledged that the automatist process was not altogether impersonal. It began "with a memory of childhood" which had become an "obsession." The private importance of the automatist process of artistic free association was that it "revealed the first cause of the obsession, or produced a simulacrum of that cause." In other words, its purpose was therapeutic. Ernst was not indulging in it only for artistic reasons, but to save himself. It was not simply an artistic lark, but a way of psychoanalyzing himself.

Ernst, it seemed, had wanted to be a psychiatrist before the war broke his spirit; afterwards he used his psychoanalytic art and knowledge to restore his mental health. The times couldn't be cured, but the self could be. The spell of the obsession was lifted when it was represented in the simulacrum of the hypnogogic vision. But a problem remained: Ernst didn't want to give up his hypnogogic visions, for to do so would be to give up being an artist. He had to stay obsessed, which eventually led him to become repetitive. His later hypnogogic visions became tedious and predictable, however variable their detail. "I have seen. And I was surprised and enamored of what I saw, wishing to identify myself with it." Doing so, he turned Surrealist magic, and with it frottage and automatism, into cliché, no longer capable of intensifying the mind's "irritability."

Automatism was not the only "road available to surrealism to reach its objective." There was also "the stabilizing of dream images in the kind of still-life deception known as *trompe-l'oeil* (and the very word 'deception' betrays the weakness of the process)." But for Breton, it "has been proved by experience to be far less reliable and even presents very real risks of the traveler losing his way altogether."¹⁵ Breton was thinking of de Chirico and Salvador Dalí, whose ironic *trompe-l'oeil* works he initially celebrated, but who both eventually lost their way altogether, and whom he excommunicated, as it were. De Chirico disavowed his "original quests," as Breton said, surrendering to "vulgar temptations," "shameless cynicism," and "greed."¹⁶ In 1925, de Chirico began to make neo-Classical images, which Breton thought "very poor," and began to forge his earlier "metaphysical" works, which had become famous, so that he could sell them twice. He later mass reproduced certain works, mechanically copying them, as though to show that they were not so mysterious. This repudiation of uniqueness later made him famous among Pop artists, postmodernists and deconstructionists, who disbelieved in creativity and originality. But for Breton, it was a dismal suicide — a steep decline from his pre-war "visual conundrums." Similarly, Breton turned against Dalí, who also forsook his earlier Surrealism for "the artistic ideals of the Renaissance," became a "fashionable portraitist" and "converted to the Catholic faith." Most of all, Breton despised Dalí's commercialism, which led Breton to give him the anagrammatic nickname "Avida Dollars." Dalí replied that "[t]hat's the only truly brilliant intuition Breton ever had in his life."¹⁷ But Marcel Jean thinks that Dalí's "definitive break" with Surrealism had to do with his unexpected "pro-Nazi attitude," evident in the eulogizing of the swastika in Dalí's essay "Honor to the Object!"¹⁸

Whatever the reason — the dictatorial pursuit of power, the desire to uphold the true Surrealist faith, personal animosity — Breton was constantly falling out with other Surrealists, who were in general a quarrelsome, high-strung lot, each claiming to be more authentic — more in touch with the un-

conscious — than the other. They were simply too individualistic and rebellious to sustain a group relationship. Surrealism was a heresy, and, like the Protestant heresy, it split into numerous sects, often with only one member. But an art based on the unconscious was in fact inherently unstable, and after a while the contradictoriness of dreams became predictable, and it became easy to manufacture their incongruities. Many Surrealists eventually repudiated Surrealism as “infantile” — Alberto Giacometti’s word — and came to think of it as the decadent dead-end of avant-garde art, returning to tradition in search of a richer sense of aesthetics, that is, aesthetics based on conscious perception not simply unconscious expression. They wanted a more fully human, coherent art. They no longer believed Breton’s dictum that “the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist.”¹⁹ There were, in fact, many other artists who were not Surrealists — however much they dipped into Surrealism when it became fashionable — who thought that Breton’s “total revision of real values” had discarded what was of real artistic and human value. These were not necessarily reactionaries, but rather an alternative avant-garde, transforming tradition in the light of modern experience. Thus, where de Chirico and Dalí regressed to the Renaissance, to recover an obsolete integrity and authenticity, Giacometti and Francis Bacon used the traditional figure to create a new sense of existential integrity and authenticity — ironically, by showing its isolation, alienation and self-torment, to the point of disintegration.

In 1912, in “Meditations of a Painter,” de Chirico declared: “I believe that as from a certain point of view the sight of someone in a dream is a proof of his metaphysical reality, so, from the same point of view, the revelation of a work of art is the proof of the metaphysical reality of certain chance occurrences that we sometimes experience in the way and manner that something appears to us and provokes in us the image of a work of art, an image, which in our souls awakens surprise — sometimes, meditation — often, and always, the joy of creation.”²⁰ Thus, a dozen years before Breton wrote the first Surrealist manifesto, de Chirico stated the core Surrealist idea of the work of art as a dream composed of seemingly arbitrary, chance associations, that is, as a “metaphysical” phenomenon. The moment of metaphysical revelation is “enigmatic” and “inexplicable,” de Chirico wrote, and what his paintings did was to fix or stabilize it so that it seemed to exist stably without losing its mystery. For de Chirico, creativity was rooted in the so-called defamiliarization effect, as his quotation of Schopenhauer makes clear: “[T]o have original, extraordinary and perhaps even immortal ideas, one has but to isolate oneself from the world for a few moments so completely that the most commonplace happenings appear to be new and unfamiliar.” Creativity is rooted in a related kind of estrangement for Dalí: “[P]aranoia uses the external world in order to assert its dominating idea and has the disturbing characteristic of making oth-

ers accept this idea's reality. The reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof, and so comes to serve the reality of the mind."²¹ Dalí's "paranoiac-critical method" produced hallucinatory images full of "dream objects" that had the "tangibility" of "everydayness," but that "operate symbolically," that is, embody the "immovable shape of desire."²² Dalí's ambition was to represent the dream in as photographically precise and clear way as possible, so that it seemed ironically real — literally the case, however strange — but also visually compelling and seductive enough to be one's own.

The deceptive, hypnotic verisimilitude of the trompe-l'oeil imagery of de Chirico and Dalí is fraught with "surreal drama" and tension, to employ the term Apollinaire used to describe his play *The Breasts of Tiresias* (ca. 1914), first performed 1917 (apparently the first mention of "surreal"), that is, the sense of uncanniness and enchantment generated by the clash of incommensurates. But I think that Breton finally repudiated the metaphysical paranoia — to bring de Chirico and Dalí under one emotional umbrella, where they belong — of Surrealist trompe-l'oeil art because it seemed too close to Renaissance art, however different in appearance. It was not simply the narcissistic antics of de Chirico and Dalí that bothered Breton, but the anti-Surrealism implicit in their ostensibly Surrealist work. However distorted, it was too well-crafted — conscientiously constructed — to be authentically unconsciously "inspired." It was too reflective, that is, appealed to consciousness rather than irritated and terrorized the unconscious, breaking through the barrier of repression. In short, trompe-l'oeil Surrealism seemed, in Breton's ultimate analysis, more realistic than surrealistic, and, like all realism, it seemed one-dimensional, that is, it implied there was only the shared reality we know from everyday experience. In its effort to make the unfamiliar familiar, it became all too familiar. Thus, its impact was limited, however intriguing its deceptiveness. And even that was problematic, for it suggested that trompe-l'oeil Surrealism was more interested in creating the illusion of perceived reality than in conveying the emotional tensions and obsessions of unconscious reality.

Without the violence of the moment of convulsive spontaneity and disruptive revelation, art was emotionally worthless for Breton. I think that his growing suspicion that de Chirico and Dalí were imposters — that their biggest product was their persona, as their pursuit of publicity suggests — was confirmed the moment they began to make, not simply Renaissance art (Breton, after all, admired Leonardo), but insipid, lifeless Renaissance art.

Part 2

If there is any one, consistent purpose to Surrealism, it is to bring into question, and finally undo, the conventional idea of reality as stable and self-evident.

As Breton wrote, "let us not forget that for us, in this era, it is reality itself that is involved."²³ The heroes of this era are Einstein and Freud, as Breton says, because they show that reality is not what it seems to be. Both show that reality is relative to the observer. That is, they suggest "the sovereignty of the mind" over reality, to use Breton's lofty phrase, or at least the mind's implication in it. At the same time, they reveal the "hidden reality" in which "there is more to be found" than in immediate reality, as Breton says, quoting Gaston Bachelard. Surrealism's task is to confirm all this — to demonstrate the mind's rule over immediate reality, while at the same time showing what can be found in hidden reality. Or, as Dalí more simply stated, the Surrealist work of art "systematizes confusion . . . and so assist[s] in discrediting completely the world of [everyday] reality."²⁴

For all the diversity of its works, Surrealism involves two fundamental processes: the suspension of reality testing and, correlatively, the construction of what Wilfred Bion calls "bizarre objects," that is, dream objects or objects with a dream-like, indeed nightmarish, reality. It involves a deliberate regression to the paranoid-schizoid position, as Melanie Klein calls it; and with this, "simulations of mental diseases," to use Dalí's words. The more interesting Surrealist artists — or artists who were at one time or another associated with Surrealism, for many moved on or came into conflict with Breton — like Jean Arp, Antonin Artaud, Hans Bellmer, Victor Brauner, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, René Magritte, André Masson and Yves Tanguy, never abandoned the splitting and fragmentation characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position, suggesting that they never really emerged from it into the mature depressive position, and that their works are expressions rather than simulations of mental illness.²⁵

Michael Balint's account of reality testing is useful in understanding just exactly what the Surrealist suspension of it involves and how it results in what might be called a lame duck, bizarre reality, in which objects are composed of incongruous parts, making them "surreal" (all the more so because the parts never form an organic whole). The Surrealist object remains unfinished and ill-formed, that is, permanently arrested in its formation, and as such, "unsightly." Reality is, as Dalí might say, diseased, mental illness reified. Reality testing involves four steps, Balint writes: "The first is to decide whether the sensations are coming from within or from without. The second step is to infer from the sensations what it is that causes them. I shall call this step the object formation. Very closely connected with it is the third step, to find the significance of the sensations. The problem to solve is: what does it mean to me that I perceive them? This step could be called the interpretation or finding of the meaning. The fourth step is then to find the correct reaction to the perceived sensations."²⁶

How do the Surrealists subvert these steps? First, they equivocate

about the source of the sensations, refusing to decide whether they come from within or from without. Secondly, they assume that the sensations appear spontaneously, as though they caused themselves, or have no cause. They are mysteriously given. Such enigmatic sensations can never congeal into a clear and distinct object. It is hard to interpret the resulting aborted object, or rather, one can find whatever meaning one wants in it, since it has no clear meaning of its own, that is, no meaning bound to its integrity or wholeness, for it has none. It is a sum of exciting sensations — rudimentary fragments of sense experience — which do not add up to a whole object. As such, it has no overall meaning or, ultimately, any meaning, for the sensations, unintegrated, seem primordially given, that is, so consummately concrete they preclude symbolization. Finally, there being nothing correct or exact about the Surrealist object — it is inherently incorrect and unintelligible, as its bizarreness indicates — there can be no correct or proper reaction to it: It becomes a stimulating screen — the exciting surface of Leonardo's wall — in which every viewer can find his or her own mental landscape. The Surrealist hallucination is a composite of conflicting sensations in a state of suspended reality, which adds to their bizarreness, that is, their sense of unreality.

In fact, the basic goal of the Surrealists is to generate a sense of unreality — not simply of aborted reality, but of the not-real, indeed, the never-to-be-real. Surrealist artists want the viewer to experience unreality through their works, and find in them a clue to his or her own hidden reality. The works themselves are fantasies of unreality generated by the hidden reality in the artist: the “more” that can be found in hidden reality is the ultimate unreality of it all.

The epitome of the Surrealist work of art is the so-called “exquisite corpse.” It originated in a kind of group game. One player writes a phrase on a piece of paper, folds it to conceal part of what had been written, and passes the paper to another player, who writes something in response to the words that remain visible. This continues until every player has his say.

The assumption is that the collective unconscious of the group will produce a sentence that, however technically unintelligible, makes profound emotional sense. One sentence thus produced was “The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine” — whence the label “exquisite corpse.” Its suggestiveness is a function of its contradictoriness. “Corpse” implies death; “young wine,” fresh life. Thus the beginning and the end are brought together. It also seems contradictory, not to say perverse, to call a corpse “exquisite.” The sentence is absurd, but its details are evocative, separately and in combination. The importance of the exquisite corpse is that it is a collaborative work of art, and as such undermines the traditional idea of the independent author. More subtly, it suggests that each of its authors has something unconscious in common.

In fact, what they usually have in common are those old standbys, sex and aggression. Thus the visual exquisite corpse made by Jacques Hérold, Yves Tanguy and Victor Brauner about 1932 shows a manneristically elongated female figure with a small head and a huge erect penis. It is a crudely executed cartoon, with some amusing details. Appended to the tip of the penis is a text in a balloon, as though the penis could talk. The figure's womb is a niche in which a female head and a male hand, caressing it, appear together. Bubbles emerge from the mouth of the head, as though it was underwater. Both head and hand seem to be photographs, indicating that the work is a collage. The figure holds an apple in its left hand, a perfume sprayer in its right hand, and wears, on its head, what look like three bonnets or lamp shades, one on top of each other. The body, with its poorly matched breasts, is sexually mature, but the face high above it, on a long neck, is that of a very young, innocent-looking girl. The headdress is a kind of fetish that turns the figure into a phallic woman. Indeed, she belongs to the same family of fantasy as Henry Fuseli's authoritarian woman, as the resemblance in phallic coiffure indicates. The Hérold-Tanguy-Brauner exquisite corpse is a perverse if comic construction of a perverse if tragic young woman — the seductive femme fatale. The first such temptress was the sexually inexperienced and emotionally naive Eve with the apple, as the work itself makes clear. Here the girl-woman Eve adds perfume to her stock of charms, modernizing her. The comic effect is a defense against what is emotionally disturbing. In short, while the exquisite corpse may look surprising at first, it is not hard to read. The image readily creates associations. In the end, one finds oneself looking at something familiar, however distorted, as though in a dream.

Exquisite corpses are still being made, as "The Return of the Exquisite Corpse," a '90s exhibition, indicates. The newer ones seem more like virtuoso performances than spontaneous expressions, more visually provocative than unconsciously evocative. The sense of unforced revelation has been replaced by the facile manipulation of the already revealed, often by popular culture, which seems to have a monopoly on sex and aggression.

The already seen — indeed, the all-too-often-seen — has replaced the freshly seen. Perversity has become stylized, indeed, high style, suggesting that it has lost its novelty and mystery. The obscene has become "the scene," and a standardized one, with mass appeal, at that. Indeed, the bizarre has become a populist cliché. There is really no emotional tension — indeed, nothing even visually startling — in the slick juxtapositions of the 1992 exquisite corpse of Julie Ault, Cindy Sherman and Marc Tauss, however bold their contrast. The work is clearly manufactured and seems unfelt, compared to the Hérold-Tanguy-Brauner exquisite corpse, which in its naiveté seems created out of experience. There is a sense of subjective immediacy to it that is lacking in the over-mediated, mechanically sophisticated images — all appropriated

and thus doubly objectified — in the Ault-Sherman-Tauss exquisite corpse. The friction between Ault's phallic rocket in the upper register, Sherman's ironically grotesque female nude construction in the middle register, and Tauss' dirty feet in the lower register ignites no emotional spark, however intellectually clever. (One wonders if the rocket is a reference to Robert Rauschenberg, who had made it into a theme in the '60s. If so, Ault's rocket is a bit of postmodern nostalgia, that is, the backward, self-conscious look at art history that signals the end of avant-garde advance, not to say the conclusion of its history. Rockets in general have become a standard part of the cultural landscape rather than technological miracles, suggesting that Ault is bogged down in postmodern nostalgia with or without reference to modern art.)

The rocket head, dummy body, and feet form a whimsical figure, like the Hérold-Tanguy-Brauner figure, but the result remains an accumulation of sophisticated signifiers — a tower of visual Babel, as it were, for the images are from different discourses — rather than an ironical restoration of a sinister archetype. It is the difference between the modern and postmodern exquisite corpse, and modern and postmodern Surrealism. Jaded Pop Surrealism, which cynically knows everything beforehand — with postmodern pseudo-sophistication — without having experienced it, has replaced the Surrealism that was once an adventure into unknown visual territory, where it found what it knew to be emotionally true, however strange. Thus what was unexpected has become expected, even foreordained.

In a sense, every Surrealist work is the detail of an exquisite corpse, with the viewer's imagination.

For all their provocative wishes and cunning inventions, the Surrealists were concerned with the tragedy of being human. Psychoanalysis confirmed it, and rationalized it, but their rebellion against pure art — art which eschewed the human and tragic sense of life — began with their experience of the first world war. Breton's first Surrealist manifesto was written six years after the end of the war, but his experience of the conflict shaped his ideas. His fascination with violence suggests as much. His famous description of Surrealism as psychic automatism without the inhibiting controls of reason, morality and aesthetics sounds like a diagnosis of the war mentality. It involves the uninhibited expression of aggression with no concern for the moral consequences, let alone its devastating effect on the world, which becomes an ugly place. No doubt ugliness, irrationality and moral indifference can be aestheticized, which is what the Surrealists and *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists did, but this fact hardly redeems them.

It has been said that Cubism arrived on a wave of optimism about modernity, but the first world war turned it to pessimism. But even Cubism internalized the insidious negativity of modernity — its pursuit of efficiency seemed to spoil the pleasure of life — and defensively aestheticized it. At the

very least, like a good deal of early avant-garde art, it struggled to master what seemed unavoidable in modernity, and thus unconsciously traumatizing, for one could do nothing about it: the machine, which came to symbolize not only efficiency but uniformity and standardization. Geometricizing the organic and finally, in Synthetic Cubism, replacing it altogether, or at least allowing the geometrical to dominate and subsume the organic — the struggle between organically alive nature and unchanging geometric form, along with the slow but steady transformation of the former into the latter, is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Cubism — the Cubist picture becomes a kind of machine, an abstract construction functioning as a “picture,” if no longer exactly a window on the world.

It is because of the tension between the organic and the geometric — emblematic of the authority of modern analytic intellect and technological innovation — that Cubism is the first genuinely modern art, that is, the first art to truly engage modernity. Fauvism celebrated the organic, unconsciously in defiance of the machines that were taking over the world — certainly appearing everywhere in everyday life — while Dadaism and Surrealism fetishized the machine, often substituting it for the organic human body. Sometimes machine and body seamlessly fused — a hopeful reconciliation of opposites, resulting in a new modern “integrity.” Abstract mannequins and robot-like figures begin to proliferate, such as those that appear in George Grosz’s *Republican Automaton* (1920) and on Oskar Schlemmer’s *Bauhaus Staircase* (1932). In Dix’s *Dr. Mayer-Herman* (1926), the globe of the X-Ray machine competes uneasily with the bulbous body of the doctor for our attention. He may in fact be a kind of machine underneath his sterile white smock. There is a subtle absurdity to the portrait, no different in principle from the sense that the machine has made the lifeworld an absurd place, which is what Cubism conveys.

In the ‘20s, with the emergence of the Bauhaus, with its credo of applied abstraction — abstraction in the service of design, whether of buildings, furniture or tableware, and, more generally, the integration of abstraction and technology — the great divide in 20th century art became explicit. It had already appeared at the beginning of the century: An unprejudiced look at early modern art reveals that, alongside Cubism, which is a kind of *art pour l’art*, the human figure, as a vehicle for tragic humanism, remained an enduring theme, most obviously in the so-called *peintres maudits*, for example, Marc Chagall, Amadeo Modigliani and Chaim Soutine — all Jewish outsiders who came to Paris to assimilate avant-garde art without abandoning their “difference,” not to say idiosyncratic identity and personal history. The so-called “return to order,” and the magic realism associated with it, had less to do with a rebellion against avant-gardism and a return to the idea of a timeless art — avant-garde art is inherently transient, for the sensation of newness must be sustained, so that exciting breakthrough follows exciting breakthrough, star-

ting innovation follows startling innovation, with a quixotic mania that leaves little time for development let alone maturation, corrupting the idea of originality — than with the determination to develop a modern humanistic art. Surrealism was part of that determination, as was the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

Clement Greenberg once wrote: “The present age as much as any in history lacks an operative notion, a viable concept of the human being — a lack that is one of the ‘still centers’ around which the crisis of our times revolves.”²⁷ Many artists struggled to develop a viable concept of the human being — not a new concept of art, however much they sometimes used trendy new ideas from *avant-garde* art, that is, modern *art pour l’art*, to make their all-too-human point more emphatically, suggesting that the traditional means of doing so had become stale and that the traditional concept of the human being had become an obsolete stereotype — or at least sustain the idea of the human in a world that seemed increasingly inhuman, as the first world war and the dominance of technology demonstrated. Just as Cubism involved an expanded sense of *art pour l’art*, deepening and refining it so that it came to involve the deconstruction and reconstruction of the image and, simultaneously, the articulation of the medium as an end in itself, so the new humanist artists sometimes used Cubism to convey the modern sense of the human being as basically conflicted, that is, torn between the destructive and constructive, the regressive and progressive, irrational impulses and rational ideas, and, above all, obsessed with and dominated by time rather than eternity, as in Chagall’s *Homage to Apollinaire* (1911-12).

Perhaps the most important of the modern humanist artists was Alberto Giacometti, especially because his work shows the conflict — which he never entirely resolved — between surreallistically inspired *art pour l’art*, that is, suggestive abstraction, and the attempt to re-articulate the human being in modern terms, that is, to articulate the situation and mentality of the modern self-tortured human being. Giacometti had briefly been a Surrealist (1930-34) and became a painter and sculptor of all-too-human figures, using people who were personally meaningful to him, such as his wife Annette and brother Diego, as well as, after the Second World War, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet, to make his existential point. Brilliantly reconciling the Surreal sense of the mystery hidden in every human being with the tragic sense of human vulnerability, these uncanny portraits, whether in two or three dimensions — each figure is in fact simultaneously flat and rounded, as though to convey the tension between its mental reserve and its body, its seemingly flat affect and unequivocally mortal presence — are dream pictures of human suffering at its most subtly intense, even as each solitary figure seems to epitomize the miseries of modern social history.

Like the Surrealists and *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists, Giacometti struggled with the trauma of world war, but while they revealed, with whatever defen-

sive irony and graphic ingenuity, its disastrous effects on human life, suggesting that there was no way to repair it and thus in a sense capitulating to their own trauma, Giacometti showed human beings holding their own against the meaninglessness the war left in its wake — human beings with enough ego to emotionally survive, however traumatized they were. Giacometti's portraits are an amazing act of faith in humanity at a time there was no reason to have any. In a sense, the disillusionment that began with the First World War, which betrayed the civilizing ideals of reason, morality and beauty, reached its inevitable climax with the Second World War, whose atrocities destroyed the last vestiges of faith and hope in modern life. Giacometti's empathic reaffirmation of human dignity, in the face of overwhelming emotional as well as physical annihilation, and the anxiety that accompanied it — annihilative anxiety is what makes the skin of Giacometti's figures crawl and crumble, for all their apparently invincible uprightness — is a triumph of human belief in a situation in which there is nothing human to believe in.

In a sense, Giacometti fell back on the personal and the individual as the last hope for the ideal, while the Surrealists and *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists saw only anonymous impersonal forces, whether in the unconscious or in mass society, that devalued the individual they animated. Giacometti's figures are not puppets of forces beyond their control, but beings who will themselves into existence despite the nothingness — the immense empty spaces, whether actual or fictional, that are an essential part of Giacometti's works, and whose stillness suggests death — that surrounds them. Self-preservative in a social vacuum, they are dispassionate milestones of inner life, that last refuge. Giacometti, for all his sense of human tragedy and frailty, and the ultimate futility of human life, was a desperate optimist, trying to reverse an irreversible tide of death, or stand up to its strong undertow, while the Surrealists and *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists were complete pessimists, for they saw no alternative to human self-destructiveness, the final confirmation of human irrationality.

Giacometti's portraits are an artistic as well as existential feat: They reconcile the modern idea that the work of art is fundamentally abstract whatever it communicates with the modern sense that human beings are fundamentally conflicted however outwardly integrated they may appear. What these apparently irreconcilable ideas share is a sense of fragmentation: The modern figure tends to be a tense construction of abstract fragments. They often seem at odds with each other, so much so that the whole they form seems imposed and merely technical. Indeed, they seem mechanically manipulated rather than imaginatively transformed. Like the modern human being, the modern work of art often looks like a precarious balancing act, so that it seems to be about falling apart as much as hanging together, that is, about anarchic disintegration and nominal integration. As the poet W. B. Yeats famously wrote, "the center

does not hold, all things fall apart" in modernity. The problem of modern art and modern man is how to create a center that can anchor a whole while showing that modern human beings sooner or later fall apart. Giacometti is one of the few artists who are able to give human beings a center that enables them to hold their own and hold together while showing them in a precarious state of being — in danger of self-loss, for both personal and social reasons, and thus spiritual and even physical collapse.

In 1927, Giacometti made three portraits busts of his father, one naturalistic and two abstract, that is, one carefully describing his father's face, seemingly down to the least detail, and two reducing it to a shadowy sketch inscribed on the shape of his head, presented as an abstract form in itself — as almost pure geometry. In one abstraction the head is carved, in the other it is molded, and in both cases it is flattened into a plane, making its shape more emphatic. In 1925, he had already made *Torso*, an abstract figure, and in 1926-27 he produced *Cubist Composition: Man*, a rather chunky figure made of heavy blocks arranged in a geometrical composition. *The Dancers* of that same year seems pre-Columbian in spirit, the totemic *Spoon Woman* of 1926-27 has a more African look, although the use of a giant spoon for the torso seems ironical, even subliminally Dadaist. The flattened spoon curves outward, suggesting a bosom, and then slopes inward, becoming concave where there should be a belly, a reversal of physical reality that implies a certain misogyny. Indeed, Giacometti seems to be scooping out woman's body — flattening it and reducing it to an abstract icon which seems to have more formal than feminine reality. This anti-woman attitude becomes explicit in perhaps his most sensational Surrealist work, *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932). The spoon body has now been cut open, as though on an anatomy table — this already occurred in *Project For a Passageway* (1930) — with some of its parts strewn around, if still attached to one another, and the throat manneristically elongated, the cut becoming a kind of crease in a series of ridges. The figure, which resembles a kind of praying mantis — the female consumes the male after copulation — has all but lost its sexual identity (a semblance of breasts remain), suggesting that it has been emotionally as well as physically eviscerated in Giacometti's fantasy. But this act of hatred and revenge is also ingeniously abstract: It is a tension of curves and angles, condensations and elongations, that show Giacometti struggling for epigrammatic brevity with no loss of emotional complexity and mystery.

For all the abstract wit and sexual innuendos of Giacometti's Surrealist works, which become increasingly abbreviated, theatrical and toy-like, as *The Palace at 4 A.M.* (1932) and *Flower in Danger* (1933) indicate, he remains deeply attached to the figure, as *Hands Holding the Void (Invisible Object)* (1934) makes clear. Even such works as *Disagreeable Object, To Be Thrown Away* and *Disagreeable Object* (both 1931) are figures, however per-

versely phallic. They are in fact derived from *Family Portrait* (1931), one of several works in which Giacometti articulates his sense of family hierarchy. In *Man, Woman and Child* (1931), the open-armed woman seems to be protecting the baby ball from the knife-like man. Giacometti in fact never escaped his family, as his 1937 painting of his mother — ten years after his portrait bust of her — indicates. That same year he painted *Apple on the Sideboard* twice, a domestic interior which suggests his continued sense of his humble position in the family as well as his desperate need for its comfort. The Surrealist abstract ball has been transformed into a real apple, and the tabletop of the Surrealist table pieces — their flattening of the pedestal on which the figures stand is an innovative triumph — has become the stone top of the sideboard. Giacometti is desperate for the safety of domestic life, with its promise of shelter, intimacy and support.

The need grew acute during the second world war. Such sculptures as *Small Bust on a Double Pedestal* and *Small Figure on a Pedestal* (both 1940-45) convey the sense of isolation he felt — he had moved back to Switzerland, his homeland, after living in Paris — but also the sense of determination. After the war he returned to his studio in Paris, which had been kept intact by his brother Diego, and married a Swiss woman, Annette. Diego became the subject of several of his most remarkable postwar portrait busts and portrait paintings, among them the *Bust of Diego* and the painting *Diego in a Plaid Shirt* (both 1954). Annette, whose naked elongated figure had already appeared in the sculpture *Woman with Chariot* and the painting *Nude* (both 1942-43), became the model for many similar indomitable, archaicizing figures. All of Giacometti's figures, whether full-bodied or spare flesh, tend to be both manneristic and expressionistic. They are doubly dynamic. Richly textured, with a fluid surface that resembles a sea of turbulent, forceful gestures, their bodies stretch into space, marking it with their mournful yet vivid presence. Are they evanescent wraiths or indestructible individualists? They seem marked by death but intact and indomitable — disintegrating yet majestically self-assured and integrated. For all their ambiguity, they are authentically who they are — self-identified rather than playing a role. They are the epitome of D. W. Winnicott's True Self, rooted in the spontaneous gesture and personal idea, in a false world that has abandoned it. Confronting us with their bodies and penetrating us with their eyes, Giacometti's figures are symbols of endurance in an unbearable world.

Commenting on his emaciated, elongated, static sculptural figures, with their ambiguous aura of abandonment, nobility and detachment -- emancipation and emptiness, both connected to the fact that they are incapable of relating to others — Giacometti stated: "The form undid itself; it was little more than specks moving in a deep black void."²⁸ What we see in such sculptures as *Walking Man* (1947) and *Standing Woman* (1948) is the form of the

figure undoing itself without completely dissolving into space. It may assert itself, as *Man Pointing* and *The Nose* (both 1947) do, but in vain: however vigorous, it is a gesture in the void — a temporary erection, as it were, like the figure itself. The world is a void for Giacometti; it hardly exists outside his studio, which he sketches and paints many times. Giacometti's model was Tintoretto, whose figures he admired. But Tintoretto's figures dissolve into the light and space of heaven, while Giacometti's figures are morbidly earthbound, weighed down by a heavy pedestal. Without that primitive anchor rooting them in the ground, they would float away into the void, finally dissolving like a cloud.

It is only in the paintings that the deep black void becomes luminous — but never completely. As has been much noted, they are suffused with grayness, which seems to shroud the figure, as though cocooning it in death. Life-negating gray often unites with life-affirming red, conveying profound ambivalence towards his subject, as in the two paintings of *The Artist's Mother* (1950 and 1951) and the painting of *Annette at Stampa* (1950). But depressing gray usually dominates, as in the poignant *Apples in the Studio* (1953) — a speck of passionate color in the gray void — and finally banishes the red, as in the colorless portraits of Diego and Yanaihara (both 1956). Traces of red subliminally remain, but they are no match for the sober gray, which becomes a fatal brown in the Caroline portraits of 1962. These stark, vivid images, full of inconclusive gestures that seem to veil the figure they delineate — undermine it without denying its intelligibility — are supposedly Giacometti's most memorable portraits, but it seems to me his last works deserve that honor.

The paintings *Large Black Head* (1961) and *Large Nude* (1962) and the 1965 sculptures of Lotar, his head held high on a body that has melted into a heap of mortal clay, epitomize human presence, in all its desperateness and defiance. It is at once tumescent and detumescent, tangible and intangible. An amazing blend of amorphous abstraction and mimetic structure, chaotic formlessness and unsettled form — human presence deformed by its own formative process, which it seems to have willed — these dialectically indecisive last works are the most inherently dramatic, tense, equivocal and uncanny that Giacometti ever made. They are his most consummate articulation of the basic conflicts that make for all-too-human being. None of these conflicts can ever be resolved for all time, which is why they erupt again and again. One is between libidinous and destructive feelings, the other between inner necessity and outer necessity. That is, one conflict is located within the self, the other between the world and the self struggling to separate from it, at the same time as it belongs to it. The self may negate the world — declare it meaningless, empty — but it cannot escape its space. In the end it is a family space, from which there is no separation, which is why Giacometti's self remains insecure. Giacometti's late works are his most deeply moving, intimate images, not only

because they are his boldest statement of the existential and formal issues he struggled with from his Surrealist days, but because they explicitly reveal the eschatological mood that has always informed his art.

It is as though he himself only slowly became aware of its eschatological purpose, finally, with his last works, gaining clear insight into it and into the final truth about life. The *Large Black Head* is in effect a skull — it has become one with the deep black void, thus losing its illusory purity — but the triumph of death it implies is compromised by its own open eyes, which suggest a powerful, alert consciousness. Human beings remain conscious to their deaths, and are conscious of their deaths. Death and consciousness are in conflict in the late portraits. Each stands in awe of the other, neither dominating. The late portraits are filled with profound stillness, silence, melancholy: Giacometti has at last become conscious of the death in his unconscious and of its connection with the death in the world. But they also show the triumph of consciousness and self-consciousness over fate and inner conflict.

Part 3

Giacometti was the greatest of the tragic humanist artists of the 20th century, but there were other important ones, particularly those who worked in Paris and Vienna before the first world war. In a sense, they prepared the way for the magic realism that emerged in the 20s. It was imbued with de Chirico's sense of isolation and melancholy, magically embodied in his absurd spaces. But where de Chirico abstracted suffering from its personal and social situation, so that it had nothing to do with particular individuals and thus seemed oddly unrelated to the particulars of human experience, the magic realists re-humanized suffering by showing it to be inseparable from the vicissitudes of individuality, confirming its tragedy in an existentially indifferent society. The pathetic figures that the Parisian *peintres maudits* and the Viennese romanticists portrayed were the soft underside of the hard instrumental society celebrated by the idealized geometry of the Constructivist art that developed parallel to it.

The *peintres maudits* and Viennese romanticists were incorrigible pessimists, for all the decorative and erotic élan that formed the surface of their art, whereas the Constructivists, with their vision of the artist-engineer, enlisted art in the service of the brave new geometrically correct (not to say rigid) technological society that would save us from our all-too-human selves. No doubt the abstract geometry was refined, giving their art a certain reductive elegance, but it made no sense apart from its idealistic social purpose. These artistic opposites never met; they represent the severed halves of 20th century thinking about the human condition. The tragic humanists tell the emotional truth about it, the utopian Constructivists offer technological hope in

what seems like a hopeless historical situation. The former are conservatives, in that they see the failings of humanity, which they regard as inevitable, while the latter are revolutionaries, looking for social miracles in a mundane world. For the former, avant-garde art is a new way of stating old insights into human existence, and thus making them seem fresh, while for the latter avant-garde art is a fuse that will help ignite social revolution, even as it shows that art can keep up with scientific and technological revolution, the bright side of modernity.

Pathos is not a word usually associated with the sensual nudes Modigliani painted toward the end of his life, but they have the inertness of the death that ended his life prematurely. Suffering from tuberculosis since adolescence, Modigliani took to drugs, alcohol and free love, weakening an already weak body. But his real self-medication was art. His figures, with their attenuated features and slenderness, are a unique blend of modern flatness and archaic abstraction, influenced as much by the Siennese art of his native Italy as by African, Egyptian and Indian art. All were exotic (all the more so because they were traditional, with deep social and religious roots) in the context of Cubism, the dominant, entirely secular avant-garde art when he began to make his first stone sculptures, carved directly like the Archaic Greek sculpture he also admired. There is a hieratic look to his sculpture of a *Head* (ca. 1911-13), just as there is to his paintings of Jeanne Hébuterne, his last lover, who killed herself the day after he died (1920). In fact, Modigliani's 1917 *Nude* looks like an emblem of a nude, as her streamlined, flattened body — it is as attenuated as his three-dimensional heads, if not quite as elongated — indicates. Like the heads, the bodies of Modigliani's nudes are symbols of paradise, which he knew would soon be lost forever, for he realized that he would die young, because of his recurrent illness as well as his excesses.

Modigliani uses African mannerisms in his faces — noses tend to splay and become long, and seem concave where they should be convex (abstraction is often achieved by contradicting nature in an attempt to discredit and defeat it) — but this seems to make them all the more intimately personal rather than impersonal, as one might expect. There is, in fact, an odd mix of pathos, individuality and abstractness to his figures, suggesting their iconic character. They are sacred presences, schematically Byzantine and detached, as though in another realm of being. Their accessibility is an illusion. *Chaim Soutine* (1916) is unworldly, however ordinary his appearance and surroundings. It is a votive portrait: a martyr to art, his head the shape of a halo, facing us in quiet modesty, his devotion to art eliciting our own.

Soutine, Modigliani, Chagall, even Jules Pascin and Maurice Utrillo — to name other “cursed painters” — were in effect religious painters, determined to show the indomitability of the human spirit in a modern world alien to it. They are cursed because they are spiritual in a world that seems increas-

ingly soulless, and because, like Georges Rouault, they wanted to make a modern spiritual art, although, unlike Rouault, they realized that traditional religious imagery would not work: The everyday world itself must be shown to be subliminally spiritual. It is an old idea: The secular world is secretly full of saints who don't even know they are saints. It is they who keep God from destroying it altogether. The world is evil, but there are good people in it, who redeem it for everyone. I am suggesting that the work of the *peintres maudits* has a theodicean subtext: It is an attempt to show that good can come of evil, that God puts evil to good use, which is why he tolerates it. It is about mercy as well as suffering, ecstatic transfiguration as well as doom.

This is perhaps most apparent in Soutine, whose landscapes seem apocalyptic and ecstatic — damned and saved — at once, and whose figures, for all their pathos and vulnerability, seem instinctively alive. Soutine supposedly heralds Abstract Expressionism, but this is to sell his humanism short. Soutine is a psychological realist, and his painterliness is fraught with a sense of trauma that makes it more existential than aesthetic, as Greenberg complained. As he said, Soutine was trying to master in art feelings that he could not master in life, which was to misuse art. Greenberg admired Soutine's painterliness, but he thought that Soutine's attempt to use it to "maximize expressiveness," along with his interest in human beings and their feelings — the intense "human interest" that Greenberg declared anathema to pure art — precluded total commitment to the medium, the only salvation for art in modernity. Soutine clearly thought it was not enough to save the artist's soul.

When he began to study the Old Masters, more particularly Rembrandt, Greenberg all but repudiated him. "The great masters of the past," Greenberg wrote, "achieved their art by virtue of combinations of pigment whose real effectiveness was 'abstract,' and . . . their greatness is not owed to the spirituality with which they conceived the things they illustrated so much as it is to the success with which they ennobled raw matter to the point where it could function as art."²⁹ For Greenberg, the physicality of art was more to its point than its unique capacity for expressiveness. Especially for spiritual expression; it involved, after all, human interest, for spirituality was a healing response to suffering, which it attempted to undo. For Greenberg, art that could represent suffering, and through its cathartic expression attempt to repair the psyche it damaged — Rembrandt's and Soutine's art — was inherently inferior to art that existed for its own pure sake, that is, with no spiritual purpose.

Romantically, Soutine found tortured human emotion in nature, as *Village Square, Céret* (ca. 1921) suggests, and even in dead animals, as *La Dinde Perdue* (ca. 1926) indicates. When he was dealing with human beings, he presents them with dignity while revealing, through their awkward body language — the strange, disjointed syntax of their bodies (which he also found in nature) — their hidden suffering. *Woman in Red* (ca. 1924-25), whose

suffering and spirituality are implicated in each other, indeed, indistinguishable — was it spiritualized suffering or spirituality produced by suffering, a last emotional measure rescuing the self from its suffering? — makes the point brilliantly. So do Soutine's choir boys and page boys, symbols of his own isolation in the shtetl of his youth. It may be because Soutine was Jewish, and grew up in great poverty in a Hasidic community, that the spiritual came to him "naturally," as it were, or that he found spirituality in daily life and ordinary people — in other words, that his paintings make the spirituality latent in the lifeworld manifest. Modigliani in his way and Soutine in his way were spiritual artists, not in the sense that they had a particular spiritual belief, but because they saw the sacred in profane things, be they Modigliani's pagan bodies or Soutine's *Carcass of Beef* (ca. 1924), luminous in decay, that is, glowing with light even in the darkness of death. The painting, based on Rembrandt's *Butchered Ox* (1655) and probably also a print in which the hanging meat is emblematic of the crucified Christ, shows, in effect, the bloody body of the dead Christ transfigured, that is, spiritualized in anticipation of its resurrection.

There is an undertone of religious meaning in the *peintres maudits*, but nowhere more so than in Chagall's art. It revolves around two places, both personally sacred to him: his provincial hometown of Vitebsk in Russia, and cosmopolitan Paris, the capital of modern art. *I and the Village* (1911) and *View of Paris through a Window* (1913) represent these poles. The former mythologizes his native village and the latter mythologizes the great city, which he had moved to in 1910. The rural village is a fairytale place, full of bizarre folklore, with animals and human beings as equals — they are the same size, flanking each other like friends — and a tree of life growing in its center. In *To Russia, Donkeys and Others*, also painted in 1911, a cow stands on a roof, giving suck to a calf and a child, a kind of Romulus and Remus pair. The woman who has come to milk the cow has lost her head, which looks up to the light in the dark sky, as though to God. Paris is also a place of tall tales, represented by the Eiffel Tower, which Delaunay had also apotheosized.

The tension in Chagall's art is clearly conveyed by the Janus figure of the artist in the lower right hand corner of the Paris picture. One face looks beyond the picture, presumably back to Vitebsk, while the other face looks at Paris through the window. Chagall is clearly torn between them. The conflict is epitomized by the difference between the Jewish couple, dressed in traditional black Hasidic clothing, floating horizontally above his head, and, high above them, the luminous vertical figure — an anonymous Parisian, emblematic of modern man — parachuting from the Eiffel tower, as though into the safety net of the Vitebsk villagers. It is a colorful picture, pierced with a plane of light — the flowers remind us of Chagall's love of life — but haunted by the not-too-distant past, which remains an obsession. Chagall's conflict is also

poignantly evident in *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912-13), where we see the artist painting *To Russia, Donkeys and Others*. His Cubist face indicates that he is a modern artist, but he is formally dressed, with a flower — a symbol of life — in his lapel and flowing cravat, suggesting that he remains a romantic at heart. The Eiffel Tower is framed by the window — another picture within a picture — but the focus of his nostalgic attention is Vitebsk.

Jewishness was Chagall's safety net, and his identification with the Jewish characters in his village, from *The Holy Coachman* (1911) and *The Fiddler* (1912-13) to the rabbi in *The Holiday* (1914), saved him from the purest excesses of Cubism, as well as its tendency to reduce people, things, and nature to inhumane anonymity, depersonalizing them to the point of no return. Chagall's outwardly humble figures have a certain inner grandeur — a nobility of spirit of which they themselves are unaware. Chagall's deep bond with his childhood world and Jewishness — his fidelity to his Russian roots and religious identity — must have also afforded him a certain comfort and warmth in the harshly competitive world of Parisian avant-garde art.

In an attempt to reconcile the opposites, Chagall has made Paris a cozy place, in effect miniaturizing it, so that it seems like a toy village, however crowded with buildings, and made the inhabitants of Vitebsk larger than life and above all mysterious — miraculously floating in the sky, as though moving between heaven and earth, like angels. These holy fantasy figures are figments of Chagall's imagination, however derived from local legend. Chagall's pictures are in effect reveries on his environment and experience — musings on his lifeworld and sense of self. He depicts his memories of Vitebsk, making an unfamiliar world seem familiar without destroying its difference — no doubt that was part of the appeal of his pictures to Parisians — and he makes the familiar, everyday world of Paris seem memorable, which no doubt suits Parisians' sense of the universal significance of their city.

Chagall has been accused of sentimentality — as though that is a crime — but there is a toughness to his art. It takes a hard look at emotional reality. He puts the flesh of feeling on the bones of Cubist planes, but the flesh, for all its fluidity, is firm. All of Chagall's Jews are remarkably self-assured, however poor and oppressed and however exotic they may look to Parisian eyes. Chagall was in pursuit of self-knowledge — he was not interested in turning the alien into a sideshow attraction — and his pictures are informed with the analytic intelligence that alone can make it possible. His art is a kind of magic realism, that is, fantasies made realistic or reality made fantastic, but, more importantly, it is filled with a sense of human dignity, tinged with tragedy but protected by good humor and joie de vivre. Indeed, his high spirits have rarely been commented upon. They are the reason that he ecstatically floats above his beloved wife Bella in *Birthday* (1923), giving her a kiss that seems much more tender than the one Brancusi carved in 1916. His crude male and

female are one, but their embrace seems ritualistic rather than affectionate. Chagall is "high" on love and life, like all his figures. The room is humble, but Chagall and his wife have the luxury of love, which brightens the place. Its decorative beauty — the bright red floor derived from Matisse, the colorful wall hangings, with their floral pattern, from Vitebsk, and the bouquet of flowers Chagall has just given his wife — radiates their happiness. Both figures float in an aura of intimacy, conveyed by the hermetic dream space that cocoons them, cutting through the Cubist space of the room. *Birthday* is a spatially as well as emotionally complicated and sophisticated picture, demonstrating Chagall's remarkable ability to integrate deep feeling and pure form.

Chagall returned to Vitebsk in 1914, becoming its Commissar for Fine Arts after the October Revolution. He commissioned revolutionary banners, which were made by the town's house painters, but his upside-down animals and modern style upset the local revolutionaries, who preferred something more conservative and less fantastic. He was eventually ousted from the local art school — ironically, Malevich was the ringleader of the opposition — and moved to Moscow, where he made a number of extraordinary murals for the State Jewish Theater. Integrating folk fantasy and abstract geometry — his own kind of expressionistic figures and his very personal understanding of Constructivism — his stage designs proved too original for both leftist Constructivists and traditional representational artists. Presumably the designs compromised their antagonistic ideals, reconciling what ought to remain ideologically pure and thus irreconcilable. Chagall left Russia in 1922. His murals managed to survive the Russian civil war, and have since been acclaimed as among his most important works.

But his most characteristic works are his most physically intimate ones — his prints. Throughout his career Chagall made wonderful etchings. *Those in My Life*, made in 1922 in Berlin, used the imagery of his paintings. Back in Paris in 1923, he made 118 etchings illustrating Gogol's *Dead Souls* (*Chichikov's Journeys*), 100 color etchings to accompany La Fontaine's *Fables* (1927-31), and, most famously, 105 etchings illustrating the Old Testament (1929-39), singled out by Meyer Schapiro as the most consummate statement of Chagall's vision. Everyday life and spiritual life seamlessly fuse; spiritual life is shown to be down-to-earth, and everyday earthly life is shown to be spiritual in every one of its details.

It may seem strange to say so, but Pascin's prostitutes, some nude, some in a state of dishabille, are also spiritual beings, for all their lethargy. They tend to be diaphanous, and all but dissolve in light. Dematerializing, they become ethereal presences. Pascin is clearly sympathetic to them, as the sensitive lines and exquisite color with which he portrayed them indicate. *Young Girl Seated* (ca. 1929) is a superb example of sexual mystery transformed into spiritual mystery. Again, spiritual redemption arises from personal suffering.

Pascin shows that spirituality can be found in unexpected places. So does Utrillo, who finds it in the street — the ultimate proof of the everydayness of spirituality and the spirituality of everyday life. Utrillo was the illegitimate son of Suzanne Valadon, a model for Degas, Puvis de Chavannes, Toulouse-Lautrec and Renoir, and a painter in her own right. Untrained and already an alcoholic in his teens — it has been said that he paid the price for his mother's sins — he painted the streets in the villages surrounding Paris. He was, in effect, showing the wasteland in which he lived his life.

For all its banality and dullness, the *Street in Asnières* (1913-15) is a sacred space — a nondescript suburb of Paris that is nonetheless holy ground because of its closeness to that city, sacred by reason of its devotion to art. For all its emptiness, Utrillo's street has a certain ascetic integrity and monumentality. It is a very basic, honest street — an honest, basic emptiness. Indeed, it came by its emptiness honestly — Utrillo's paintings are ruthlessly honest — because the street, a symbol of Utrillo's self, was never full of life. Nonetheless, it is not simply a projection of his feeling of emptiness and abandonment; the homely street, however lonely, was his home away from the home he never had, and as such he idealized it. It was a symbol of security even as its emptiness symbolized his insecurity, his feeling of being at a loss, the result of having been deserted. The street's emptiness is a shocking revelation: It represents his mother's indifference. Utrillo boldly declares it, for he never had anything to hide, indeed, never had a place to hide, which is why he was out on the street, where he was abandoned. Yet Utrillo's street is oddly reassuring. It is uncanny, paradoxical: a stable, safe, predictable space — it was always there for him, and the firm lines that define its limits show it to be a reliable presence — in which he felt protected from his unpredictable inner life and uncertain identity, which clung to art for stability. Utrillo's street is a necessary contradiction: Its objective shape and clear boundaries contain his feeling of emptiness, indicating his lack of a core self. The street's continuity gave his life a sense of continuity, just as the fact that it was going somewhere gave him a feeling that he was going somewhere. Perhaps even more than art, the street gave his life a sense of purpose — which is why he frequented the streets, painting them again and again.

Thus, the street becomes a sacred terrain, and as such a quiet refuge — Utrillo's street is profoundly still — all the more so because it is self-contained. *Sacré Coeur de Montmartre and Rue Saint Rustique* (1938) — an image of one of many churches Utrillo painted — makes the point explicitly: Climbing to the church, the street becomes the path to salvation. It is Utrillo's *Via Dolorosa*. He identifies with the straight and narrow path, and perhaps with the saint for whom it is named. The luminous white dome makes it clear that Utrillo's art is about the sacred heart — the sacredness and warmth of the loving heart in a desolate, soulless world. It symbolizes the love that Utrillo

probably had little of in his childhood. The church becomes the mother Utrillo never had. The church is the symbol of his hope, just as the street is the symbol of his despair. Their juxtaposition defines Utrillo's unhappy life. At least his faith in art never failed him. Again, art spiritualizes suffering, thus redeeming life.

Perhaps the height of empathic humanist modern art comes in the form of the tragic portraits and self-portraits of the Viennese artists Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. Schiele's *Self-Portrait with Black Vase (Self-Portrait with Spread-Out Fingers)* (1911) and *Self-Portrait with Arm Twisted Above Head* (ca. 1910) convey a tragic sense of spiritual self. So does Kokoschka's self-portrait in "Vortrag O. Kokoschka" — a 1912 poster announcing a lecture by him — *The Tempest* (1914) and *Knight Errant* (1915). However personal the cause of the suffering represented — in Kokoschka's case, problems with a woman (he wrote a notorious play *Murder, the Hope of Woman*, one of the first expressionist dramas) — and whatever the suggestion of pathological narcissism, or at least troubled introspection, suffering has been transmuted into spiritual substance. It has become the substratum of aspiration, the foundation, however shaky, of a sublime sense of self.

Indeed, the astonishing thing about Kokoschka and Schiele's portraits is that they convey suffering and spirituality simultaneously. In Kokoschka's double portrait of Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat (1909), the figures, for all the anxiety visible in their troubled gestures and furtive glances — their quivering hands and inward-looking eyes — are spiritual beings, as their luminous flesh, marked by golden striations, in effect radiant emanations, indicates. Kokoschka depicted madness, as in his portrait of Ludwig Ritter von Janikowsky (1909) — in a mental hospital at the time — but it is madness conscious of itself, and thus in a sense spiritualized. It is a face in hell, reminiscent of Munch's portrait of himself in the same infernal place, but it is also full of inner light, breaking through its gloom. It is the face of death and damnation, but also of eternal life. Light and dark mix inextricably in Kokoschka's portrait, the light breaking through the ash of the dark, the dark suffused with uncontrollable light. Something similar occurs in Schiele's portraits of Dr. Erwin von Graff and Eduard Kosmack (both 1910), where planes of light and dark are dramatically juxtaposed, as though representing the conflict in the sitter's psyche. However disturbed, the figures are radically self-conscious, as their staring eyes suggest. Von Graff's arms and hands — they are at odds with one another, and grotesquely enlarged and elongated, especially the fingers, which seem to have an uncontrollable life of their own — and Kosmack's hands, tightly clasped as though in desperate, repentant prayer, reveal the agony hidden behind their poise, indeed, the inner tragedy of their existences. Nonetheless, their desperate seriousness — the sense of urgency in their distraught bodies — suggests that they are working their difficult emo-

tional way toward a very personal salvation.

No doubt one should refer to Freud in explaining Schiele and Kokoschka. He lived in Vienna and, by 1910, when they were emerging, he had already written about hysteria (1895), dreams (1900) and sexuality (1906), all of which are involved in their pictures. Certainly, that can be said of Kokoschka's nightmarish *Tempest*, also called the *Bride of the Wind*, in which he pictures himself anxiously awake — an insomniac — next to the peacefully sleeping Alma Mahler, the older woman with whom he had a passionate if also unhappy relationship. There is an uneasy balance between them, and the emotional tension is palpable. They clearly represent different states of mind, and the difference between them represents the conflict in Kokoschka's own mind. The painterly texture has a hysterical flair; it can be read as a somatic expression of sexual aggression. Schiele's sinuous nudes have a similar hysterical intensity and unbalanced character. For all their clinical clarity and candor, they also have a nightmarish quality, however subliminally: Schiele's nudes are femme fatales, teasing one with one's own frustration. For example, the *Reclining Nude with Yellow Towel* (1917), who has her head tilted to the side so that it becomes horizontal, seems about to fall over. The diagonals of her dark stockings draw us toward her vagina, marked by dark pubic hair, a vertical accent at odds with the horizontal accent of the dark hair of her head. She may look at us quizzically, as though we are odd, not her — she may even be demented, as her position suggests, implying that we are demented for being interested in her nakedness — but the sexual invitation is there.

Schiele's nudes have been wrongly understood to be pornographic. The psychoanalyst Robert Stoller points out that pornography dehumanizes the human body, while Schiele's figures never lose their humanity. Their sexuality is, in fact, inseparable from it, and makes it all the more profound by signaling its tragedy; the delicately tinted vaginal slit that is the focus of the image of a notorious 1911 nude — she seems like an innocent child — reclining on her front, mars the whiteness of her skin, suggesting the tragedy of being a woman, and of human life in general, which depends on sex to propagate itself. This work, like all of Schiele's drawings of female nudes, is about the tragic character of sexuality. Sexual relationships are tragic, and so are human relationships in general. The naked *Man and Woman* (1913) combines both. The couple is at odds, with the woman dominant — indeed, all-powerful compared to the supine man — and both frustrated. The clothed *Seated Couple* (1915) shows a limp, mentally ill man, who looks like a broken doll, embraced — held together — by a strong if unhappy woman. *The Family* (1918) is a rare picture of human and sexual harmony, although the naked figures are vagabonds exiled to a dark void. They are all deeply troubled — the man's suffering is evident in his disjointed body, the woman keeps her suffering to herself, and the child is becoming aware of his — however full of hopeful expectation.

They look into the distance for some sign of salvation, but it is not clear that any is visible. They are a group portrait of the human condition.

Sexuality is full of disappointment for Schiele. Even the physical sexual organs are strangely tragic and disappointing. In the 1911 drawing, the vagina looks small and trivial compared to the huge circle of vivid colors that surround it. It may be the center of attention — and of life — but it looks marginal. It looks like an unhealed wound, still bleeding a little, but it is an emotional letdown. The nude's blouse is a grid of colors, her skirt is a rainbow of colors, but her vagina has little or no color. In general, her clothing is clearly more attractive than her pale body, with its silly slit. Woman is all deception, because underneath her gorgeous clothing there is next to nothing. Woman is a defective flower, Schiele seems to be saying: If the bright colors of the outspread skirt are the flower's petals, then the vagina must be its stigma, the part of the pistil that receives the pollen, that is, sperm. Schiele plays, however unconsciously, on the different meanings of "stigma": not only is it the female organ of the hermaphroditic flower, but the characteristic mark of a disease or defect, a small spot on an organ or animal, and a place on the skin that bleeds during certain mental states, for example, hysteria. These contradictory meanings converge on the vagina, suggesting that, for all his fascination with woman's sexuality, Schiele is afraid of it: Woman is, for all her seductiveness, a defective, diseased, hysterical animal. There is a stigma attached to her existence — it began with Eve — and it is associated with her vagina, which thus becomes a sign of her sinfulness, suffering and punishment, even as it suggests her Christ-likeness, for it resembles one of the marks or stigmata — wounds of Christ — that sometimes appear on the bodies of the holiest human beings.

Schiele's drawings of the female nude are about his profound ambivalence toward woman. His attitude is typically male: He is drawn to her outer appearance, but disappointed by her "inner" reality. To glimpse the vaginal slit that is hidden under her skirt, indeed, to boldly stare at it, is to become deeply disillusioned. To penetrate the mystery is to discover there is none — it's all in man's fantasy. Freud writes that sustained fascination with the vagina is perverse, but while Schiele is perverse, he is also coldly realistic and descriptive — a detached observer. His infantile sexual curiosity has been satisfied — a kind of peeping Tom looking underneath woman's skirts, he has satisfied himself that what women have between their legs is very different from what men have, and inferior to it (they are, after all, "castrated," and the 1911 nude may be about his own castration anxiety) — but the revelation is not as exciting as it is supposed to be. So much for woman's beauty and mystery. Schiele's images debunk these ideas, showing that woman is ugly and dangerous, physically and emotionally, underneath.

But there is more to Kokoschka and Schiele's portraits of human suffering than their ironical perversity — their unhappy scopophilia. They are

about the struggle to transform the self — an incomplete process, in which human beings struggle to free themselves from their suffering, that is, to heal themselves, but fail to because they are unable truly to relate to one another, establishing what Balint calls a “harmonious mix-up.” The Tietzes have trouble relating — establishing empathic intimacy — as do Kokoschka and Alma Mahler. Both couples are physically together, but emotionally separate, indeed, at odds. Their highly developed individuality — each portrait amounts to a credo of individualism — keeps them inwardly isolated and apart even as their sexual and social needs and shared interests bring them together. Schiele makes this brilliantly clear in several of his drawings of lesbian couples, who embrace but remain emotionally neutral and unrelated. The people Kokoschka and Schiele portray are too civilized to acknowledge their need for intimacy and love, which is why they seem narcissistic, however morbidly exhibitionistic, that is, however much they show their emotions and bodies to hide their lack of commitment to one another.

Klimt’s notorious allegorical murals of *Philosophy, Medicine and Jurisprudence*, made between 1899 and 1907 for the University of Vienna and ultimately removed because of their blatant nudity (they were destroyed in the second world war), seem to bypass the relational ambiguity of Klimt’s and Schiele’s portraits — but the figures in them remain cut off in their own emotional space. This is not only because their purpose is symbolic and they must convey their meaning unequivocally. Klimt also symbolizes the cycle of life and death, as the juxtaposition of nudes and death in *Philosophy* indicates. It is a recurrent theme in his art, most famously in *Death and Life* (1916). (Schiele also represented *Death and the Maiden* (1915), a traditional German theme associated with the Triumph of Death.) Various states of mind, particularly the opposites of brooding melancholy and sexual ecstasy, are also symbolized. But the figures, however entangled — it is a device Klimt repeatedly uses — are emotionally unconnected because of their autonomy. They are proudly who they are, whatever their symbolic meaning. Their spiritual independence allows them to rise above the physical and social fate they also represent.

Such proud individuality is especially evident in Klimt’s portraits of Emilie Flöge (1902), Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), Fritza Riedler (1906), Adele Bloch-Bauer I (1907) and Baroness Elisabeth Bachofen-Echt (ca. 1914). The decorative beauty of these works, and the youthful beauty of several of the women — the gorgeousness of the women’s gowns, the sumptuousness of the setting, the glamour of their social position — is deceptive. It is an ornamental frame for their resolute individuality, rendered with great psychological realism, insight and persuasiveness. Their presence transcends the elegance of their clothing and surroundings, and even Klimt’s exquisite painting. Klimt’s strong women stand alone not only because convention decrees they pose that way, but because they exist in a realm apart. No doubt this is

because of their wealth and social class, but also because they are unique personalities — indeed, they are modern liberated women for all their fancy dress. Their poise and cultivation is not simply a matter of their status and privilege, but a statement of sovereign selfhood. Body and spirit form a luxurious whole in them, reflected in the integration of decorative abstraction and psychodynamic representation that makes their portraits unique. Klimt's women have a strength of character and majestic presence that seems out of reach of the anxious figures of Kokoschka and Schiele. They are clearly different kinds of people than Schiele's tantalizing, teasing nudes and Kokoschka's troubled intellectuals.

Alfred Kubin's drawings epitomize the nightmarish, uncanny "other side" of Viennese tragic humanism, to refer to his novel *Die Andere Seite* (1908). It is full of the same perverse reveries and grotesque imagery that appeared in his visual art. Kubin's work involves the same ambivalent misogyny and emotional violence that we see in Kokoschka and Schiele, even as it surpasses them in visionary extravagance. Its horrific, grim fantasies — for example, the monstrous female arising out of *Primordial Mud* (1904), and as engulfing and mindless as it — made Kubin appealing to the Surrealists. He seemed to carry Bosch into modernity, and his dreamlike images were more sexually explicit and openly aggressive than those in Redon's famous portfolio of prints, "In the Dream" (1879). Klimt's heroines, on the other hand, represent the higher side of Viennese tragic humanism. However protected by wealth and status, they were self-possessed and fearless. Their stateliness is not an expression of position and power, but of sublimity.

Luxury is a sign of vitality and sublimity in Klimt's works. He uses the decorative to create a heavenly space full of magical life. The various ornamental emblems that spontaneously proliferate in his portraits, often on the dresses of his sitters, so that they seem to merge with their environment, mark them as magical higher beings. Indeed, Emilie Flöge's dress seems to be covered with starlight, as though she was a modern Danae, and Adele Bloch-Bauer's dress is covered with magical signs that seem meant to ward off the evil eye. Baroness Bachofen-Echt is protected by the Oriental warriors on the wall behind her and the mysterious aura of ornamental designs that forms a cloak around her exquisite, gossamer dress. These women in fact live a higher, cultivated life — a life in which consciousness and the self are cultivated. Their decorative clothing dematerializes them, making them oddly ethereal. This is particularly evident in the Stonoborough-Wittgenstein, Riedler and Bachofen-Echt portraits, where the luminous gowns, meticulously detailed by Klimt, seem to dissolve and supplant the bodies supporting them, the way Gothic drapery does to the figures it covers. It is also true in the Flöge and Bloch-Bauer portraits, where the flatness of the more colorful, erotic, svelte modern dresses not only integrates the figures with the ground but sets them

apart. They seem to be emerging from another realm of being to grace this earthly one with their divine presences. Flatness, the opposite of rounded reality, suggests spirituality rather than physicality, which is why Klimt's flat figures seem unreal, simultaneously materially real and transcendental. They seem made of some magical, otherworldly substance, worldly and all too human. This is clearly indicated by their nervous hands, which seem in motion, partly because of the inner tension and emotional uncertainty they express.

The sublimely decorative reaches a special climax in Klimt's remarkable landscapes. The surfaces of *Beech Forest I* (1902), *Garden Landscape (Blooming Meadow)* (ca. 1906) and *Farm Garden with Sunflowers (The Sunflowers)* (ca. 1905-06) are lush decorative carpets filled with the same busy ornamental motifs as Klimt's other pictures, but now the motifs are naturalistic rather than abstract, organic rather than geometrical. And yet there is an abstract flatness to the overall design, and the flickering leaves in the *Beech Forest* and flowers in the meadow are gestural jewels that seem to exist for their own aesthetic and expressive sake. Klimt was a master of finding the sublime in the familiar, indeed, in the most transient appearances — of showing that the everyday was latent with spirituality, which is what made it so alive.

The German Bauhaus is a long way from Austrian Vienna, and seems more mainstream avant-garde because of its uncompromising abstraction. But today the utopian constructivism of the International Style architecture that, its most influential contribution, seems inhuman — that is the criticism of such postmodern architectural critics as Charles Jencks — compared to Viennese tragic humanism. Vienna's art was local and romantic, while Bauhaus abstraction was a new universal classicism. But the Bauhaus' universality has come to be regarded as specious precisely because it is indifferent to the particularities of human use. This is ironic, since the Bauhaus aimed to collapse the distinction between fine and applied art, that is, art that existed for its own pure (and theoretical) sake and art integrated into social and human practice. It was essentially a school of architecture and industrial design, which tolerated such individualistic artists as Kandinsky and Paul Klee — they were useful as propaganda — but did not particularly encourage them, however much it influenced them (Kandinsky entered a geometrical phase). Klee was perhaps the most "poetic" and personal of the abstractionists, as Greenberg suggested. Such witty, ironical figures as *Dance, Monster; to My Soft Song!* (1922) and such clever geometrical landscapes as *Ad Parnassum* (1932) — essentially a colored grid — combine a miniaturist's delicacy with irksome charm.

But the basic concern of the Bauhaus was the production of modernized — which meant geometrized — mass products. Bauhaus products had a signature geometrical look, in which all ornament and un-standardized detail was eschewed. This made them easier to craft and mass produce. The works

of the painters were handmade and idiosyncratic and, as such, insufficiently severe and anonymous; they did not readily lend themselves to reproduction as standardized designs. Above all, their art was not useful, and facilitating ease of use and efficiency were the ultimate Bauhaus ambitions. In a sense, the Bauhaus wanted to domesticate the avant-garde; its innovations were less conceptual than technical. The early avant-garde artists were too illogical in their construction and too irrational in their purpose to have much influence and, in fact, when the Bauhaus is thought of today it is such architectural “logicians” and rationalists as Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe who are celebrated, rather than Johannes Itten, a mystic and philosopher who developed the basic theoretical course. Gropius was the first director of the Bauhaus, van der Rohe, the last — but Itten only lasted until 1923. He was replaced by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, and, when he left in 1928, by Josef Albers, both of whom were more “technically” oriented — they had the mentality of engineers (Albers eventually produced a manual on the “interaction of colors”) — and less mystically inclined than Itten. Their attitude was similar to that of the French architect Le Corbusier, who was not a member of the Bauhaus, but who developed an austere if geometricizing style of painting called Purism, a critique of early Cubism as insufficiently geometrical. The Bauhaus preferred the clear and distinct rather than the obscure (emotionally or otherwise), the ostensibly simple to the overly complex. (The Bauhaus was started in 1919 in Weimar, and moved to Dessau in 1926. It was closed by the Nazis in 1932, when Gropius and Mies as well as Moholy-Nagy and Albers, among others, emigrated to the United States.)

Mies famously said “less is more” and claimed that “God is in the details” rather than in the whole — the gestalt whole looked boring, impersonal and static, however innovative-looking his buildings, which had a steel skeleton and glass skin (a revolutionary departure from the cave as architectural model, in use since prehistoric times). But when one looks at the works of such Bauhaus individualists as Lyonel Feininger, Schlemmer and Willi Baumeister, one finds “more” rather than “less,” a dynamic whole which transcends its details. Even Moholy-Nagy’s works, while Constructivist — he called himself one in 1922 — have a certain dynamic “excess” to them. Manipulating actual light and using transparent and translucent plastics — the new material of the future — Moholy-Nagy’s *Light-Space Modulators* were complex installations rather than simple architecture. He called himself an “anonymous agent” working for society, but his works have a personality all their own. They may be mechanical sculptures incorporating space — among the first examples of it — but they look like strangers from another planet. They seemed to have been influenced by science fiction as well as machine ideology.

Albers, who argued that “economy of form depends on function and material” — in effect, the Bauhaus credo — nonetheless made a series of paintings called *Homage to the Square* which were mystical icons, like

Malevich's Suprematist squares, to which they were indebted. (Malevich's writings were published by the Bauhaus in 1928.) Begun in 1950 when Albers was in the United States, they distilled Bauhaus ideology — clarity, balance, proportion — and simplified the geometric designs he used in his Bauhaus glass works (he ran the glass shop there) while exploiting the mysticism and eternity associated with geometry since Plato and Pythagoras.

Baumeister used abstraction more intuitively, but with no sacrifice of mysticism, making figural works that had a certain affinity with those of Schlemmer, whose figures resembled mystical robots. In the 1940s Baumeister made works the mystifying signs of which seem derived from cave painting, like those the Abstract Expressionists were making at the time. Feininger was also an intuitive abstractionist with mystical inclinations. The cover of the first announcement of the Bauhaus featured his Cubist-Futurist woodcut of a medieval cathedral. His thirteen paintings, begun in 1913, of the church in the village of Gelmeroda, become decisively abstract, but abstraction is used in the service of mysticism, indeed, mystical ecstasy. These works have a gnostic dimension, as their blazing luminosity, suggesting a moment of religious revelation, indicates. Feininger's later images of sailboats were also "mystified" by "illumination," and also involved a steeple-like structure, that is, the sailboat's mast (the height of which Feininger exaggerated to a mannerist extreme).

The Russian Constructivist brothers Anton Pevsner and Naum Gabo supposedly turned against the materialism and revolutionary ideology that informed the work of the first Constructivists, Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko (but not against their anti-painting stance). Nonetheless, like Tatlin's *Counter-Relief* (1915) and proposed *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20), spiraling to a utopian technological and egalitarian future, and Rodchenko's *Hanging Construction* (1920) — works as revolutionary as the Russian Revolution the artists supported, and which exemplified Marxist dialectical materialism in their structure — Pevsner and Gabo looked to technology for inspiration. Gabo's abstract *Kinetic Construction* (1920) used an electric motor to set a rod in motion, creating a vibration which resembled a streamlined column. His *Monument for an Observatory* (1922) was a three-dimensional construction of plastic that used Suprematist geometrical elements to celebrate scientific and technological progress. They would conquer the cosmos. Gabo's works eventually became stringent and subtler, fusing flat planes in what is essentially a spatial installation, as in the intricate *Construction in Space with Balance on Two Points* (1925). Such works as *Linear Construction No. 2* (1949), with its carefully calibrated curvature and use of nylon thread — then a novelty — are the technocratic climax of his oeuvre.

But for all Gabo's attempt to uproot mysticism, it survives in the visionary character of his works — each is in effect the model of a scientifically mastered cosmos — and their complicated structure, which is perceptually

ally mystifying, however technically precise. The nylon threads of *Linear Construction No. 2* catch the light, making the whole work luminous. It seems almost immaterial — certainly there's not much material in it. One becomes aware of how much of it is pure space. Its curves seem oddly irrational, as do those in his brother's *Dynamic Projection in the 30th Degrees* (1950-51). Aggressively projecting in space, it seems like a modernized *Winged Victory* rather than an homage to mathematics. Throughout his career Pevsner, who along with his brother published a "Realistic Manifesto" in 1920 — the "real" had to do with their decision to use real rather than illusory timespace — made drawings of the human head, which straddled the border between mimesis and abstraction, integrating them to mystifying effect. If one looks carefully at all their real timespace sculptures — works that seem to move freely in both time and space, and that seem to have an inner spring-like dynamic of their own that allows them to do so — one notes that they involve the interplay of light and shadow, transparency and opacity, emptiness and matter. This formal dialectic has a mystical effect, that is, it makes the work seem to transcend its own condition.

Light has always been a mystical substance, transcendental in import, and the sculptures of Gabo and Pevsner, for all their careful engineering — indeed, ingenious craft — are transcendental objects. So are those of Moholy-Nagy, which are also pure constructions. Even before the *Light-Space Modulators*, his photograms — cameraless photographs similar to those of Man Ray — reveal his fascination with light. The *Light-Space Modulators* make it the exclusive subject of art. Feininger, Moholy-Nagy, Gabo and Pevsner converge through their interest in light, the ultimate mystical substance. Albers belongs among them, for his squares are as radiant as suns. Unexpectedly, the Constructivists — Bauhaus and non-Bauhaus, painters or sculptors — offer a mystical alternative to the tragic humanists, however technologically and socially oriented they claim to be.

Notes

- ¹ Elizabeth M. Legge, *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1989), 36.
- ² Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1907), *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959), Vol. 9, 143-44.
- ³ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 71, 87.
- ⁴ André Breton, "Surrealism and Painting" (1928), *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 5.
- ⁵ André Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism" (1941), *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 74.

- ⁶ André Breton, "Oscar Dominguez," *ibid.*, 129.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism," *ibid.*, 68.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹² Quoted in John Golding, *Visions of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 76.
- ¹³ André Breton, "Kandinsky," *ibid.*, 286.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 429.
- ¹⁵ Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism," 70.
- ¹⁶ Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," 15-16.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Polizzotti, 471.
- ¹⁸ Marcel Jean, ed., *The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Viking, 1980), 302.
- ¹⁹ Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," 5.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Chipp, 389.
- ²¹ Quoted in Chipp, 415.
- ²² Quoted in Chipp, 425-26.
- ²³ Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," 3.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Chipp, 422.
- ²⁵ Hanna Segal, "The Klein-Bion Model," *Models of the Mind*, ed. Arnold Rothstein (New York: International Universities Press, 1985), 36, notes that "there are always fluctuations between the two positions," which "persist throughout life. The paranoid-schizoid position is the earlier one; the later, depressive position leads to maturity." In the splitting that is the characteristic way "the infant tries to organize his perceptions and instinctual drives and emotions . . . he attributes all love, goodness and bliss to an ideal object and all distress to a bad object. . . . The absence of satisfaction is felt as a persecution by a bad object. All love and desire is directed to the ideal object which the infant wants to introject, possess and identify with. All hatred is both directed to the persecutory object and projected onto it, since the infant wants to rid himself of everything within that is felt to be bad and disruptive." "Excessive anxiety," Segal writes (37), "leads also to fragmentation, giving rise to typical schizoid fears of annihilation and disintegration. Another feature of excessive anxiety is what Bion described as pathological projective identification. In pathological projective identification, part of the ego is fragmented and projected onto the object, fragmenting it, and giving rise to terrifying perceptions of what he calls 'bizarre objects' — those objects being fragments of the object, containing projected fragments of the self and imbued with hostility and anxiety." "The depressive position," Segal states (38), "is defined by Klein as the infant's relation to the mother as a whole object. The infant begins to realize that his good and bad experiences come from the same object and from himself as the same infant who can both love and hate his parent. . . . With the discovery of this ambivalence and the growing capacity to recognize absence and loss, the infant or growing child is open to feelings of guilt over hostility to a loved object and loss of mourning. The

working through of this situation of mourning initiates reparative feelings and capacities for symbolization and sublimation..."

²⁶ Michael Balint, "Contributions to Reality Testing" (1942), *Problems of Human Pleasure and Behavior* (London; Maresfield Library, 1987), 165-66.

²⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949, The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 26.

²⁸ *Écrit/Alberto Giacometti*, eds. Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin (Paris: Hermann, 1990), 39.

²⁹ Greenberg, 233.

Chapter 4: Aesthetics Against Barbarism; The Fourth Decade

The Soviets were the first to tyrannize art. While at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, modern art also was seen as a revolution and therefore was accepted, soon afterward it was rejected as not being "real." They did not see modern art as freeing itself from passing events and feelings, capable of establishing a more true reality. It is evident that when art is forced to be a representation of daily life in its common aspect — directly understandable by the mass — then modern art's free vision is not acceptable.

... Later than the Soviets, Nazi rulers exercised an analogous tyranny in Germany. Before the Nazi dictatorship, art in Germany was as free as anywhere else. Modern art was appreciated according to individual feeling and conception — just as in the rest of the world. . . . Then tyranny cut all off.

... Nazi leaders dictated the way art had to go. Whereas its way is continual progress, art had to regress.

... Never before has art known such constraint as Soviet and Nazi domination imposed.

Piet Mondrian, "Art Shows the Evil of Nazi and Soviet Oppressive Tendencies," 1939-40¹

The outer world, the world of contemporary events, always has an influence on the painter — that goes without saying. If the interplay of lines and colors does not expose the inner drama of the creator, then it is nothing more than bourgeois entertainment. The forms expressed by an individual who is part of society must reveal the movement of a soul trying to escape the reality of the present, which is particularly ignoble today, in order to approach new realities, to offer other men the possibility of rising above the present. In order to discover a livable world — how much rottenness must be swept away! If we do not attempt to discover the religious essence, the magic sense of things, we will do no more than add new sources of degradation to those already offered to the people today, which are beyond number. The horrible tragedy that we are experiencing might produce a few isolated geniuses and give them an increased vigor. If the powers of backwardness known as fascism continue to spread, however, if they push us any farther into the dead end of cruelty and incomprehension, that

will be the end of all human dignity.

Joan Miró, "Statement," 1939²

Part 1

I think the best way of understanding what the art of the '30s was about — or at least what its main thrust was — is to look at two works by Paul Klee, one made at the beginning of the decade, the other at its end, in the year that was the last of his life. *Mask of Fear* (1932) and *Death and Fire* (1940) are two of Klee's most famous works. There had always been a morbid, pessimistic streak in Klee's work, however balanced by comic irony — both are evident in the sardonic etchings made between 1903 and 1905, especially *Comedian II* (1904) and *Senile Phoenix* (1905) — but now the morbidity becomes dominant, in response to social events beyond his control. In 1932, Hitler came to power in Germany: The mute, blank face of the mask — fixed mask and expressive face are conflated — is Klee's castrated response. It is the face of defeat.

In 1940, Hitler quickly conquered France, completing his domination of Western Europe: It was the latest *Triumph of Death*, as *Death and Fire* announces. Klee's ghostly, grimacing figure is burned alive — the smoldering red in the upper left corner of the picture symbolizes the flames of war — but it is also an abstract representation of Death, exulting in the surrounding chaos and destruction. The figure looks like a quick graffiti sketch, but he is a grotesque apparition from hell. Indeed, he seems to personify the Blitzkrieg, and the lightning speed with which it brought death, as is suggested by the lightning speed with which the work seems to have been made.

Klee's pessimistic little figure, with its outsized face-mask and schematic form (Klee's *Comedian II* shows how fascinated he was by the interplay between face and mask, suggesting the two-facedness or two-sidedness of human beings, each side showing the feelings the other denies, and thus suggesting inner conflict) has been understood to represent the spiritual bankruptcy and creative sterility of Nazi Germany. But it also represents Klee's state of mind. As he said, all his works are about "what weighs upon my soul," influenced, no doubt, by external events, but fundamentally about his own feelings. Thus, the fear depicted is his own fear, not only for Germany, but for himself and ultimately for modern art.

His concern was well-founded. He had taught in the Bauhaus, leaving in 1930 to become a professor in Düsseldorf. He was dismissed in 1933 when his art was attacked as degenerate by the Nazis. Klee once wrote: "I want to be as though newborn, knowing absolutely nothing about Europe, ignoring facts and fashions, to be almost primitive",³ but Europe caught up with him, and outdid his primitivism with its barbarism. The new aesthetic primitivism

that had flourished since Cézanne, becoming explicit in Expressionism and abstraction, was no match for the age-old forces of inhuman barbarity; like a frail flower, it was easy to stamp out, which is what Hitler's boots attempted to do.

Klee was not alone. The work of many other prominent German artists — Otto Dix and Emil Nolde among them, to mention two who represent the objectivist and subjectivist extremes of German avant-garde style (ironically, Nolde had been an early member of the Nazi party, and could not understand why his work was regarded as degenerate, as he wrote in a letter to Joseph Goebbels) — was declared “degenerate,” that is, spiritually diseased.

It was the beginning of what climaxed in the “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937, the most important art event of the decade, for it was the largest single show of 20th-century avant-garde art ever held until then, and gave more people than ever a chance to see it, even if the works they saw were presented as symptoms and specimens of cultural degeneracy. The Nazis staged an Augean stable of avant-garde lunacy that they hoped to clean up and replace with their supposedly healthy quasi-classical art, also on view. But the crowds — the exhibition toured many cities — seemed to prefer the degenerate art to the new pseudo-heroic Nazi art. If Klee's gentle, coy, witty modern art — an art celebrated for its childlike, fey character — could be regarded as degenerate by the Nazis, nothing that had any hint of artistic difference could escape their clutches.

In 1956, visiting an exhibition of children's drawings, Picasso remarked: “When I was their age I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them.”⁴ But Klee drew like a self-absorbed child from the beginning to the end of his career, with a child's idiosyncratic, innocent, impulsive vision, however much his idiosyncrasy and impulsiveness came to seem ritualistic, even stylized, and his innocence arch. He also drew many children throughout his career, maintaining his identification with them. The inner child always remained alive and active in Klee, however aesthetically sophisticated it became, as his heavy investment in Cubist planarity and Orphic color — many works have a Synthetic Cubist look — indicate. The flatness of his intimate, concentrated pictures and the hieroglyphic, cryptic look of his figures suggest an austere, abstract sensibility, despite the fantastic character of his imagery. Stamping out avant-garde art, the Nazis were stamping out the child in modern man, and with that modern imagination.

Klee left for Berne, Switzerland (his original home) in ill-health, and no doubt *Death and Fire* is fraught with a sense of impending death. But, more broadly, like *Mask of Fear*, Klee's 1932 painting is about the crisis of avant-garde art itself. It is a crisis of faith: How could avant-garde art believe in itself when the society in which it existed no longer did? Klee had come full circle: He began his career depicting, with scrupulous realism, sinister, menacing,

brutish adults, each an allegorical personification of society — the grotesque figure in *Pessimistic Allegory of the Mountains* (1904) is a climactic example — and ended it making equally pessimistic allegories, now with a different import, for in *Mask of Fear* and *Death and Fire*, the primitive, emblematic, abstract figures represent avant-garde art. What had been latent all along in Klee's art now became explicit: Klee had always felt that harsh adult society posed a threat to the delicate artistic child in him — to avant-garde art, which was new and innocent of the ways of the world, like a playful child — and now the threat was real. It was no longer just a subjective reality, conveying Klee's feeling of being out of place in society — indeed, too sensitive to live in it — but an objective reality. Both pictures are pessimistic allegories of avant-garde art: The former shows its unhappy state of mind, the latter its unhappy fate — the Nazis made the underlying oppressiveness and destructiveness of adult society transparently clear. The child is full of foreboding, the burning figure full of anguish — persecuted by Nazi tyranny, avant-garde art inevitably became paranoid: It is this paranoia — a very realistic paranoia — that is also personified by Klee's troubled figures. Its life threatened, the avant-garde child experiences annihilation anxiety, which becomes actual annihilation in *Death and Fire*. Avant-garde art was incinerated by Nazi fire, like the books and, not much later, the Jews the Nazis committed to the flames: It is as though Klee prophesied the Holocaust and, more broadly, the bombing and burning of Europe. Passive despair becomes the terrifying anguish of death: What the child foresaw happens. The works are the systole and diastole of the same suffering.

Ironically, European avant-garde art came under siege just when it began to achieve social success and consolidate its ideas. As the opening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 indicated, it was on the verge of international recognition. The Bauhaus brought together, in a cooperative spirit, such radically different avant-garde practitioners as Gropius and Klee — an architect oriented to “the outer world,” a painter concerned only with his own “inner drama,” to use Miró's language — indicating that avant-garde art was no longer a revolutionary cause but had matured into an established ideology. It now had two major organizations behind it, one to produce it — indeed, mass-produce it, as Bauhaus design made clear — and one to disseminate its ideas. It was no longer a loose-knit network of competing individualists, but a vested interest with enormous power. It was on the verge of becoming Modern Art, Inc.: What had only a few short years before been speculative and outrageous, now became standardized and respectable. What once seemed like an attack on tradition, now became a tradition of its own — the “tradition of the new,” as the critic Harold Rosenberg called it. What had seemed “outsider art,” indeed, beyond the pale of art, now became insider art. Avant-garde art no longer had to defend itself, but slowly but surely was becoming *de rigueur*. Differences remained, both in point of view and method, but the avant-garde

began to codify, integrate, and stabilize its ideas, most obviously in the theories of John Graham and Hans Hofmann. In the '20s, Hofmann opened the first school of modern art in Munich, moving it to New York in 1932, where it had great influence. The avant-garde had become a school of thought, and had a school to propagate its ideas. It had in effect become academic, indeed, the official art of the establishment, the way classical art once had been. Its various strands synthesized — however much the narcissism of small differences remained, to use Freud's phrase — it had become a new form of aesthetic tyranny.

If Klee's 1932 painting, which marks the beginning of Hitler's ascent, heralds the beginning of the end for European avant-garde art, then the 1940 painting marks the end, for the world war that devastated Europe also devastated European avant-garde art. It would not recover for a long time — its members dispersed, many of them going into exile in the United States — and in fact after the war the baton of avant-garde art would pass to the United States. Klee's visionary pictures did not anticipate this, but they do depict, with angry mourning as well as stunned disbelief, the death of European avant-garde art. It was destroyed by the outer world, which initially made it aware of its vulnerability and helplessness — how else should a child feel when victimized by "the world of contemporary events"? — and then burned it alive. Klee's fear painting is about living death, his fire painting about violent death, with death implicitly coming from the outside world, vaguely in the background of *Death and Fire*. But, unwittingly, Klee also showed death coming from the inside, growing like a hidden disease within avant-garde art: His witty paintings show avant-garde art at its wit's end, indeed, in an aesthetic dead-end. Abstract drama — the drama of autonomous forms — is toned down in Klee's works, whatever the inner drama his figures express. Primitive aesthetics has been stylized, losing the subtle unintelligibility it had in Cubism and the sharp emotional edge — the sense of being cut to the quick by unexpected feelings — it had in German Expressionism. In Klee's two pictures, abstraction and figuration smoothly synthesize, as though their fit — compatibility — was fore-ordained. Earlier abstract figures — for example, those by the Cubists — are much more awkward and forced, as though acknowledging their incompatibility while struggling to make them work together. Indeed, primitivizing abstraction was initially regarded as a healthy aesthetic antidote to classical decadence. Heroically pure forms were an exciting challenge to the stale classical figure — but Klee classicizes the primitive abstract figure, destroying the transcendental import and subversive potential of the pure forms out of which it is constructed.

Klee's works raise a problem: How move beyond the stasis that the new harmony of abstraction and figuration — already evident in Picasso's grand *Three Musicians* and Léger's equally grand, stately *Three Women* (Le

Grand Déjeuner) (both 1921) — brought with it? It is in effect a new classicism — a new formalism of the figure, and a convenient way of configuring pure form — and, like all classicism, an expressive dead-end, eventually leading to creative sterility. Indeed, it is even an aesthetic dead-end, becoming purely decorative in effect. The paintings by Picasso and Léger look like decorative luxuries — high abstract (Cubist) design, with each detail an aesthetic gem in the setting of the familiar figure. Neither seems necessary to the other, however seamless the dialectic between them. The everyday figure becomes a way of making the abstract forms more emotionally accessible and socially acceptable than they would be in their pure state. And abstraction becomes a way of making the figure more novel than it otherwise is, indeed, more mysteriously alive and intriguing — a cross between a robotic mechanism and organic body. Looking at Picasso's and Léger's paintings, and those of Klee, it is not clear whether we are looking at applied abstraction or applied figuration. The question, then, is raised: What is the next creative step, now that an old avant-garde problem has been solved? What is the way out of the new avant-garde's smugness? Klee's figures, however uncanny — however much they get under our emotional skin — are too clever for their own aesthetic good.

Only a new creative sword — a new creative rawness — could cut the slickly tied Gordian knot of abstraction and figuration, and it arrived right after the end of the Second World War in the form of Jackson Pollock's all-over Abstract Expressionist paintings. Their fragmented drips and clotted shapes are suggestive of the war's destructiveness, indeed, they seem like an abstract representation of the flames of war, even of the charred ruins of the Old World the war left in its wake — however highly personal they undoubtedly are, as Pollock's troubled personality suggests. As Willem de Kooning said, they "broke the ice," coming down decisively on the side of abstraction rather than figuration. But the breakthrough was short-lived, for in the early '50s, Pollock returned to abstract figuration, which had been his main interest in the early '40s. His post-all-over abstract figures are not as innovative as his completely abstract all-over paintings, nor for that matter his pre-all-over abstract figures. Pollock himself seemed to realize the problem, for *Portrait and a Dream* (1951) splits figuration and abstraction without saying anything new about either.

The painting is a dialectical stalemate: It pictures a stand-off between opposites that no longer enrich each other. On one side is a self-portrait, in a stale Cubist style. On the other side is an Abstract Expressionist rendering of a nightmare Pollock had, its violence and torment conveyed in the chaotic gestural style that had quickly become a popular cliché. This was in part because of the publicity accorded it as the "American breakthrough" — "Jack the Dripper," as *Life* magazine called him, became the first American success story in postwar avant-garde art, living proof (though soon to be dead, in an automobile suicide that made him into the American van Gogh) that America had

what it takes to make radical, cutting-edge art — and in part because Pollock, having climbed the peak of pure gesturalism, had nowhere to go but down. Where there had been recklessness and vision, there was now predictability and convention.

Apart from the fact that Pollock had run out of creative steam after the short-lived spurt of the all-over paintings — his later samples of it are a decadent epilogue — it was clearly time for avant-garde art to go somewhere else, that is, away from its cocooning itself in purity and back toward the outer world, which it did in Pop art and, in a different way, in Minimalism. The all-over paintings made the expressionistic best of social and personal ruin and disorder as well as the avant-garde's past, but Pollock's abstract figuration, both pre- and post-all-over painting, was, however more dynamic, stuck in the same rut as Klee's. Both addressed an old problem that was no longer to the avant-garde point, and, above all, because it no longer seemed equal to the catastrophic events of history — to an outer world that seriously impinged on art, as the "Degenerate Art" exhibition made clear, rather than simply responded to it with indifference and mockery. The "Degenerate Art" exhibition was the revenge of the masses, as Mondrian implied. The question is whether avant-garde art could revenge itself on the world by bearing aesthetic and expressive witness to "the powers of backwardness known as fascism," as Miró called them. That was the only way it could preserve its own dignity, and find a way out of the impasse of its new establishment-oriented classicism.

The '30s were about the attempt to reconcile the outer world and the artist's inner drama — public reality and private reality — and the most successful reconciliation is Picasso's spectacular, mural-sized *Guernica* (1937). Even more than in Klee's intimate little pictures, figuration, emblematic of external reality, and abstraction, emblematic of internal reality, seamlessly merge in *Guernica*, with much greater rhetorical — not to say oratorical (and oracular) — impact than Klee's pictures, and with much more differentiated abstract figures.

Nonetheless, *Guernica* is a failure, for it shows that avant-garde aesthetics is not equal to barbarism. In the end, it is about Picasso's inner drama rather than the outer world. His aesthetic matters more than the "horrible tragedy" of *Guernica*, which in fact is not really represented. It involved the bombing of the old Basque capital of Guernica by Nazi airplanes, in support of Franco in the Spanish Civil War — it was a trial run for the Blitzkrieg, a turning point in the war, and a demonstration of the important role that air power, and more broadly, technology would play in this most modern of wars — but there are no airplanes in *Guernica*. The only bit of technology is an old-fashioned light bulb — next to an even more old-fashioned kerosene lamp — in the upper part of the picture. Instead we have a statue with a sword, another bit of old-fashioned technology. The "hero" of the picture — it is clearly an alle-

gory of Picasso's turbulent love life, that is, his dominance and power over women, who are the victims in the picture — is a bull, that familiar Spanish symbol of death and masculinity, and a Surrealist symbol of the artist, with whom Picasso clearly identified, as his *Minotaurmarchy* (1935) indicated. The bull has clearly won the battle with the toreador — the statue broken to pieces on the earth. The bull is the invincible Picasso, smashing his artistic competitors, and men in general — other male artist toreadors. In both works the bull is killed rather than kills, reversing the usual outcome of a bullfight. The clusters of women in *Guernica* are his trophies, and they cry in pain at being conquered by him. In the *Minotaurmarchy*, the female toreador is vanquished by the bestial man. (*Guernica* is in effect a crucifixion and triptych. The dead horse in the center is the victimized Christ. The barbaric bull in the left panel symbolizes the power of "fascist" Rome. The despairing woman in the right panel is one of the mourning Marys, proliferating throughout the picture to "Gothic" effect, as Uhde said. The work certainly has the aura of Spanish brutality that Apollinaire saw in Picasso's art.) The conflict between them — a fight to the death, like the bullfight — suggests Picasso's conflicts with the women in his life.

Both pictures, along with many others from the same time, were made under the auspices of Surrealism — the latter revives Picasso's realistic, "classical" style, but it uses symbols in a Surrealist way, that is, to suggest unconscious meaning. The claustrophobic crowding and abrupt juxtapositions of both works (to give two examples: in *Guernica*, the bull's head next to the woman's head; in *Minotaurmarchy*, the little girl holding a candle and the Christ-like figure climbing a ladder behind her) create an effect of Surrealist incongruity and incoherence. They convey inner conflict, suggesting they have more to do with Picasso's feelings than with the Spanish Civil War. Its conflict triggered his inner conflicts, epitomized by the life and death conflict between bull and toreador. No doubt the Spanish Civil War was also a conflict between life and death, but there are no signs of it in *Guernica*. It is not clear that the fire was caused by bombing. Perhaps it was accidental — maybe the old-fashioned electric wiring caused it, or a kerosene lamp spilled. (We seem to be in a primitive village rather than modern city, which *Guernica* was. The whole environment looks decayed, as though it was ripe to become a ruin.)

Guernica is officially an allegory of the devastation caused by the bombing of the town, and more broadly of the self-destruction of Spain, and Picasso's sense of outrage at the event. But it is subliminally — and not-so-subliminally — an allegory of Picasso's subjective rage at the world and pursuit of personal and artistic power, with the women that come with it, as Freud reminds us. Even the abstract Surrealist comic strip of *Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) has more to do with Picasso's feelings — his inner drama — than it does with Franco. While his contempt for Franco — satirically reduced to a

weird growth — is clear, the work makes no particular political point, although it does suggest Picasso's support of the existing Republican government which Franco eventually defeated. However modern *Guernica's* style, it is anti-modern — indeed, altogether antithetical to the modern world, symbolized by the bombing, a technological triumph — in spirit.

Guernica is a gray, grim, dismal work, which integrates Expressionistic figures, Cubist planarity and Surrealist absurdity. But its drama seems forced — it is clearly staged and theatrical — and beside the point of the bombing. It tells us absolutely nothing about its world-historical meaning. It was simply a ready-made occasion for the expression of feelings and concerns that had long been a staple of Picasso's art. *Guernica*, like Klee's two paintings, is an endgame avant-garde work, not only because it subtly calibrates abstraction and figuration in a stable new aesthetic harmony, but because it shows the difficulty avant-garde art has when it tries to engage the outer world rather than articulate the artist's inner drama — especially when the outer world is more dramatic than the artist's inner world, and for that matter than his art.

(Predictable harmony, that is self-sameness, seems to be the kiss of death for avant-garde art, for it has always been at its most innovative when it lacks harmony and is unpredictable — as if to acknowledge the inner reality and uncertainty of the modern world. More particularly, it is at its best when it deals with emotional disequilibrium, however much it struggles to turn it into a dynamic aesthetic equilibrium. Avant-garde art, after all, is ultimately about the destabilization of the very idea of art — or at least the demonstration that it is an eccentric, protean idea, with no fixed identity. When avant-garde art becomes a stable art it is no longer avant-garde. Maturity never agreed with avant-garde art, which had to remain a child to be genuinely creative, that is, spontaneously innovative.)

Picasso may master his inner conflicts by embodying them in *Guernica*, but they are nowhere near as complex and dramatic as the world-changing event of the town's bombing. Picasso has turned a social trauma into an individual trauma, ostensibly in sympathy for the victims, but really to exhibit his own feeling of being wounded and victimized by the world — the same feeling Klee had, however different their artistic response to the narcissistic wound. While Picasso's picture may symbolize what occurs in everybody's inner life, its effect on people's lives, inner and outer, is limited compared to the effect of world-historical events. The picture is fascinating, but it changes nothing in society, however much reproductions of it were sold to raise money for the Republican cause.

Picasso's picture sidesteps *Guernica*, and became famous more for his celebrity, and its important place in his oeuvre, than because it tells us something important about the bombing of Guernica. *Guernica* is about tragedy, but the tragedy of Picasso's own life, not of Spanish society. It is about

Picasso's own barbarism, not the barbarism of war. Like *Massacre in Korea* (1951) and *War* (1952), *Guernica* has more to do with the war within him, and within his style, than with social reality.

Part 2

Guernica is perhaps the climactic work of avant-garde art made during the first half of the 20th century, but it is not the only one made that tries to use aesthetics against barbarism. Perhaps more subtly, it is not the only work integrating the artist's inner drama with that of the violent, threatening outer world, as though to do so was to adapt to it and thus survive in it. Nor is it the only work that was monumental in scale, as though that would guarantee its universal import. Max Beckmann's grand *Departure* (1932-33), the first of nine triptychs that are the culmination of his life's work, is another major response to the Nazis.

Like Klee, Beckmann was directly threatened by them — his art was also branded as degenerate and censored — and he also left Germany. *Departure* hints at his decision to emigrate — he didn't do so for another five years, when he moved to Amsterdam, where he managed to survive the war — but, more broadly, it pictures terror and tragedy, like *Guernica*. It also fuses personal and social allegory, but *Departure* is more obviously about social cruelty — the violence human beings do to each other, presumably in the name of ideology, as the torture chamber in the left panel indicates. There is another kind of torture chamber in the right panel, where an upside-down man, his hands tied behind his back, is tied to a woman, who nonetheless is able to walk. Holding a kerosene lamp like a latter-day Diogenes in search of a decent human being, she steps forward with a determined look on her face, as though that might clear the way, which is blocked in front by a drummer and threatened from behind by a bellhop with shaded eyes — he is as blind as she is open-eyed — holding a fish. She clearly gets nowhere. She remains trapped in a terrible marriage — as her “union” with the upside-down man suggests — and, more generally, in a threatening man's world. The fish is presumably the same one that appears in the basket that unexpectedly — dare one say, miraculously? — replaces the blade on the ax the brute in the left panel wields.

In the center panel, we see the Fisher King, a medieval symbol of Christ, the fisher of men. Presumably even the torturers in the left and right panels can be saved, as the fish associated with them suggest. The mythical Fisher King is in the boat with the departing couple — the ugly, dark-haired, mischievous looking child behind the woman in the right panel has been transformed into the beautiful blonde child in the center panel, now held by his mother and pointing the way (and also seen from the back rather than front, suggesting the completeness of the transformation) — as though promising

salvation after the voyage across the sea, its placidity suggesting an easy passage. The couple and infant, who clearly symbolize Mary, the Christ Child and Joseph (traditionally hidden behind them, to emphasize his secondary role) — Beckmann frequently uses religious symbolism to mythologize a contemporary situation, deepening and universalizing its meaning (he never abandoned the early interest in religious painting evidenced by the *Descent from the Cross* and *Christ and the Adulteress* (both 1917)) — are accompanied not only by the Fisher King, but by another man, who is much more sinister and hostile, as the helmet hiding his eyes, the way the vizor hides the bellboy's eyes in the right panel, suggests. He is probably the oarsman — he stands next to the oar — but he is also a warrior.

Clearly he is at odds with the Fisher King, who gestures towards the peaceful world beyond the sea (although he points in a different direction than the child, thus suggesting uncertainty about which way to go). His robe is blue and he wears a yellow crown, while the warrior has a gray helmet and red robe. The warrior looks toward the Fisher King threateningly, while the Fisher King looks out to the open sea, unaware of the warrior's glance. The warrior wears two gold bands around his upper right arm, while the right hand of the Fisher King holds a net full of fish, still in the water, but presumably to be saved by being brought into the boat. I want to suggest that the boat is stranded on a dead sea, that there is no wind and current to carry the boat forward — where are the sails? — and that the entire triptych is about entrapment and being stranded in an impossible situation. The center panel is a more subtle kind of torture chamber than the two side panels: The warrior is about to lift his right hand — rather grotesquely large — to attack the Fisher King. The warrior's hand is in the same position as the much smaller, more delicate hand of the mother, as though threatening her with violence. The warrior stands to the Fisher King the way Judas stands to Christ — the warrior wears the 30 pieces of gold on his arm, as it were — or the way the Anti-Christ, that is, the Devil, stands to Christ. Beckmann is depicting the battle between good and evil, and it looks like evil is winning, even though there are signs of good. The work is a medieval psychomachia adapted to a contemporary and personal situation and using a mix of modern styles — flatness and distortion — to underscore its dramatic point.

Beckmann has a vocabulary of images and symbols that are much more cosmopolitan than Picasso's provincial bullfight. *Departure* derives from classical mythology, North European carnival imagery and medieval martyrdom triptychs, including pictures that deal with Christ's suffering on the way to his crucifixion, all transformed to suit Beckmann's psychosocial purpose. Like all the triptychs, *Departure* is theatrical, indeed, a kind of Grand Guignol theater or Gothic horror tale. The odd couple in the right panel is clearly on a stage, and the whole unfolds like a miracle play (with an unhappy, or at least

uncertain, ending). The main event is in the center, and the figures that appear in it, posed statically, as though fixed in a tableau, are the most important ones. As such, they are larger than those in the side panels, whose actions cause the central event, invariably a major turning point in medieval visual narrative. The center panel relates to the story of Perseus and the Argonauts, and the carnival figures threatening the unhappy couple — he is in effect crucified upside down on the cross of marriage (making him a perverse Peter) — could easily have come out of a painting by Bosch or Breugel, as could the executioner in the left panel, where the tied up woman in the foreground is a martyr awaiting execution. The gruesomeness — and angularity — of the scenes is medieval, but German society was already becoming gruesome, violent and edgy in the aftermath of the first world war, as Beckmann's *The Night* (1918-19) makes clear. (It was also a society in which experimental theater and Expressionistic film flourished.) This notorious work, full of menace and murder, has the same crowded format and claustrophobic space visible as the side panels of *Departure*. There is also another young woman with her back towards us, also being sadistically tortured. The two candles, one lit, one knocked over and unlit, are rather dubious symbols of hope, just as the huge still-life of fruit in the left panel of *Departure* is a dubious symbol of life in a situation of almost certain death. The male figure in the process of being hung has the same body as Christ in the *Descent from the Cross*.

The Night is one of a series of apocalyptic pictures Beckmann painted in the '20s, and *Departure* continues and complicates the series on a grander scale. All of the triptychs are about remaining conscious in a dismal situation in which human beings are morbidly unconscious of themselves and their behavior. In *Departure* the two open-eyed women are symbols of consciousness, the figures with their eyes hidden represent the state of being unconscious, and the drummer and executioner go about their business unconsciously, indifferent to their own inhumanity and the humanity of their victims. "Open your eyes and you shall see" seems to be Beckmann's modern biblical message — see, observe carefully and become fully conscious of the horrible world around oneself, witnessing it, which is the only salvation. *Blind Man's Buff* (1945), another triptych, makes the point clearly: Not only is the blindfolded man unaware of the situation, but so are the revelers around him. Again, women seem to be the only ones who are fully conscious of it, along with Beckmann himself. But where they symbolize hope, he is full of despair — the despair the revelers try to escape by becoming beasts, as the animals pictured suggest. The carnival, in fact, tended to degenerate into a drunken bestial brawl, a predatory war of all against all. (The work is one of many in which Beckmann portrays himself, continuing a North European tradition of self-portraiture that dates back to Dürer and Rembrandt. Concern with the self — beyond the social stereotype in which it is embedded — is a staple of modern German art, as

the portraits of Otto Dix indicate. Even the military types in George Grosz's Dadaistic, satiric drawing *Fit for Active Service* (1916-17) — a brilliantly ironic Triumph of Death in the guise of anti-war propaganda — have individual personalities.)

In *Family Picture* (1920), Beckmann alone represents consciousness, however wounded he is, and reduced to a helpless, inert child. The only man in a family of woman and children — in effect the father crippled and castrated by war (as the twisted horn he holds suggests) — he is conscious of the family's miserable situation, and thus in a sense transcends it, however hurt. The work includes an allegory of the stages of life, represented by the three women around the table — one young and melancholy, one old and in complete despair, and the third reading the newspaper, indicating her interest in contemporary events, and thus her realism (in contrast to the two self-absorbed, indeed, self-pitying, unhappy women). Another sub-theme — so many of them involve women, who are usually, like the woman in the central panel of *Departure*, narcissistically remote and self-sufficient — is vanity, as the local Venus admiring herself in the mirror suggests. But her primping — she adjusts her hair — is futile, for no one else is likely to see her seductive beauty. (Unless she is a prostitute prettying herself for the street. She may be the only breadwinner in the family.) The young men who might have appreciated it have died in the war, and her family is too indifferent to notice it. Her beauty is likely to be short-lived, as the dingy attic space suggests. She is another depressing part of the allegory of life. Note the light hanging from the ceiling in the center of the picture, like the light in Picasso's *Guernica*, but here more clearly to the emotional point. For Picasso it was an ironic touch of realism in an abstract fantasy — very much like some of the realistic devices in his abstract Cubist paintings — while for Beckmann it is part of the banal reality of life, which is a nightmare come true.

Beckmann's pictures are psychologically as well as socially realistic. *Departure* is full of ambivalence about marriage and women. The boat marriage of Mary and Joseph is as much of a joke as the marriage of the couple — they indeed have tied the knot — in the right panel. The Mary figure is implicitly dominant — the still quiet center of the still quiet central scene (however seething the warrior may be) — while the sturdy female figure in the right panel is explicitly dominant. Both can protect themselves, especially against men, for they are sacred, enlightened figures, really married to the truth. In the left panel, the fruits of life are grotesquely large — like those in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* — as though nourished by the death that is clearly in the atmosphere. There is much despair, and a modicum of hope — a bit of light in the emotional darkness — suggesting Beckmann's uncertainty about the outcome of the voyage of life, and perhaps its ultimate meaninglessness.

In his last triptych, *The Argonauts* (1949-50), finished the day before he died, he returns to the theme of *Departure*, showing what has become of the

world in the decades between them. It remains as contradictory and troubling as ever — the half-naked woman in the left panel poses with a sword (Beckmann is busily painting her), the glamorous woman in the right panel plays a guitar, and in the central panel we see once again the ladder that appeared in the *Descent from the Cross* and *The Dream* (1921). Again there is a grouping of innocent and oppressive figures — the naked David and Jonathan, implicitly lovers, and the depressed and bestial King Saul, without his crown and caged by the ladder, that is, trapped and crucified. (David's harp has fallen on the ground, and he wears two gold armbands, like the warrior in *Departure*, but now on his left forearm, and a huge falcon — a phallic symbol, suggesting predatory dominance — rests on Jonathan's left forearm.) Nothing really has changed: The carnival may have gotten merrier — there is the soothing music of the flute and guitar, rather than the ominous beat of the drum — and it may be possible to paint without worrying about the Nazis, and love may be possible, in whatever form, but violence is still in the air. The voyagers have safely arrived in a new world — Beckmann moved to the United States in 1947 (does Saul represent the Old World, the golden youths the New World?) — but it is really the same old torture chamber in disguise, however much the torture now has more to do with the artist's inner life than with world-historical events.

There is an eschatological fatalism to Beckmann's triptychs. They are about suffering without transfiguration — meaningless, living death. Perhaps another torture chamber is waiting beyond the horizon in *Departure*. The side panels suggest there is no escape from suffering. The Holy Family is trapped between them, and between the warrior and the Fisher King, uncertain who will be victor. They rest on the Flight to Egypt, as it were — Beckmann's pictures are full of biblical and classical allusions — pursued by enemies eager to betray or kill them. Persecuted by and temporarily trapped in the tyranny that was Nazi Germany — like Klee's *Child Consecrated to Suffering* and *Mask of Fear*, Beckmann's *Departure* is about paranoia — Beckmann became a profound observer of the human condition, indeed, one of the great humanist painters of the century. If genuine realism is grounded not simply in observation of reality but in the anxiety it arouses, leading to the angry attempt to master its ugliness and ironies, then Beckmann's realism is the most masterful and ironic of the century.

Part 3

Beckmann is just one of many German artists who attempted to deal with the social reality of their unfortunate country, even if he is the most moving because he showed its disastrous effect on the individual. Germany had begun to unravel after the First World War, and it came together — or rather

was forced into totalitarian unity — with the ascent of Hitler. Hannah Höch captures the spirit of its disintegration in her witty, aggressive Dadaist collage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919-20) and John Heartfield illustrates its forced integration under fascist auspices in his ironic, mock poetic photomontage *O Christmas Tree in German Soil, How Crooked Are Your Branches* (1934). The threadbare tree, with its drooping, twisted branches — hardly the sturdy German Tannenbaum of tradition — is mounted on a swastika, and grotesquely bent into the shape of one at its top, giving the tree as a whole — a symbol of Germany — a demented look. Höch's work is wildly chaotic and absurd — German reality is spinning out of control under the Weimar Republic, and full of contradictions, as the discrepancy in scale between the image-fragments suggests — while Heartfield's work has the brevity of a visual epigram: A single central image tells the whole perverse/silly story of the new fascist Germany. Where Höch's work is a tower of verbal and visual Babel — or is it a battlefield full of social shrapnel? — Heartfield is deceptively simple and clear. Both works are satiric, but Höch's Germany is dynamic and lively — unmanageable but free, and on the move — while Heartfield's Germany is inert, deflated, banal: The Christmas star has become a swastika, boding ill for Germany. There is a sadness to Heartfield's ridicule, while Höch's has a certain angry vigor. Höch's dramatic work marks the beginning of the short, troubled but creative period that began after the First World War, and Heartfield's work marks its end, when fascism laid its deadening hand on Germany.

Both works have a journalistic look. Höch in fact assembles fragments of photographs and texts from newspapers and magazines — mischievously adding the word “dada” as a kind of punctuation (suggesting how much Dadaism mirrored the chaos) — and Heartfield's image looks like an anonymous commercial drawing. Where Beckmann aesthetically transformed and mythologized social appearances so that they became symbols of the human condition — the uprooted artist, for example, becomes rootless modern man, and women suggest the need for kindness and mercy in a cruel, indifferent world — Höch and Heartfield rely on mechanical reproduction, and remain impersonal reporters and debunkers to the bitter end. While ostensibly indifferent to aesthetics — although their anti-aestheticism quickly became a new avant-garde aesthetics — they defended against their bitterness with a kind of aesthetic irony, but it was a futile visual gesture that did nothing to reverse or stop the tide of contemporary events. Their Dadaist irony was a kind of life raft in the flood of traumatic events, always about to be overwhelmed by them — perhaps just the straw the drowning artist grasped in vain.

Nonetheless, they meant their art to be a kind of public commentary — indeed, an intervention in public life — as its populist, activist character indicates. Heartfield in fact photographed his works for reproduction in the

mass media, and from 1930 on they appeared in *AIZ*, a left-wing illustrated worker's magazine. They were in effect political cartoons — impish, sniping attacks against fascism. Heartfield used Dadaist absurdity and rebellion to make a critical point: Dadaism led the rebellion against fascism by revealing its absurdity. Nonetheless, his images were never so absurd as to be unintelligible, never so ironical as to forget the seriousness of the issue they addressed. They may have been aesthetically abrasive — the usual nihilistic joke on art — but they were also socially abrasive. They were instantly readable propaganda against fascism, meant for a receptive proletariat audience, and calling for a Communist revolution against fascism. They were meant to stir up the oppressed masses, rather than pacify them with humor, or, for that matter, entertain them.

But there is a deeper point to the Dadaistic realism of Höch and Heartfield: It suggests that the way to break the stalemate between abstraction and representation (more particularly, figuration) — the aesthetic impasse created by their opposition — was a healthy nonconformist dose of outer-world influence, forcing a recalibration of their relationship in favor of representation, with abstraction going underground, as it were — not denied but hidden. The result was a sense that there was something magical about reality, that is, inherently fantastic and strange. What has been called “magical realism,” and I want to call “fantastic realism” — realism that calls attention to the absurdity of even the most matter-of-fact reality, that is, the bizarreness of the banal — became the major contribution of post-World War I German art to modern art. Weimar Germany was a bizarre world and Hitler was a bizarre character. The ideologues as well as the libertines of '20s Berlin lived a fantasy, with equally disastrous social results.

Fantastic realism seems to first appear in the work of George Grosz, a contemporary of Höch and Heartfield who was also a Dadaist observer of German society. (He was in the United States when Hitler came to power in the '30s, and stayed there, losing his Dadaist spirit and style.) Grosz was also less concerned to make high art — which Beckmann still believed in — than to communicate social reality in the most efficient visual form possible, hopefully influencing the course of contemporary events. He also used mass media methods, and cloaked social criticism — not to say cynicism — in grim comedy, as the notorious caricatures in his book *Ecce Homo* indicate. He also turned to Communism, but he gave it up. For him Communism was as absurd, oppressive, stupid and futile as Fascism — an astute perception. Like Bosch and Breugel before him, he was more interested in the general madness and folly of humanity, as he said, showing human beings as deranged, sex-crazed, violent creatures, at other times representing them as conformist robots. His people are unaware of their self-destructiveness, and of the fact that they are “disgusting,” as the secretly moralistic Grosz thought. His pictures are satiric,

but they are also morbid, fatalistic fantasies, as the dramatic presence of death in such different works as *Dedication to Oskar Panizza* (1917-18) — a censored 19th-century writer and anarchist, with whom Grosz probably identified — and *Fit for Active Service (The Faith Healers)* (1916-17) indicates. Grosz's images are as nightmarish as those of Alfred Kubin, although the nightmares they deal with are social rather than personal.

In fact, his pictures have a dreamlike, hallucinatory quality — social reality had become more surreal than any dream an individual could have. Society had become a barbaric dream no one can escape, certainly not by means of aesthetics, which was hardly adequate to it. One of the reasons the German Dadaist realists turned to photography as a model, however much they departed from its apparently clinical realism, is that it alone seemed capable of representing what was too horrifically true to be imaginatively represented. Imagination would get in the way of a reality that had become unimaginable. Truth once again showed that it was stranger than fiction, and the clinical truthfulness of photography was the best way of conveying it. The avant-garde devices — collage, Futurist dynamics, Dadaist incongruity — they used seemed dishonest in comparison. They were a futile overlay on the stark truth, imaginatively enlivening it without necessarily penetrating it. Nonetheless, for Grosz, clear-eyed social observation — implicitly photographic, however unphotographic in style — fed into a traditional apocalyptic vision of collective human bondage, to use Spinoza's term. It was the same morbid bondage pictured in the right panel of Beckmann's *Departure*. Höch's and Heartfield's Dadaistic realism also has a dreamlike absurdity — a fantastic quality of unreality that was nonetheless true to reality. Everyday reality is always a component of a dream, but in Höch, Heartfield and Grosz it becomes the whole ugly dream. Indeed, they suggest that society is a kind of mad dream — its reality is so insane it has to be a dream. For the German Dadaist realists, reality itself is Dadaistic, that is, it has the bizarre coherence of a fantasy. The fantasies of the German Dadaist realists are not manufactured, like those of the Surrealists, but routinely real. Fantasy and reality are indistinguishable in fact as well as in the fiction of their art, which tries to capture the fantastic character of reality.

In short, the German artists were fascinated by social reality because strange, unfathomable human forces seem to inform and shape it. From Cézanne on, artists have perceived a mysterious tension at the core of physical reality; the German artists found this same primitive tension in social reality, whose workings came to seem mysterious. Indeed, the more they showed how the social machine worked — for them society was like a malfunctioning machine that needed a complete overhaul — the more mysterious it seemed. The artists used all the avant-garde means at their command to give it aesthetic credibility, but in the end they found it incredible. Grosz's frustration with all ideologies suggests that there is no political or economic explanation for social in-

sanity and violence. Intuitive sociologists, the German artists nonetheless came to realize that no social science could explain human absurdity. In their vision, human beings are irredeemably irrational because there is no reason for reality itself. This is why it looks so strange in their art, however mechanical. Reality cannot be mastered by scientific explanations or artistic representation, which is why there is a profound aura of unreality in their pictures of social and human reality — an uncanny sense that the features of their life-world are inexplicably the case and cannot be fundamentally changed, even by social revolution, which is why they gave up on it.

Fantastic realism is a compromise formation, as it were, not only between the artist's inner world and the outer world of contemporary events, but between avant-gardism and traditionalism. More broadly, fantastic realism integrates abstraction (in whatever primitivizing, ironical form) and representation, for whatever social or emotional purpose. The subdued, enigmatic figures of Wilhelm Lehmbruck and the powerful, assertive biblical types of Ernst Barlach are perhaps its most unexpected manifestations. The former turn inward, often in despair, the latter outward, sometimes in anger, and both are streamlined — on the one hand delicately abstract, on the other hand forcefully abstract. Both kinds of figure are representational and abstract at once, resulting in a feeling of magical reality — reality with an unspoken secret.

When Picasso and Klee integrate abstraction and representation in a figure, the result seems more abstract than representational, that is, the representational seems embedded in the abstract, even to dissolve and disappear into it, or at least to be garbled by it. Abstraction no longer has any secrets, nor does it generate a sense of secrecy and mystery. But when Lehmbruck and Barlach do so, in such haunting embodiments of human hurt as Lehmbruck's *Seated Youth* (1917) and Barlach's *Beggar* (1930), the abstract seems embedded in the representational, which remains conventionally intelligible and communicative — readable as everyday reality, however strange and secretive.

In fantastic realism, the mysterious strangeness of reality becomes beautiful, even seductive. More particularly, the strangeness in beauty, as the philosopher Francis Bacon called it, seems to stand out without becoming disruptive, that is, with no loss of the sense of that harmonious integration called beauty. For Lehmbruck and Barlach, ideal beauty and fantastic social reality converge in human suffering, which brings with it a sense of fate — a fate which the German Dadaist realists tried to resist with their Dadaist aesthetics, as though that could avoid it.

Part 4

Fantastic realism seems self-evident in the work of Stanley Spencer, Balthus and Pavel Tchelitchew — and in the post-Cubist work of Picasso,

Braque and Léger, and even in the cutouts of Matisse. It is also evident in the Pittura Metafisica of Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà, and the still-lives of Giorgio Morandi, an artist who shares their sensibility if not their style. It is, in my opinion, a pervasive compromise formation in 20th-century art — the major aesthetic way of reconciling the demands of inner and outer reality, that is, the artist's inner drama and the outer world.

To get more precise about it, we have to turn to Picasso's 1937 interview with André Malraux, in which he explains the reason for his use of African masks in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. He first saw them in the old Musée d'Ethnologie du Trocadéro in Paris, which he described as an "appalling" place, "like the Flea Market." Alone in the "awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins" as his only company, he had a revelation: "The masks weren't like other pieces of sculpture. Not at all, they were magic objects."⁵ It was then that Picasso realized that, as he later said to Françoise Gilot, "painting isn't an aesthetic operation. It's a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires."⁶ Or, as he said to Malraux, "the Negro pieces were intercessors, mediators. . . . They were against everything — against unknown, threatening spirits. . . . They were weapons to help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits, to help them become independent." In other words, art had a "spiritual" purpose, that is, it dealt with spirits, both good and bad, within the artist and in the outer world, defending against the hostile, terrorizing, destructive ones, encouraging the friendly, libidinous, life-sustaining ones.

Clearly Picasso is describing the battle between Thanatos and Eros — barbarism and beauty, one might say — that raged in his psyche and in the outer world. Art is a way of articulating the conflict, at times fusing the opposites in an aesthetic compromise formation, which makes for a kind of harmony, however awkward and bizarre — so-called "modern beauty" — at other times suggesting that the war between them can never be resolved, for the triumph of one over the other would be a Pyrrhic victory, emotionally and aesthetically.

(This is what the moderns thought traditional beauty was, since erotic surface and form seemed to triumph over fatal reality and unhappy feeling. The result was too tame — vacuous, for something was missing, whereas in modern beauty neither term dominated the other. Both are explicit, which is why so many modern works of art look distorted, the result of being pulled between the opposites. Thanatos and Eros remain on the modern surface, which is why it becomes disjointed, fractured and finally crumbles into almost complete painterly chaos, as in Pollock's all-over paintings. Their rhythm, however broken, is the last semblance of integrating form.)

Picasso never lost his sense of art as "magical," that is, a defense

against inner and outer reality, and, more crucially, a way of influencing or controlling, and even changing, them, that is, modifying the reality of one's internal objects — the spirits within oneself — and of external objects, which have their own spirits. This is sheer fantasy — hence what I call fantastic realism, for it involves both the defense of fantasy and what Freud called “omnipotence of thought,” the magical thinking that is characteristic of childhood. It survives in art, as he said — especially in modern magical/fantastic art, of which Picasso's is an extreme example, especially his Surrealist-inspired work of the '30s. As Charles Brenner writes, the child assumes that “all the objects” in its “environment. . . have thoughts, feelings and wishes just as he himself does. All nature is animate until experience, and his parents, tell him otherwise.”⁷ When Picasso said that “I use things as my passions tell me”⁸ he shows his reluctance — inability? — to give up childhood thinking. It seems particularly evident in the still lifes that proliferate throughout his art, from *Guitar on a Table* (1915) through *Mandolin and Guitar* (1924) to *Still Life with Horned God* (1937), and beyond. The objects in these pictures, whether natural or man-made, not only seem to be alive, but to have an inner life, that is, to be tense with inner drama.

Nonetheless, one can regard the classical streak in Picasso's art as adult, particularly because it offers organically whole objects rather than the fragmented, partial, peculiarly inorganic ones of Cubism. But he never abandons the disintegrative Cubist mode. *Girl Before A Mirror* (1932) ingeniously integrates them. This dialectical image, in which woman is split into a desirable good spirit and a terrifying bad spirit — the blonde beauty in front of the mirror, the dark-haired succubus within it — shows an organically ripe body partially flattened into a Cubist shadow and Cubist planes enriched by libidinous color. It is a strategy that can be traced back to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In other words, the splitting between the “real” woman and her mirror image continues into her body, and also her face, and in fact in every detail, which is simultaneously rounded and flat, belly and breasts being the most obvious examples. The background grid, with its nipple-like circle in each little square — rows of protective amulets, as it were — shows the doubled-edged dynamics succinctly. This work encapsulates Picasso's ambivalence toward Woman, indeed, the difficulty he had reconciling his conflicting representations of her. The conflict spills into the space, which is also divided against itself. Two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality vie for dominance, with three-dimensional figures constructed of two-dimensional planes, which more often than not seem forced together, making them seem like ironical deconstructions as well as ingenious constructions. Picasso's 1933 drawing of a series of different abstract anatomies — not always clearly male or female — makes the point clearly. Picasso's pictures tend to be dramatic contradictions, that is, psycho-aesthetic dramatizations of self-contradiction.

Picasso's idealistic classical phase seems to coincide with his 1918 marriage to Olga Koklova, a minor performer in Serge Diaghilev's Russian Ballet company. He portrayed her, in 1917, dressed in Spanish costume, and in 1921, the year of the birth of his first son, Paolo, he painted, in his so-called Roman style, *Mother and Child*, the one rather matronly, the other somewhat plump. It is worth noting that this same year he painted the Cubist *Three Musicians*, in which the figures are fragmented as well as abstract. Thus, on the one hand, we have the whole, mature human figure, connected to Picasso's new sense of maturity and responsibility, and on the other hand we have, as though left over from the childhood of his art — the fresh start he made with Cubism — a work in which splitting dominates, making for a figure that is a sum of eccentric planar parts that do not add up to a coherent whole. I think a good reason for the expressive appeal of Picasso's art is its use of splitting — it is the essence of Cubism — and his projective identification with the objects he paints, to the extent that their identity seems to be displaced by his own. Both reveal the deepest level of defense — the magical defense against the world he spoke of when explaining the appeal of African masks. But in the classical works he presents whole, integral, intelligible figures, suggesting a different sense of reality, indeed, a new reality principle. The world is no longer hostile, and he doesn't have to defend against it — this is the inner meaning of the classical images.

They began before his marriage to Olga, with the so-called Ingres portraits, drawn in lead pencil, of his friends Max Jacob (1915) and Apollinaire (1916), among others, and were reinforced by a 1917 visit to Rome, where he was inspired by classical sculpture and painting, which he also saw in Naples and Pompeii. (His mature, sturdy women seem Roman and Pompeian at once.) He was invited to the eternal city by Diaghilev, who wanted Picasso to design the scenery and costumes for *Parade*, an avant-garde ballet commissioned by him. "We made *Parade* in a cellar in Rome," said Jean Cocteau, who described it as a "ballet realist." He wrote the incoherent plot, and Erik Satie wrote the dissonant music, which incorporated the sound of "dynamos, sirens, express trains, airplanes, typewriters," among other modern sounds.⁹ Cubist in style, mixing realism and fantasy, and utilizing collage and what Cocteau called "organized accident," *Parade* was a consummate statement of what Apollinaire, in the program introduction, called the "new spirit" of art. Fusing populist spectacle — vaudeville and circus performance rather than high theater were its model — and avant-garde absurdity and irreverence, it was a major attempt to go public with avant-garde ideas. It was successful in the usual avant-garde way, that is, it outraged and offended the audience, suggesting that it was still possible to shock and confuse the bourgeois. Clearly, avant-garde art had not yet been assimilated, despite several decades of production (although the lag of acceptance became less and less as time when by, until, as Leo Steinberg

wrote, it required only a few years for an *enfant terrible* to become an elder statesman — and no time at all these days.) The audience felt insulted and mocked — the work certainly did not live up to conventional expectations of ballet theater — and responded in kind, declaring the organizers, troupe, and artists “Sales Boches” (dirty Germans), not exactly the thing to be during the last year of France’s long, drawn out, ruinous war with Germany. Once again, the avant-garde seemed to betray art, which made it all the more intriguing.

Picasso portrayed Diaghilev and his colleague Selisburg in a 1917 drawing. They have a stately classical look, much more so than the Jacob and Apollinaire portraits, where the bodies seem less full-bodied, even frail. The impresarios have an invulnerable look, the artists look somewhat more vulnerable. But both have a wholeness of being that seemed unimaginable in the Analytic Cubist portraits, made just a half decade earlier. Picasso’s classicizing images promised tranquility in turbulent wartime, a tranquility he found for a while with Olga — it seems no accident that he married her the year the war ended — and which is evident in such paintings as *Two Seated Women* (1920) and *Seated Woman* (1923), with their dignified, monumental figures. Perhaps he felt that his Cubism had disturbed the artistic peace too much, and he wanted to restore it by a return to tradition, which also suited his benign new mood. Depicting *Paolo, the Artist’s Son, at Age Four*, in 1925, he shows an unexpected, refreshing tenderness — evident in the softness and delicacy of the handling — for the intimate other. Perhaps this was because he identified with children, indeed, struggled to keep the child in himself alive, as his 1956 remark about children’s art suggests. But in 1925 he also painted the abstract *The Dance*, in which the figures are not only malevolently distorted, but seem to represent the crucifixion, as the central figure, her arms outstretched as though on a cross, suggests. The two attendant figures, one attenuated and shadowy, the other grotesquely shaped — indeed, a cruelly deformed monster, ineptly balanced on one gross leg, with the other clumsily raised — represent the thieves who were also crucified, one on each side of Christ. It is a picture of mocking, destructive alienation from women, signaling the beginning of the end of his relationship with Olga, which occurred a decade later, precipitated, no doubt, by his affair with the young Marie-Thérèse Walter — with whom he had a daughter, Maia — but long in the offing, by reason of their incompatibility: Olga was a rather conventional woman, eager for the trappings of success and propriety, while Picasso was a free creative spirit. He clearly felt hemmed in by Olga — a creative inhibition that turned to impotent despair in 1933, when Picasso’s usually prodigious output diminished, and some say vanished for a time.

This contradiction between classicizing and what one might call a crucifying, abstract style persists and climaxes in the ‘30s. On the one side there is patient, gentle concern for the other, and a certain sense of inner har-

mony — instead of tortured drama — and on the other side there is the impatient, aggressive Juggernaut of abstract style, contemptuously crushing whatever crosses its path, indeed, consuming, digesting and excreting the remains of whatever human beings get in its way. Picasso's style becomes an impersonal instrument of dissection and torture, like the punitive machine in Franz Kafka's story *The Penal Colony*. Picasso's 1927 etching *Painter and Model Knitting*, illustrating Balzac's story *The Unknown Masterpiece*, summarizes the split in Picasso's style. In the painter's hands, the realistic model dissolves into an abstract matrix of lines forming geometrical patterns. A similar pattern appears in an iron wire sculpture of 1928, which seems to be a framed figure, indeed, a cage of art. On the left we have what is in effect a canvas. A stick figure — female, as the huge oval that forms her body suggests — stands more or less in the center. Orthogonal lines extend between the model and the canvas, measuring parts of her body in the process of bringing them into focus. Three straight lines, spanning a section of the perimeter of the oval — the work is a composite of curves and angles — converge in the center of the canvas, forming a vanishing point. All the lines seem to be parts of an eccentric perspective construction — the same complex perspective evident in the painting depicted in the 1927 etching. It is the grid the artist in a Dürer print uses to help him draw the model in perspective, but now the perspective is modernized — no longer single-point Renaissance perspective, but the disjunctive multiple perspectives of Cubism, generating many vanishing points, which are oddly connected, however divergent. Thus the strangeness and relativity of reality is brought out by the seemingly infinite variety of perspectives it is possible to have on it, especially because none of them is absolutely binding and convincing — definitive — in itself.

The absurd, abstract, monstrously deformed and mangled females in three 1929 paintings — *Head of a Woman with a Self-Portrait* (Olga's abnormal head has the same sharp tongue that later appears in the horse in *Guernica*, and Picasso shows himself to be normal compared to her), *Woman in a Red Armchair* and *Seated Bather* — not only suggest Picasso's angry new view of Olga, now his enemy, and his low opinion of marriage, but make it transparently clear that he uses abstraction to caricature and crucify bad spirits. In the 1930 *Crucifixion*, crucified figures and crucifying style fuse in a fresh sense of rabid violence. The contradiction between classicizing clarity and crucifying abstraction — the one serving to represent good spirits, the other bad spirits — is again spelled out in the difference between two bronze sculptures of female heads, made about the same time. The lovely *Mediterranean Head* is calm and introspective, the insanely grotesque *Sculpture* of 1931 conveys distress and outrage. Picasso goes back and forth between neo-classicizing representational and modernizing abstract styles, the former evident in his illustrations for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1931) and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (1934)

as well as the images of *The Sculptor's Studio* (1933), the latter visible in such works as *Portrait of Dora Maar* and *Weeping Woman* (both 1937) (a new and unhappy mistress). Sometimes the integrative tendency seems to soften the disintegrative tendency, as in *Portrait of Maia* and *Girl with a Cock* (both 1938). Picasso seemed to be able to reconcile the opposites more readily when children were his subject matter. They are in fact the embodiment of fantastic reality.

Braque and Léger did not suffer Picasso's conflicts nor have his virtuosity, but they did create solid, unitary styles. The one made a connoisseur art of studio solitude, the other made an extroverted, social art — indeed, a modern art for the people. They were both fantastic realists, but in Braque's case the fantasy was about the artist's self — embodied in a ghostly bird, suspended in the studio space like a mirage of creative freedom — while in Léger's case it was about a modern utopia, in which the worker could enjoy life in effortless happiness. Both modified their abstraction in the service of representation, to the extent that abstraction lost its novelty and came to seem like a code. In retrospect, Braque, realizing that avant-garde art could not survive outside the sanctuary of the studio, seems like a clear-eyed realist, while Léger's optimistic fantasy of social solidarity seems naive. In contrast to both, Matisse's optimism was sustained by a faith in nature and art — both appeared in his Mediterranean imagery, seamlessly integrated to sublime effect — however much the suffering of the world made its imprint on his late cutouts, fusing no doubt with his own personal suffering, evident in the life-threatening illness which catalyzed his last burst of creativity.

Braque was obsessed with aesthetic harmony, that is, the subliminal formal relationships that exist in nature. "It suggests emotion," as he said, "and I translate that emotion into art. I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman."¹⁰ This is a kind of aesthetic idealism or absolutism, in which the sense of transcendence the aesthetic brings with it seems to overcome the contingencies of life and nature, indeed, mortality. Thus, the nude woman in his series of *Canéphores* (1922-26) is not only a traditional symbol of nature's abundance, as the fruit and flowers associated with her suggest, but also conveys the intense emotions her fertile body arouses in him. It is more light than shadow, but her head is divided into light and dark halves, suggesting Braque's ambivalence. As in his series of *Guéridons* (pedestal tables) (1928-29), also laden with symbols of life — domestic life in this case (it also seems "natural") — contradictory emotion is conveyed by the harmonious balance of unequal forces. Aesthetic harmony becomes a metaphor for emotional harmony, or at least of its possibility. In both types of picture, a comparatively gigantic object, a human body or a substitute for it, is juxtaposed with much smaller still-life objects, which the human object contains and supports. Just as they peacefully rest on the young Mother Nature's soft lap, so

they repose on the safety of the hard tabletop. "Nobility grows out of contained emotion,"¹¹ Braque said, and the monumental body and table contain the emotions symbolized by the smaller objects associated with them. This is what makes the body and table seem noble — spiritually grand — rather than simply physically large.

The discrepancies in size, shape and surface are overcome by Cubist aesthetics. Solid, stable figure and vivid, unstable still-life objects are reconciled in "the new space" of Cubism, as Braque called it, that is, in modern abstract space. For Braque, Cubism was the decisive move from conventional representation, in which objects are mirrored, to pure representation, in which relationships are created, or rather teased out of intimate space by aesthetic means. In Cubism, it is the rendering of relationships that matters rather than the discreteness of objects. There are no independent objects, only objects that exist in and through their relationships. Braque's series of *Ateliers (Studios)* (1948-55) are the grand climax of his career, indeed, the most ambitious, difficult works he ever made. Objects float in space-time, and seem to embody its flow, presided over by an enormous bird, the age-old symbol of the free human spirit — the soul liberated from the body. Indeed, Braque's still-life objects are spiritualized. They become mysterious phantoms in the solitude and safety of the studio, immune and indifferent to the outer world. It is a tense place — electric with creativity — in which harmony has become complex, for it involves a seemingly infinite, ever changing variety of relationships. The same objects exist in conflicting relationships; they seem to belong to different constellations at once. All are finally harmonized in an oceanic, cosmic space, in which they become intersecting imagistic currents. The studio looks like a domestic space, as the still-life clutter of familiar things suggests — but it is an infinite space of purely aesthetic beings.

The insularity of Braque's visionary works, which carry Cubism to a climactic new height — they are in fact its consummate final statement — is balanced by their expansiveness. Space is more magnificent and imaginative — not simply "analytic" or "synthetic" — than it ever was in early Cubism, and objects more evocative. Braque's *Ateliers* series was begun when Pollock was making his painterly field paintings and ended when Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still were making their post-painterly abstract field paintings, in which eccentric gesture was reduced to an abstract minimum on a flat surface, making for a tauter if also tenser harmony between figure and ground. Braque's works are also grand abstract fields. Objects conform to the field by flattening, which turns them into aesthetic gestures. They become pure forms whose eccentric shape is determined by their aesthetic relationship to other forms. But Braque's field paintings are less minimal than those of Newman and Still, and their gestures fuller, because they are images of life at its most subtle and intimate and, as such, more emotionally resonant and intricate than even the

most flashy abstract gestures. What seems rhetorical in Newman and Still is authentically epic in Braque. Braque's studio is not only a world unto itself, but the whole wide world, in which Braque soars freely, magically transforming the remains of reality into pure art. For the bird is Braque himself, the holy ghost of pure aesthetic aspiration, the subtle aesthetic wizard, able to give aesthetic life to a reality that seems strangely dead. It is as though the studio was a cemetery that had become a heaven of art — a truly sublime, otherworldly place, for in it objects have only what Braque called “a sort of intellectual non-existence,” which is why they can live in mythical harmony. For Braque, the aesthetic resurrection of the world of objects gives them value and meaning, which they otherwise lack.

Léger accommodated to machine reality in a way Picasso, Braque and Matisse never thought of doing. In 1923, he gave a lecture on “The Aesthetics of the Machine: Manufactured Objects, Artisan and Artist,” which was in effect his credo. He was drafted in the first world war, and found himself in the Engineer Corps, working among ordinary Frenchmen and dealing with weapons, which seemed to him to have a life of their own. Indeed, he was particularly impressed by the breech of a 75-millimetre gun — it shone in the light as though there was a halo around it. The piece of artillery had in effect become a “personage,” as he said — a much more impressive personage than any ordinary person. He represented people as machines. Their bodies became blueprints, but they didn't quite measure up. Even fitted into the dehumanizing procrustean bed of the machine, they were not as pure as the inhuman machine, Léger's model for aesthetic purity as well as for the good life.

The City (1919) is a place of machines and machine-like human beings — or are they robots who look like human beings? This tendency to mechanize appearances — indeed, to see reality entirely in mechanical terms, or to celebrate machines as the ultimate reality — accelerates in the '30s and climaxes in a series of populist, decorative murals Léger made in the '40s and '50s. Full of mechanical joie de vivre, in conformity with their mechanical figures, his cyclists of 1948-49 — supposedly “classical” by reason of its clarity and precision, which is why it was also called *Homage to Louis David* (David was also a social revolutionary, like Léger, although Léger seems to have forgotten that later in his career David forgot the people and endorsed the new, post-revolutionary ruling class founded by Napoleon) — and *The Constructors* (1950) have left Cubist complexity behind. The figures are lined up like puppets in a theatrical tableau, their inertness countered by the bold background color, which seems to have nothing to do with their dull reality. Fetishizing the machine, Léger confirmed that he had, as he once said, no imagination. It is a failure of artistic vision — at bottom a failure of creative nerve, or the sacrifice of it to make a collective point — that becomes explicit in the garish billboard-poster look of his later works, which seem like mass-

produced designs rather than handmade paintings. These grandiose works are heavily dependent on a media idea of mass communication. The figures in them have the hollowness of people in advertising images. Braque's final works are facile panoramas of platitudinous people — soulless social landscapes in which avant-garde art has lost its soul.

Léger identified with the people, which is why his work lost its identity as high art. Or rather it is a high art version of people's art — a case of high art accommodating to popular art to make a social point that even the people lost interest in, for they didn't think they were inhuman machines, and they didn't care to have their lives predetermined by ideology, revolutionary or otherwise. In a sense, Léger gave Cubism — or what was left of Cubism in his art — legitimacy by bringing it to the people, which is also to corrupt and falsify it, aesthetically and emotionally. In fact, his murals seem to condescend to the people they are meant for even as they descend from the aesthetic perch of avant-garde art, which not only loses its complexity but its meaning. To stoop to conquer society is to fall from aesthetic grace. In letting one aspect of the outer modern world take over his art, Léger destroyed its inner drama and confirmed that he had none. Léger's art lost aesthetic resonance by limiting itself to the simplistic aesthetics of the machine, and human resonance by blindly professing the cause of humanity. There is an odd naivete to Léger's work, which makes it self-defeating as both art and social advocacy, however charming.

Where Léger's later works have a kind of unwitting charm, for all the heaviness and cumbersomeness of their figures and handling, Matisse's later works have a determined grace and ease, in both handling and imagery. He wanted, as he said, a "comprehensively human" art, from which "troubling or depressing subject matter" was banished. In the '20s, this meant a sensual Mediterranean art, in which odalisques became the centerpiece of an interior landscape and the Riviera landscape a kind of exotic odalisque. (He moved to Nice in 1917.) After a few early works in which the male figure appeared, Matisse never abandoned the female figure, for it was the source of "luxe, calme et volupté" (to refer to a Fauve work) in a harsh world, which Matisse, like Braque, kept out of the studio. The female body was a mix of consolation and excitement for Matisse, and the Riviera was the female body in another form. He in effect worshipped woman with a cult-like devotion. Matisse's '20s works have been called ingratiating, by reason of their seductive lushness, amplified by flowers and textiles, forming exquisite patterns, autonomous and interlacing at once, but they reflect a deliberately upbeat lifestyle, in which happiness was cultivated and suffering — that inner human ugliness — banished, along with the ugliness of the modern world, especially of modern Lumpen society (Léger's anonymous world of lumbering machines and commonplace people) and the grotesque German world of barbaric war and social

insanity.

This is no mean feat, all the more so because it seemed to have been accomplished with no sense of strain or effort, but rather with lyrical spontaneity — a lightness of touch that made the reality represented seem magical. This is why Matisse's work is an aesthetic beacon in the social blackness, even more than Braque's, which has a certain melancholy cast, for all its formidable aesthetics. Both are masters of the intimate, that is, expert at creating sacred aesthetic space, a studio sanctuary that seems to concentrate all the goodness of life in it, which is why it seems more important than the outer world, and why it must be protected. But Braque's studio has a certain shadowy sadness, for all the light that permeates it — all the light that blazes from the bird — while Matisse's studio is all shadowless luminosity, which makes it seem permanently fresh, indeed, a marvel of sophisticated innocence. Stendhal said that art was for the happy few, and the art of both Matisse and Braque is aesthetically happy, which is why it is for the few who truly realize that the point of life is to be happy, which involves a deliberate effort to enjoy it and not suffer, possible only in privacy, far from the maddening crowd. It is also why they never tried to appeal to that crowd, nor represent it, the way Léger and the German artists did. Theirs is not a public art, but a private art of passion recollected in aesthetic tranquility.

If Cubism gave us a "new space," then Matisse gave us a new elegance — modern elegance. It is especially clear in his drawings. We see Matisse's sophistication and freshness in their seemingly innocent, unlabored touch. The white surface of the paper becomes absolute light and crystal-clear space, and the few swift lines of the female figure exist like the rustling of leaves in the wind. There is a persuasive deftness to Matisse's drawings, which show a remarkable economy of means, and have a deceptive simplicity that became more and more pronounced and refined as he developed, climaxing in the abrupt suaveness of the religious drawings he made for the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence (1947-50) and the subtle cutouts — the paper is a sheet of color — that illustrate *Jazz* (1947), a book with a text composed and handprinted by him, which also has a certain religious dimension. (Many of Matisse's drawings were made to illustrate books, and the cutouts are in effect drawings made with a scissor. But they are also sculptures: "To cut right into color makes me think of a sculptor's carving in stone," he said. Just as he wanted to reconcile drawing and painting, as he said, so he wanted to unite them with sculpture.)

Between the mid-career works of the '20s and the late works of the '40s and early '50s — a series of blue nudes is especially noteworthy — he made a number of large female nudes, beginning with the *Dance* mural he made for the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania (1931-33). It takes his famous 1910 *Dance* as its point of departure, and seems less successful, probably because Matisse had to fit the work into three lunettes, which is why

it looks incoherent and fragmented, compared to the more cohesive, vigorously Dionysian earlier *Dance*. Indeed, the '30s murals seem to be all movement and no energy. Part of the problem seems to have been that Matisse was given the wrong measurements to begin with. He apparently had to redo the work; the first, unfinished version, discovered in the '90s, was much more masterful. *The Pink Nude* (1935) was much more successful — lively and elegant at once — than the nudes of the *Dance* mural, perhaps because Matisse was making it for his own edification, and above all with no architectural destination in mind. The figures in the Vence Chapel also seem diminished by the architectural setting, especially because of its relentless whiteness and the colorful stained glass windows, both of which make a greater impact than the figures, which seem all too schematic and subdued, even peculiarly trivial, as though Matisse couldn't put his heart into religious art, which demanded a certain sobriety and restraint rather than *joie de vivre*. I suspect that Matisse was inhibited by the task, but however much he felt the approach of death — he sculpted a crucifix for the altar in Vence, and depicted the Stations of the Cross — he never gave in to it, retaining his sense of happiness and love for the pleasures of life to the aesthetic end.

Joie de vivre is not exactly what we find in the “metaphysical” imagery of de Chirico, Carrà and Morandi, but reality has become fantastic, if not the aesthetic fantasy it is in Braque and Matisse. For all three Italian artists, real things exist in a loneliness that makes them seem unreal, creating an in-between state of unreality that is the inner theme of their art. This is what makes it “metaphysical” rather than merely physical. “Metaphysical content,” as de Chirico called it, conveying his “surprise” at the inner reality that existed beneath the threshold of appearances, is evident in the deserted spaces of such works as *The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour* (1913) and *The Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914). Symbols abound in de Chirico's proto-Surrealist works (he was discovered by Apollinaire and celebrated by Breton). The locomotive refers to his father, an engineer who worked for the Greek rail system, and with whom he had a distant relationship. The locomotive is usually pictured in the distance, behind a wall, suggesting his father's aloofness and emotional remoteness. The ancient temples and sculptures represent Greece, where he was born and lived until he was seventeen. But the essence of de Chirico's pictures is their emptiness — the desolate, depressing urban spaces emblematic of the emotional vacuum, passivity, even paralysis he felt deep inside himself. No doubt modernity and antiquity were in conflict in his mind, and more broadly technology and art. In *The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour*, the dynamic locomotive, puffing smoke, and the classical sculpture of a woman passively reclining, are in altogether separate spaces. They also show father and mother at odds, and neither available to de Chirico, invisible in the empty space that is his signature. The picture's core is in fact its profound

emptiness, dramatized by an absurd perspective, which manneristically extends it, presumably to infinity. A tiny couple — the parents again? — can be found passively standing in the empty space like wraiths in Hades, or like somnambulists in an incomprehensible world. Their smallness suggests that de Chirico has turned the tables on them: They are now small, worthless children, indeed, toys he can play with. They are as isolated and abandoned as de Chirico felt himself to be. The space is the symbol of that abandonment and isolation.

De Chirico studied in Munich, where he was influenced by Arnold Böcklin, particularly, no doubt, his famous *Island of the Dead*, and by Max Klinger's dream pictures, already quintessentially Surrealist in their juxtapositions, especially of such things as a woman's glove and a weird, bat-like creature from "the other side," to use Kubin's term. He wanted his pictures to have what the Germans called *Stimmung*, a certain mood or atmosphere, particularly the melancholy mood in which the real world became fantastically unreal without losing any of its reality. That is, a world in which the real became subjective and objective at once. But the Germanic influence went only so far. De Chirico was interested not only in what he called "metaphysical loneliness," but "plastic loneliness," or what we might call "aesthetic loneliness" — the loneliness of forms, indeed, the loneliness of an aesthetic epiphany. De Chirico's modern-looking mannequins embody these "two different lonelinesses," as de Chirico called them, especially *The Great Metaphysician* (1917), an ironically geometrical, machine-like statue — it has planes for gears, and seems about to fall apart, especially because none of the planes seem synchronized — isolated in an empty square whose perimeter is marked by banal official-looking buildings, a sort of Potemkin village of pretentious facades with nothing behind them. Thus, the forward look in the backward situation — a typical metaphysical absurdity, that is, the dialectic of emotional stagnancy with avant-garde and technological progress, de Chirico's accurate vision of modernity.

De Chirico abandoned this brilliant vision for his version of Renaissance classicism, but it was too academic and artless to measure up to Renaissance standards. He did so because he felt abandoned and misused by the Surrealists, even though they recognized him as their forerunner, and by his Italian Futurist compatriots, who were more hopeful about modernity and machines than he was. Moreover, Carrà, in his 1918 book on *Pittura Metafisica*, did not give de Chirico the credit he deserved for his innovations. In the '20s and '30s, de Chirico made a series of images of heroic horses, usually on a beach — clearly a throwback to Renaissance grandeur (or else a sterile relic of it) — often accompanied by classical temples. These works have a schematic, mechanical look, even though the fantasy is compounded by the pointless juxtaposition of modern figures with the ancient symbols. These works are sup-

posedly full of the old melancholy, but they are boring. Carrà struggled to sustain the haunting, melancholy mood of Pittura Metafisica in such odd fantasies as *The Drunken Gentleman* (1917), with its sculptural tidbits, and *The Daughters of Lot* (1919), with its pseudo-classicism, but it survived more intact in the subtle still lives of Morandi. His work appeared in the first Futurist exhibition in Rome, held in 1914, and after the first world war he allied himself with the Scuola Metafisica. He came into his own in the '30s, and especially after the second world war, in works that seem like meditations on ordinary objects, plastically transformed to reveal their inherent loneliness. Where metaphysical aesthetics goes bankrupt in later de Chirico and Carrà it comes alive again, along with the pursuit of aesthetic purity — which they shunted aside — in the uncanny realism of Morandi.

De Chirico had great influence on René Magritte — a reproduction of de Chirico's *The Song of Love* (1914) converted him to Surrealism, and the little locomotive emitting smoke, absurdly in a fireplace with no fire, in *Time Transfixed* (1938) derives from de Chirico — but his fantastic reality seems contrived and inauthentic compared to that of Morandi as well as de Chirico. In Morandi's still-lives banal everyday reality is "naturally" fantastic — fantastic in its plasticity (indeed, Morandi is a master of "plastic loneliness" as well as "metaphysical loneliness," which eloquently unite in his objects) — while in Magritte's *The Human Condition* (1933), a pseudo-speculative painting in which a real landscape and a realistic painting of it are all but indistinguishable, the effect is one of manufactured absurdity. Where Morandi offers us an epiphany of reality, Magritte drains it of life, and archly arranges the dead dregs to pseudo-intellectual effect. His objects certainly do not have the aesthetic and intellectual non-existence of which Braque spoke. Magritte is cleverly toying with illusion, but his somewhat forced, coyly deadpan irony results in an empty paradox. His intellectual wit is evident in the statement he published in *La Révolution surréaliste* (in 1929, the last issue), where he distinguishes between objects and their images and names while suggesting the ironical arbitrariness of their relationship, but it doesn't work as well in his paintings, where it becomes all too facile, indeed, a kind of labored joke. The interplay of language, image and object in *The Treachery (or Perfidy) of Images* (1928-29) — a somewhat bland picture of a pipe, with the words "This is not a pipe" written underneath (in French) — is more amusing than philosophical.

Magritte's most authentically fantastic works are those in which his personal barbarism, indeed, raw sadism, is apparent, for example, in *The Menaced Assassin* and *Pleasure* (both 1926), and both painted with a forceful crudity and an authentic sense of absurdity. The danger and violence in these vital, astonishing dream pictures — his first and most truly Surrealist works, for they involve eruptions from the unconscious — disappeared in his later

intellectualization of Surrealism. It was a deliberate repression that drained Magritte's works of their emotional impulsiveness and insight — their emotional staying power, indeed, the emotional insidiousness so crucial for Surrealism. Magritte had a short-lived career as a provocative visionary, and a much longer one as a clever manipulator of images, in the end producing works that had no emotional impact, which made them peculiarly farcical.

The metaphysics of the absurd, and the morbid sense of estrangement that went with it, became domesticated in the reality-based fantasies Balthus and Tchelitchev painted in the '30s. Where Braque and Matisse set up aesthetics as a barricade against the barbarism of the outer world, and Picasso and de Chirico used it to mediate inner drama, Balthus and Tchelitchev carry fantastic realism to a charming anticlimax, however sensational their works seem to be. Tchelitchev's magical *Hide-and-Seek (Cache-cache)* (1940-42), with its children, their blood vessels exquisitely visible and magnified through their skin, in a matrix of meticulously detailed iridescent nature, and Balthus's intimate *Living Room* (1942), with its young, self-absorbed girls — the one on the curved couch seems in a kind of ecstatic trance, and the dresses of both are temptingly short — are fantasies that leave little or nothing to the unconscious imagination, for the artists have become all too self-conscious about the unconscious. They did not abandon the unconscious the way Magritte did, but they knew its interests all too well. Balthus is known for his perverse fascination with females who have just become adolescent and thus aware of their sexuality and bodies, and Tchelitchev's so-called "X-ray" perception carries vision to a disconcerting extreme, but their pictures lack mystery, however provocative. And yet Tchelitchev's quasi-scientific representation of nature brings out its fantastic character, just as Balthus's inquisitive observation of adolescent girls brings out the fantastic character of sexuality. But their fantasies are somewhat predictable, and their realism more shrewd than evocative — Balthus's works supposedly have the same sublime subtlety as Renaissance art, but if so then it looks somewhat worn (his impersonal figures supposedly have the same majestic stasis as those of Piero della Francesca, but they certainly don't have the same inwardness) — suggesting that fantastic realism has become a cliché.

Fantastic realism had become the dead-end of aesthetic and emotional resistance against the barbarism of the outer world. Braque and Matisse picture private space, aesthetically sanctified, and so do Balthus and Tchelitchev, but in their works it has lost its aesthetic intimacy and sacredness, however private it remains. The objects in it have lost their intellectual non-existence, indeed, even the pretense of intellectuality that Magritte accords them. They clearly exist on earth — in the outer world, however strange they seem to be. Without plastic Aloneliness and metaphysical loneliness, magic realism becomes a descriptive shell without a mystical kernel, which is what

happens in Balthus and Tchelitchev. Barbarism can take many forms, including that of outward appearance without inward reality or with false inwardness — a simulated, Hollywood inwardness. This is what occurs in Balthus and Tchelitchev's works — they look like something out of a lurid, art(y) film — and this makes their works subliminally barbaric. They lack inner drama and aesthetic conviction — aesthetic inwardness. They are essentially outer dramas, with whatever inwardness they may have turned inside-out. They seem suggestive, but they wear their emotions on their sleeves. Both depict children — very young children in Tchelitchev's picture, slightly older children in Balthus' picture — but the child's fantastic vision of reality that we see in Tchelitchev's picture and the vision of childhood sexuality we see in Balthus' picture are no longer fresh, which suggests that outwardness has triumphed over the inwardness and aesthetics, not to say spontaneity, that it once masked.

Apart from Morandi, the one truly authentic fantastic realist of the '30s was Stanley Spencer. In the provocative *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece* (1936), the artist stares at the flesh of a modern Venus, not exactly with the so-called male gaze but rather with astonishment at the ease with which she exhibits her nakedness. He looks at her body as though at a dream come true: She's as much his fantasy of an ideal woman as she is a real person. The boyish Spencer — not exactly an Adonis — is no emotional nor for that matter sexual match for her. He's wide-eyed with innocent desire; she's knowing and indifferent. Their eyes don't meet, and she remains untouched and unavailable, except in fantasy: Spencer said that he crawled over her skin with his paint brush like an eager ant. She's an exotic odalisque within reach, but he can only reach her through art. She's blonde, beautiful and perfect; he's black-haired, unattractive and imperfect — they're clearly not meant for each other. In the picture, his head is positioned between her left breast, which lushly spreads between the top of his forehead and the bottom of his nose, and her pubic hair, which he turns away from, unconsciously realizing he's not likely to have sexual intercourse with her — her legs are tight together — although he's free to look at her body as much as he likes. He is caught between her pincers, suggesting her emotional cruelty. It is her hauteur, which in fact makes her oddly barbaric, along with the primitive abundance of her body.

In fact, Spencer never overcame his sense of the primitive character of the body. His infatuated picture of Preece, with whom he was self-destructively involved, is the closest he comes to doing so. But there is something disturbingly primitive, indeed, confrontationally primitive, about her body, especially in Spencer's *Nude (Portrait of Patricia Preece)* (1935), where she seems harsh and sinister. The bodies in Spencer's "Beatitudes" series (1937-40) are unequivocally primitive, with not the slightest hint of beauty — ungainly and even ugly, as he acknowledged. It is in these works that his fantasy of the human body as a kind of bizarre creation, and of human life as a kind of

fantasy, becomes explicit. Spencer was a religious primitive, as his biblical fantasies of the '20s indicate — a latter-day Blake, as it were, without the literal visions (and like Blake obsessed with the body and sexuality). For him, the body could be possessed by the soul, and the more completely it was possessed the more strange and fantastic it became, at least until he encountered Preece, who seemed all body and no soul. In the notorious *Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and His Second Wife (The Leg of Mutton Nude)* (1937), in which Spencer and Preece remain at odds emotionally however physically intimate and naked, she is implicitly the cold leg of mutton. But waiting for her to allow him to have sex with her — “it is so extraordinary to get near to her at all,” he wrote — his genitals also became cold mutton. (There is in effect an odd resemblance between the two in both color and shape.) She finally spreads her legs, but she remains inaccessible, except to his eyes, as usual.

Sex is always a frontier of fantasy, and so is the naked body, by reason of its sexual explicitness — the figures in Spencer's *Leg of Mutton Nude*, with their aggressively displayed genitals, apparently inspired Lucian Freud's similarly exposed, equally confrontational nudes, which also have more than a touch of fantasy about them — but Spencer, like a good mystic, could find the fantasy, one might say the miraculous, in even the most everyday reality, as his wonderfully luminous *From the Artist's Studio* (1938) indicates. The prominently placed daffodils are an offering to the sun, and the whole scene has a sacramental aura, as the play of light suggests.

A really fantastic realist does not have to pull fantasies out of his hat as though by artistic magic — fantasy is not a magic trick, as de Chirico seemed to think it was — but rather finds it in the street, as it were — readymade in ordinary reality. Again and again Spencer passes the test, capturing the inner strangeness of reality, often turned inside out, so that outer world looks strange. It is their everyday realism that makes such visionary works as *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* (1927-32), implicitly an indictment of the barbarism of the war, magical — the fantasies of a true original — not their religious content.

Notes

¹ Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, eds., *The New Art — The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 321-22.

² Margit Rowell, ed., *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 166.

³ *The Diaries of Paul Klee, 1898-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 232.

⁴ Quoted in Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 275.

⁵ Quoted in Wayne Anderson, *Picasso's Brothel* (New York: Other Press, 2002), 62.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 63.

⁷ Charles Brenner, *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1974), 217.

⁸ Quoted in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso. Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 271.

⁹ Penrose, 199.

¹⁰ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 260.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

Chapter 5: Brave New World of American Abstract Art; The Fifth Decade

Although still persuaded that his was the best of all countries, the American of the mid-20th century was by no means so sure that his was the best of all times, and after he entered the atomic age he could not rid himself of the fear that his world might not end with a whimper but with a bang. His optimism, which persisted, was instinctive rather than rationalized, and he was no longer prepared to insist that the good fortune which he enjoyed, in a war-stricken world, was the reward of virtue rather than of mere geographical isolation. He knew that if there was indeed any such thing as progress it would continue to be illustrated by America, but he was less confident of the validity of the concept than at any previous time in his history.

Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind*¹

Some periods in history become identity vacua caused by the three basic forms of human apprehension: fears aroused by new facts, such as discoveries and inventions (including weapons), which radically expand and change the whole world image; anxieties aroused by symbolic dangers vaguely perceived as a consequence of the decay of existing ideologies; and, in the wake of disintegrating faith, the dread of an existential abyss devoid of spiritual meaning.

Erik H. Erikson, "Identity Crisis in Autobiographic Perspective"²

And if something like an identity crisis gradually appeared to be a normative problem in adolescence and youth, there also seemed to be enough of an adolescent in every American to suggest that in this country's history fate had chosen to highlight identity questions together with a strangely adolescent style of adulthood — that is, one remaining expansively open for new roles and stances — in what at the time was called (as it had been at the very beginning of the republic) a "national character." This, incidentally, is not contradicted by the fact that today some young adults are forcefully questioning the nation as to what generations of Americans have, indeed, made of themselves by claiming so irreverently to be self-made; what, indeed, has become of their now old New World identity; and what they have made of their continent, of their tech-

nology, and of the world under their influence.

Erik H. Erikson, "Identity Crisis in Autobiographic Perspective"³

The admission of chance and accident into the process of painting is their realism, the abstract counterpart of what our earlier realists chose to see in the concrete world of objects. It is from this process that the continuing American qualities of this new art stem: the unmeasured spaces, apparently haphazard composition, the hostile, indifferent surfaces, and the overriding impression they give of being fragments of a vast, continuing process beyond the control of their makers.

John W. McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting*⁴

If there is any one moment of decisive change in American art, it seems the moment when Jackson Pollock, freshly released from the Westchester Division of New York Hospital, where he had been treated for acute alcoholism, "went for the first time abstract," as his older brother Sanford McCoy wrote.⁵ "After years of trying to work along lines completely unsympathetic to his nature, he has finally dropped the Benton nonsense and is coming out with an honest creative art." Sanford wrote this in May 1940, two years after Pollock was hospitalized "in serious mental shape," and one year after he began Jungian psychoanalysis, still suffering "from isolation and extreme emotional deprivation in early childhood," as Joseph Henderson, his therapist, thought. It seems ironic that it was schizophrenia that liberated American art from provincial realism — that the abstract turn was taken by an artist who suffered from "a pathological form of introversion."

It was Henderson who made the diagnosis of schizophrenia, noting Pollock's "paralysis or withdrawal," alternating with "violent agitation" — deep depression followed by drinking binges, as Sanford's wife Arloie Conway observed — and who, over a period of 18 months, received 69 "psychoanalytic drawings" and one gouache painting from Pollock. Interpreting the symbols in the first drawing, which depicts a bizarre crucifixion, Henderson stated: "The patient appears to have been in a state similar to the novice in a tribal initiation rite during which he is ritually dismembered at the outset of an ordeal whose goal is to change him from a boy to a man." Did Pollock ever reach the goal? It seems not, considering the fact that he died (1956, aged 44) driving under the influence, indicating that he remained an alcoholic until his death, apart (apparently) from the few years (1947-50) during which he made his "breakthrough" all-over paintings. Nor does the fact that dismemberment became the method and theme, not to say substance, of his art — a dismemberment of the traditional figure, and of the traditional idea of painting, that, I want to suggest, signals Pollock's unending identity crisis, indeed, his perpetual process of disintegration. Like a seismograph, Pollock's painting regis-

ters the shattering. Every tremor left a painterly trace, quixotically aestheticized into tragic elegance.

Paradoxically, it is their aura of destructiveness and catastrophe — unrelenting violence — that makes the paintings innovative and gives them staying power. Ironically, Pollock's art, which gave him a temporary sense of identity — Arloie noted that after a binge, and after enduring another bout of depression, he was able to paint and draw with remarkable concentration and intensity, at least until the cycle of binge and depression recurred — demonstrates his otherwise complete lack of identity, or at least his deep insecurity and annihilative anxiety. It was as though Pollock had been dismembered — or had never come together — in the remote prehistory of his childhood, and that, however much he attempted to put himself together (create himself, as it were), by the creative act of making art, he could only futilely reenact and ritualistically repeat, in artistic terms, his dismemberment.

Again and again he relives, in art, the ordeal of his dismemberment — or rather his inability to “re-member” himself, indeed, to remember ever having been a sturdy, integrated self — as though to master its trauma. It was not successful, however masterful the art. Henderson hoped that Pollock could and would re-integrate himself, but he never had much of a self to integrate in the first place, nor any family member who could serve as a model self — certainly not his weak father, a victim of the Great Depression, nor his authoritarian mother. (Around 1934, Pollock painted *Woman*, generally understood to be his domineering, oppressive, phallic mother — her harshness is also suggested in *The She-Wolf* (1943) — which he paired with a portrait showing himself profoundly depressed.) Whatever his artistic progress and growth, his art was about his inability to get out of the rut of regression. He could outgrow the artistic past — Allan Kaprow thought that, “after a pathetic apprenticeship to older art,” in which he “misused his sources,” Pollock “was able to become major by ignoring demonstrable familiarity with existing models”⁶ — but he could not outgrow his personal past, which may be the paradox of his creativity as well as an indication of its limits. The Futurists thought that people would think they were “mad,” but they also thought they were “the primitives of a new, completely transformed sensibility.”⁷ Pollock was in fact (partially) mad and emotionally primitive, however much his paintings extended the primitive sensibility of early modern art to its limits, in effect renewing it while showing its devastating result. Pollock's hellish primitivism is a long way from Gauguin's primitive paradise.

Henderson thought that the “oval-shaped area in the center” of *Drawing 57* “represents the primitive conception of the axis mundi, which stands for the strength of tribal identity,” but apart from his identity as a member of the tribe of New York artists, Pollock had little or no identity. While, art historically speaking, dismemberment was inaugurated by Picasso — it seems

Pollock had read John Graham's 1937 article on "Primitive Art and Picasso" and seen his work in New York's Museum of Modern Art — and continued under the auspices of Surrealism, it was an expression of Pollock's problematic sense of self. From *Figures in a Landscape* (ca. 1936) — a desolate landscape of dark poles, some of which are crosses — through *Mural* (1943) and *Gothic* (1944), to the famous all-over paintings of 1947-50, and on to the disturbed faces that appear in many 1951 paintings, and finally to *Blue Poles (Number 11)* (1952), Pollock represented dismemberment.

He did so by representing dismembered figures and, more crucially, dismembered gestures. The surface of his paintings looks as though it is collapsing in on itself — it is what gives the paintings their peculiarly imploded, over-condensed look — and his gestures look like the tattered remnants of a net. The weaving has come undone, and with it the figures who were once pictured on it. (The all-over paintings began with drawings of schematic figures, which were then buried alive in paint — engulfed and finally dissolved in the rapid flow. In *Out of the Web, Number 7* (1949) the half-buried ghost of one shows, suggesting that all of Pollock's figures are Hadean.) If one looks carefully at the all-over paintings, nowhere is there a painterly gesture that is not fragmented, disrupted, or divided against itself — a self-devouring snake turned into twisted shards — even when it forms a supposedly rhythmic *Arabesque (Number 13)* (1948). Pollock remained split and fragmented, as *Portrait and a Dream* (1953) — Pollock's own violent nightmare, as he said, flanked by his fractured, crumbling face — makes explicit. The discontinuity of Pollock's gestures suggest the discontinuity of self — the break in the sense of self — he experienced as a child because of his "frustrated longing for the all-giving mother," as Henderson said, that is, the mother who was rarely there for him emotionally. It ruined him, and it made his paintings dramatic ruins.

Energy, forcefulness, chaos, flux, perpetual motion and turgidity are terms that have been repeatedly applied to Pollock's paintings. Writing about a 1949 show, Sam Hunter declared that it "reflects an advanced stage of the disintegration of the modern painting. But it is a disintegration with a possibly liberating and cathartic effect and informed by a highly individual rhythm."⁸ He spoke of the "high-tension moments of bravura phrasing (which are visually like agitated coils of barbed wire)," as though amplifying Edward Alden Jewell's 1943 opinion that Pollock was "extravagantly, not to say savagely, romantic."⁹ Writing about the same exhibition, Paul Mocsanyi thought Pollock's "combination of the ecstatic and monumental is not without a certain grandeur."¹⁰ In 1943, Robert Coates noted that Pollock's work "zigzags between the intensity of the easel picture and the blandness of the mural,"¹¹ and in 1947 Pollock himself said that his "pictures . . . function between the easel and the mural."¹² Whether easel or mural, they are packed with irrepressible, violent gestures, which "'fill the borders' in a kind of 'horror vacui'" — a tendency in

schizophrenic art — suggesting “primary process,” which also informs Pollock’s “ambiguous . . . configurations.”¹³ To use Erikson’s words, Pollock was expressing “the existential abyss devoid of spiritual meaning” he found in himself — it makes a climatic appearance in *The Deep* (1953) — even as he desperately tried to fill it with artistic meaning.

On a more positive note, Pollock’s all-over paintings have been interpreted as renderings of oceanic experience, which gives them mystical, transcendental import, although it may be recalled that Freud thought oceanic experience expressed a yearning to return to the mother’s womb. Pollock never felt at home in it, let alone comfortable near his engulfing, threatening mother, as the turbulence of the waves in his particular ocean make clear. Pollock’s paintings offer little comfort to those who expect art to console and compensate them for an uneasy life. The greatness of the all-over paintings has in part to do with the fact that they lack a center — the center that gives most art its power, as Rudolf Arnheim demonstrated — but for most people the feeling of lacking a center is horrific. Disoriented, they feel lost at sea. Pollock admitted a debt to Ryder’s seascapes, but there are no life-saving boats on his sea. Similarly, Pollock’s all-over paintings, however much the grand climax of musical painting by reason of their polyphonic complexity — Greenberg compared them to Arnold Schönberg’s innovative twelve-tone music — belong to what Gustav René Hocke called the “tradition of the irregular,” but regular people don’t like irregularity, especially when it is unrelenting, to the extent of precluding the possibility of harmony.

Pollock is regarded as the premier Abstract Expressionist — “Jackson broke the ice,” as Willem de Kooning, Pollock’s leading competitor, said — but his work, however innovative, is not characteristic of Abstract Expressionism, which doesn’t mean that the other Abstract Expressionists were less innovative, but rather that they had another kind of innovation — one which did not abandon the figure, collapsing it into the ground, nor dissolve differentiated space into undifferentiated chaos. The work of William Baziotes and especially de Kooning makes that clear. But the majority of so-called Abstract Expressionists, after going through a figural phase, made primordial patterns — abstract forms that were mantra and mandala in one. They were sacred emblems, meant for meditation, and were often repetitive, as though chanted like incantations, intensifying their hypnotic effect. Indelibly imprinted on the spectator’s mind, they became instant memories of eternity. There was a Jungian dimension to them: They symbolized the self’s attempt to unite itself even as they showed it at odds with itself. They also had gnostic import: They conveyed the enlightenment — the blaze of revelation — that would follow from integration. The painting became a kind of sacred space and sanctuary in which the self could recover the depth and creativity it had lost to the world. In their different ways, Adolf Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hoffman, Richard

Pousette-Dart, Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman painted what might be called expressionistic emblems, which they repeated, with whatever subtle variation, ad infinitum. It was as though they were transcribing the intricate dynamics of the inner world onto the static, flat plane of a map so that people could find their way through it. At the same time they were freeing themselves from gestural clutter, without abandoning gesture altogether. It made a last stand as Newman's "zip": Isolated on the empty stage of his canvas — it was clearly no longer the arena of action that Harold Rosenberg famously called it — it made up in integrity for what it lost in force. Nonetheless, what began as an unconscious bang in Pollock seems to have become a self-conscious posture in Newman's zip.

Gottlieb's *Division of Darkness* (1947) is a kind of schematic rendering of inner life in all its dramatic turbulence, and the tortured grid of *Labyrinth #3* (1954) conveys its labyrinthine complexity. Gottlieb's cryptic pictographs, many of which look like menacing omens — a kind of ghostly handwriting on the pictorial wall — slowly but surely lose their human form while retaining their emblematic character. The result is the famous abstract emblem of the Burst series, which deals in "polarities," as Gottlieb said, not only of "good and evil, the sick and the well," but the gestural and geometrical, as *Blast I* (1957) makes clear. The opposites subtly inform each other: The grand gesture, however explosive, is self-contained (it almost neatly fits in a square), while the orb above it is densely painted, with atmospheric edges echoing those of the brushy gesture. They are set in an infinite space which bears the trace of a surrealist horizon. No doubt the abstract forms are signs like the pictographs — the lower tier of *Above and Below I* (1964-65) and *Conflict* (1966) makes that explicit — but they are unreadable compared to pictographs. They exist more for their emotional impact than their intelligibility, as their expressionistic flair suggests.

The more socially poignant emblem in Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series — its alternation between phallic bar and testicular shapes suggests the castration of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War, as well as Motherwell's own castration anxiety, as he implied — is another example of the tendency to emblematic expressionism. Motherwell's *Elegies*, symbolic portrayals of the tragic, self-destructive hero (artist no doubt included), lack the headlong momentum of Gottlieb's *Blasts*, but they share a similar grandeur. The paintings of Kline, Still, Rothko and Newman are much more ambitiously sublime — purely abstract and "elevated." In their work, a wide open planar surface, more desolate than Pollock's "landscape" of gestures but less like quicksand, is marked by grand, increasingly stylized — mannered — gestures, sometimes dramatically harsh, as in Kline's paintings, sometimes exquisitely crude, as in Still's paintings, sometimes precious and poignant, as in Rothko's paintings, and sometimes attenuated, even streamlined, as in

Newman's paintings. The early works of all four artists were as surreally anthropomorphic as the early works of Gottlieb and Motherwell, but their mature works convey a sense of brooding upon the abstract depths. The contrasts they use are much more emotionally challenging — it is the difference between the blurry black and meager white in Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* and the bold, stark constructions of black and white in Kline's paintings and in Newman's *Stations of the Cross* — which makes for a more incisive emblem. Pousette-Dart's late paintings, radiant with transcendental icons, are perhaps the clearest statement of the kind of spiritual illumination — intuitive insight into the absolute within the self — that emblematic expressionism pursued.

The Abstract Expressionists were in pursuit of “transcendental experiences,” as Rothko wrote in 1947.¹⁴ They identified with the “archaic artist” who represented such experiences in the form of such “intermediaries” as “monsters, hybrids, gods and demi-gods.” But the Abstract Expressionists realized that modern society was very different from archaic society. Modern society — and by this they meant American society — did not believe in transcendental experience let alone understand its “urgency.” “The unfriendliness of society” to art didn't help. Rothko's aggressive response was to eliminate every trace of the “familiar world” of society from his paintings, turning them into abstract “dramas” in which “shapes” functioned as “performers.” To represent, or at least suggestively evoke the “transcendent realm,” “the familiar identity of things had to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly shrouds every aspect of our environment.” Rothko conceived his abstract shapes as “organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world.” In other words, they were the modern version of the “strange and unfamiliar” beings the archaic artist used to personify the transcendental. They became even more strange and unfamiliar when they became emblematic planes of atmospheric color arranged in layers that seemed to represent different states of consciousness. It is as though the Theosophical program of Kandinsky and Mondrian — the movement upward from everyday perception to spiritual expression, involving the cleansing of consciousness of social contaminants — was given new form.

All of this suggests that the Abstract Expressionists thought of themselves, without exactly saying so, as shamans, in that they could “enter alternate states of consciousness” and mediate them artistically.¹⁵ But it is not clear that their art “serve[d] their community by “translat[ing] the ‘divine’ messages into a language understood by all,”¹⁶ which is what the shaman traditionally did. A society accustomed to the seemingly realistic, commonplace language of social figuration was not open to the seemingly unrealistic, uncommon lan-

guage of abstraction, however more visually fundamental a language it is, and however more immediate if ineffable its effect. Abstract Expressionism has been socially assimilated and institutionalized since its heyday, but that does not mean that its transcendental ambition has been understood and appreciated. It is doubtful that American society can tolerate the sense of "silence and solitude" — Rothko's words — that informs and sustains the best Abstract Expressionist art. Its aura of "human incommunicability," as Rothko called it, had to be intolerable to a busily communicating society. Abstract Expressionism has been dipped in a sea of ordinary language, as though that could purge it of its ineffability, and make us forget its mystery. But until the incommunicability of what it struggles to communicate is recognized, Abstract Expressionism's extraordinary character cannot be truly grasped.

Until it became appropriated as a symbol of American energy and innovation — the moment seems to have been when the United States Information Service organized an international touring exhibition of Abstract Expressionist work in the late 1950s — there was great resistance to it and little or no comprehension of the transcendental values it attempted to embody. It seemed to indulge in obscurity, all the more so because it had "no direct association with any particular visible experience." If, as Rothko suggested, Abstract Expressionist paintings "begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space," then Americans didn't like the unknown. "Pictures must be miraculous," he declared, "a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need," but Americans don't think pictures can be miraculous (unless they are of miraculous people, like saints), and they are less aware of spiritual needs than material ones, which are much more easily satisfied. They certainly don't believe that a mere picture, let alone an abstract one, can be spiritually satisfying.

"Make no mistake, abstract art is a form of mysticism," Motherwell wrote in 1951,¹⁷ almost a decade after Matta painted *Disasters of Mysticism* (1942). Rothko's declaration of the mystical autonomy of abstract art appeared in the one and only issue of *Possibilities*. Motherwell was its "art" editor. (Harold Rosenberg, another devotee of Abstract Expressionism, was its "writing" editor. It is worth noting that John Cage, the Dadaist composer, was its "music" editor.) Andrea Caffe's "On Mythology," another magisterial essay that lent support to the mystical strand in Abstract Expressionism, also appeared: "The realm of the myth has rightly been called 'sacred.' Now the sacred is beyond attainment, incomprehensible . . . ineffable. And the whole effect of the myth — inseparable from active magic or passive mysticism — is to touch, to make present (by fiat or insinuation), to symbolize (the symbol was a sign of reconciliation or alliance) by means of the word, 'the nonexistent,' by means of the assertion . . . The paradox is that without this "nonexistent," our existence would have no human significance, as without the ineffable, human speech

would scarcely differ from the vocal expressions of animals.”¹⁸

In the late 1940s, and throughout the 1950s — until it faltered in Vietnam — America was too full of the myth of its own greatness to believe in any other myth, let alone the myth-making powers of art. Abstract Expressionism believed in the “manifest destiny” of abstract art, but the manifest destiny of American society, confirmed by its sweeping victory in the second world war, was much more obvious. It was the most powerful and important country in the world, and it had no need of art, let alone abstract art, to trumpet its dominance.

Nonetheless, however ironically, and indirectly, Abstract Expressionism reflected American hegemony. Despite its apparently un-American character — all the more un-American because it was mystical, obscure and deeply subjective — it mirrored America’s triumphant materialism in its own radical materialism. Abstract Expressionism was as preoccupied with the physical side of painting as America was preoccupied with the physical side of life. Also, its belief in its own heroic, sacred character was supported by America’s belief in its own heroic, sacred character. Both Abstract Expressionism and America had inordinate ambition and pride in themselves. They were powers to be reckoned with. The grandeur and sweep of the Abstract Expressionist mural seemed to reflect the grandeur and sweep of the American landscape, indeed, the expanse of a country that spread across a continent — a country that thought big. Thus Abstract Expressionism, for all its universal pretensions — and European roots — was an American art. But the sense of sacredness it struggled to convey was altogether different in spirit from the sacredness America believed had been conferred upon it by reason of its economic success.

This was the kind of success that Rothko repudiated when he said that the artist had to “abandon his plastic bank-book, just as he has abandoned other forms of security.”¹⁹ Abstract Expressionism, then, however physically American, remained spiritually un-American. It shared some of its traits, but it was unreconciled to American society. The surface of Abstract Expressionist painting is, after all, not the same as the surface of American life. It is an expression of depth rather than of spiritual vacuum. But, to compound the irony, Abstract Expressionism seems to be a throwback to 19th century American Transcendentalism, something which makes it even more American — deeply American — than its physicalism. It also makes it an anachronism — a nostalgic holdover from an older America, an aesthetic reminiscence of the spiritual vitality that once was, American idealism kept alive in the amber of abstract form — in the popular culture that avant-garde art joined forces with when it became Pop art, and lost its avant-garde identity.

America was not reconciled to its art until Pop art came along (The point is made clearly by the fact that Andy Warhol appeared on a postage stamp in 2002 though Jackson Pollock has yet to make an appearance.) Cer-

tainly Warhol's arrogant 1963 self-portrait is more in line with America's view of itself than Pollock's depressed self-portrait. The times certainly have changed. Pop art was much more socially successful than Abstract Expressionism because it pays homage to the media — indeed, signals their colonization of avant-garde art — that are the dominant modes of representation and art in America. In Pop art, avant-garde art abandoned the ineffable and sacred for the outspoken and profane. Both active magic and passive mysticism were out, and active exploitation and passive conformity were in. By definition, the altered state of consciousness necessary for transcendental experience is a socially alienated state of consciousness, just as transcendental experience is critically alienated from everyday experience. But Pop art is not alienated from nor critical of American society: It apotheosizes everyday American life. Indeed, it legitimates the American *Weltanschauung* by giving it the blessing of art. Surrounded with an aura of art, popular American imagery, derived from movies and advertising, looks “divine.” Packaged in art, the already packaged looks more perfect than ever. Thus, the superficial becomes transcendent in Pop art. Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962), an icon of an already iconic figure — such as Warhol became — makes the point succinctly. Endorsed by art, that most noble of human endeavors, American values seem immutable, suggesting there is no need to transcend them, let alone alter them for the better. There are no better values than American business values, as Warhol said.

Pollock is supposedly the greatest Abstract Expressionist, and as such the consummately American artist — after all, he was born in Wyoming and lived in California until he came to New York (he was not a European immigrant Jew like Rothko) — but the liberated, all-encompassing, uncontrollable energy, simultaneously ecstatic and anguished, visible in his all-over paintings, has nothing to do with the American belief that energy exists to serve some commercial purpose and as such has no spiritual meaning. It must be managed and used, not allowed to run rampant and thus wasted, the way Pollock seems to onanistically exhaust his spiritual energy. His all-over paintings look like oil spills compared to Warhol's neatly packaged social images, which remain organized and coherent even when they are partially obliterated. However flawed, in what looks like a throwaway ironical gesture — it suggests Warhol's equivocal attitude to them, even to art itself — they seem more poised, polished, stable, manufactured and socially intact than Pollock's antisocial handmade paintings. Compared to Warhol's mischievously contrived, tongue-in-cheek works, Pollock's look naively passionate. Warhol once said that he wanted to be a star so that he could meet real stars. Seeing them up close, he could see that they don't look like they do in their publicity photographs. They are deceptive illusions — their skin marred (like his own) rather than smooth. But every one of Warhol's stars, however tortured by the eccentricities of his

silkscreen technique, is a version of what William James called the bitch goddess of success, suggesting that the fame and fortune that come with stardom remain central to his art. Warhol loves stars, and his figures continue to be stars, however compromised — almost blurred into oblivion — their presence is. They never fade away completely, but remain glorious and charismatic however ghostly, certainly in comparison to the inglorious figures — repulsive fallen creatures or desperate morbid demons — in Pollock's uncompromising paintings.

Abstract Expressionism supposedly has its roots in Cubist planarity and Surrealist automatism, but the formalist-art historical argument that it does — made by Greenberg and William Rubin, who hoped that by giving it European credentials it would be read as the next major avant-garde development — goes only so far and is in fact misleading. Even the work of Arshile Gorky, who consciously emulated Picasso and Miró, takes a very different course — and has a very different content — however technically reminiscent of the European masters. It has been argued that Abstract Expressionism would have been impossible without the emigration to the United States of many major European masters during the second world war. Among those who came were the Surrealists Max Ernst, André Masson and Yves Tanguy, as well as Fernand Léger and Piet Mondrian, who shared a debt to Cubism. Duchamp was already in New York, and Breton also arrived, adding to the avant-garde ferment. Peggy Guggenheim opened her Art of This Century gallery, devoted to European avant-garde art and encouraged emerging American artists, among them Pollock. But all this is deceptive, however influential and inspiring the European avant-garde masters undoubtedly were. American Abstract Expressionism was fundamentally different in character and attitude from European avant-garde art, however much it owed to it — and it is not clear that it owed much more than some general ideas of what it meant to make a modern art. No doubt Abstract Expressionism reconciled what had seemed irreconcilable in European avant-garde art — self-conscious abstraction and unconscious expression — but it did so on its own terms. It was not simply an offshoot of what Rosenberg called the “tradition of the new” established in Europe, but psychoaesthetically innovative in its own right. Gorky was not the humble epigone of Picasso and Miró, but rather a sophisticated artist who used Cubism and Surrealism for his own purpose.

It was the trauma of exile from his native Armenia that shaped his art, not his commitment to high European avant-garde art. Gorky was a victim and refugee, fleeing his homeland, at the age of 15 (1920), after the dissolution of his family and the death of his mother, among the more than one million Armenians starved or slaughtered by the Turks in what has come to be regarded as the first ethnic cleansing and genocide in a century of many. Planarity and automatism were the means by which Gorky expressed his suffering — Gorky

was an assumed name, meaning in Russian “bitterness” (this is more relevant than the attempt to make Gorky a quasi-leftist by arguing that he took the name in homage to the Russian Communist writer Maxim Gorky) — and it was his suffering that led him to make works that were more exquisitely linear than those of Cubism and more color-sensitive than those of Surrealism. With a rare clarity and directness, Gorky’s art reveals the underlying issue of Abstract Expressionism: How to represent — or at least evoke — seemingly unrepresentable and enduring emotional trauma. It is the most provocative and catastrophic of feelings, for it involves the collapse of the self in panic. No one but Gorky conveys it in such a nuanced, obsessive way, capturing the pain of self-loss — inseparable from the loss of his mother, who seemed to have abandoned him as he had to abandon his homeland — as though in discreet slow motion. He could never rid himself of his loss — never resolve his mourning — but repeated the trauma endlessly, with an artistic mastery and poignancy that failed to give him lasting emotional mastery and peace.

Nowhere do Picasso and Miró approach the mournful, brooding tone of Gorky’s mature works — a tone of abandonment and loss that sets the standard for Abstract Expressionist melancholy. For underneath the *Sturm und Drang* of Pollock and de Kooning, and even Hofmann, there is a profound melancholy, having as much to do with world history as personal history. It was world history that killed Gorky’s mother, destroyed his family, and forced him to emigrate to America, and world history that creates the atmosphere of such late works as *Agony* (1947), whatever their personal import. It is destructive world history that appears, in the form of “the light of the atom bomb . . . a truly Christian light,” as de Kooning ironically said, in Gottlieb’s *Blasts*, as well as in the violence of de Kooning’s own handling. “The eyes that actually saw the light melted out of sheer ecstasy,” de Kooning added, compounding the irony, and it is with these mystically melted eyes that Rothko saw the world. The atomic explosion melted all forms, dissolving them into nothingness; Rothko’s melted planes of ominous colors are their poignant residue — nothingness incarnate in ironically seductive color. No doubt Rothko’s aesthetic treatment of man-made death and destruction is as defensive as Monet’s aesthetic treatment of the face of his wife who died from natural causes — he was also fascinated by the colors of loss — but it is much more radical, for it looks the nothingness of death in the face. Hofmann’s *Cataclysm* (1945), *Elegy* (1950) and, with greater finality and poignancy, *Memoria in Aeterna* (1960), also arouse feelings of death and nothingness. They use presence to articulate absence. Meltingness becomes mournfulness. No doubt they reconcile transcendental geometry (Suprematist form) and dramatic gesture (Expressionist formlessness), articulating them with equal urgency and conviction — Hofmann was one of the great synthesizers of avant-garde ideas, as his writings show — but he uses them to convey irreparable and thus eternal loss and trauma.

So does Gorky when he painted his mother and himself in 1926-29. Based on an old photograph — the only thing he had left of his mother — this intimate work was supposedly a learning experience. Gorky transforms rounded forms into flat planes, showing his shift from naturalism to abstraction. He is on the way to becoming a modernist. His scholarship is evident in the black eyes and mask-like face he gives his mother and himself. They are derived from Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (1906). But Gorky has also painted out — in effect erased, as though they had never existed — the flower pattern on his mother's apron, and reduced the small bouquet he holds to a barren sketch. He has stripped the photograph of all signs of life, leaving aesthetically embalmed corpses where there were once living beings. No doubt he also reveals his fear of creative sterility without the support of his mother and, more broadly, his Armenian homeland, the touchstone of his art. Picasso's and Miro's work may be emotionally exciting, but it lacks the emotional depth — one might say the capacity for depth born of extreme suffering — of Gorky's work. Compared to his art, theirs remains on the surface. I think that Gorky practiced his Picasso and Miró the way a pianist practices finger exercises, sometimes lyrically and humorously, following Miró, sometimes with epic power and incisiveness, following Picasso.

Most of Gorky's works allude to the Armenian landscape of his lost youth — the fantasy or interior landscapes of Xhorkum or his father's *Garden in Sochi* (1938-41). *Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia* (1934) looks more like a still-life than a landscape, but its abstract forms have the same haunting, oddly organic — “biomorphic” is the technical word — character as those we see in *Image in Xhorkum* (ca. 1936) and even in the obviously geometrical *Organization* (1933-36). In such beautiful later works as *The Plow and the Song* (1947), the forms are more diffuse and protean, and sometimes lose their contours — these tend to become autonomous lines, seductively curved, as though in an eccentric process of endless metamorphosis — and the surface becomes more atmospheric and soft, but the scene is the same basic “Garden of Wish Fulfillment,” as he called it in 1942, he painted from the start. Dreams are wish fulfillments, Freud demonstrated, and the garden of Gorky's father was a dream garden, full of incestuous possibilities and bizarre energy, which made it all the more sacred. And surreal, for like the Surrealists, Gorky believed that pictures were dreams in principle. Like them, he preferred dream pictures to realistic pictures — the indeterminate to the pre-determined — as his transformation of his photograph of his mother and himself into an abstract dream indicates. Gorky's abstract forms are mnemonic traces of his father's garden, inseparable from his profound feelings for his mother as well as his father — she makes a mysterious appearance in the garden — and his self-doubt, in part the result of their loss and his disorientation. The roots of his art are in the “little garden with a few apple trees which had retired from giving fruit. . . . There

was a blue rock with a few patches of moss placed here and there like fallen clouds." It is an apt description of Gorky's own abstract forms, which have the same contained amorphousness as clouds and moss, and seem to have dropped from the sky, however suspended in its atmosphere they remain.

The garden was elusive — Gorky struggled to remember it the way one struggles to remember a fading dream — but a number of vivid details stuck in his mind, enough to form a marvelous vision. He recalled his "mother and other village women opening their bosoms and taking their soft and dependent breasts in their hands to rub them on the rock" — a no doubt arousing if strange sight, but one whose contrast of softness and hardness, organic and inorganic, rubbed together, is basic to Gorky's art. They also suggest his Surrealist talent for visual puns. The rubbing indicates sexual frotteur, and his knowledge of Ernst's frottage technique, which also has a sexual meaning. Stimulated by his fantastic memories, Gorky combined incongruous forms and materials, uniting them in tense sexual congress, as some interpreters think. It was clearly a union of Eros and Thanatos, epitomizing the problematic of creativity — the longing for fertility, the terror of sterility — that the "Holy Tree" in the center of the garden symbolized. It was "enormous," but leafless and dead, "bleached [by] the sun, the rain, the cold." It was Gorky's Garden of Wish Fulfillment that first made it clear that Abstract Expressionism was about the wish for everlasting creativity, or at least for the rejuvenation of creative power that seemed to have died. The unconscious threat of the loss of creativity — fear of failure of creative nerve — drove the Abstract Expressionists to ever more self-conscious displays of creative power. It was as though they were clinging to — even exaggerating — a creativity that was always on the verge of disappearing. Perhaps they were forced back on it because they had nowhere else to turn: They seemed to be using their creativity to defend themselves from a society from which they felt alienated — and which found artistic creativity alien — even as they incorporated their feeling of alienation into their creativity. In a sense, Abstract Expressionism condenses the rise and fall of creativity — indeed, the odd simultaneity of creative potency and impulsiveness with creative impotence and inhibition — in a singular gestural image.

The tree in Gorky's father's garden was dead but art brought it to life: The primitive peasants in Gorky's village "voluntarily" replaced the leaves with strips of their own colorful clothing. This "parade of banners" — "personal inscriptions of signatures," as Gorky called them — made the dead tree seem like a young poplar in his imagination. Thus, the tree of life — the rich life that exists only in memory — is given new life by art. Gorky wanted the innocent creativity of childhood, like many modern artists searching for innocence of vision in a world burdened by history and saturated with memories, which are like "shadows in constant battle." Gorky's art is the most consum-

mate realization of what the Symbolist Redon called “suggestive art.” The mixture of elation and melancholy — the cycle of creative assertion and depletion that is nature at its most elemental — in his abstract images set the emotional standard for Emblematic Expressionism or what can also be called Expressionistic Symbolism. It also reminds us of how many Abstract Expressionists, perhaps most notably Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, depended on landscape, however fantasized into what Gerald Manley Hopkins called an “inscape,” for their inspiration.

In Gorky’s carefully composed and self-contained works, with their carefully manicured if whimsical gestures, we seem to witness a final autumnal efflorescence of creative power. There is an elegiac quality to his works: They long for what they are about to lose, conveying a ghostly rather than full-bodied creativity. In sharp contrast, de Kooning’s much more impulsive, dense works vigorously apotheosize the creative act. Every gesture is its visceral representative. De Kooning’s surface tends to be opaque and abrupt rather than translucent and massaged, like Gorky’s. De Kooning doesn’t insinuate, he proclaims. The male figure, and then more famously the female figure, was his point of departure, but he thought of the female body as a landscape, as the title of one of his paintings suggests, and he eventually painted abstract, erotically charged landscapes.

But for all its libidinous energy it remains a traumatic landscape, as the black and white paintings of the late ‘40s — perhaps most notably *Night Square* (1949) — and the ironically white *Excavation* (1950) make clear. The latter is supposedly based on a photograph of naked Jewish bodies found in an open pit in one of the Nazi extermination camps. Bleached skeletal white by black death, their bony bodies lay in decaying disarray. The harshness of the scene — and of all of de Kooning’s early imagery, including his weirdly lurid women, are desperately grim and grotesque — is disguised by its quasi-Cubist constructed look and panoramic all-overness. Fragmentary, angular planes, often smudged and incomplete, and composed of brisk, idiosyncratic lines, spread across the work with agile abandon. But the planar gestures are the visceral traces of emotional catastrophe. They are oddly elegant aesthetic bandages on blatantly open wounds. Space is built of these misshapen, agitated planes, each a death-deflated body, a human presence that has been abstracted by death — turned into an anonymous ghost. *Excavation* is an ironical horror vacui: The vast open grave is completely filled, but it is filled with vacuous forms — forms emptied of human meaning, ironically transforming them into pure shapes. De Kooning has stared into the abyss and seen the nothingness of human beings in modernity.

It is the decisive moment of avant-garde creativity, an ironical moment endlessly repeated in avant-garde art: Concrete body becomes abstract form because it has been dehumanized. Paradoxically, it is the emptiness —

the feeling of absence that informs de Kooning's planar presences, the blankness that indicates that they have been liquidated by history, their appearance as white shadows emblematic of oblivion — that makes them aesthetically innovative. *Excavation* forces us to face what we dare not face and can barely stand remembering: The sweeping triumph of death that was World War II, and more broadly, the inhumanity of the 20th century. Modernity is premised on an abstract attitude toward human beings, reducing them to the disposable instruments of collective causes, thus denying their individuality, even right to exist. De Kooning's paintings eloquently articulate the dehumanizing attitude endemic to modernity, suggesting that avant-garde aesthetics — its skewed syntax and semantic ironies, fragmentary structure and insecure forms — creatively expresses the destructiveness that inevitably results from this nihilistic attitude. It is a soul murder that is ironically self-defeating, even suicidal, for the collective. There is a strong streak of suicidal rage, not to say sadomasochistic violence in de Kooning's paintings. Women are gesturally battered in the act of being tenderly embraced by soft paint, as though de Kooning was not sure which would give her subjective presence — which would turn a socially significant object into an intimate living individual. He must destroy the social female object in order to escape his own fear of being destroyed — of becoming another slick object in the crowd of the living dead which is mass society.

One cannot understand de Kooning, or for that matter any of the Abstract Expressionists, without understanding that their expressionism is a subjective rebellion against American mass society, on the grounds that it reifies individuals in slick collective terms, thus stripping them of subjective purpose and depth. Women are the symbol of mass society, as de Kooning's use of Marilyn Monroe and female faces from advertisements suggests. De Kooning's *Depression* portraits of working men are perhaps his clearest statement of the individual's defiance of the collective. Standing with classical dignity, holding their own against the world, they have a poise and stability — indeed, inherent nobility — that de Kooning's women lack. The latter are almost always floozies, even when they are menacing, as the toothy, intimidating grimace of *Woman I* (1950-52) indicates. (But she's wearing a seductive red skirt and high heels, and has a huge bosom!) Perhaps this is because, for all his painterly efforts to penetrate and dissect them, their inner life remained a mystery to him. Perhaps he didn't think they had any — they were all showy glamour, exciting spectacle. De Kooning's *Depression* working men have a spiritual presence that trumps the physical presence of his women, however much the latter are more obviously expressive — or is it more exhibitionistic, as though to hide the fact that they have no core self.

In their own way, the Abstract Expressionists engage the perennial philosophical problem of the One and the Many: The problem of becoming the One that stands out from the Many — the One that is creatively and subjec-

tively alive in the uncreatively objective world the Many inhabit. De Kooning painted many more pictures of women than of men, suggesting that he thought women were a crowd phenomenon rather than individuals. Needing to be reflected in the eyes of strangers, they became the fantasies these strangers wanted them to be. Certainly his remarkable late sculptures of heroic male figures — Promethean survivors, however marked by the ravages of time — suggests as much. He has returned to working men, with whom he clearly identifies. Crusty and alert, they remain emotionally impenetrable yet peculiarly intimate, no doubt an effect of their textural richness and protean appearance. They are a long way from Rodin's sturdy allegorical figures — de Kooning's isolated figures are made of clumps of clay that barely hold together, suggesting that they are about to fall apart, even as they remain intact — but they radiate a sense of quiet strength that makes them climactic statements of masculine selfhood.

De Kooning's morbid early paintings — of women as well as landscapes — are the grand climax of a long line of 20th century apocalyptic imagery, traceable back at least to Louis Meidner's distorted landscapes of human hell. Like many works made at the time, de Kooning's works reflect the unhappy mental state of an outwardly happy America. They have something of America's fabled robustness, but it is robustness in crisis — vigor unraveling into angry melancholy. Perhaps more than any of the emerging Abstract Expressionists, de Kooning reveals the unpleasant underside — in part the heritage of World War II, whose human cost unconsciously lingered — of outwardly prosperous postwar America. They expose the emotions that America hid from itself. De Kooning showed that it could not run from itself even as he showed the power that kept it running. In Gorky, the sense of tragedy is subdued and personal, while in de Kooning, tragedy has become explosive, as though to deny the sense of helplessness that informs it. Both were able to put their finger on the emotional pulse of America because they were outsiders, not only because they were immigrants but because they were artists.

Pollock famously said "the source of my painting is the Unconscious," but there is also something self-conscious about his painting, as there is about Abstract Expressionist work in general. There is an aura of reprise about it — something stylish, or at least stylized — about its automatism, indeed, something forced about its impulsiveness. It may have had "plenitude of presence," as Greenberg said, but its sense of physical and emotional presence was heavily indebted to early modern art — made in Europe. Harold Rosenberg's ambitious attempt to show its independence — to prove that the Abstract Expressionists were authentic New World artists rather than inauthentic Old World artists (the former were a rare breed of individualist, the latter wore Abstract Expressionism as a stylistic uniform or collective Look) — deliberately side-stepped the fact that they stood on the shoulders of Old World giants. For all

their apparent novelty — at least on the American art scene — the American Abstract Expressionists were epigones. They were followers rather than originators. They were secondary elaborators of what were primary innovations in the seminal European masters. They were not as heroic as their press — including the intellectual press — made them out to be. Pollock became popular because he was all-American — “Jack the Dripper,” as *Life Magazine* put it, suggesting that, like Jack the Ripper, he was a violent killer, like all true Americans (as D. H. Lawrence suggested in his *Studies of American Literature*) — not because Americans understood what his art was about. (Gorky and de Kooning never became popular because they were born in Europe rather than Wyoming. Pollock was a wild Westerner — people appreciated his art for its ruthless violence, wide open spaces, and rolling surfaces, emblematic of the “let it roll” mentality of the mythical West — not a fake American like Gorky and de Kooning.)

The Abstract Expressionists expanded the base of European modernism, but they did not change anything fundamental. They performed its ideas, with a certain rhetorical flair and dramatic bravado — Franz Kline may be the best example of this theatricalization — but they did not discover them. They assimilated and transformed, but not so much that their sources were obscured. Greenberg’s deliberate effort to dismiss post-World War II French *art informel* as second-rate did nothing to change the fact that ostensibly first-rate American Abstract Expressionism depended heavily on pre-World War I European originality. As Rosenberg said, all the avant-garde cards were on the table in 1914 Europe.

Greenberg’s unfairness — his calculated indifference to Cobra and faint praise for Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Hans Hartung and Tal Coat²⁰ — has obscured the deeper truth that American Abstract Expressionism was not only an extension of European ideas, but a cruder version of them. Pollock had a simpleminded sense of the unconscious compared to Dalí and Ernst. Gorky’s dream pictures are nowhere near as intricate as theirs, if more touching — and not as spiritually moving as Kandinsky’s early abstract painting, to which they claim allegiance. A great deal of American Abstract Expressionism dead-ends in Emblematic Expressionism. Gestural expression becomes frozen resonance, as in Helen Frankenthaler’s supposedly interior landscapes — lovely surface with no emotional depth — and finally cancels itself altogether, as in Ad Reinhardt’s black paintings. Gottlieb’s late works are exemplary expressionistic emblems — a sort of expressionistic posturing.

In short, there is an air of manufactured irrationality to many American Abstract Expressionist paintings, in contrast to the “natural” irrationality of Chaim Soutine’s paintings. Something changed when irrationality hit the American shores — it was rationalized and manipulated. It became readable rather than enigmatic. It became an idol to be worshipped rather than an abyss

into which one could fall. The uncanny became lost in something typically American: The urge to make a "big statement." American irrationality tended to be in your face. It didn't wait to get under your skin. It tended to be hectic rather than insidious. The grand gesture came to matter more than the insinuating mood. Clyfford Still seemed to combine the two in the late '40s, but his gestural "act," as he called it, looks, indeed, like an act. So was Still's aggressive dismissal of European artists and intellectuals in his writings. It was a typically American effort to wipe the cultural slate clean, but Still did not realize that it also meant that the slate was blank. The sense of emptiness that slowly but surely informs Still's paintings as well as those of Newman and Rothko belies their pretensions to a spirituality that can exist apart from and in opposition to culture, all the more so because culture is the only sign of it we have.

Looked at as a whole, it becomes clear that New York self-dramatizing — dare one say self-promoting? — angst is only one aspect of Abstract Expressionism. Beyond the New York stage, Abstract Expressionist painting tends to be more introspective than explosive and, it seems, unpretentiously lyric rather than pretentiously epic. The work of Richard Pousette-Dart, Mark Tobey, Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell suggests as much. Pousette-Dart's cosmic abstraction, with its visionary intensity, Tobey's Bahai-inspired pulsating "white writing," Mitchell's expressionistic epiphanies, grounded in impressions of engulfing nature, and Francis' conflation of the decorative and revelatory, articulate light as a spiritual end in itself as well as the substance of painting. Light and space are virtually indistinguishable in their work. Their colors are informed by light, and seem like specimens of light. Their paintings seem less driven than those of the New York painters, and made for meditation. It was only when Pousette-Dart and Mitchell left New York that their work became spiritual, in Kandinsky's sense: Far from the maddening crowd, "sensations of color" became "spiritual experiences."

Kandinsky's "Über das Geistige in der Kunst" addresses the final dialectical problem in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hegel describes the voyage of consciousness from sense certainty to pure spirit — consciousness conscious of itself, as it were. But the journey ends in a paradox: Pure spirit, at the moment of its revelation — the moment it becomes absolutely pure, in no need of material and cultural expression to realize itself — becomes pure sensation. It can be concretely sensed not simply contemplated in consciousness. It is simultaneously real and ideal — a dialectical triumph. Paradoxically, unconditioned spirit is purest when it is unconditioned sensation. This is the ultimate dialectical mystery. As though reminding us that Kandinsky is respected as the first Abstract Expressionist, the more transcendently inclined and aspiring — as distinct from unconsciously motivated and distraught — American Abstract Expressionists show that pure color can

in experiential fact be spiritual self-consciousness. They show that color and spirit co-imply and catalyze each other — that color is spirit actualized rather than simply signaled — and that painting is the cultural space in which this perceptually miraculous event is most likely to occur.

To find a new emotional and artistic security in color is the only viable antidote to angst — the only way the avant-garde painting becomes more than an anxious object, uncertain of its identity, as Rosenberg argues. Indeed, the immediate experience of the spirituality of color is the most exalted way consciousness has of rising above unconscious suffering and creative uncertainty. Abstract Expressionism which has left the demiurge for the light is the consummate realization of Kandinsky's aesthetic vision of spiritual color. Consciousness that pure color is the purest self-consciousness is the ultimate aesthetic truth.

Notes

¹ Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 411.

² Erik H. Erikson, "Identity Crisis in Autobiographic Perspective," *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975), 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ John W. McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting* (New York: George W. Braziller, 1963), 119.

⁵ C. L. Wysuph, *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings* (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), 18. All subsequent quotations about Pollock are from Wysuph unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 23.

⁷ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 293.

⁸ Quoted in Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967), 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ The words are those of the psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris, and applied to Pollock by Wysuph, 15.

¹⁴ Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted," *Possibilities I* (Winter 1947-48): 84.

¹⁵ Ruth-Inge Heinze, "Foreword" to Mark Levy, *Technicians of Ecstasy: Shamanism and the Modern Artist* (Norfolk, CT: Bramble Books, 1993), ix.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁷ Robert Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 86.

¹⁸ Andrea Caffi, "On Mythology," *Possibilities 1* (Winter 1947-48): 87.

¹⁹ Quoted in Chipp, 560.

²⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Contribution to a Symposium," *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1965), 125.

Chapter 6: Mythic/Expressive Representation and Ruthless Abstraction: An Unresolvable Dialectic; The Sixth Decade

The aim of art, so far as one can speak of an aim at all, has always been the same; the blending of experience gained in life with the natural qualities of the art medium.

Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real*¹

The difference between art produced by children and great works of art is that one is approached through the purely subconscious and emotional, and the other retains a consciousness of experience as the work develops and is emotionally enlarged through the greater command of the expression-medium.

Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real*²

The aporia of art, pulled between regression to literal magic or surrender of the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality, dictates its law of motion: the aporia cannot be eliminated. The depth of the process, which every artwork is, is excavated by the irreconcilability of these elements; it must be imported into the idea of art as an image of reconciliation.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*³

Whereas art opposes society, it is nevertheless unable to take up a position beyond it: it achieves opposition only through identification with that against which it remonstrates.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*⁴

Part 1

The '50s are usually understood as the triumph of action painting, but they begin with Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) as well as Pollock's *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (1950).

The former is almost mechanically organized, indeed, spatially coherent for all the oceanic grandeur of the over-all space — the work is clearly a triptych, as the vertical dividers indicate, with a central square and flanking rectangles — while the latter verges on chaos, however subliminally rhythmic it seems to be, an effect generated by the repetitive character of the linear streaks, although the repetition is unpredictable and irregular. Newman's painting is somewhat staid, its stasis overcome only by the color contrasts — the

thin white, blue and yellow verticals are throbbing veins in the red plane, showing that it is inwardly alive, however outwardly inert — while Pollock's hypermanic gestures continue into the space beyond the painting, suggesting the irrelevance of the frame, thus carrying to an extreme what began in Kandinsky's first abstract work, made only 40 years earlier. Newman's painting is clearly geometrical, with a trace of gesture in the vertical zip, while Pollock's painting is gestural, with a hint of geometry in the lines. They at times criss-cross, in a false crescendo, as though they were the rotten beams of a helter-skelter hatching, an abandoned or aborted blueprint, or else the raw material of the cohesive structure of self that Pollock could never build.

But for all their ostensible difference — however "formal" the Newman, and "informal" the Pollock — their paintings have something in common: not only their evocation of the infinite, an effect of their sublime, awe-inspiring scale — Newman's painting is wider and higher, but both are cosmic spaces — but the absence of recognizable content. Newman strips his triptych of traditional religious content, Pollock strips his gestural landscape of the primordial figures that haunted his works in the early '40s. Mimetic narrative — the representation, however skewed, of some sort of human story and experience — seems missing in both paintings.

Yet mythic representations of the figure are implicit in their ruthless abstraction: Newman's dramatic zips and Pollock's vehement lines — both punctuate the surface, with a certain disruptive insistence — are the final, abstract residue of the sacred primordial figure (sacred because it is primordial, that is, emotionally primitive), an ongoing theme in 20th-century avant-garde art from its Cubist as well as Expressionist beginnings. They are in effect stick figures, stripped even of their limbs, as though these would distract from their essential presence. Newman's figures may be upright totems, Pollock's may be fallen idols (the viewer can identify with both states), but both distill what Edward O. Wilson has called the "human aesthetic" that is the archetypal fundament of art. The human is embedded — sedimented, in Pollock's case — in these paintings, however unrecognizable to conventional perception. The human is inescapable, even in pure painting.

But that doesn't mean pure painting and the human are easily reconciled, however much the human is represented in abstract terms — as though to concentrate it into an essence — and the abstract acquires a human resonance by reason of its evocative power. In fact, I want to suggest that, in their different ways, Newman's and Pollock's paintings demonstrate the irreconcilability of mythic representation of the human and abstraction at its most ruthless.

For all their efforts to integrate the opposites, and apparent successes at doing so, these artists are stuck with the old dilemma of the ambiguous relationship between figure and ground. The struggle to reconcile them is un-

ending, for their relationship can never be adequately defined, since it is inherently indefinite. Every attempt to fix them in space or to make one space out of them subtly fails, confirming their irreconcilability. The tension between them intensifies, so that they come to seem at odds, at least in unconscious perception. The effort to integrate figure and ground unexpectedly exposes the flaw built into every representation. It is an inner fault line; outwardly the representation looks stable, inwardly it is unstable. It is always in danger of collapsing into abstract fragments, a potential loss of wholeness that nonetheless makes it all the more expressive. Catastrophe is always implicit in representation, but without catastrophe it would lack abstract power — artistic power.

The figure symbolizes human experience and the ground that contextualizes the figure symbolizes the autonomy art acquires by keeping its distance from human experience. Mimetic mirroring cannot help but establish a certain distance from its object, however empathic the mirroring; the absolute distance called abstraction is implicit in the mirror of art. Kandinsky's path from impression to improvisation — external necessity to internal necessity, that is, physical to "metaphysical" distance, or relative to absolute distance — makes this clear. The discrepancy between figure and ground, however formally overcome, as seems to occur in the Newman and Pollock paintings — both render what might be called the latent figure in terms of the manifest ground — cannot be emotionally overcome. Thus, their works remain equivocal: overtly abstract but covertly mythic/expressive — artistically sophisticated on the surface but inwardly childlike in their feeling for the cosmos. Indeed, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and *Lavender Mist* are magically expressive — they mythically represent profound emotional experience — because of their heroic command of the medium of paint. They are triumphs of spiritual or depth representation because they triumph over the physical medium by giving it aesthetic resonance. Nonetheless, they are opposite poles in the dialectic of painting and the dialectic of feeling. Painting embodies feeling even as feeling informs painting, implying that feeling doesn't work without a fluid means of representation that conveys its own fluidity. The dialectic of rough and smooth, to use Adrian Stokes' terms — of Pollock and Newman — is ultimately a dialectic of primitive feeling and civilizing art.

Thus the unity of mythic/expressive representation and ruthless abstraction is always ironic: each unwittingly becomes the other's instrument. One is always subsumed in a goal alien to its own perfection. The grand climax of avant-garde painting, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and *Lavender Mist* reveal the split identity of the avant-garde artist: He is torn between his urge to mythically represent and express his experience of life and the obsession with his medium that is "proof" of his autonomy. He is torn between impure life intention and pure artistic intention — between pressing unconscious need for self-expression and conscious aspiration to what is ineffably beyond the self, a

serenely selfless beyond that is at once evoked and embodied by pure art. We pay special attention to these paintings because they seem to reconcile these intentions while revealing their fundamental difference. Their ability to suggest both at once makes them powerful masterpieces — truly unique. Similarly, immersed in the cosmic space that Newman and Pollock make oppressively immediate, the viewer grasps his own paradoxical identity. In the flash of self-understanding and existential insight inseparable from aesthetic consciousness, he experiences his doubleness. He discovers that he is simultaneously a historical product and an original existence — an incidental consequence of his environment and an autonomous individual, seemingly self-created — and that the two are inextricable yet at odds.

Sublime space does not resolve the figure/ground, individual/environment, autonomy/dependence dilemma, but forces it underground. Indeed, it intensifies the problem, as Caspar David Friedrich's paintings make clear. Friedrich's small, finite figure is explicitly at odds with the grand space that is its infinite ground and context. In Newman's and Pollock's paintings the figures — now primordially abstract rather than conventionally familiar — merge with the spatial ground, becoming a part of it, yet also standing out, as though independent of it. They hold their own in both paintings, however troubled in Pollock's painting. Thus the figure/ground, life/art relationship in both works is emotionally unresolved, however sublimely resolved.

In a sense, the tendency to "reductive" abstraction — the reduction of complex figure and ground to comparatively simple abstract elements — is an attempt to force the parallel lines of life and art to meet in sublime infinity. If the meeting is emotionally as well as formally convincing — humanly as well as aesthetically frictionless — then the "eureka" moment of the merger lifts the self to new heights of awareness. It achieves aesthetic awareness of life, which makes it aware of the way it conceives the world — the way the self works on the world and the world works on it. Such aesthetic consciousness is a prelude to pure consciousness, that is, consciousness at its most sublime — consciousness that has become its own object. In aesthetic consciousness, the world is no longer an impingement on the self, but an abstract delight in consciousness as such. Newman's and Pollock's works are not only about the polar possibilities of painting — about radically different uses of the medium of painting (to sharply different, if superficially overlapping, expressive effect: Newman is transcendental, Pollock is descendental, that is, the former evokes higher consciousness, the latter evokes the unconscious) — but pictures of a certain experience of life, the former idealistic in tone, the latter conveying the feeling of being violated. Indeed, their abstract paintings grow on one because of what they seem to tell us about life rather than because of what they have materially achieved with the medium. Each is a tour de force of abstraction — the Newman of minimalist concentration within maximalist

space, the Pollock of painterly process undermining metronomic regularity, thus suggesting that the amorphous duration which is the perpetual motion of painting can last forever — but also vital experiences.

Their stature has as much to do with their existential import as their inventive art. Newman's extravagantly red painting evokes pure Eros. Pollock's turbulent painting — it carries the realistic sea storms of the nineteenth century American painters Albert Ryder Pinkham and Winslow Homer to an absurd, abstract extreme (Pollock admitted to the influence of the former) — evokes pure Thanatos. Both painters intuitively realize that traditional rationalizing means of personification are no longer adequate — if they ever were — to the task of representing the ultimate irrational forces that inform existence. They show Eros and Thanatos as the engulfing environments they emotionally are. They make the instinctive substratum of life aesthetically memorable as surface. The greatest works of abstract art are sedimentations of existentially profound life experiences. They have the mythological quality of autonomy and inevitability because they are discontinuous with everyday contingent appearances. They commemorate a certain state of consciousness — and unconsciousness — by using the formal fundamentals of art to mythologize it. They hold elemental existence in memorable suspense by candidly asserting the ultimate primacy of the art that is alien to it.

The exemplary artist of the '50s is the sculptor David Smith. His works reveal, with excruciating clarity, the dialectic basic to avant-garde art since Symbolism, perhaps avant-garde art's true beginning. I have characterized it as the conflict between mythic/expressive representation — ingrained human imagination, most evident in the tortured poetry of the dream — and the ambition to create completely pure or absolute art, that is, art without the slightest trace of life experience. Smith's development, more than Newman's or Pollock's, shows that every attempt to cut the Gordian knot that unites these opposites fails, however sharp the artistic sword. The imaginative rendering of existentially urgent life experience and the pursuit of pure art — art conceived as an end in itself, and thus necessarily abstract — are inseparable however separate they come to seem. The dialectic reached an ironical climax in Smith's sculpture: As the opposites reconciled, their irreconcilability became glaring. It became transparently clear that every effort to isolate them by apotheosizing them was creative self-deception. Imagination and purity unavoidably inform each other, however subliminally — in the unconscious of the work, as it were.

Even more intriguing, Smith's sculpture makes it clear that the struggle between gesture and geometry that shaped abstract art from its beginning — evident in the difference between Kandinsky and Malevich, contemporaries in spirit but not in formal practice — conveys the dialectic of imagination and purity in a kind of formal nutshell. Expressive gesture epitomizes the temporality of experience, stable geometry epitomizes the eternality of pure art, that

is, art not conditioned by unstable temporal experience. Gesture is art acknowledging its own temporality, geometry is art asserting its eternity. In his most consummate works, Smith gesturalized geometry and geometricized gesture, but without losing their difference. He showed that they had to be reconciled in formal practice even if they couldn't be reconciled in life, at least if one wanted art that was a living experience rather than a naive illustration of a philosophical truism. Art is not an intricate philosophical discourse about the mysterious relationship of time and eternity — the seeming immanence of eternity in art limited by its times and history, the unexpected timeliness or contemporaneity of eternal art — but the aesthetic display of the tensions that constitute existence. Art conveys their emotional urgency even as it creates the illusion of comprehending them by making their latent dialectic aesthetically manifest.

Smith's art begins with historical experience emotionally amplified, as the *Medals for Dishonor* (1938-40) make clear. Violent sex suffuses these "Anti-war Medallions," as he called them. The cannons are explicitly phallic, a point made glaringly clear in related sketches, collages, and such later sculptures as *Atrocity* (1943), *The Rape* (1945) and *War Landscape* (1947). Whatever their historical associations, these works reveal Smith's sadomasochism. They mythically express his confused passions. Smith's convulsive representations are an inadequate defense against unmasterable emotions, but they also reveal his deep roots in European Surrealistic Expressionism. And in painting. As he wrote, he began as a painter, and even though he began to make steel sculpture in 1933, he continued to paint many of his sculptures, as *Cathedral* (1950) and *Zig IV July 7, 1961* (1961) show. Even unpainted works have a vivid painterly texture, as the stainless steel "Cubi" series (1964-65) show. Their lively surface scrambles light, giving the structure gestural intensity. Each work is, in fact, composed of geometrical elements handled with gestural agility. They are geometrical gestures juggled to form an eccentric construction, which for all its abstract purity seems like an imaginative expression of the human figure.

Smith in fact remained bound to the figure, however mythic/expressively conceived, as the "Tanktotem" series (1955-56) and "Sentinel" series (1957) indicate. Social and emotional violence are implicit in these constructions, as their titles suggest, but now the violence has been geometrically structured — suggesting that it is under control — rather than organically expressed and rampant. The male figure is not exactly its perpetrator; he seems to stand guard against it. He may be a stoic survivor of emotional assaults, as the fragmented structure suggests.

But it is in Smith's landscapes that the tension between mythic/expressive imagination and emotionally detached — not to say existentially muted — pure art becomes clearest, even though it looks formally resolved. *Hudson*

River Landscape (1951) is the classic example of this. Where the earlier *Helmholtzian Landscape* (1946) tilts toward the mythic/expressive — and is painted, adding to its expressivity — and the “Zig” series seems ruthlessly abstract, as though eschewing experience, *Hudson River Landscape* deftly integrates the two. The work is at once an imaginative rendering of an experienced landscape and an ingenious geometrical construction made of linear gestures. The transparency of the sculpture turns it into a mirage or dream, confirming that it remains poetic for all its purity. The moment doesn’t last. Smith, unstable in his development, remains divided against himself, now veering toward imaginative primitivism, as in *Australia* (1951), now toward rationalist abstraction, as in the “Voltri-Bolton” series (1963). Perhaps his most engaging works are those in which the crudely primitive becomes awkwardly elegant — as in *Birdheads* — and in which civilized shapes become oddly primitive, as in *The Letter*.

Both sculptures were made in 1950, suggesting that it was a turning point, but Smith never completed the turn from the imaginative to the pure, remaining indecisive — and thus uncanny — until the end. It is the aporia of art — magical immersion in the medium and imaginative mimesis of life experience — that gives his work depth. It was his primitive gracelessness that in the end saved him from empty formalism, which unfortunately became *de rigueur* in the strangely shallow ‘60s.

Part 2

Strange as it may seem to say so, this shallowness began to emerge in the mid-‘50s, when mythic/expressive representation began to be replaced, slowly but surely, by media representation, under the auspices of Duchampian irony. At the same time, art began to mock itself, that is, mock its belief in its own autonomy, bringing the idea of pure art into disrepute as an unrealizable pretension.

The combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns — they were a team during the late ‘50s (while Johns’ works are not usually thought of as combine paintings, they also combine found objects and pseudo-expressive paint) — are the decisive event in the shift. It was one of method as well as attitude — away from emotionally charged paint toward collage and manufactured imagery. There was more than a touch of Surrealism, and even Dadaism, alongside rundown Expressionism. Johns wrote a little essay in praise of Duchamp’s “hilarity” and Rauschenberg, equally nihilistic, said that once you recognize “the canvas . . . is simply another rag then it doesn’t matter whether you use stuffed chickens or electric light bulbs or pure form.”⁵ In their found imagery — largely mechanically reproducible photography — things appear self-same, and thus conventionally recognizable and rationally given,

however blurred by paint into hallucinatory text, giving them unconscious resonance, if not exactly mythic/expressive significance. Rauschenberg wanted you to "recognize an object when you're looking at it," which meant you weren't thinking of its choice as a sign of the artist's subjectivity. There was really nothing behind its everyday givenness. Thus, the beginning of "what you see is what you get," as Warhol and Stella said. Art here is on the way to becoming surface without depth, which means radically shallow — shallow objectivity as well as failed subjectivity.

The shift was away from subtle subjectivity toward blunt objectivity, whatever painterly vestiges of subjectivity remained — away from unconsciousness and self-consciousness toward impersonal social consciousness, however contaminated by the illusion of unconsciousness and self-consciousness — but the socially scavenged imagery was rarely if ever questioned, even if its transformation for seemingly personal purposes seemed to bring it into question. There was no critical consciousness of its manipulative purpose — it framed reality according to a predetermined collective script (socially correct visual thinking, as it were) — only ironic appropriation of it for seemingly artistic purposes. "Seemingly," because it was a shift from the hard-won aesthetic to the facile anti-aesthetic which brought the idea of artistic transformation — and recreative mimesis, repairing the world in the act of representing it — into question, however unwittingly. The shift from mythic/expressive representation to socially fabricated representation of everyday reality — in effect, from personal creativity to entertaining appearances, in acknowledgement of the abundance of information images meant for idle consumption — implicitly acknowledged the limitations of art, for it was now explicitly dependent on the social environment. It would become almost totally — abjectly — dependent with Pop art, sacrificing creative nonconformity and imaginative intuition for social acceptance and conformity. In most Pop art there was little or no effort to imaginatively transform social material; it was only redesigned, which left it fundamentally unchanged. Socially dominant imagery was fatalistically accepted in the act of being cleverly reproduced. The fundament of Pop art was faithful copying, as though in celebration of the dominance of mechanical reproduction. Copying was devotion to mass culture — an apotheosis of its visual products in which the pretense of individual originality was lost.

In a sense, Pop art regressed to Social Realism, however ironically conceived (and it is debatable just how ironical Pop art is), and like Social Realism, it is less aesthetically and emotionally compelling than Abstract Expressionism. Mythic/expressive representation was diluted (poisoned?) by representations of banal things — sometimes quite upfront, as in Rauschenberg's *Canyon* (1959), sometimes ingeniously incorporated in the texture of the work, as in Johns' *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) — and abstraction became less

ruthless, to the extent that gesture lost force and geometry became matter-of-fact. It was as though gesture and geometry were no longer personal ideas and spontaneously created — visceral expressions of the True Self — the way they seemed to be in Pollock and Newman, and for that matter in Kandinsky and Malevich. Rather, they seemed mimicked. The infusion of banality was supposed to be enlivening — but why does high art need an accommodating touch of banality to make it acceptable to mass society, or, to ask this another way, why must it be amusing to be believable? (Why must it stoop to conquer?) — but it in fact was deadening. The banal images hang like dead weights in their painterly shroud. In short, with Rauschenberg and Johns, American art began to become more prosaic and less poetic, however much their '50s works can be read as prose poetry.

Rauschenberg famously described the artist as “part of the density of an uncensored continuum that neither begins nor ends with any action of his,”⁶⁶ privileging the uncensored continuum of everyday imagery — but it is naive to think that the continuum of popular culture images is uncensored, and that the artist is more than a veneer on its density — over the artist’s imaginative transformation of it. Perhaps “action” is the important word, for Rauschenberg was clearly aware of action painting, but for him it is the lifeworld’s actions, each represented in a mechanical image, that has much more import and importance than the artist’s actions. Like Allan Kaprow’s happenings, Rauschenberg’s actions are parasitic on everyday action, and blur art and life — obscuring the difference between them — to use Kaprow’s famous phrase. There seems to be a certain humility in this — the artist realizes that the world is bigger than his art — but there is also a failure of creative nerve. There is something more: When Rauschenberg said that he didn’t “want my personality to come out through . . . my paintings,” but wanted them “to be reflections of life,”⁶⁷ he is saying that his life is not worth reflecting in his painting. He may need the exciting life outside himself to feel inwardly alive. “Your self-visualization is a reflection of your surroundings,” which implies that the self is a mindless mirror mechanically recording the social environment. Such a naive idea of the self — and of mimesis — suggests bankruptcy and emptiness. Rauschenberg had to fill himself from the trough of social imagery to become full of himself. His appropriated images may be collective memories, but they are also social stuffing — imagistic straw in scarecrow works, peculiarly hollow for all the abundance of images and materials that fill them. They are trash that has been turned into artistic illusion, but unlike Schwitters’ collages — also made of social trash — Rauschenberg’s lack aesthetic nuance, however nominally haunting. With a flair for spectacle, Rauschenberg exhibits discarded remnants of life without adequately synthesizing them into aesthetically convincing art as Schwitters does, thus making it clear that art and life are not the same, however much art may look like leftover life. Rauschenberg often veils

his imagery with paint, making it atmospheric, ghostly, mysterious and as such emotionally engaging, but the veil does not recreate the object represented in mythic/expressive terms, so that it becomes a full-fledged symbol of an internal state. It remains all too objective, if no longer exactly naively and “naturally” given.

Rauschenberg was “put . . . off” by “the self-confession and self-confusion of abstract expressionism — as though the man and the work were the same,” and moved “in the opposite direction.” He did not want his imagery and material to be “an illustration of my will, but more like an unbiased documentation of what I observed . . . the area of feeling and meaning [would] take care of itself.”⁸ However impossible it is to deny the subject — the wish to do so is itself a sign of subjectivity — Rauschenberg’s wish to do so, perhaps most evident in his absurd belief that he could be unbiased in his observations, suggests an identity crisis. Like Warhol later, he turned to the social environment to escape from himself, without realizing that documenting the environment would reflect his sense of himself. That is, he could not help but project himself into his imagery and material. He found his identity in every passing image, which means he had no stable identity. He also did not realize that the environment could not help him solve his problems, which is why his work became more and more shallow, as did Warhol’s. The environment only distracted him from himself and short-circuited his development. Like Warhol, he never fully matured as an artist, but remained bound to youth culture. Like Warhol, his works lacked the wisdom of Old Master art. His self eventually withered on the vine of his environmental imagery and material medium. They took over his art completely, depriving him of what imagination he initially had.

Rauschenberg’s 1959-60 illustrations for Dante’s *Inferno* are perhaps his most imaginatively successful works, but they are also imaginative failures in that they do not transform his everyday sources into mythic/expressive symbols as Dante did. Perhaps this is because he lacked the faith that rescued Dante from the depression which led him to journey through hell and purgatory to paradise. There is little or no sense of narrative continuity between particular images, not only because the illustrations endorse standard modern discontinuity and fragmentation — discontinuity of contemporary experience and fragmentation of artistic form — but because Rauschenberg has nowhere to go. Certainly not upward, the way the Dante did, painfully repenting his sins. Rauschenberg has said that “the details should not be taken in at one glance, that you should be able to look from place to place without feeling the bigger image,”⁹ but there is no bigger image — no grand synthesis and over-all purpose, such as Dante had. Rauschenberg’s *Inferno* illustrations are visionary failures, however superficially visionary and technically novel. Soaking magazine reproductions in lighter fluid he transferred them to paper by rubbing

their backs with an empty ballpoint pen — a technique reminiscent of Ernst's frottage, but without the same startling results and evocative power. We seem to be in a hallucinatory limbo, neither entirely dream nor reality, but we don't know what we're doing there — there's no sensuous surprise, no imaginative manifestation of latent content, no expressive intensity, no mythic import. Rauschenberg's illustrations offer a proto-Pop sense of mystery: outwardly mysterious, they lack inner interest. Just as there is no human mystery at the core of Warhol's images of human beings (nor much artistic mystery to his work), so there is no human mystery at the core of Rauschenberg's images of human beings, although there is a certain artistic mystery to their making. The issue of masculinity is addressed — the end of Rauschenberg's intimate relationship with Johns seems to be at issue — but it remains unresolved. Indeed, the dialectic of heroic athletic types and fragile artistic types — potency and impotence, dominance and submission? — is the most significant aspect of the illustrations. Rauschenberg seems to have become stuck in limbo, as the hallucinatory haze around the figures suggests, but Paolo and Francesca were at odds rather than at one. They abandoned God for each other, but it may be that Rauschenberg and Johns abandoned each other for the god of art.

"Painting relates to both art and life. . . . I try to act in that gap between the two." But Rauschenberg was acting in the gap between the hand and mechanical reproduction, which was the gap between mythic/expressive representation of the self and demythologizing mediation of social appearances. It was the difference between naive verisimilitude, extracting facts from human process, and idolizing them as the gospel truth — an example of what Alfred North Whitehead called "misplaced concreteness" — and the articulation and communication of human process through the sophisticated transformation of appearances into aesthetic phenomena, a transformation which emphasized the art in art, that is, which veered toward pure art or ruthless abstraction. More simply, it was the difference between the traditional idea that art was made by an individual hand, and thus inherently and uniquely expressive — especially because the hand's energy-filled movements registered psychosomatic tensions (the movements were their vector outcome, given aesthetic purpose and personal resonance by the artist) — and the modern idea that the representation of the world by mechanical means was more accurate than, and thus ostensibly superior to, any representation that could ever be made by hand. This idea came into being with the invention of photography. But it assumed that recording external appearances — which did not necessarily mean understanding external reality — was more important than externalizing internal reality. Resembling a seismograph, the sensitive hand was the instrument of doing so.

In such works as *Charlene* (1954), Rauschenberg shows the sensitivity of his hand. Mass produced images had not yet become the underpinning of

the work. Rauschenberg remained uncertainly between the restless hand and mechanical imagery, affording a kind of smooth resting place on the otherwise crude surface. The imagery afforded security within the otherwise insecure painterly act. Indeed, Rauschenberg, something of an Icarian figure — the painterly *Bed* (1955), the phallic *Coca-Cola Plan* (1958), and the scapegoat *Monogram* (1959), all ironical self-portraits, make this clear — always hoped to make a smooth artistic landing, even though he invariably made a rough one. His Icarian awareness — great ambition, undermined by overreaching, resulting in self-defeat — is evident in *Axle* (1964), which juxtaposes President Kennedy, assassinated a year earlier, and the first astronaut, parachuting to a safe landing, that same year. Allegorizing the mechanical images, Rauschenberg states the dilemma of his identity, and perhaps the split artistic identity in general. Both figures took risks by soaring to the heights — Kennedy by means of deceptive art (he made a good appearance, whatever his reality), the astronaut by means of science and technology (in the mid '60s, Rauschenberg started a short-lived organization called Experiments in Art and Technology) — but one fell to a violent death, while the other gracefully descended from his adventure, safely returning to everyday life. Rauschenberg's art sometimes seemed like a form of public relations designed to hide his private sense of failure.

Certainly his nihilistic *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) suggests envy of his Abstract Expressionistic betters. It was in effect a soul murder. Destroying de Kooning's work, Rauschenberg symbolically destroyed de Kooning, already a famous artist. This gave Rauschenberg the mental room to make his own art, and even pretend that he was as creative as de Kooning. But where art was self-expression for de Kooning — indeed, self-creation, as Harold Rosenberg said — for Rauschenberg it was suicidal expression, however unwittingly, for it was a means of losing what self he had in society. He hid his sense of creative inadequacy by appropriating social imagery that looked self-created and adequate in itself. The supply of mechanical reproductions was limitless, suggesting that he would never run out of creative resources, but also suggesting how mechanical his creativity was. The images, strewn around his work, are so many Icarian feathers from wings that could fly far in the world but never to the heights — or for that matter, depths — of the self.

Sexual symbolism abounds in *Odalisk* (1955-58), but the punning Duchampian title mocks woman, as the piece — a box mounted on a pillow with a stuffed white rooster on top — does. Sex has been dumbed down, as it were, to slang terms. Woman has become a jerry-built, shabby construction of image and paint litter — like the work of art itself. It's a long way downhill from Ingres' elegantly painted *Grand Odalisque*. Woman as well as art has been de-aestheticized — de-beautified, one might say. Rauschenberg's work is a frontal assault on both in the best Dadaist spirit. Indeed, all of

Rauschenberg's combine paintings have a shabby, thrown-together Dadaist look, full of would-be portents. The pillow and another stuffed bird — this time a black eagle — reappear in *Canyon*, another quasi-dramatic work. In the '60s, Rauschenberg became heavily involved in performance, suggesting the performative character of his combine paintings. But what seems most important about them is that they show a man still struggling with his psyche — trying to “object-ify” it, to comprehend its mystery. He succeeded to an extent, but the result was self-defeating — rather than self-creating — for Rauschenberg showed that he was a hodgepodge — shambles? — of incoherent fragments. Rauschenberg was in a hurry to know himself, but he ended up hurrying along with the world. The extroverted combine paintings are full of the flotsam and jetsam of daily life and art — a rowdy ocean of junk with islands of clarity and meaning. They are of dubious documentary value; their images seem to be randomly chosen and arranged, however much they can be read as a stream of free associations, and often obscured — even annihilated — by pseudo-atmospheric paint, giving them a moodiness that confirms their unconscious import. This is why they are staccato masterpieces of aborted selfhood rather than imaginative records of American society.

Johns had a stronger, more discreet sense of self, but it was also a more limited, introspective self — less wide-ranging, however many socially recognizable images he also appropriated. But he turned them into signifiers with no significance, except whatever significance art conferred on them — and that was not clear. The American flag and the map of the United States dwindled into painterly occasions, however arch Johns' painterliness — full of fake risk and arty recklessness, as *False Start* (1959) makes clear. More crucially, where Rauschenberg's paintings alluded to himself, however indirectly, Johns' paintings alluded to painting itself, as a substitute for the self. Nonetheless, *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) can be understood as a self-portrait — an allegory of the self, as it were. The bull's-eye is the core self, holding its own in the void, and existing apart from the body, a heap of incoherent fragments, suggestive of part objects, which is the destructive way things are seen in what Melanie Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position. (Is the bull's-eye the idealized self-object, the body what Wilfred Bion calls a bizarre object?) The circle in *Device Circle* (1959) is a more attenuated version of the core self — the artistic self holding its own against the objects it uses. It also alludes to Duchamp's “devices,” especially the “measuring” ones, just as the bull's-eye alludes to Duchamp's rotary devices. Johns' mechanical device holds its own against the onslaught of paint, each quasi-impulsive gesture a fragment of animal expression — which is what Duchamp thought painting was — indifferently flung in emotionally empty space. Like Duchamp, Johns is determined to maintain the mind/body distinction, however much he seems to establish a dialectic between them. Thus, where Rauschenberg tried to integrate life and

art — the former was signified by the world of objects, the latter by seemingly self-expressive paint, and the Rabelesian Rauschenberg had an indiscriminate hunger for both — the more ascetic, inhibited Johns epitomizes the tense conflict between them. If brevity is the soul of wit, then Johns' works are witty, but it is the wit of black humor.

Like Rauschenberg, Johns strips paint of the personal meaning it had for the Abstract Expressionists, replacing it with the ironical referencing of paint within a painting. In *False Start*, the names of colors are stenciled on colors with different names, which are painted rather than printed (made with the aid of a mechanical "device," suggesting that the work as a whole is manufactured), for example, the word red on a painterly yellow gesture, the word blue on an amorphous orange gesture. Sometimes the name and the color are the same yet ironically unrelated, for example, the word yellow is stenciled in blue and placed on yellow paint, the word red is printed in red and stuck on yellow paint. The mechanically printed and placed label and the lively painterly color it labels are almost always at odds, however obliquely related. The discrepancy — it is at its most intense in Johns' number paintings — makes for a certain ambiguity and absurdity. The bad fit between the verbal and the visual objectifies the difference between abstract language and physical reality. At the same time, the incommensurate parts are forced together in the painting — a perverse conjunction with erotic implications, as the libidinous splashes of primary colors suggest. It is gesture as discharge, an idea that mocks the machismo of the Abstract Expressionists, as *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) wittily does. In this mock painterly work, the animated all-over surface is literally disrupted by the two inert found objects — they are stuck between the upper two of the three canvases that form the work — and further subverted by the title mechanically stenciled at the bottom of the painting. It all seems very literal and matter-of-fact, but the physicality of the work is fraught with innuendo, suggesting that the painting has unconscious implications for all its self-consciousness as painting.

Even when Johns presents what seem like straightforward objects, such as his sculpture *Flashlight* (1960), the cruddy texture gives the object expressive resonance. The nature of the object itself — a flashlight, presumably shining in the surrounding darkness (thus an insult to the viewer, that is, a typically Johnsian joke) — adds to the aura of suggestiveness enriching the object. For Johns, the work is a joke on the viewer which states that the viewer doesn't get the joke. *Target with Four Faces* (1955) incorporates the anonymous viewer's redundant face, blind to the painting below it and Johns' presence in the painting, for the bull's-eye represents Johns' eye (more broadly, the mind's eye, which is the eye with which Johns asks the viewer to look at his works). The bull's-eye is in metaphorical fact an abstract rendering of the eye that literally appears in several Surrealist works. (Like the flashlight, Johns'

bull's-eyes are encrusted — with encaustic — also giving them an expressive look, if not expressive substance.) Johns' bull's-eye seems to invite the viewer to take aim (potshots?) at the work, that is, hit the bull's-eye even as its geometrical perfection suggests that the work hits the bull's-eye. But its circular redundancy and insularity conveys Johns' indifference to the viewer, as well as the ironically circular character of painting for him. It comically incorporates the spectator, ironically completing its self-referentiality.

Johns has Americanized Duchamp's ironical indifference to the viewer — and the aesthetic indifference of the work itself — by staging it as an intellectually titillating vaudeville act, as its ironical "little theater" look suggests. Where Rauschenberg's combine paintings are swashbuckling theater verging on folk opera, Johns' combine paintings are ironically intimate tête-à-têtes between a coy performer and a mystified viewer. They are subtly tragic epistemological puzzles, for they bring the relationship between work and viewer into question even as they show that the work itself is as incongruous as the relationship, thus bringing it in question. In contrast, Rauschenberg's combine paintings seem robustly comic, whatever their tragic implications — for American society as well as the artist's self, which remain subliminally at odds in them.

Johns seems to be suggesting that there's nothing outside the painting, anticipating Jacques Derrida's idea — also ironical, as has not been sufficiently noted — that nothing exists outside the text. Johns' '50s works can also be understood as aborted Wittgensteinean language games — a game between the ordinary visual language of painting and the ordinary verbal language of writing and speech. There is no winner — it is a kind of intellectual stalemate. Indeed, like Duchamp, Johns plays chess with himself, and like Duchamp, his art game is a dead-end, for the life has been taken out of the art — the life Wittgenstein thought was basic to the language game, in effect a fragmentary representation of life. Johns and Duchamp seem to dismiss both art and life, suggesting the hollowness of the self, while in Rauschenberg they are weighed in a social balance, suggesting that the self is the uncertain byproduct of their relationship. Johns's *Field Painting* (1964) makes this transparently clear — art is mocked by being reduced to a lifeless object — just as Rauschenberg's *Buffalo* (also 1964) does, for Kennedy is the symbol of a self weighed in the social balance and found wanting, however great his achievements, represented, once again, by the astronaut (Kennedy is Rauschenberg's self-object, and the astronaut his ego ideal).

Rauschenberg and Johns have parted ways by this time, perhaps in part because Johns became obsessed with art at the expense of life — which is perhaps why his art becomes increasingly empty emotionally — while Rauschenberg remains obsessed with life and the self, which is why his art, for all its shortcomings, remains emotionally engaging and evocative. He may be

what has been called a saturated self — a self that gets its emotional density by communicating the social events with which it identifies — and, as such, a self with no core, such as Johns has. Where Rauschenberg's work involves histrionic excess, Johns' work is schizoid, using painterly irony to withdraw from the world of objects the existence of which it mechanically — that is to say, barely — acknowledges. Johns thus conveys a sense of abstinent selfhood by way of pseudo-fullness and pseudo-expressivity, while Rauschenberg achieves real fullness without a fully realized self.

Part 3

As I have argued, there is a strong mythic/expressive streak in '50s American Abstract Expressionism — sometimes tending to epic bluntness, as in Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series, where the castrated penis of Spain dangles in black death, other times tending to lyric subtlety, as in the work of William Baziotis and Philip Guston, all of whom mystically allude to nature, however ruthlessly abstract it ultimately is — but on the whole American art lacks the irrational power and emotional grittiness of the figures of Karel Appel, Francis Bacon and Jean Dubuffet or the surfaces of Alberti Burri, Antoni Tàpies and Wols.

There is an air of desperate urgency to the European work that the American works lack, for all their intensity. Larry Rivers' realistic *Double Portrait of Birdie* (1955) can't hold an emotional candle to Francis Bacon's horrific *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), nor, for that matter to Lucian Freud's 1952 weirdly realistic portrait of Bacon. The surfaces of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, however diaphanously beautiful, lack the emotional force of those of Pierre Alechinsky and Asjer Jorn. Similarly, the surfaces of Grace Hartigan and Fairfield Porter look tame — even emotionally vacuous — in comparison. There is a streak of insanity — a sense of the emotionally bizarre — in the figures and surfaces of the European masters that is a long way from the American figures of Elmer Bischoff and David Park. In their work, expressionistic surface has become meditative and solemn. Their figures are sedate compared to the nightmarish figures of the European painters.

Perhaps because their paint was informed by the violence and destructiveness of World War II — they came into their own in its aftermath — they were able to experience and articulate what Bion calls the stubbornly psychotic core in every human being. This is why their work, whether figural or expressionistically abstract — the abstract was used to express the inner morbidity of the figure — is ultimately more emotionally convincing than American Abstract Expressionism. In the European work, life experience and art fuse, while American Abstract Expressionism ultimately seems more about

art than life experience, which always seem to be at second hand. The European expressionists, however different their means, convey a sense of first-hand, lived experience, while the American Abstract Expressionists distill experience into artistic form — experience that in the first place was not literally life-threatening nor deeply felt (it was meditated by art before it could sink in), however much the Americans believe their art is also a matter of life and death, and as such just as existential.

Appel famously declared that art was based on madness, and Dubuffet made a cult of the art of the insane. Excited by the images in Dr. Hans Prinzhorn's famous *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1923), Dubuffet began making his own collection of the art of the insane after visiting Swiss psychiatric hospitals in 1945. In July 1948, he founded the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut*, and in 1976, his collection became the basis of the first public museum devoted to the art of the insane (in Lausanne). Repudiating what he called "asphyxiating cultural art," "the activity of a very specific clan of career intellectuals," Dubuffet declared: "Other artists identified with da Vinci or Michelangelo — in my head I had the names Wölfli and Müller etc. It was these artists whom I loved and admired. I was never influenced directly by Art Brut. I was influenced by the freedom, the liberty. . . ." ¹⁰ Going out on a theoretical limb, he wrote: "I believe that this art brut, this art which has never ceased to be made in Europe parallel to the other, this savage art to which no one has paid attention, and which often enough itself failed to recognize that it was art, that it is here that one can, on the contrary, discover the true and living art of Europe." ¹¹ Finally, in what amounts to a credo, he asserted that art's "true function" is not "arranging forms and colors for an imagined pleasure of the eyes," but to communicate "instinct, passion, caprice, violence, insanity." ¹² To reject "with the condescending label 'art of children, of primitives and of the insane' . . . conveys a very false idea of awkward or aberrant stammerings standing at the very beginning of the great road which culminates in 'cultural art'" . . . These works have nothing in common except a rejection of the narrow rut within which ordinary art is confined, and a tendency to trace freely their own pathways in the immense territory which the high road of culture has allowed to fall into disuse to the point of forgetting that other possibilities exist." ¹³

Dubuffet's postwar revival of what he called "the values of the savage" — one can't help thinking of Gauguin's description of his art as "savage" — is not just another exploitation of outlandish, bizarre imagery, disturbing to Western eyes and emotions, which is what early 20th century primitivism is sometimes understood to be, but rather an attempt to articulate the roots of art, and more crucially to demonstrate that art is rooted in and expresses human nature. As John MacGregor writes, the two essential criteria of Art Brut are "intensity of expression, and freedom from cultural influence." ¹⁴ The latter makes possible and the former conveys what Dubuffet variously called "inti-

mate internal events occurring within the depths of the artist"¹⁵ and "spiritual states of a truly original kind,"¹⁶ suggesting that the artist could plunge into the psychic depths, bringing back a pearl of original art. Appel's *Psychopathological Drawings* make this point decisively clear: They are perhaps the most original expressions of the madness in artistic creativity.

I have argued that art and madness are closer in European art informel than in American Abstract Expressionism, not simply to support my contention that the former is expressively more profound and more powerful than the latter, but to argue that authentic intensity of expression and total freedom from cultural influence, however much they are incompletely realizable ideals, are only possible when civilization has, in principle as well as practice, destroyed itself. It did this in Europe in World War II, and before that in World War I. The death instinct is clearly very powerful in 20th century Europe, and its eruptions necessarily affected and made themselves felt in European art informel — a post-civilized art as distinct from a stylish neo-primitivist art.

The European artist was more able to plunge the psychic depths than the American artist because the depths were exposed in all their starkness and ugliness. War destroyed the facade of high culture and civilized behavior, nakedly revealing the savagery of human beings. American Abstract Expressionism was full of subliminally morbid fantasy and outspoken feeling — fantasies of destruction and attempts to "wear the heart on the sleeve," in Winnicott's telling phrase about the True Self — but it was compromised by its claim to be high culture. It was more cultural art than art brut.

The American Abstract Expressionists — and their critic-supporters, particularly Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg — wanted to carry on what Rosenberg called the "tradition of the new" that originated in Europe. But above all, they wanted to give America the authentically modern art it deserved, now that it was victorious and seemingly omnipotent, and perhaps above all the most modern country in the world. They wanted to make a modern art worthy of a modern country — a modern art that expressed the inner dynamic of modernity itself as well as of triumphant modern America. I am suggesting that free expression was compromised by a peculiarly American version of art for the sake of art — art that, at bottom, was more concerned with "arranging forms and colors for an imagined pleasure of the eye," to recall Dubuffet's words, than with becoming emotionally convincing. The optically oriented Hofmann was the guiding spirit of '50s American art, while the visceral Dubuffet was the guiding spirit of '50s European art.

In fact, whenever Pollock and Smith were emotionally convincing, Greenberg thought that their art failed as art, which is also what he said about the emotionally powerful art of Soutine and van Gogh. He did not appreciate an art of emotional — not to say painterly — excess, which is why he did not fully appreciate de Kooning. His point of view was profoundly influential,

perhaps because American artists were never as terrorized by history and their emotions as the European artists. How could an American make emotionally convincing art when he did not suffer the collapse of civilization, and when, in general, Americans did not know how to use and appreciate the suffering innate to being human?

The problem was signaled by Johns' ironically expressionistic — not to say quasi-expressionistic — paintings: Paint was used to signify itself rather than to communicate deep, "original," intimate feelings. There is no emotion in Johns' all-too-calculated, ironically civilized art. Irony is a civilized way of dealing with a civilization — and with insane feelings — one doesn't like, but it inhibits intensity of expression and self-discovery. This is why American painting had to fall back on figural representation: However much the figure is realized through paint, the paint is secondary to the representation. It is the emotions associated with the figure that matter rather than the primary emotions paint can express.

In contrast, for the Europeans, the paint subsumes the figure, the way the existentially original and savagely insane subsume the social.

Notes

¹ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 539.

² *Ibid.*

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵ Quoted in Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000, 2nd ed.), 183.

⁶ Quoted in Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), 15.

⁷ Quoted in Fineberg, 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁰ Quoted in John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 297.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹² *Ibid.*, 300.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

Chapter 7: The Appeal of Popularity, Ideology and Theory: The Objectification of Art and the Abortive Protest of the Subject; The Seventh Decade

Thus publicity is the poetry of Modernity, the reason and pretext for all successful displays. It takes possession of art, literature, all available signifiers and vacant signifieds; it is art and literature, it gleans the leavings of the Festival to recondition them for its own ends; as with trade, which it takes to its logical limits, it confers on all things and all beings the plenitude of duality and duplicity, the dual value of object (utility value) and of consumer goods (trade value), by a carefully organized confusion of these "values" to the advantage of the latter.

Publicity acquires the significance of an ideology, the ideology of trade, and it replaces what was once philosophy, ethics, religion and aesthetics. The time is past when advertising tried to condition the consumer by the repetition of slogans; today the subtle forms of publicity represent a whole attitude to life . . .

Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*¹

The essence of ideology is to create illusions, disguise the real, and substitute something unreal for it without this substitution being apparent. . . . Why combat ideology, if not to free; and free whom, if not the individual? . . . Only the individual has to be freed, and precisely because he is alienated. . . . It will still be objected that this anti-ideological discourse, calling on the subject, remains within the confines of ideology. We can only respond with a counterattack: the passion for code also haunts the discourse of those who denounce it; a similar terrorism rages in the interpreters of the system, as in the defenders of deconstruction.

Mikel Dufrenne, "Why Go to the Movies?"²

The rule of theory always rises in proportion as creative power falls.

Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape Portrait Still-Life*³

Part 1

On the one side, Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol, on the

other side Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys, to elevate to exemplary status only a few of the many artists working on opposites sides of the great divide — the brutal dialectic — of '60s art. For the former, the work of art is a "specific object," to use Judd's famous term. For the latter, the work of art is the expressive byproduct of a "therapeutic process," to use Beuys' important idea. On the one hand, there is the use of "real materials in real space" to construct "an object" which is "the whole idea without any confusion," to use Stella's words. "Confusion" is caused by social and subjective import. As Stella writes, "only what can be seen there *is* there." This statement resembles Warhol's remark — it was made about the same time, and with the same smug coolness — that "there's nothing behind. . . the surface of my paintings and films and me." This is usually understood to be ironical, but it is, in fact, an honest acknowledgement of the lack of depth in all three artists.

For Judd, Stella and Warhol, the meaning of the work of art is exhausted by its manifest content. It is nothing but manifest content — altogether lacking in latent content, and as such emotionally empty and inexpressive. The specific object is completely explicit, with nothing implicit, uncanny, mysterious, bizarre — all those things that signify the strangeness and "difference" of the unconscious as well as the artist's feeling of self-alienation and social alienation, that is, sense of being different. When art becomes object-specific — when it is completely reduced to irreducible objective terms — it no longer involves "the irresistible urge to create something imaginary," as Redon put it, art's driving force since Symbolism. "Nothing in art is achieved by will alone," Redon declared. "Everything in art is done by docilely submitting to the arrival of the 'unconscious'." This involves "putting — as far as possible — the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible," which is what occurs in a dream, as Redon recognized. But in specific object art there is no invisible — no trace of the unconscious — only the logic of the visible, only the manipulation of conscious perception.

At their expressive and evocative best, avant-garde inventions restore the sense of the enigma and singularity of existence lost to everyday life, which is why they seem absurd and uncanny. The conventional view that equates them with technological innovations, based on hard science, accords them a certain soundness and authority, as though to deny the suggestiveness that comes with expression and evocation. These latter characteristics tend to be "soft" — unpredictable and uncertain — because they depend on lability of feeling and form, more particularly, subjective involvement lured on by inconclusive form. Many avant-garde artists have used science and technology, the dominant modern ideologies, to obscure the sense of seminal mystery their art unconsciously pursues. They want their art to seem as knowledgeable and advanced, not to say credible and prestigious, as science and technology, but they betray only their own radical difference. Specific object artists carry the modern bias

in favor science and technology to a reductionist extreme, using a minimum of engineering to make minimal structures. Instead of complex hybrids of the visible and the invisible, the consciously willed and unconsciously felt, the controlled and uncontrolled, specific objects are the sterile result of limited creative will and the limited sense of control afforded by simple geometry. Indeed, their naive visibility makes creativity and art seem easy. Instead of blending the definite and indefinite — making oddly precise use of accident, chance, the spontaneous, the improvised, the seemingly arbitrary — they are trivially definite. Instead of being richly evocative — emotionally resonant and elusive — they convey flat affect.

Indeed, in splitting off the subjective implications of the work of art, and banishing them into the oblivion of irrelevance, specific object art — whether in Judd's and Stella's Minimalist version or Warhol's Pop version — signals the end of the avant-garde ambition to integrate object and subject in a dialectically singular work of art. Specific object art is one-dimensional, self-certain and self-privileging, and as such loses the expressive uncertainty and self-doubt that drove avant-garde development. Specific object art is no longer about differentiation and individuation, but self-sameness. Suggestive nuance is kept to a minimum, for it would unsettle the specificity of the object. Specific object art is the end of the avant-garde road, that is, it is entropic, decadent avant-garde art — perverted, mocking, inauthentic avant-garde art, pseudo-singular and facilely universal. (Warhol resembles Judd and Stella in his use of the object-like figure as a Minimalist module in a self-reproducing series, thus reifying it into self-defeating self-sameness. Perhaps the classic Minimalist example of this is Carl Andre's grids of squares — a collective of squares that form a square, in effect over-objectifying it. They are the complete antithesis of Malevich's subjective use of the heroically isolated square.)

Clearly Judd, Stella and Warhol are a long way from Kandinsky's emphasis on the "mood" or "spiritual atmosphere" of the work and his "tendency toward the 'hidden', the concealed," climaxing in his 1925 assertion that "I want people to see finally what lies *behind* my paintings." They are an even longer way from Beuys' realization of "the part the artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process." Two different conceptions of the artist are at stake: on the one hand, the artist as anonymous, detached, completely conscious manufacturer of objects in which there is no difference between outer appearance and inner reality — and thus objects that are robot-like closed systems (for there is no imaginative feedback from the uncanny, allowing for a certain ambiguity and intensity, indicative of an expressive-cathartic-transformative intention) — and on the other hand, the artist as someone who, in the words of Beuys expert Caroline Tisdall, suffers "a real illness, the season in hell through which every creative person must go."

The Judd-Stella-Warhol artist makes seemingly rigorous, logical works of art, but they are specious in their rigor and simplistic in their logic, for they result from uncritical submission to the material and a perfunctory idea of form — the series, as Judd said, a derivative of the grid, which in its modular homogeneity and mechanical redundancy signals entropy, as Rudolf Arnheim noted. The specific object is reified, hygienic art — art from which all subjective presence has been erased, as though it never existed. The Hesse-Smithson-Beuys artist has a more contradictory conception of art — a tortured conception of its possibilities, one might say. The object is a Sisyphean means of approaching and expressing the subject in both its universality and individuality. It seems to arrive at its goal, but just when it seems to metamorphosize into the subject — this is the essence of the object's magic or artfulness — or at least become a convincing symbol of the subject and self-experience, it becomes, after all, just another object. Not a specific object, but rather one whose specificity has been spoiled, for it seems to have no clear place in art or life.

The Hesse-Smithson-Beuys work of art conveys the conflict and tension endemic to the relationship between object and subject, and with that the difficulty of expressively integrating them in art as well as life. There is something unresolved about Hesse-Smithson-Beuys works, something that makes their “convulsive beauty,” as Breton called it, especially anguished. They offer a new kind of surreal convulsiveness: Where traditional Surrealism thought it was possible to reconcile “those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality [Redon's invisible and visible], into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality,” to quote Breton's famous words, postwar Surrealism hypostatizes their contradictoriness, implying they can never satisfactorily be reconciled. The eureka effect of surreality, bringing with it the experience of the work of art as absolute reality, now results from the subliminal awareness of irreconcilability rather than the wish for reconciliation. This is what induces “convulsive beauty,” that is, the Surrealist idea that artistic expression is a kind of conversion hysteria — the involuntary conversion of psyche into artistic soma, more particularly, uncontrollable emotion into imagistic form.

But in the new performance surrealism, as it can be called, the conversion is incomplete, leaving a residue of agony. Whatever their resemblance, Smithson's sites and non-sites are irreconcilable, the objects in Hesse's installations are almost chaotically at odds, and Beuys' performances with a dead hare and a live coyote show that animal and human can never reconcile — especially because the effort to do so arises entirely from the human side. Beuys tries to heal himself by attuning to animal instinct, but it is a futile effort, for the hare is dead and the coyote indifferent to his presence, if tolerant of it. It becomes just another artistic performance, which, however symbolically pregnant, to use Cassirer's term, announces the empathic inadequacy of the narcissistic artist. Strange as it may seem to say so, their work has an affin-

ity with Pollock's *Portrait and a Dream* (1953) in which dream and reality exist side by side, suggesting a split self on the verge of disintegration. In a sense, for Smithson, Hesse and Beuys, as well as Pollock, the articulation of the split is resistance against complete collapse. The split is an expressionistic scream that signals annihilation even as it defies it.

The Hesse-Smithson-Beuys work of art is impaled on the horns of an epistemological dilemma: How do we really know we are in the presence of the subject, especially when the object's presence is so conspicuous? More particularly, how does a conspicuously material object — an object whose form serves to display its material rather than subsume it — suggest or evoke the elusive subject? More generally, how can a work of art reconcile object and subject, that is, how can the subject and object be reconciled in and through the process of making art? Nonetheless, the therapeutic object, as it can be called — an object that symbolizes a therapeutic process that is implicitly artistic — is a holding action against the tide of objectification or anti-subjectivism that threatened the integrity of art in the '60s.

In a sense, the objectification of art is a social necessity. To survive, it has to lose its subjective aura and become a historically objective material artifact — a stage on the way to its becoming a theoretical object. The materially, socially and mechanically objective art of the '60s — Minimalism and Pop art — signals historicization and theorization and, with these things, the end of avant-garde art. That is, instead of being resisted, as it was when it seemed full of creative nerve — when it seemed to overthrow, with revolutionary malice, the traditional objective order of artistic values, replacing it with works that seem valueless and degenerate, to use the Nazis' word, because they seem all too subjective and as such expressively bizarre and incoherent — it becomes an established fact of cultural life. It becomes, as Adorno says, a cultural industry — the avant-garde industry — producing standardized products according to fixed conventions.

It thus loses the experimentation and flexibility that were its original strength — the daredevil openness and wide-ranging curiosity that were the source of its originality. It no longer attempts to re-originate art by restoring the connection with the origin of being that primitive art was assumed to have — thus the adulation of its "originality." What was once a freshly "primitive" art, as Franz Marc suggested — an art that expressed the originality of existence in modern terms — decays into high design, its inner aliveness lost to outer sophistication. More particularly, avant-garde art is accepted into the social-commercial-intellectual order of things as a luxury consumer product, indeed, the ultimate trophy of speculative capitalism, available only to the economic elite. As Daniel Bell writes, it becomes a powerful market force, so much so that its exchange value becomes its major value, to some speculators, its exclusive value — its whole meaning. It tends to become pure speculation,

in effect reflecting the ups and downs of the market in its identity. It also becomes the object of intellectual speculation by the theoretical elite — it lacks identity without its intellectual exchange value, just as it lacks identity without its economic exchange value — suggesting that theoretical and economic speculation have a good deal in common. Intellectually and commercially rationalized, art loses any semblance of originality.

Hesse-Smithson-Beuys resist this engulfing tide of objectification, commodification, intellectualization and sophistication — the new knowingness about avant-garde art, the new “in-ness” infecting its production as well as reception — by making works of art that, however vigorously material, have a subjective aura, an odd emotional resonance, if only because their ambiguous vitalism suggests a traumatized individuality. For all their unmistakable, in-your-face materiality — Hesse’s fiberglass, Smithson’s earth, Beuys’ fat and felt — they are expressively perplexing, all the more so because they seem gratuitously thrown in space, and as such placeless, abandoned and isolated, even when, as in Smithson’s case, site-specific. Hesse, Smithson and Beuys are mystics, implicitly merging with the environment, or making works of art that are environments in themselves — a kind of artistic cosmos — in order to restore their sense of self. Traumatized by history — World War II in the cases of Hesse and Beuys (the former indirectly, the latter directly), America’s criminal treatment of nature in Smithson’s case — which they each implicitly repudiate, they empathically identify with their material, as though immersing themselves in it could sustain them, giving them the nourishment society never did. If the misery of history is indicative of the empathetic failure of society, then the expressive use of exposed material is an attempt to recover empathy from nature. For Hesse, fiberglass is as raw and malleable — “natural” — as Smithson’s earth and Beuys’ fat and felt. And the emotions it exposes are equally raw.

Hesse, Smithson and Beuys perform themselves (thus bringing out the performative dimension latent in all avant-garde art). Hesse does this through surrogate art objects, Smithson through his writings as well as earth works, and Beuys literally as well as figuratively. (He once told me that his materials were meaningless apart from his performative use of them.) Their performative-transformative works, charged with anxious — and ambitious — emotion, are clearly not as empirically reassuring as the inexpressive, unambiguously materialistic works of Judd, Stella and Warhol, which underscore the mechanistic, unabashed materialism of the American culture in which they were produced.

In short, where Judd, Stella and Warhol are complacently conformist, Hesse, Smithson and Beuys are non-conformist because of their expressive poignancy. Their expressive materialism has a tragic import that makes the materialism of Judd, Stella and Warhol seem trivial. To be insecurely expressive — to express existential and artistic insecurity — becomes the one way of

resisting the avant-garde's new-found social security and success.

Part 2

There is a touch of irony in the Minimalist constructions of Judd and Stella, which is perhaps redemptive, and which adds a touch of expressive value. It has, ironically, to do with the fact that they have a weak center, or no center, or an ambiguous center. The fact that the center doesn't hold — doesn't have much organizational weight and thus seems nominal — is characteristic of Minimalism. Lacking what Arnheim calls "the power of the center," Minimalist works lack inner "hierarchical scale," to use his term. If, as he writes, "a center, in the dynamic sense of the term, acts as a focus from which energy radiates into the environment,"⁴ then Minimalist works have no energy. They are, as has been said, monotonous. In them less is less, no longer more, as Mies van der Rohe thought it was, echoing Adolf Loos' dismissal of ornament as a false more, a hollow excess. Minimalism is ABC art, as Barbara Rose said, but reciting the letters of the geometrical alphabet is monotonous. Only when they are combined in a dynamic way, or regarded with cabalistic awe, do they come alive.

No doubt Minimalist monotony is relieved by the color that Judd and Stella use, and by Stella's intricate geometry as well as exotic, provocative titles, but it is a false relief, for the colors and geometry are expressively empty. And when there's a center, it is literally empty, as in *Ileana Sonnabend* (1963), or oddly displaced, as in *Les Indes Galantes* (1962), or eccentrically split, as in the *Sinjerli Variation* series. Stella's works are divided against themselves, not in a Cubist way — they are not sums of planar fragments that add up to a subliminal, subtly organic whole — but rather in a quasi-Constructivist way. They have a preordained, technocratic look, in which discovered nuance is sacrificed to prefabricated design. Stella's art is programmed art — ingeniously programmed, no doubt — rather than art grounded in lifeworld experience, however distilled into elusive abstractions that confirm the elusiveness of experience, by reason of its dialectical complexity. Stella's abstractions are less elusive than clever, suggesting they have nothing to do with lifeworld experience, whatever their titles. They are brilliantly inventive, but beside the human point, however much they are to the perceptual point, that is, however much they demonstrate the cognitive ironies and uncertainties of perception.

But perception by itself is not human experience — indeed, to objectify it at the expense of its subjective aspect is to bifurcate it, and finally to misplace its concreteness, to use Whitehead's concept, that is, to elevate one of its factors at the expense of the whole process, simplifying it so that it becomes incomprehensible. If the transformation of human experience into art, or art in the service of revealing the mystery of being human in a world in-

wardly experienced as an abyss — thus the empty space in which the greatest Old Masters dared to place isolated figures, in unconscious acknowledgement of the groundlessness of human existence (human presence gaining its poignancy by the surrounding absence) — has been the purpose of art from its beginning, then Stella is in headlong revolt against the purpose of art. Prehistoric and primitive art make it clear that art is representational and abstract at once. In the best art, to articulate the visible is to symbolize the invisible, to symbolize the invisible is to create a new kind of visibility. Stella has dealt with all too human themes — for example, the Holocaust, by way of works meditating on the wooden synagogues that were burned by the Nazis in Poland — but his works end up being about visibility as such. Elusive expression is invariably sacrificed to decisive construction, suggesting that when the only purpose of art is to construct art it is no longer exactly art with a deep purpose.

Constructivism was initially associated with constructive social purpose — sometimes partisan, as in Tatlin's case, sometimes utopian, as with Pevsner and Gabo — but Stella's work has no social purpose. It is a decorative constructivism, successfully conveying the ambiguities inherent to perception as such, which means that it is beside the point of lifeworld perception. It is a tactic within pure art rather than that truly rare thing in art, a new perspective on lifeworld experience. In a sense, Stella's abstract art is the consummate realization of Cézanne's representational art, which revealed, with disturbing precision, that we can never be certain of what we are sensing. Cézanne was not simply anxious, as Picasso said, but panic-stricken and terrorized by sense experience, for it embodied his feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, and ultimately of being without a secure ground. Indeed, the more his sensations vibrated, the more groundless and unsupported they became. In the end, they were precariously suspended in the nothingness of the blank canvas, which made itself felt as much they did. In a sense, Stella's work is an eloquent *reductio ad absurdum* of the uncertainty that made Cézanne's sensations vibrant, but with Cézanne's terror — which made it a radical uncertainty — edited out. Stella has no comprehension of terror — certainly no sense that "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror we're still just able to bear," as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in the first Duino Elegy — which is why he is a formalist rather than the subliminal expressionist that Cézanne was.

The twin halves of the ironically titled *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (1959) (clean thinking and dirty sensing? logical splendor and material misery?) are constructions of lines that echo the edges and shape of the canvas. They make a formal rather than expressive point, however dark and thick the surface and light and however thin the lines. And also despite the metaphor of the title, which raises the age-old existential question: is the marriage of opposites really possible? If it is, will it last? Or will the conflict between the opposites tear it apart? Thus, Stella claims to address the existen-

tial dialectic of life. But, apart from its title, the painting is neither dialectical nor existential. It is a minor tour de force of formal irony. Stella constructs a Chinese box of frames — frames within frames. The halves seem joined by a central line, but it is attached to neither of them, that is, it is not the one side that they have in common. It is a center that does not work as a unifying center. In other words, it is a center in appearance only. The sides are not reconciled, they are decisively separated by the central line, which extends beyond the canvas. Stella said he was painting stripes, with their fixed interval and repetitive rhythm, but he is painting the irrelevance of the center. It is not necessary — a fact that Pollock's all-over painting made explicit, and that Stella absolutizes.

The center of *Les Indes Galantes* is a sort of tricky Gordian knot. It seems to tie the four sections of the painting together, but they don't precisely meet in the center. It is a perverse, enigmatic center, oddly out of focus and inconclusive. It has become absurd and tentative — at odds with itself, as though succumbing to the pressure of the opposing parts of the painting — rather than the linchpin of the work. Pull the linchpin and the painting falls apart. It is unclear whether Stella is pulling the linchpin or inserting it. His abstractions seem to come apart in the process of being put together — a display of “creative destruction,” as capitalism has been called, or perhaps of destructive creativity. They hold together because of their over-all geometry — *Hatra I* (1967) shows this clearly — but otherwise disintegrate into geometrical fragments. None of them neatly fit together — displacement is rampant — even though they look like they belong together. The simultaneity of integration and disintegration — of wholeness and the piecemeal, of balance and disequilibrium — is breathtaking, but the point is that the grand, brightly colored circle is a false center, both optically and structurally, for it pulls nothing together. Indeed, its multiple, differently colored diameters, none exactly conforming to the other, announces the self-dividedness of the work. The quasi-center is just another piece of the unresolvable puzzle.

Stella uses stripes to convey lack of cohesiveness and coherence, not only because his stripes are ironically off, but because they show that a work of art doesn't have to have a center. The work of art doesn't have to be centered in itself. It does not have to be balanced around a center. It is not an act of centering and balancing, suggesting that making art is not a way of centering and balancing oneself. The center has become irrelevant — that is the important statement Stella, and more broadly Minimalism, makes. A repetitive pattern, with no center at all, can be regarded as a work of art. If we take seriously Arnheim's idea that “the visible pattern represents a symbolic statement about the human condition,”⁵ then Stella's works, and those of his Minimalist colleagues (their works make this point more obviously), suggest that the modern self has no center or else has a false center, just as Stella's

works have the look of a false front or facade with nothing behind it. This links up with Hans Sedlmayr's idea that modern art has lost its center because it no longer sees the human as central to art.

Not all Minimalism involves the abandonment of the center. Kenneth Noland paints centerless stripe patterns, but he also paints chevrons and concentric circles, which clearly have a center. But the center cannot escape the pattern, however autonomous it seems to be. In *Cycle* (1960) it loses autonomy because its color is repeated in the outer circle. The power of the center is diffused by repetition. Again and again we see works with no center — works that are all elegant margin and open field, as in Jules Olitski's *High A Yellow* (1967), or a field of stripes, all the more sensational because they are eccentrically grouped, as in Gene Davis' *Raspberry Icicle* (1967), or bizarrely placed and convulsively gestural, as in Morris Louis' *Sigma* (1961), where they radiate from the lower corners. In none of these works is the center necessary, however much it may be implied. The center of the concentric circle work is just another part of the pattern. It is not the unmoved mover of the work. Removed from the work, the pattern of circular stripes would continue to vibrate "sensationally." The elimination of the center is a denial of essence. It seems that Minimalist stripe painting anticipated the attack on logo-centricity in deconstruction, as well as the general tendency towards de-centering in society, indeed, the denial that there is any privileged center to the self.

The Minimalists have elaborately justified their art, as the theoretical writings of Robert Morris indicate, but this does not change the fact that their objects have little to expressively offer, however dramatic they sometimes look. Indeed, many look rather stunning, or at least interesting (if still not particularly engaging), in an architectural setting. Tony Smith's *Die* (1962), Ronald Bladen's *The X* (1967), Dan Flavin's fluorescent *Monument for V. Tatlin* (1968), Richard Serra's lead *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969), as well as Robert Morris' L Beams, Donald Judd's modular objects, Sol LeWitt's open cubes and Keith Sonnier's neon works — to name only the most prominent of the many Minimalists — are best understood as responses to architectural space. Many of the works are sited in corners as though in homage to Tatlin's corner reliefs, while others seem like mock buildings. There is an air of programmed randomness to many of the works, perhaps most explicitly in Morris' use of industrial threadwaste and scrap metal in an untitled 1968 installation. It is as though for all their regularity they were gratuitously conceived, an effect heightened by the often stark contrast of white and dark surfaces — white sculpture and dark floor, or dark materials and the so-called white cube of the modern gallery (a Minimalist work in itself) — giving the work a kind of abrupt if strangely flimsy sensuousness.

Nonetheless, they hold their own within the Cartesian space of conventional architecture, almost defeating it — certainly upstaging it — even as

they depend on it for support. Even Minimalist “soft” sculpture — most noteworthy Robert Morris’ industrial felt works, supposedly “determined” by gravity but lately reinterpreted as erotic in import (thus their double-edged, Duchampian heritage, overt in such works as *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961)) — are a kind of ironical comment on the walls they hang from and the floors to which they fall. They are in effect all installations — the installational character of Minimalist work is made explicit by LeWitt’s transient wall drawings (the first appeared, like geometrical mirages, in 1968, and even the later ones in color have an insubstantial look) — indicating that their placement counts as much as their materiality and structure, however irregular it sometimes is. In fact, the interplay between regularity and irregularity — including the regularity of the architectural environment and the material irregularity of some of the surfaces — seems to be the major point of Minimalist installations.

To call them simply conceptual, as LeWitt did in his 1967 “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” is to miss this dialectic. In “a conceptual form of art,” he famously writes, “all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.” But this ignores the tension and seeming discrepancy between the idea — which LeWitt calls “a machine that makes the art,” suggesting the same fascination with the machine that we see in such different early modernists as Duchamp and Schlemmer, Epstein and Gabo (once again the technological model of art, that is, the rule of technology over art) — and the execution. The effect of the work depends on the difference between the idea and its execution — their seemingly absolute separateness, yet ironical interrelation — rather than on the character of the idea (LeWitt acknowledges the simplicity of his geometry) or the visual appearance of the executed idea. The idea is a kind of blueprint, the work a kind of mechanical drawing, whether two- or three-dimensional, and however eccentric and individual its “touch.” What counts is the inexact yet exacting fit between them.

Minimalism seems to strip the work down to fundamentals — concept, structure, space — in a final act of purification. It seems to be the final fruit of Braque’s 1917 conviction that “limitation of means determines style, engenders new form, and gives impulse to creation. . . . Extension, on the contrary, leads the arts to decadence.” This is often thought of as the basic idea of modern art. Like LeWitt, Braque emphasizes the primacy of conception: “There is no certitude but in what the mind conceives.” But what the mind conceives is a “pictorial fact,” not a formalist dead-end. For Braque “painting is a method of representation” not an end in itself. For him “emotion . . . is the seed, the work is the flower.” The goal is a noble work of art: “nobility grows out of contained emotion.” The emotion is contained by the work, and the act of containing it is the work of the mind. “In my painting I always return to the

center," Braque writes in 1954, in an "attempt to reach the core of intensity." "I concentrate," he declares. "The visual reality of painting" is not "shifted . . . to include the space around it," as the Minimalist painter Ellsworth Kelly said — it does not become an adjunct of architecture, like Kelly's planar sculptures, nor does it become a kind of architecture in itself, like Robert Mangold's geometrical paintings — but remains concentrated in itself, that is, a space apart, nobly expressive. Also, for all his emphasis on what the mind conceives, in practice Braque "work[s] with the material, not with ideas." "I prepare my own colors, I do the pulverizing."

Nobility, emotion, the center, a hands-on approach, a sense of craft, concentration, intensity — all this is anathema to Minimalism. It clearly betrays the goals of modern art. Limitation has become decadence in it, the concept an end in itself rather than a means of containment, emotion has disappeared, craft is beside the point, one doesn't need hands to make a work of art, and the center disappears into the geometrical gestalt. Nobility has been replaced by what one might call geometrical intimidation. There is something peculiarly passive about Minimalist works. They seem creatively inert, making them a kind of gratuitous art. They are a product with no creative process behind it. This was made decisively clear when Morris gratuitously withdrew the aesthetic from his work in a letter — presumably an act of mind — and when Andre, in response to what he regarded as the misplacement of one of his sculptures in an exhibition of 200 years of American sculpture in the Whitney Museum of American Art, declared that the work was not art and not his. Andre thought his floor piece was placed too close to a wall hydrant. The Whitney didn't think so, so Andre declared that the work was simply a pile of material worth a certain (small) amount of money. The "real" (and expensive) work would be installed in the Clocktower, a cutting-edge gallery of the day. It was, leaving the Whitney holding the bag, as it were, although it still thinks it owns an Andre.

The lesson here is not only the conceptual license Andre took with his work, but its need for a site — natural sites as well as architectural sites are frequently used by Minimalists — to become "meaningful," and thus transcend its trivially hermetic material self-identity. Judd's installations at Marfa, Texas, make this point explicitly. Punctuating the sublime space of the desert, they acquire a significance they would not otherwise have. They borrow their grandeur and value from the natural grandeur in which they are placed. They need the larger environment to have an impact, but it is the environment that has the impact, not them. Also, the fact that most Minimalist work is prefabricated in factories (it has a low-tech look) suggests its imaginative inadequacy. Minimalists are certainly a long way from Baudelaire's and Coleridge's belief in the primacy of the imagination. Minimalism has been celebrated for its intellectuality, but its cognitive appeal is minimal and so is its architectural-

environmental finesse. At its best, as in Stella, it is ironically decorative and fanatically geometrical, however sometimes veiled by color, as though to make outwardly alive what is inwardly dead.

Al Held was able to use color and geometry with sufficient idiosyncrasy to integrate them, and Charles Hinman and David Rabinowitch were able to use geometry with sufficient imagination to make objects that transcend their own theory and specificity, in the process making clear the paradoxical character of space: it gives presence to absence, indeed, it is the presence of absence. For them, space is inherently uncanny and dialectical rather than routinely given. They offer an expressive way out of the barrenness of the Minimalist version of purity — a vital alternative to the Minimalist reification of space — which perhaps makes them the most engaging of the '60s geometricians.

Part 3

Sterility disguised by monumentality, a simple concept made physically big, as in Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* (1996-97) and Michael Heizer's *North, East, South, West* (1967-2002) — can the same be said of Pop art, especially, that of Warhol, master of the popular? Does Pop art also strip the expressive richness out of art? Does its significance and value depend on its social and ideological site the way the significance of Minimalism depends on its conceptual and environmental site?

I think so. It uses socially familiar figures and objects the same inexpressive, idolatrous way Minimalism uses geometry. The irony of the specific object has to do with its relationship to the physical space in which it is sited, the irony of the Pop-specific object has to do with its relationship to the social space from which it is appropriated. Both are slightly at odds with their space, but never seriously question, contradict or threaten it. Minimalist and Pop irony — if and when they are ironical — is a needling, insignificant irony that precludes revolutionary consciousness of its object. That is, the object, geometrical or social, is not imaginatively transformed into an aesthetic object, affording a kind of perspective on geometry and society as well as objectivity itself — it is not a transcendental irony — but rather reified into mock eternity. Warhol's Marilyn Monroe becomes as eternal as Andre's square. Both Minimalism and Pop art offer the illusion of immortality: the immortality of geometry, the immortality of popularity.

But geometry is out of human reach, which makes the autonomy it symbolizes ironical — Minimalism is the grand climax of the modern pursuit of autonomy through geometry, of the strength of identification with the unchangeable permanence geometry represents — and popularity is short-lived, suggesting that obsolescence (temporal limitation) is built into it, which is its

irony. On the one hand, seduction by the aloofly nonhuman, on the other hand by all too human narcissism — on the one hand the wish to be absolute, on the other, the wish to be told one is the fairest of all, forever. Only when Minimalism and Pop art become morbid — when Minimalism suggests the absurdity of the wish to be as eternal as geometry by reminding us of the contingency of space, and Pop art suggests the absurdity of the wish to be popular by reminding us that popularity is fleeting because it is contingent on the fickle crowd — do they become truly ironical. Minimalism is ironical because it implies the inconsequence of the human, and Pop art is ironical because of its implicit necrophilia. (Exemplified particularly by Warhol's death imagery. In general, the living dead — those embalmed by fame — is his subject matter.) Both are nihilistic statements of the irrelevance of being human from the superior point of view of art. In granting immortality, they acknowledge death, giving eternal relevance to what has become irrelevant to life. Minimalism and Pop art carry Duchampian indifference — perhaps more a symptom of the times, as Sartre implied when he said that human beings are fundamentally indifferent to each other (thus his schizoid morbidity), rather than particular to Duchamp — to new heights.

Pop art began in London in the '50s and climaxed in New York in the '60s, losing cognitive complexity but becoming more visually spectacular. Beginning as a kind of critique of the consumer society, or at least with an ironical attitude towards it, as Richard Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) suggests, Pop art became an endorsement of spectacle, that is, the world of commodity illusions that oiled the consumer society's motor. Hamilton's work, like that of Eduardo Paolozzi — another leading figure in the Independent Group, which advocated what Lawrence Alloway called the fine art/popular culture continuum, in rebellious defiance of Clement Greenberg's elevation of avant-garde abstraction over kitsch representation — makes it clear, at least to me, that envy of the everyday abundance of America, with its accompanying and presumably enlivening vulgarity, motivated the London group. Greenberg was American, but he wanted a European-type high art in America. Its democracy was acceptable, but not its democracy of imagery. America won the Second World War, and to the winner went the spoils of prosperity, and envy of that prosperity, and the wish to have it by emulating capitalist America, was the lot of wrecked Europe. It was the way to recovery, and an unconscious — and self-conscious — endorsement of the American way.

Virtually every object in Hamilton's collage — from the phallic lollipop muscle builder and the sexy nude lady with a lampshade for a hat, to the vacuum cleaner, tape recorder, Ford logo, *Young Romance* comic book cover, elder statesman portrait, can of ham, tacky furniture, and movie marquee advertising a blackface Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (the first talkie) — is Ameri-

can in origin. Hamilton's work is boldly sexual, routinely materialistic, fascinated by mechanical gadgets and generally machine-like in organization, as though each part was a gear in a social machine. Substanceless signifiers prevail — even the figures are robot-like cutouts or paper dolls — creating an aura of hallucinatory unreality, a visual space in which things seem simultaneously real and unreal, round and flat, integrated yet incongruous. The brightly colored comic book cover replaces the dark, stodgy traditional portrait in pride of place on the wall, suggesting the dominance of the youth culture — the very young indeed. Their literature is universally comprehensible — an international vernacular or visual esperanto — so why not use it to achieve a new post-aesthetic universality, that is, the universality of crowd appeal. The contrast between old and new — past and present — is emphasized by the difference between the portrait and automobile logo, in effect a contemporary coat of arms everyone can have, which flank the comic book cover. The whole work is about material success and social license. "Let's have fun," it preaches, however crude and vulgar the fun — and when isn't fun crude and vulgar?

There is precious little irony in this work, unless the provocation of presenting an assemblage of American kitsch images as serious art and doing so in cultured England is ironical. Hamilton's sensational picture is a destructive assault on high modernist aesthetics — populist sources have been integrated into modern art since Cubism and Surrealism, but they never totally dominated it, and never formed a coherent picture that could stand on its own without aesthetic transformation, more particularly, that regarded popular style as sufficient unto itself — carried out in the name of a new vision of the reconciliation of art and life. This, I think, is the cutting edge of Pop art, and the secret of its success. It was a demonstration of the "parallel of art and life," to refer to the first Independent Group exhibition (1953), and, more particularly, of what Allan Kaprow, the instigator of Happenings — a kind of informal performance, which opened the way to performance art in general — called "blurring the boundary between art and life," with life clearly given precedence over art. British Pop, American Pop and Kaprow's Happenings are a new kind of crowd art, attacking supposedly elitist abstract art — art for the enlightened happy few rather than unhappy, unenlightened masses (although Hamilton's masses aren't unhappy and not particularly concerned about enlightenment, aesthetic and otherwise, so long as they have their material goods). Pop happenings, as they can be called, celebrate the postwar welfare-for-all society, which is essentially a commercial society, in the sense that exchange value takes precedence over use value in it — including emotional use value — and, perhaps above all, a society in which what Lefebvre calls the ideology of publicity has taken over consciousness, so that to be a celebrity or social idol, which means that one's existence is widely publicized (whatever its content), becomes an ideal. It seems that Marx had to wait for the Pop culture to

complete the reduction of all culture to exchange value, the trivialization of culture — and Pop culture is culture that is accessible to everyone and that everyone can afford and that offers no aesthetic-transcendental experience, however imaginative it sometimes seems to be — that he wrote about in the Communist Manifesto.

The question that haunts Pop art is whether or not it implies critical consciousness of its objects. The best Pop art — the '60s works of Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Mel Ramos, James Rosenquist, Ed Ruscha, Tom Wesselman and Warhol — is a species of satire. Satire is not merely ironical, but moralistic. But the paradox of satire is that it shares in the decadence it deplores, as Whitehead points out, and thus unwittingly capitulates to it. It attempts to gain a perspective on it, but ends up mirroring it, so that it becomes less a critical judgment on it than an endorsement of its values. It seems no accident that Warhol, who began as a commercial artist, briefly made “this thing called art,” as he said, and finally became a “business artist,” to use his term (he thought the business of making money was the highest art) celebrates celebrities in his imagery. It is no accident that Warhol became a wealthy celebrity himself, as did Lichtenstein, both leaving estates worth more than half a billion dollars — much more money than Pollock ever imagined having. It is no accident that they became Heroes of Capitalist Realism, as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter called their version of Pop art — how humorously is debatable — and as such role models for a whole generation of artists, perhaps most notably Jeff Koons and Mark Kostabi. They are the most consumer-oriented artists in a rapacious consumer society.

Erich Fromm has written that “the marketing orientation [is] the dominant one . . . in the modern era.” It involves “the experience of oneself as a commodity and of one’s value as exchange value,” an attitude epitomized by the celebrities. The celebrity is the success story of what Fromm calls the “personality market. . . . Success depends largely on how well a person sells himself on the market, how well he personally gets across, how nice a ‘package’ he is.”⁷⁶ Warhol depicts commodities, sometimes with a poignancy that suggests they may be human — the poignancy effect is the result of calculated flaws in his silkscreen technique — but it is simply part of the packaging. It is a cosmetic human touch, a kind of artificial beauty mark, enhancing the glamour of the commodity personality by adding a patina of expressivity to its otherwise hollow appearance. For Warhol, commodities such as Coca-Cola and Campbell’s Soup have a marketing personality of their own, that is, an instantly and universally recognizable brand identity, the result of successful advertising. The patina is as manufactured as the appearance, and essential to its seductiveness. The “touching” patina adds to the luster of the object, human or non-human, making it more “gripping” — and Warhol’s human beings have a way of looking non-human, that is, socially constructed objects with no

interior life, people completely lacking in subjectivity, and as such mannequins. (Warhol's figures belong to the long history of 20th century fascination with the mannequin, a simulated person, that is, the reductive depersonalization and dehumanization of the individual, evident in Picasso as well as Duchamp, among many other artists. Whether it occurs for formal reasons or as ironical social commentary, it strips the human of value and reality.)

The seductiveness suggests longing for the product, indeed, asserts the product's desirability — imbues it with desirability, encourages the consumer to emotionally invest in it, as though possessing it would satisfy a deep need. The commodity becomes something like a sticky tar baby — an adhesive trap. The seductive patina is meant to encourage projective identification with the product. The brilliance of Warhol is that he shows us how celebrity commodities gain power over our lives. His works share in this power — which is not to liberate us from it. If critical consciousness is emancipatory for the ego, in that it questions whatever claims to have authority over us — in the case of Pop art, the authority of celebrity commodities — so that we do not feel compulsively drawn and submissive to it, and thus retain autonomy of judgment, allowing us to determine the existential use value of objects, then Pop art can hardly be regarded as emancipatory. Indeed, Warhol lines up his commodity personalities like so many items in a store display — thus, his use of the series and grid, in his hands a means of creating an engulfing spectacle — presenting them for the greater glory of the market.

The secret of Pop art in general is that it worships what William James called the bitch goddess of success. It is fascinated by success, and traffics in symbols of success. Everything it appropriates — the comic strip (Lichtenstein), the billboard (Rosenquist), the commercial nude (Ramos and Wesselmann), everyday objects (Oldenburg), the signpost (Indiana and Ruscha) — is socially successful. Pop art applies familiar avant-garde techniques to populist imagery and styles — to be universally popular is the grand climax of social and commercial success — in order to idolize them. This process of deification or apotheosis popularizes hitherto unpopular avant-garde techniques, turning them into visual clichés, thus conventionalizing what was once unconventional. What was once a breakthrough becomes broken in — domesticated for everyday use, more particularly, designer art. Pop art often uses avant-garde ideas in a clever but mocking way. Lichtenstein's brushstroke series — a mechanistic parody of the spontaneous expressionistic gesture that turns it into a celebrated commodity — is a major example of such witty but destructive appropriation. So is Rosenquist's use of Surrealist incongruity.

I am suggesting that Pop art is as decadent as the popular media representation of reality it appropriates. Popular media representation is decadent because it falsifies reality into ideological familiarity. Presenting it in the mode of everydayness, it precludes critical insight into it. Media consciousness be-

comes the only legitimate consciousness, all the more so because it seems so communicable and everyday — a communicability and everydayness that Pop art envies and emulates, even as its use of avant-garde techniques makes it seem to do so ironically. Popular representation presents itself as the only legitimate mode of representation because it is the people's mode of representation — it is legitimated by its crowd appeal. It is a kind of People's Republic of Art, speaking with the one voice for the people, indeed, constructing that one voice. In short, Pop art is that paradoxical thing, an avant-garde collective art — collective art dressed up in fancy avant-garde clothes. Indeed, Pop art uses avant-garde tricks of the trade to disguise its collectivization of art. In this strange dialectic of the avant-garde and kitsch — a prelude to the postmodern version, and for some theorists its beginning — the avant-garde becomes kitschy and kitsch becomes avant-gardey. Pop art is a triumph of marketing — the marketing of the avant-garde, and the use of the avant-garde as an instrument of collective marketing.

Thus, Wesselmann uses found objects and everyday signs in his "Great American Nude" series. The nude herself is abstracted into schematic nakedness, with such erotic zones as lips, nipples and loins left intact. They are not only the focus of sexual attention but visceral punctuation marks on a vacuous cliché. Similarly, Lichtenstein brings out the abstract dimension of the comic strip, making it more visually complex by heightening its design. He adds drama to his already dramatic, all-Americanized themes — love and war, more particularly, sex and death, as *We Rose Up Slowly*. . . (1964) and *Blam* (1962) make clear (including the war between the sexes and the sexiness of war) — by representing them in boldly contrasting colors and shapes. The Ben-Day dots characteristic of the comic strips of his day become an abstract field on which his everyday figures float like mirages, making them strangely magical. Lichtenstein has presented isolated details of his works — explosions, for example — as abstract ornaments, in a tour de force demonstration of his visual wit. But at the same time, this trivializes abstraction as well as his subject matter. Pop art may have begun as a hard-hitting commentary on American society, but the more pretentiously artistic it becomes — the more it becomes a critical commentary on art, that is, the more it becomes art about art — the less relevance it has as social criticism.

Oldenburg's sculptures are an important example of this. Suggesting the "big" place objects have in American life, Oldenburg transforms them into arty "performances," in a brilliant reprise of Dadaism and Surrealism. Hard objects become soft, small objects become gigantic, and all objects become grotesquely unfamiliar. It is a brilliant tour de force, but the social point gets lost in the artistic wit. The objects are ultimately pawns in a conceptual theater. Oldenburg was, in fact, a conceptual nihilist from the beginning. Responding to an invitation "to participate in a city outdoor sculpture show[,] he 1) sug-

gests calling Manhattan a work of art, 2) proposes a scream monument wherein a piercing scream is broadcast through the streets at 2 a.m., and 3) finally has a 6' x 6' x 3' trench dug behind the Metropolitan Museum by union gravediggers, under his supervision, and then filled up again."⁷⁷ The conceptual artist Douglas Huebler once said: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."⁷⁸ — unless, of course, they're corny objects, like those Oldenburg made.

The one work that seems to successfully integrate populist imagery and modernist style, with no loss of social consequence, is Rosenquist's *F-111* (1965), a magnificent construction of Baudelaire-like correspondences — ambiguously equivalent visual tropes that function as objective correlatives of subjective ambivalence — are used to satirize America's military power. The F-111 fighter airplane has indeed a charismatic marketing-media personality. Rosenquist's installation of paintings on aluminum — the outer skin of the F-111 — is a triumph of art as well as criticality.

Part 4

With Minimalism, avant-garde art became a matter of diminishing visual returns — something that Constructivism, which Minimalism claimed as a legitimating ancestor, never envisaged. This devaluation and undermining of the visual became complete with Conceptual art.

What one saw in Conceptual works — when there was something to see — was the ashes of visibility. The point is made decisively clear by Joseph Kosuth's 1992 Documenta installation in Kassel's Neue Galerie. Draping a number of 19th-century sculptures in black drop cloths, as though mourning the death of the sculptural object, Kosuth littered the drop cloths and walls with quotations about art. They were from all kinds of sources, and broadly philosophical, with little reference and relevance to particular works of art. Philosophy covers a multitude of ignorances, especially about empirical particulars, and Kosuth's philosophical installation — he acknowledged his Conceptual art's dependence on philosophy from the beginning — was a dramatic show of indifference to the empirical reality of art.

It was also indifferent to the human significance — symbolic import — of art. Kosuth, who famously said that material objects were trivial illustrations of abstract ideas, and that only the ideas were the art, offered ideas of art that were impossible to illustrate, and preposterous in themselves. Kosuth's conceptual art is a tour de force of nihilism masquerading as profound understanding. Nonetheless, it makes a point implicit in avant-garde art from the beginning: the "impossibility" of art, particularly high visual art in a world saturated with visual information, however lacking in what Jung called "primordial vision." It has been argued that avant-garde art was an attempt to

create a new primordial vision of existence to replace the old one offered by religion. Kosuth's Conceptual art shows the failure of this ambition — the bankruptcy of the ideal of art as an alternative religion.

To put this a different way, if Pop art can be understood as high art's homage and submission to popular culture, in acknowledgement that it was better to join an enemy with which one could not compete than be slaughtered, then Conceptual art can be understood as high art's suicide in acknowledgement not only of its psychosocial irrelevance but also its meaninglessness. Its need to be taken over and supplanted by philosophy — Hegel thought this was inevitable, that is, consciousness, knowing itself, would become a matter of pure ideas in no need of materialization to become self-evident — follows from its loss of purpose in the modern world. Art was beside the point of modern life — it could never feel secure in an age of science and technology — but philosophy was never beside the point, because it always had the last word, like some *deus ex machina*. If the owl of philosophy flies at dusk, as has been said, then the philosophicalization of art that occurs in Conceptual art symbolizes the night that is falling on art. Owls are predatory birds, and in Conceptual art philosophy preys on art, picking it to death. Perhaps more crucially, Conceptual art is the form that art's existential neurosis takes, to use Viktor Frankl's term for the sense of meaninglessness that depreciates life — including the life of art. I am suggesting that Conceptual art is the death rattle of art, an indication that it has lost vitality and inner necessity, to use Kandinsky's term. It began to die with Pop art — the first example of what Kaprow called "postart" (for him, Warhol was the major example of the postartist or, as Kaprow also called him, the nonartist) — and achieved intellectual rigor *mortis* with Conceptual art. Strange as it may seem to say, when art became a consumer good, it became ripe for intellectualization, as though being taken over by philosophy could save it from itself rather than complete its reification.

Conceptual art also signals the crisis of representation that was responsible for avant-garde art from the beginning. The "impossibility" of art is tied to this crisis, that is, the recognition of the difficulty of making a representation adequate to modern life led to the realization that it was impossible to make art, which is at bottom what Conceptual art is about. Traditional representational art is unequal to the revolutionary dynamics of the modern world, which was initially suggested by increasingly raw, pure gesture. However spontaneous and personal, such gesture had a certain abstract intensity, but this missed the representational point: gesture is not a comprehensive, totalizing representation of the modern experience, however much it evokes modern energy. In Boccioni's *The City Rises*, we see traditional, intelligible structured representation in the process of changing into modern, unintelligible gestural representation. Slowly but surely the representation of destabilizing modern movement begins to replace the representation of a stable world. But the result

is inconclusive — the picture is torn between traditional and modernized representation, more generally, between conflicting world pictures. Not only are the two modes of representation incommensurate, just as the traditional and modern worlds are incommensurate, but Boccioni seems uncertain about which to prefer. Although a self-proclaimed modern realist, his works also have a residue of traditional idealism. As he said, he wanted to eternalize modern sensation, but eternity is unchanging while modern sensation is always changing. He was in an impossible predicament — a predicament that suggested the impossibility of an adequate representation of revolutionary modern life.

It may seem strange to say so, but this predicament is at the core of Kosuth's art, although it takes a quite different form — the form of the inadequacy and finally impossibility of representation, and with that the impossibility of art. Kosuth's most famous work *One and Three Chairs* makes the point clearly. There is no preferred, absolute representation of the chair: the chair, its dictionary definition, and its photograph are incommensurate, however much they acknowledge the same thing. They're all equally valid and equally inadequate. The perception of the material chair itself is not an adequate representation of it, and its verbal and visual representations seem to be beside the point of its materiality, however much they seem to denote — or is it connote? — it. If perceptual experience, a pictorial record and conceptual language fail the material object, then its representation is beside its material point. Or else its materiality is beside the point of its representation, which is the only way we "know" it. If art is supposed to be representation at its most consummate — a grand synthesis of perceptual experience, pictorial record and, implicitly, concepts — then art is impossible, because perceptual experience, pictorial record and concepts are at odds, and at odds with the material object they claim to represent. The perception, picture and concept of the object do not converge on it — inform its material reality, as it were — but go their own representational ways. Kosuth's piece is meant to show that art has fallen from its heights and can't be put back together again. He shows its disintegration into representational fragments, all of which attempt to mediate the immediate material chair but none of which do so in an absolutely convincing way. The discrepancy between the experienced thing to be represented and the mode of representation is the starting point for Conceptual art. Conceptual language became Kosuth's metier because it made no pretense of representational adequacy, as perceiving and picturing seemed to. If art was a concept, it need not concern itself with vision and imagination, only with the ironies and contradictions inherent in every effort at conceptualization, and with the differences between incommensurate modes of representation.

Kosuth may be the official inauguration of conceptual art, but the work of Beuys and Smithson is conceptual — grounded in a certain idea of art — with no sacrifice of expressivity, materiality and human consequence. Hu-

man trauma is implicit in Smithson's earthworks as it is in Beuys' performances. The sublime scale of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is meant to heal the spectator as much as the intimate scale of the sleds in Beuys' *The Pack* (1969). Walking along the *Spiral Jetty*, in effect at the edge of the world, one has a self-transformative transcendental experience. One is in the great beyond, liberated from the cares of the lifeworld. One is immersed in the cosmos, healed by the magic of its delirious colors and recurrent forms. The earth spiral coordinates with the spiral nebula and the spiral that is the cochlea of the ear: the spiral is a universal form, at once macrocosmic and microcosmic. Smithson's work is an abstract American version of what has been called the therapeutic landscape, and Beuys' work is a German version of shamanistic ritual, involving identification with nature, in the service of community health, as the Volkswagen bus suggests. Both artists are nature mystics — spiritual artists for whom nature is living spirit, indeed, the only source of spontaneous life in the modern world. Whatever their ecological import, Smithson's works signal a romantic return to Mother Earth, the source of strength, as the myth of Antaeus indicates. Beuys is also a romantic, but a modern German romantic: the fat and felt with which the sleds are equipped — along with a flashlight to see in the dark — are the animal materials that healed his war-shattered self and body.

What is important about the sculpture of Smithson and Beuys is what cannot be seen in it yet which is implicit, and which can even be understood, from a dialectical point of view, as its secret essence: the life-draining urban environment, whose traumatic effect Smithson's art tries to undo and reverse, and the life-defeating second world war, whose traumatic effect Beuys' art tries to undo and reverse. Their art is rooted in disillusionment with the modern world, represented by the crowded city for Smithson and by total war for Beuys. If, as Greenberg wrote, avant-garde art rose on a wave of materialistic optimism, Smithson and Beuys show it collapsing in spiritual pessimism. There is a strange coincidence between Beuys' near-death in a 1943 airplane crash — his fighter plane was shot down over the Russian steppes — and Smithson's 1973 death when his airplane malfunctioned while he was filming the *Spiral Jetty* from it. To me, Smithson's death signals the end of avant-garde art, at least authentic avant-garde art, which is officially understood to have begun with Manet's 1862 gestural painting of the Tuileries Garden — a major park in the city of Paris, like Central Park in New York City. For Smithson, Frederick Law Olmstead, who conceived and created Central Park, was the greatest American artist, as he writes in his essay on Olmstead's "dialectical landscape." Beuys, who died in 1986, can be understood as the last great Symbolist. Symbolism emphasized art's dependence on the unconscious and its healing potential.

Manet's painting, which was described in his own day as a "patch-work" of gestures, is disintegrative in import, however intact its figures and

spontaneous the gestures. Nature forms a backdrop to the figures, but it subtly informs them, bringing them to a spontaneous life they would not otherwise have outdoors, and certainly not have indoors. Without it, they would fall flat, becoming pasteboard performers going through the motions of life on a social stage — artificial human beings in all but name. Nature is no longer inhibited by the presence of figures in Smithson's work. It is no longer ancillary to them. Society has disappeared from it. There is no longer any sense of confinement and artificiality. The entropic non-sites represent them — the mirror is perhaps the most important one for Smithson, as his Yucatan mirror installation indicates (each mirror was in effect a station of the cross) — while the site-specific works mark the open space of nature, just as the work of Albert Bierstadt and other 19th-century painters of the great American Western outdoors did. The site-specific works take their monumentality from nature's own majesty. They blend into it, and with time — geological time, which fascinated Smithson, for it was the closest thing on earth to eternity — they dissolve into it. Smithson expected the *Spiral Jetty* to dissolve in the Great Salt Lake into which it extended, and in which it was often submerged, even as he regarded its spiral shape — relentlessly moving yet tightly coiled like a snake about to spring — as an ecstatic symbol of life in the world of man-made death beyond it.

Set apart like Stonehenge — an implicit model — the *Spiral Jetty* represents the cosmos and, subliminally, the reabsorption of man in the cosmos. For, just as the center of Stonehenge was a place of sacrifice to the gods, so the end of Smithson's jetty, which is at its center — a snake with a tail in its mouth is an ancient symbol of cosmic completeness — is implicitly a sacrificial altar. Nonetheless, it remains a sanctuary — a kind of cathedral of nature, even bizarre hortus conclusus, in which one can commune with oneself as well as the cosmos — and symbol of existential integrity, like Stonehenge. The *Spiral Jetty* is not simply a colossal Minimalist work made of earth materials, but a symbol of the self as well as of the cosmos with which it must merge or ground itself to become authentic. The *Spiral Jetty* symbolizes the transcendental perspective the self must have to realize its potential on earth. Only when the self knows and accepts its place in the cosmos can it become truly creative. For Smithson, the natural cosmos inspires the self, rather than reminds it of its depressing insignificance.

The animal fat and felt in which Beuys' Tartar rescuers wrapped him to restore his body's warmth and keep him alive, emotionally as well as physically, are also symbols of life in a world of man-made death. Like the *Spiral Jetty*, they imply mystical merger with self-restorative nature, if on a more intimate scale. And like it they have a gestural quality. They are as malleable as Smithson's earth, and Beuys often uses them to make a grand expressive gesture. His placement of a pile of fat in the corner of a chair and in the corner of a room has the same defiant symbolic import as Smithson's earthen spiral.

Beuys' installations have a similar enigmatic quality — there is an oracular dimension to both Smithson and Beuys — and deliberate gravity, as though to create an introspective mood. Thus, fat and felt are also instruments of psychic transcendence for Beuys. They are as ambiguously universal and personal as Smithson's earth.

As Smithson's essay on the entropic character of Minimalism suggests — he began as a Minimalist, a very strange one, for his specific objects always had subjective import and conveyed spiritual ambition (they were stepped like the Mayan pyramids, which he later visited) — he was preoccupied with death from the beginning. The essay led Judd to repudiate him, which no doubt liberated Smithson to pursue his interest in nature. The scale of nature seemed more authentic than the scale of the art gallery or museum, which lent the Minimalist specific object a grandeur and significance it did not always deserve. Indeed, Smithson was more influenced by the Museum of Natural History, as he said, than the Museum of Modern Art, the latest edition of art history. His essay on the Passaic River, one of the oldest on the North American continent, indicates his belief in the self-cleansing or self-healing power of nature, but it fixates on the pollution of the river that killed almost all the life in it. In their different ways, both Smithson and Beuys had near-death experiences, explicitly physical as well as emotional in Beuys' case — he had a breakdown after the war, working in the fields and making religiously inspired art as part of a program of recovery. Interestingly, Smithson's early Surrealist-Expressionist paintings suggest a similar attempt at self-healing through artistic practice and encounter with nature. Both Smithson and Beuys are desperate biophiliacs working in a situation of universal social necrophilia. In their different ways, they resist society's suicidal tendencies even as they express the depressive tendencies — the emotional entropy — evident in life. Their art is a strange blend of the anti-libidinal and libidinal, morbidity and health, death and resurrection. The *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake — a place that reeks of death and sterility — is a symbol of both, as are Beuys' more fertile fat and felt. The work of both Smithson and Beuys has a life-affirmative quality even as it dwells on death, and a death-affirmative quality however determined it is to assert life. It is this profound ambiguity that gives their art its great expressive power.

Beuys was brought up in a death-obsessed society. He was a Hitler Youth, and served in the war as a dive bomber pilot, and was wounded five times. At the same time, he had fantasies of himself as a nomadic shepherd intuitively in touch with nature in all its moods — a romantic conception acted out again and again in his art. After the war ended, he "wanted to take in everything that was forbidden during Hitler's reign," as he said,⁹ and what was forbidden was the life of the spirit. He was deeply influenced by the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, and read James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*,

declaring that "what permeates things with life in Joyce's works . . . is almost always something spiritual."¹⁰ "The process of expansion" in the work is "a spiritual form of movement." Joyce's "attempts to show the coexistence of levels of consciousness or to expose the unconscious realm of dreams"¹¹ remained a basic influence on Beuys' art. He also thought of his art as a spiritual movement involving self-restoration as well as a kind of dream in which one establishes contact with what is deepest in one's nature. It is the dream or visionary state one has to experience to restore oneself, that is, to be reborn and recover the integrity and authenticity one lost conforming to death-infected society.

Beuys' belief that art could be an instrument of self-transformation and life-regeneration, a way of restoring the warmth of life lost to the life-killing coldness of society — it led him to repudiate Duchamp's "silence," implicitly his indifference, which Beuys apparently regarded as a fatal coldness — is evident in his theory of social sculpture, that is, sculpture that brought the warmth of life to society in a kind of Promethean gesture. Beuys' theory is derived from Steiner's 1923 lecture, "About Bees." Beuys writes, "The heat organism of the bee colony is without a doubt the essential element of connection between the wax and fat and the bees. What had interested me about bees, or rather about their life system, is the total heat organization of such an organism and the sculpturally finished forms within this organization. On one hand bees have this element of heat, which is a very strong fluid element, and on the other hand they produce crystalline sculptures; they make regular geometric forms. Here we already find something of a sculptural theory, as we do in the corners of fat, which also appear in certain situations in a geometric context. But the actual character of the exiting heat is a fluid element, whereby the fat is affected by the heat and thus flows off. From this undefined element of motion, by way of a diminishing element of movement, surfaces a form which appears in abstract, geometric configurations. This is practiced regularly by bees."¹²

As Adriani, Konnertz and Thomas note, Steiner's view that "the change of the fatty material of wax to a crystallized system of honeycombs" — "the absolutely amorphous" into a geometrical form "which looks like the negative of a rock crystal," demonstrating the "polarity. . . of life and death" — became Beuys' vision of the "primary sculptural process."¹³ But for Beuys, like the bee, sculpture was a two-way process: the honeycomb could be melted by what Steiner called "spiritual warmth" into honey — the purest, most nourishing food of life — when the colony needed it to survive and flourish. In his performances — and he regarded every one of his works as a performance (wax and felt were surrogates for his own bodily presence) — Beuys in effect used his body to melt "cold, hardened" socio-geometrical forms into seemingly "chaotic, flowing," life-radiating and life-giving organic substances. Sculp-

ture, and more broadly art, was about the dialectic of life and death, and the use of seemingly dead, yet "heat sensitive materials such as wax and fat,"¹⁴ that could be warmed to life, to symbolize the possibility of self and social renewal — the renewal that the narcissistically injured German self, particularly Beuys' seriously injured German self and body, desperately needed.

Beuys became a kind of Prometheus and Christ in one, taking upon himself the sin of being a German — a Nazi, no less — while offering the fiery warmth of his living body as a means of salvation. Anointing himself with honey, Beuys resurrects his dead German self even as he cradles it, in the form of a dead hare, in his arms. As Beuys' performances indicate, he is one of the first body artists, and perhaps the only one who offered his body as a sacrifice to a whole society with the hope of restoring it to emotional vitality and human credibility. Beuys was in fact socially active — his involvement in the Free University in Düsseldorf, as well as his participation in peace demonstrations, are perhaps the most telling example of his social activism — but he is best understood as a primordial conceptualist, as Karin Lingreen suggests: "Beuys' total creation appears to be a historical attempt to bridge the gap between atavism and scientific achievement, which in reality threatens to explode the world of modern man. He still has the courage to believe in the single free man and in a transformation and integration of archetypal ideas in today's world of ideas."¹⁵

This is clearly a long way from the Fluxus movement with which he was briefly associated — Kaprow was one of its leaders, and it was in fact a determined attempt to completely blur the boundary between art and life, indeed, to treat life as art (which seemed to mean to make a kind of spectacle of life) — and which led him to be regarded as a Neo-Dadaist. He denied that he was one, just as he denied that he was a performer mechanically following a script, which is what he implied Robert Morris was when the two of them performed the same piece at the same time, Morris in New York, Beuys in Düsseldorf. He was, and remains, the major German artist who emerged in the postwar period, in part because he remains the most consistently and seriously anti-Nazi, perhaps because he had directly participated in the Nazi totalitarianism which destroyed Germany. Beuys' art could not help but be haunted by the dead past. It stalked his art, even as he struggled to free himself and Germany from its brutal grip. He attempted to work through the misery of modern German history by regressing to ancient Nordic ideas, as he acknowledged. Beuys' art is premised on guilt as well as the will to primordial or "animal" power — "animal existence" is "a constantly present element" in his art, as has been said¹⁶ — just as it was in the Nazi regime. No doubt Beuys wanted to reconcile the instinctive and the intellectual in himself — reversing the loss of instinctive will that Nietzsche thought was responsible for decadence — but to become an animal is, after all, a way of losing one's humanity.

There is a grandiosity and showmanship in Beuys which suggests that he shared in the fascination with spectacle that seems inescapable in late modernity, as both the Nazis and the Pop artists suggest. But the spectacle he makes of himself is not as infantile and ingratiating as the mass culture spectacle that Pop art takes as its point of departure, nor as intellectually pretentious as Conceptual art — however intellectual Beuys clearly is (like Smithson). Beuys' performances are psychodramas — he explicitly calls them “psycho-analytic actions” — and, as such, redemptive of art as well as of history, for they suggest that art can heal the deep emotional wounds history inflicts, even if art itself looks wounded when Beuys performs it.

Part 5

Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1970) has a climactic place in what Gustav René Hocke called “the tradition of irregularity.”¹⁷ Hesse's work — a kind of space web, which can be understood as a three-dimensional gestural installation, taking as its point of departure Pollock's all-over painting on glass, but without the glass (yet one can see right through it) — was made in the year of her death, at the age of 34. Spiders that spin eccentric webs are generally thought to be sick and disturbed, and Hesse's web — one may recall that the spider was originally a woman who dared to compete with a goddess, and was punished for her efforts by being transformed into a spider — seems particularly sick and disturbed. Its threads are chaotically entangled; it hangs precariously in space, as though rendered at the moment it was falling; it seems to collapse in on itself. Hesse's crazed web has torn itself apart, leaving in its wake incoherent shreds of dangling ligament. It is a disorienting piece, indeed, an embodiment — but the piece lacks body, and suggests a process of disembodiment — of disorientation. Horizontally spread in space, it nonetheless remains spatially indeterminate, as though unable to reconcile itself to the existence of space. It articulates emptiness, even as it suggests the horror of emptiness.

Hesse's piece is an expressionistic tour de force carried to disintegrative absurdity. She herself has said that “absurdity is the key word” for understanding her work and life. She is acutely aware of “contradictions and oppositions,” indeed, “the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites,” such as “order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small.” The opposites never reconcile in her art — she seems fascinated by their irreconcilability — however superficially they seem to. They are juxtaposed rather than integrated, as another 1970 untitled piece — a series of four geometrical shapes on a wall, two rectangular, two more or less square, each with two ropes dropping from their upper area to the floor — makes clear. Her art, then, is inwardly conflicted, and bespeaks her own inner conflicts — the conflicts of a woman

wounded by life. Dying young, Hesse became a feminist icon, like Sylvia Plath, but unlike Plath, Hesse was not a suicide, but rather the victim of a brain tumor that apparently was the result of her breathing the fumes of the molten fiberglass she used in many of her works. For me, the important thing about Hesse is not that she was a woman, although that undoubtedly influenced her sense of herself and her body, as *Ishtar* (1965) — a rather anorexic goddess of love and fertility — suggests, but rather that she had an unstable sense of herself, that is, suffered from deep narcissistic problems, indeed, radical self-doubt, not to say annihilation anxiety. Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)* conveys annihilation, destruction, self-loss, including the loss of any sense of body ego. It is about being ungrounded, feeling groundless or unsupported, disappearing in an abyss, indeed, becoming an empty abyss. It is about panic.

The work is not a safety net, and this suggests a certain skepticism about art: It could not rescue her from herself, however much it was a means of articulating her sense of self. Her rope is not Ariadne's thread leading one out of the labyrinth, but an expression of her sense of being lost in it. Hesse spent most of her life in psychoanalysis, suggesting that her works, like Beuys' works, can be understood as psychoanalytic performances, that is, material enactments of emotional conflicts. Her anguished objects, like those of Beuys, express her sense of being a victim. Indeed, like Beuys, she was all but destroyed by the Nazis, if for a very different reason: her German parents were Holocaust survivors. In a sense, her works enact what they experienced, including the constant threat of death. For all their latent organization, there is a sense of arbitrariness to her quasi-Minimalist works that suggests the sudden arbitrariness of death in the concentration camps.

The awkward sensuality of her works, with their unfinished latex and fiberglass surfaces, which are like seared tissue, suggests skin ego problems — an uncertain sense of boundaries, both inner and outer. The *Untitled (Rope Piece)* is in a sense “unbounded,” with no clear inner divisions and outer limits. The work seems to expand infinitely, as has been said, but it is a peculiarly aborted infinity — infinity without sublimity, unlike the Romantic infinity. Indeed, like the Minimalist works that influenced her — like Smithson, she understood them in emotional rather than strictly formal terms, as her association of Andre's metal plate pieces with “the concentration camp” suggests (thus implying the authoritarian regimentation Hesse struggled to escape even as she invariably acknowledged it) — her bizarre Minimalism, however expressive, conveys a sense of the bankruptcy and barrenness of the sublime. Like her early boxes, with bolts protruding on the inside, as though they were torture chambers, they are death traps. Hesse's works are about death — death as an adventure, as in the chaotic *Untitled (Rope Piece)*; death as a threat to the body, as in the emaciated *Ishtar*, with her unnourishing, stringy breasts; death as a persistently contingent presence, infecting every object, as in the irregu-

larly placed and misshaped objects that form many eccentric series. Death distorts regularity into irregularity: To show the irregularity in regularity — the uncanny within the uniform — is to show death. And the irregularity is always there, as the philosopher Francis Bacon suggested when he said that there was always something strange in beauty. Strangeness underlies beauty, which is an attempt to manage the uncanny. It eventually destroys beauty from within. Death has gotten under Hesse's skin, unnerving and unsettling her.

Hesse was a German-American artist, sharing in the European tradition of disharmony that Hocke thought was inherently metamorphic and regenerative, yet also an inventive American materialist fascinated by synthetic materials that defied and outsmarted nature. Her irregular works are "ingenious mutations of the problematic," to use Hocke's words and, as such, ironically organic. But they are also unapologetically inorganic — unlike Beuys' social sculptures, which use natural, living materials, Hesse's asocial sculptures use unnatural, lifeless materials (which is why there is an air of pseudo-sentience to her pieces) — suggesting the anti-naturalistic tendency and technological bias evident in Constructivism and carried to an extreme by Minimalism. Hocke observed that the nonconformist irregular suggests the abstruse, puzzling, secretive and numinous — "primordial truth" and "personal freedom" — but also implies reckless arbitrariness and self-destructive contrariness. Hesse found her True Creative Self in the expressive contrariness of irregularity, using it to resist the compliant regularity of Minimalism, which implicitly conformed to technocratic modernity, even as she celebrated technology's invention of artificial nature. Thus her art remains stuck in contradictions and oppositions — in unresolved dialectical expression, which is exactly what makes it representative of the human condition.

Lynda Benglis and Louise Bourgeois convey a similar sense of what might be called female surface and bizarre bodiliness — but without the sense of inner contradiction and radical absurdity that make Hesse's work convincing. Their sculptural objects have an anecdotal quality that is antithetical to dialectical creativity. While Hesse reveals the negative dialectic of the new expressionism, they maintain the positive approach of the old expressionism. That is, their art offers the promise of subject-object reconciliation rather than the reality of their irreconcilability. They make material seem hopeful rather than hopeless, as Hesse does. Their abstract sculptures have a certain limited expressiveness, even as the abstract paintings of Brice Marden and Robert Ryman seem to strip material surface of all expressive associations. In their hands, material surface becomes an elegantly performed formal act. Marden's surface seems atmospheric, Ryman's surface seems to have depth. But these are expressive illusions: Their work is exquisitely studied — stylized color field in the one case, stylized gesturalism in the other. We are far from the perverse, dangerous, even tragic surfaces of Hesse's fiberglass and latex, from

her unraveling, dangerously dangling rope, from her absurdly visceral structures. The point is that every detail is under control in Marden and Ryman, and, for that matter, in Benglis and Bourgeois — nothing is left to experimental chance, not even the dense gestures of Ryman and the epic spills of Benglis.

Unlike Hesse, none of these artists risks the loss of control implicit in the radically irregular — a bizarre accumulation of incommensurates (Hesse's works are accumulations of objects rather than compositions, the series being a found, even nominal composition) — however irregular their works seem to be. Their irregularity is sporting, as it were, part of the game of painting, unlike the irregularity of Hesse, which has an air of painful, elusive self-exposure. Irregularity is not simply a way of highlighting material for Hesse, but the sign of insight into the tragic singularity of the self.

It may seem strange to say so, but Marden and Ryman ideologize paint by making it seem completely real, thus undermining its expressive suggestiveness. They do not work it through to make an expressive point, for all the manipulative subtlety of their handling. Denying painting's evocative power — the power to create subjective illusions, altogether irrelevant not to say unreal from the perspective of objective materiality — they destroy the dialectic of fresh surface and hallucinatory depth innate to it.

The result is a sacred painting that has lost its gnostic power of illumination. It is painting that has become objectively comprehensible — lost its mystery by becoming completely secular and positivist, to use Greenberg's word. Their paintings are apocryphal scripture, more pointedly, the shells of a temple of art the living inner god has abandoned. They are splendid constructions but no longer uncanny places haunted by the incomprehensible. However much we meditate on them, they give us nothing but their beauty — a perfect beauty, since it has lost its strangeness. It is the beauty of a eunuch, rather than Hesse's tragic beauty.

Notes

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 107.

² Mikel Dufrenne, "Why Go to the Movies?," *In the Presence of the Sensuous: Essays in Aesthetics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1990), 131, 133-34.

³ Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape Portrait Still-Life* (New York: Schocken, 1963), 231.

⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New

York: Henry Holt, 1947), 69-70.

⁷ Lucy Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ Quoted in Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, eds., *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1979), 13.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, 41-42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 211.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur* (Hamburg: Rowolt, 1979), 8.

Chapter 8: Conflicting and Conflicted Identities: The Confusion of Self and Society; The Eighth Decade

... human existence straddles the gap between individual and social ways of being from the beginning to the end. ... individuality emerges from a state of primary oneness, then into a primitive way of relatedness — at first confined to an I-you relatedness — which is the primary social unit. One aspect of the dilemma of human identity is that outside a relatedness to another one it collapses. Only by contrasting themselves one to another can human beings become separate, can they acquire or create an identity. . . . This special “existential” imbalance is . . . the motive behind the need for a “support system” for human beings, who must maintain their capacity for separateness, but cannot exist without being embedded in patterns of relatedness. The societal order in which human beings live may constitute this kind of support system. . . . I believe the facts support the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the specific forms of “being human” that develop within a particular societal structure, and the conditions for survival within the environment with which a group has to cope. Thus, under certain conditions, some ways of “being human” become preferred to others.

Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Dilemma of Human Identity*¹

Every person and every group harbors a negative identity as the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or which his group has taught him to perceive as the mark of fatal “difference” in sex role or race, in class or religion. In the event of aggravated crises, an individual (or, indeed, a group) may despair of the ability to contain these negative elements in a positive identity. A specific rage can be aroused wherever identity development thus loses the promise of an assured wholeness. . . .

Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment*²

Whenever information disrupts consciousness by threatening its goals we have a condition of inner disorder, or psychic entropy, a disorganization of the self that impairs its effectiveness. . . . The opposite state from the condition of psychic entropy is optimal experience. When the information that keeps coming into aware-

ness is with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*³

There are two works that seem to me telling of the 1970s: Sigmar Polke's sardonic *Carl Andre in Delft*, ca. 1968 — an important year for the counterrevolution against sociopolitical orthodoxy, as the May riots in Paris, the riots provoked by the Chicago Seven, and the Vietnam protests in the United States indicate — and Judy Chicago's feminist *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). However different, both rebel against the tyranny of Minimalism, the purest — and emptiest — abstract art ever made. For Chicago it was a symbol of masculine as well as aesthetic authoritarianism. For Polke it was a symbol of America's absolutist rule of modern art. For both the American female artist and the German male artist Minimalism was the inexpressive dead end of art. Both vehemently attacked it, Polke using irony, Chicago using ideology, to assert a new individuality — woman's individuality and independence in Chicago's case, German individuality and independence in Polke's case. Thus the oppressed rose up against the art and social establishment. They questioned and demystified — indeed, discredited and debunked — the official system of dominance and exclusivity. What had hitherto been uncritically accepted as aesthetically and culturally superior was unceremoniously relegated to irrelevance. A supposedly major art was shown to be minor, and the vanquished Germans no longer humbly emulated the victorious Americans. It was a truly great moment in modern art and social history.

For both Polke and Chicago the psychosocial use of abstract art was more important than its formal purity. Its adversarial, critical use counted for more than in its esoteric interior logic. This was undoubtedly revolutionary with respect to Minimalism, but it was an idea that went back to the avant-garde beginnings of abstraction, when formal and critical as well as intellectual and emotional concerns were inseparable. But, ironically, their work also signaled the end of avant-gardism and the onset of postmodernism. Whatever else it is about, postmodernism means that the avant-garde revolution is over. The work of Polke and Chicago does not further that revolution — it is neither formally nor conceptually innovative, however creative — but uses avant-garde ideas in the name of social revolution, or at least to raise social consciousness. Polke's ingenious demonstration of the inconsistency — not to say duplicity and idiosyncrasy — of perception is essentially Cubist, and Chicago's assertive, inspiring (if also gross) geometry can be traced back to Constructivism. For them the avant-garde had become history: like other postmodernists, they looked backward to it, as a resource, rather than forward to its next stage. It was no longer new, but, if not obsolete, a familiar story, still exciting but no longer incomprehensible.

This was not because its pursuit of enigma and purity had run out of creative steam, nor because it had finally been institutionalized and thus become the victim of its own success. The avant-garde lost credibility and value because it failed in its ultimate mission of aesthetic transcendence. It was unable, despite its best efforts, to insulate the individual from history, sparing him the annihilative emotional effects of barbarism by affording aesthetic salvation. But avant-garde art left a legacy of aesthetic innovation that seemed valuable in its own right. Its ideas and forms could be used for “impure,” commonplace — and communal — purposes. Thus abstract art, which was understood to be the universal fundament of art — however much its aesthetics dialectically arose out of the historical necessity of defending the individual from historical reality — began to be used to confront it. If, as Greenberg argued, abstract art developed through self-criticism — through hyperconsciousness of its medium — that critical consciousness could now be directed toward the historical society in which it developed.

The postmodernist use of modernist ideas and forms in the works of Polke and Chicago was what might be called a “soft revolution” against what had become socially reactionary as well as hardened art gospel. This may have been unintentional in the case of pure art, although its advocates proclaimed its superiority to “impure” representational and especially banal social message art. But the view that art made by men — especially supposedly macho Abstract Expressionist art (conceived as a display of virility rather than raw creativity) — was inherently superior was inseparable from patriarchal society. For both Polke and Chicago, the assumption that pure art and masculinist art were the “naturally” best art was a conspiracy protecting vested aesthetic and social interests. They deliberately went against the grain of what had become ingrained beliefs about the basis of artistic and human significance. Their postmodernist use of modernist ideas and forms stripped them of their inner necessity, indicating that they were not as historically inevitable as they were supposed to be. They became simply another section of the open-ended museum without walls — an infinitely extendable psychosocial space in which all works are emotionally available and of speculative use to the unprejudiced, open-minded artist — that art history became in postmodernity. It was no longer a closed system with one high road but an open system with many byroads. In the postmodern museum, avant-garde art lost its privileged position as the decisive break with all tradition. It became simply one tradition among many, all of which could be artistically exploited to satisfy the concerns of creativity.

Polke comically transforms Andre’s Minimalist grid of metal plates into painted Dutch tiles, undermining their seriousness. Chicago’s huge triangular table has place settings for thirty-nine “great ladies,” to refer to the title of the series of paintings of queens that preceded *The Dinner Party*. Interestingly, Chicago’s work, a collaborative effort with craftswomen, also uses tiles:

there are 144 on the floor — the same number that Andre used in his early floor pieces, each a 12 by 12 foot square made of 12 by 12 inch squares (a regular version of Malevich's irregularly placed square within a square, indicating that Suprematism had become standardized) — in the center of the triangle. But there is a crucial difference: both Andre's metal plates and Polke's painted tiles are square, while Chicago's tiles are equilateral triangles, echoing the shape of the table. For Chicago the triangle is a symbol of the vagina, and it is vaginas — each monumental, assertive, projecting and vividly colored — that we see on each dinner plate. Instead of phallic power, we have vaginal power — or rather phallic vaginas, that is, the mythical vagina of all-powerful, goddess-like woman. These vaginas symbolize the creative achievement, against all social odds, of the women they belonged to, among them the African-American abolitionist-feminist Sojourner Truth and Emily Dickinson, the reclusive poet, as well as Georgia O'Keeffe (she was still alive when the work was made), whose flower forms have been interpreted as vaginal displays. They may have been an inspiration if not direct model for Chicago's more dynamic — indeed, vigorously Abstract Expressionist and sculptural — vaginas.

A key moment in Chicago's development was her bold decision, at once political and personal, to call the geometrical center of her abstract paintings a vagina, in effect giving them a gender identity. It was coincidental with her 1970 decision to change her surname from Gerowitz to Chicago in conscious repudiation of "male social dominance," as she said. Her family name was not for her, for it indicated that she had her identity only through patriarchal society. Combining her first name with the name of the place where she was born, like some male artists of the Italian Renaissance — Leonardo da Vinci, for example — she made it clear that, like them, she was an autonomous as well as socially representative individual, an individual associated with a collective but not taking her identity from it.

But what is perhaps most interesting about *The Dinner Party* is not its supposedly didactic feminist point — not to say its oddly masculinized version of the vagina, turning it into a symbol of power and authority (something like the clenched fist Black Panther salute) — but rather its appropriation of avant-garde modes usually identified with masculinist authenticity and creativity. If anything symbolizes the triumph of the masculine will to artistic power it is Abstract Expressionism, and if anything symbolizes masculine toughmindedness and highmindedness — as distinct from proverbial female fickleness and vanity, indicative of her "lower nature" — it is geometrical abstraction, especially in its Minimalist form. Chicago's appropriation of conceptually sophisticated, emotionally neutered, purist Minimalism, evident in the tiles and the serial ordering of the place settings (each essentially the same however differentiated the vagina on each plate), and of visceral, emotionally primitive, gesturally raw Abstract Expressionism, evident in the vaginas — to

call them decorative is to miss their intensity — is an important early postmodernist attempt to reconcile apparently irreconcilable high modernist styles, as well as to put them to social if shocking use. The ambitious result is a kind of operatic total work of art, with score — Chicago's elaborate explanatory text — as well as visual music, loud and aesthetically harsh, for form had become ideologically explicit.

It is not so much the front-and-center placement of the vaginas, and the repetition that makes their presence even more insistent, that makes *The Dinner Party* artistically shocking and innovative — and even emotionally shocking and unsightly, for it takes what is usually hidden, in life as well as in traditional art, where modesty is a virtue signaled by Venus' hand blocking the view of her vagina — but the tense juxtaposition of a three-dimensionalized, activated circle and a passively flat (however "pointed") triangle. If analysis is the name of the modernist game, as has been said, then synthesis — the reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable styles — is the name of the postmodernist game, as different thinkers have argued. Chicago's work suggestively proposes a synthesis — a new unity of opposites — without dialectically achieving one. But she has made an important postmodernist point: she has shown that the opposites are part of the same abstract system. They form a socioaesthetic unit, as it were, with no loss of individuality. Their particularity is not so much compromised as shown to be part of a larger aesthetic whole — which saves each from becoming an academic cliché, the inevitable fate of even the most innovative style and concept.

So does their emblematic use. In a sense, Chicago fuses modernist formal clichés with gender social clichés to achieve a new revelation of female identity, even more, to suggest the bisexual dimension of all identity. As I have suggested, Chicago's vaginas are as masculine as they are feminine, indicating that neither masculinity nor femininity has emotional and social priority. The aggressivity of the former and the receptivity of the latter are opposite sides of the same emotional coin. One is not inherently superior to the other — a notion, which Chicago's unconscious seems to have, at odds with her very self-conscious, saber-rattling feminism, declaring the unequivocal superiority of women.

Polke's mischievous, sardonic appropriation of the Minimalist grid brings it down to social, indeed, populist earth, knocking the intellectual stuffing — not to say conceptual pretension — out of it. No longer are Andre's metal plates high art, but as banal and marketable as Delft tiles, a kitschy people's art. Like Andre's plates, they, too, are factory produced, if without the pretty ornament — a sad lack of cuteness which makes Andre's puritanical plates look more important than they are. Also, where Andre stereotypes the Suprematist square, so that it becomes an avant-garde cliché, the Delft tiles stereotype traditional seascapes and coats-of-arms, making them kitsch clichés.

The avant-garde Andre and the anonymous designer of Delft kitsch have more in common than one might suppose. With a deft nihilistic Dadaist twist, Polke calls Andre's bluff: his high class squares are no better than lowdown Delft designs — and even less attractive, picturesque and expressive, not to say emotionally defective. Thus high and low meet, and the low absorbs the high into it, and cancels it. Polke's tongue-in-cheek innocence — his witty light touch — makes it clear that Andre suffers from the Emperor's New Clothes self-deception typical of Minimalist-Conceptual art. Take an ordinary form, clothe it in a concept, and one thinks it has acquired new — avant-garde — majesty. But it is the same old form, as naked and dumb as the day it was found. Polke reverses the process: he de-conceptualizes Minimalism by revealing the banality of its geometrical forms, suggesting the bankruptcy and hollowness, not to say meaningless, of abstract art in general. By taking Andre's metal plates at face value he strips them of all artistic significance. Polke's clever piece is a kind of epigrammatic happening, ingeniously blurring the boundary between life and art with a facile economy of means. The punch line is that the slice of life one is left with — the casually lyric Delft tile — is more interesting and stimulating than the everyday found form — the pseudo-epic metal plate — mystified into boring art.

Polke continues his attack on abstract art in such works as *Moderne Kunst*, a spoof on gestural painting, and *Konstruktivistisch*, a mock geometrical painting (both 1968). They seem to parallel Roy Lichtenstein's '60s series of brushstroke paintings, which also cut Abstract Expressionism down to ironical size. Like Lichtenstein, Polke uses the so-called Ben Day dots characteristic of commercial printing. But Polke's surface looks much more tacky than mechanically reproduced, as such "Rasterbilder" (Screen pictures) as *Kartoffelköpfe* (Mao + LBJ) (Potato Heads) and *Knöpfe* (Buttons) (both 1965) indicate. Where Lichtenstein's *Little Big Painting* (1965) has a charismatically slick all-American surface — his grand gesture has a pre-fabricated, pre-packaged artificiality, stripping it of its spontaneity and individuality, implying that it is just another manufactured product, however customized — Polke's *Moderne Kunst* has a whimsical, insolent, cartoony look. Polke's work is much more subversive, especially because Lichtenstein theatricalizes the expressive gesture into a popular performance — all his objects become sideshows in a social spectacle — while Polke reduces it to inconsequential doodling. Also, Polke's Rasterbilder, however representational — they are derived from newspaper photographs — are weirdly abstract, giving them an uncanny, perverse aura, while Lichtenstein's Pop paintings are militantly representational, for all their designer abstraction look.

Polke is much more subtle and critical than Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein is an old-fashioned painter creating the illusion of an object in space, for all the fanfare of his abstract Ben Day dots — in effect an ornamental facade in

the Potemkin Village that Pop art is. In Polke the journalistic image — an image made for mass consumption, and pretending to be socially realistic — and abstract pattern ironically interpenetrate, turning the social image into a mirage-like illusion on the verge of dissipating. He thus uses the abstract underpinning that informs the image — indeed, out of which it is constructed — to debunk it. He in effect renders it meaningless by suggesting that it is far from the social truth, however factual and realistic it seems to be. Thus Polke uses abstraction — a kind of abstract if mechanical process — to punch holes in the representation of social reality — the dots are so many holes undermining the image they form — suggesting that it is a mass deception. Lichtenstein never achieves the ironic unity — perverse simultaneity — of pure abstract form and everyday mechanical representation that Polke does, which is why Polke's works remain enigmatic and tense for all their "superficiality" and "transparency." Lichtenstein's works are instantly comprehensible and formally simplistic in comparison. Polke is more influenced by late Picabia, as *Liebespaar I* (Lovers) (1965) and *Frau im Spiegel* (Woman at the Mirror) (1966) make clear, than by American popular culture realism, with its homage to the familiar and roots in mass culture spectacle.

Two works make Polke's ironical appreciation and debunking use of abstraction particularly clear: *Höhere Wesen befohlen* (Higher Beings commanded) (1969), a mock geometrical painting (it resembles one by Blinky Palermo, Polke's friend) with a sentence typed on it, and *Weiser Obelisk* (White Obelisk) (1968), which sets a geometrical structure in a field of skulls and bones. In the first work Polke mocks the pretension of abstraction: if all the higher beings command is that the upper right corner be painted black, then they aren't as inspired as they are supposed to be. Thus Polke turns abstraction into a kind of joke — a simpleminded exercise in conventional form — undermining its claims to transcendence and superiority. The second work is more devastating: an impossible choice is proposed, between purity, represented by geometrical perfection, and death, a powerful force in German history. Emblems of eternity and transience — the geometry looks like a grand illusion, the skulls and bones are grimly realistic — are juxtaposed in an unresolvable dialectic. The split between mystical perfection and human ugliness — between the sublime and the morbid — is a constant of Polke's art. Both are treated with Dadistic irreverence, rage and manic despair. Thus the sublime mixes with the ridiculous. They are impossible to distinguish in his art.

They mix with particular anguish in two of Polke's largest, most apocalyptic, confrontational works, *Das Grosse Schimpftuch* (The Large Cloth of Abuse) (1968) and the series of delirious paintings — an uncanny mix of all-over abstraction and irrational representation — called *Die Fahrt auf der Unendlichkeitsacht* (The Voyage to Infinity Outlawry) (1971). Both works are uninhibited self-portraits, as it were — highly emotional dream works of an

outlaw artist, apparently insane (certainly antisocial) or at least possessed by a disturbed daemon. The former, an expressionistic conceptual piece — the text is handwritten, personalizing it — hurls scurrilous insults at the spectator. The cloth is completely filled with bold black words, as though to overwhelm the spectator — imprint themselves on and blot out his mind.

The latter, a vision — or is it nightmare? — of profane figures and sacred geometrical structures in boundless, engulfing space, conveys profligate, wanton union with the devilishly divine, symbolized by the oddly cartoony face (sungod?, man in the moon?) in the center of the third picture. Polke offers a pataphysical explanation of the voyage, which resembles that of Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat* in its dissolute mysticism and savage exhilaration, but the space, paradoxically centrifugal and centripetal at once — there is an auratic circular center in the midst of the mess of magical, hallucinatory images, however displaced from the literal center of the huge field — is mythic and cosmic. It is as though we are looking at what Breton called Leonardo's paranoid wall gone crazy. It has become a dream screen tattooed with absurd images. These works, explosively maximalist, catalyzed the German, and more broadly European, rebellion against American Minimalism. They unite abstract surrealist fantasy and Dadaist nihilism — the Dadaist sense of catastrophe and the Surrealist sense of the power of the unconscious — in a way not seen since Max Ernst's late paintings. They signal the return and revitalization of the avant-garde visionary art that the Nazis had suppressed, and that, in its domesticated and dissected American form, all but lost its existential originality and authenticity, not to say human relevance.

Whatever else it is about, Polke's art, like so much of the German art that emerged in the '70s, regenerated the social contrariness and emotional bizarreness that had been declared degenerate and taboo by the Nazis. The new German art not only broke the taboo against irrational, perverse imagery — imagery that resonated with unconscious meaning ("pandemonium," as Georg Baselitz called it) — but against sociohistorical consciousness in art. American pure art had declared both irrelevant to the true, higher purpose of art. In their different ways, Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer, among others, use modernist methods to convey the depressing effect of the disaster Germany brought upon itself in the Second World War. Both are what might be called culturally narcissistic artists. They hold an artistic mirror up to the unconscious of their society, faithfully mirroring its self-destructiveness. They show its wounded body and broken spirit, reminding postwar Germany of what it would rather forget. They picture the ruins of German greatness, suggesting that it was never more than a myth. They are refreshingly if morbidly emotional in a society reluctant to acknowledge the suffering it has caused. They are the first truly tragic artists who appeared in any country after the Second World War. Their art, like that of other postwar German artists — some young,

like the Berlin *Heftige Malerei* (Vehement Painting) and the Cologne *Mühlheimer Freiheit* (a street name, suggestive of the social and expressive freedom they wanted), some older, like Horst Antes, Baselitz, Jörg Immendorf, Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, A. R. Penck and Gerhard Richter — transformed German negative identity into an optimal art experience. It is worth noting that Judy Chicago did the same with female negative identity: *The Dinner Party* transforms it, and the rage it arouses, into a positive identity and optimal experience of being human.

Adorno once wrote that “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death,” adding that “absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone.” The basic form of this negativity is “the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history”: “the individual has nothing but this self that has become indifferent.” Nonetheless, “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.”⁴ Adorno had previously written, with a certain bitter irony: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁵ This is like saying that to make love because there is death in the world is unethical. It also unwittingly implies that poetry must become a barbaric scream — Whitman’s “barbaric yawp?” — to be authentic. Only suffering is authentically human, and only its expression — as intense and unsettling as suffering itself — is artistically valid. In 1895, writing Strindberg, Gauguin noted “the conflict between your civilization and my barbarism. Civilization from which you suffer; barbarism which is for me a rejuvenation.”⁶ It seems that after the barbarism of Auschwitz became public in 1945 poetry had to become barbaric again — as barbaric as civilization had shown itself to be — to rejuvenate itself. Art had to deal with annihilation to be genuinely creative. Paradoxically, the enemy of creativity became its only source. Adorno seems to be calling for the revival of Expressionism, with its “screaming images,”⁷ as the only authentic art. Kiefer’s expressionistic pictures answer the call, illustrating Adorno’s ironical dialectic of poetry and barbarism: their black surface is the indifference — and seductiveness — of absolute negativity in plain sight, and his imagery, much of it dealing, however obliquely, with the barbarism of the Holocaust (Kiefer tends to associate the destruction of the Jews with the self-destruction of Germany, as though their fates were inseparable) — is nonetheless poetry: tragic poetry.

It is epic poetry with many bizarrely lyric passages of raw texture. Kiefer’s works are at once sweeping and intimate, theatrical and passionate, melancholy and sardonic, visionary and ironic, excruciating and ecstatic, ruthless and perverse. They are secular altarpieces — mystical and social allegories, indeed, plays about the German mystery — dealing with heaven and hell,

juxtaposed in uneasy balance, suggesting their perverse relationship. Thus the wooden staircase to the closed door of heaven rises from the dead German forest in the ironical *Resurrexit* (1973). Similarly, the wood of the sacred space of *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (also 1973) is cut from the leafless trees of the forest beneath it. Raw wood's vivid grain, with its gestural complexity and evocative power — it suggests the unconscious energy of self-reflexive automatism — has been a staple of Expressionism since the woodcuts of Munch and Nolde. Kiefer is a modernist historical painter — a critical commentator on modern Germany nationalism, using the field painting as a battlefield, a mock sublime space in which death alone triumphs. It is the battlefield after the battle is over, its barrenness — more gruesome than the twisted bodies in Otto Dix's trenches — emblematic of inhumanity. Absence haunts Kiefer's paintings, stalking the field in search of human presence. But there is none. The few figures that appear in Kiefer's pictures are scarecrows in all but name, for they represent ideas rather than suffering. With the victims of history dead and buried in the morbid German soil, only the gleanings of thought remain.

Blackness is the absence of light, and while there is light in Kiefer's paintings — he is the holy *Man in the Forest* (1971), holding a dead branch miraculously unconsumed by the fire that envelops it, flames rise from the ghostly wooden chairs in *Father, Son, Holy Ghost*, and rows of torches line the walls of the great wooden hall in *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (1973) — it is not exactly the light that brings life. Indeed, the green of organic life rarely makes an appearance in Kiefer's works. The best that we can hope for are the dried leaves that symbolize the *Women of the Revolution* (1986). Each pathetic leaf, on its twig, is in a memorial frame, and each frame is, implicitly, a page of the book in which the leaves are pressed. There are more frames than leaves, suggesting that the memory of the women has faded. They have become the ash of oblivion, as the gloomy grayness — sometimes haunted by ghostly light, indeed, the ghostly afterglow of vanished light — suggests. As everlasting as blackness, this archetypal German grayness appears again and again in Kiefer's art, especially in his brutally charred books. They allude to the burning of books by the Nazis, symbolizing their anti-intellectualism and ruthless censorship. Indeed, the burning of the books was a prelude to the burning of the bodies of the people of the book, the Jews. It signaled the systematic slaughter — organized murder — of anyone whose existence contradicted the Nazi myth of Aryan purity. Anyone deemed alien was exterminated as though to deny that they had ever existed. Individuality was automatically alien — nonconformist — in the Nazi world of mass conformity and emotional homogeneity. Kiefer's works enact Nazi nihilism, and, more subtly, connect it with Germany's vision of the nothingness of individual existence implicit in its philosophical infatuation with the vast empty spaces of the sublime. His art conveys the sublime scale of Nazi inhumanity, ironically reveal-

ing its metaphysical import, that is, the metaphysical grandeur of mass extermination.

Clearly Kiefer's smoky light is not the light of reason — of liberating enlightenment — nor is it the eternal flame, however much it sanctifies the dead, suggesting their immortality by lighting the way to the underworld. For Kiefer's light is deeply informed by darkness, suggesting its inherent ambiguity, and uncertainty about whether darkness or light will prevail. It is never a pure, convincing light, but a light contaminated by demiurgic forces that are as eternal as it is. It is a light whose flaming up may be a flickering out — the last efflorescence of a fading ideal. *Faith, Hope, Love* (1976) makes the point clearly: the cardinal virtues grow in shadowy soil, their luminous appearance tainted by it. It is not clear whether they are crawling with black expressionistic snakes or glowing with fresh life. They are stuck on the boundary between life and death. Similarly the dry yellow straw that represents the luminous figures of the Meistersinger and the golden hair of the German Margarete (both series 1981) is an ironical breath of life in a field of black death. The point is decisively clear in *Nuremberg* (1982), where the mass of dead straw represents the ghosts of all those who paraded in the Nazi rallies that were held there. Ironically resurrected as so much chaff, they are part of the dance of death. They have realized their destiny: the rallies were a feudal spectacle of death — a pledge of homage and fealty to death. Death was the real Nazi ideology — death for the enemies of Nazi Germany, which unexpectedly ended with its own death, along with the loss of many good Germans. Did Kiefer realize that he was illustrating the Allied battle cry in World War II: "the only good German is a dead German?"

Kiefer is a gnostic. Germany's life and death struggle, and its conscious commitment to death — epitomized by the "Scorched Earth" paintings, in memory of Hitler's scorched earth policy, the ultimate symbol of the Nazis' devotion to death, their relentless drive towards death (declared in the skull and bones insignia on the SS officer cap and the deliberate murder of millions of Jews and Russians and other *Untermenschen*) — becomes emblematic of the eternal existential struggle between spiritual illumination and blinding darkness. It is the absolute darkness in which there is no light to see, which is the state of damnation. But darkness is never complete in Kiefer's pictures, if only because they must be seen by their own subtle light. Nonetheless, it seems clear that darkness is more likely to be victorious than light in the conflict between them, although it will never end. The light tends to be tantalizing — out of reach in the surrounding darkness — suggesting that Kiefer is not in purgatory, however hard he tries to purge himself of his German heritage by acknowledging its horrors, but rather in a hell of history's making.

It is worth noting that the scorched earth policy, a masculine effort to uproot life itself — annihilate the life-giving power of Mother Earth — ex-

tended Nazi ethnic cleansing to an absurd extreme, but ironically backfired, for cauterizing the earth rids it of dead old growth, thus preparing the way for its regeneration. For Kiefer the dialectic of degeneration and regeneration — the wasting away and rebirth of life — is a Gordian knot which not even the Alexandrian sword of his ambitious art can cut, however hard it tries to. It is the basic alchemical problem of his art, indeed, for Kiefer the mystery of art in general: how can — does? — art transform the *prima materia* of death (lead, impenetrable darkness, catastrophe, guilt) into the *ultima materia* of everlasting life (gold, pure light, resurrection, absolution), indicating that death is reversible however inevitable? Kiefer does not solve the problem, but re-thinks it in work after work, each at once manic and depressive, dynamic and deadened. With relentless curiosity, he digs up its tangled roots, only to have them disintegrate when they are exposed by art — represented. The representation of the dialectic is itself informed by the dialectic. That is, art seems to degenerate — exhaust itself — in the process of regenerating life by representing it, and regenerate — become freshly intense and imaginative — when it represents life at its most degenerate, namely, as the living death the Nazis made it for those they conquered. Nonetheless, Kiefer shows that the confusing dialectic informs everything — not only German history and eternal art, but the perennial conflict between nature and society, the collective and individual, civilization and barbarism (society at its best and worst, cherishing life or indifferent to it). In Kiefer's art it is especially visible in the tension between formless, primitive expression, strangely articulate in raw texture — a kind of absurd hieroglyph, at once oracular and perplexing, beyond interpretation yet utterly convincing — and the abstract forms and mythic images that contain it. They bring it under the control of civilization and afford the measure of aesthetic security necessary to meditate on the annihilation Kiefer represents. The spectator of Kiefer's pictures becomes a participant observer in their tragic space, an enigmatic presence witnessing the death of Germany, apparently as enigmatic as that of Christ.

Kiefer's *Sick Art* and *North Cape* (both 1975) picture the opposites of degeneration and regeneration. The former shows a blemished Norwegian landscape. The northern lights are misshapen pink pustules, with a sickly yellow nucleus, suggesting that the sky is diseased, perhaps even "plagued." The latter shows the same landscape with freshly bright lights — radiant, full-bodied red corpuscles, with clear rather than distorted boundaries, self-contained rather than spreading like cancer cells — and inscribed with the handwritten words "die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter." That is, art doesn't just disappear: the sacred lights of the aurora borealis continue to glow over the sickly black earth. (No Northern forest, dead or alive, in either picture — we are above the timberline.) Kiefer seems to be addressing the Nazi view that avant-garde art is degenerate — an unhealthy symptom of social as well as artistic decadence.

Sick Art shows degenerate art, *North Cape* shows healthy, regenerated art. And a healthy Northern landscape: it was a favorite theme of Northern Romantic art (including German Expressionism) as well as German ideology, and Kiefer restores it to artistic credibility, suggesting that Romantic Germany can be rehabilitated. There is something healthy and existential in Northern nature worship, especially when it involves worshipping raw nature — nature in which the conflicting forces of life are vivid and self-evident, and thus nature which is a revelation of the inner self. Nonetheless, Kiefer suggests that regeneration — the revitalization of nature and art (another ironical expression of the dialectic) — is difficult, for signs of degeneration abound in his art, as though to suggest the futility of regeneration. It is never sustained.

There is a paucity of images of unequivocal regeneration in Kiefer's oeuvre and innumerable images of unregenerate degeneration. There are many more unhealthy art landscapes than healthy ones. One of the many paradoxes and ambivalences of Kiefer's art is his unconscious identification with such degenerate artists as Hitler and Nero in the act of despising and mocking them. It is as though, despite himself, he envies their imperial power — an imperious power that they perversely used for destructive purposes and that the imperious artist in Kiefer tries to put to constructive, soul-searching use. The abuse of power, squandered on delusions of grandeur, is as much a theme as fascination with its grandeur, indeed, awe at its intimidating absoluteness. Thus, in a 1969 conceptual series of photographs, Kiefer shows himself making the Hitler salute at various places the Nazis occupied. It is a mocking but also triumphant gesture, suggesting a certain pride in Hitler's military accomplishments in the act of turning them into farce. It was in fact Hitler who was a degenerate artist, not the avant-garde artists who revealed the degeneration of humanness in modernism. The degenerate traditionalism of Hitler's youthful paintings — they did not even get him admitted to the conservative Vienna Academy — as well as the degenerate classicism that became the Nazi ideal makes this clear. Nonetheless, Hitler made art history as well as social history by remaking the map of Europe, as several of Kiefer's works suggest. *Nero Paints* (1974) indicates that Nero, like Hitler — the artist-emperor is symbolized by the blood-red outline of a palette that seems to map the entire field of blackened earth on which it is superimposed, becoming an ironical abstract picture within the larger realistic picture (the field has lightning-like furrows, suggestive of the Nazi Blitzkrieg; the palette's four brushes are also ironically tipped with "spiritual" flames) — had an artistic temperament that made destructive history, as the burning houses of imperial Germany-Rome in the background indicate.

Hitler wanted Germany to be a new thousand-year empire, like ancient Rome, and Hitler made art while Germany burned, as Nero made art while Rome burned. Indeed, both perversely regarded destructive burning as creative art, a point clearly made by Kiefer's *Painting=Burning* (1974). A

ghostly palette encompasses the entire terrain of a charred Germany, burned completely to death except for a lone tree. It is a more consummate image of death than *Nero Paints*, where a row of green trees remains on the horizon next to the burning homes. Again and again Kiefer dismantles Nazi fantasies, showing their pathology but also their real effect on history. However much Kiefer's landscape remains diseased or dead — however emblematic it is of the misery and nightmare of German history, writ large as an existential paradigm of world-historical trauma — he breathes imaginative dialectical life into avant-garde as well as traditional ideas and styles that have become reified, particularly avant-garde process art as well as conceptual art and traditional history painting as well as landscape painting. Again he shows his postmodernist attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. Neither sense and intellect nor history and nature are mortal enemies for him, although they are not always on the best terms. Their parallel lines meet in the infinity of Kiefer's sublime space — the space in which being dialectically emerges from nothingness. A masterful postmodernist, Kiefer has encyclopedic knowledge of art history, mourning for the historical art he uses while suggesting that it still has expressive potential, especially when it is put to trenchant contemporary use. Art does not commit suicide in Kiefer — formal as well as expressive suicide — as it does in Minimalism, but reveals the suicide that is German history, less protracted than Rome's suicide, and more dialectical, for the Nazis committed suicide with open-eyed self-deception.

The dialectic of degeneration and regeneration — usually unresolved — takes many forms in Kiefer's art, perhaps most obviously the mythic conflict, cosmic in scale (like Kiefer's works), between the serpent Nidhoff, who appears in *Resurrexit*, and Yggdrasil, the tree of life with roots in hell and the kingdom of the giants — they rule the underworld, punishing those who never repented their guilt — exist. Both serpent and tree appear in many pictures. They are featured in the Norwegian Eddas — a Nordic saga — but the battle between them occurs in every cosmic myth. Before the Eddas there was the biblical tree of life around which the snake of temptation twisted, spoiling paradise. There was also the struggle between the Titans and the Olympians. The latter are victorious, but the former, imprisoned deep in the earth, threaten to rebel — erupt in instinctive violence. Both Hebrew and Greek mythologies convey the same universal psycho-ethical conflict. It is also evident in the battle between the Christian St. George and the devilish Dragon, which Albrecht Altdorfer placed deep in the German forest. Kiefer is replaying — restaging — the age old, archetypal drama: a destructive dragon always gnaws at the roots of the tree of life, and Kiefer — an artist warrior, as it were, wise to the ways of the bizarre snake and aware of the existential stakes of the battle — tries to slay it. But the snake has already won the battle of the German forest, for all the trees are dead. This is clearly the case in the very black *Varus* (1976),

Ways of Worldly Wisdom (1976-77) and *Ways of Worldly Wisdom — Arminius' Battle* (1977-78). All deal with the German chieftain Hermann's famous slaughter of the legions of Varus, stopping the Roman advance into Germany. In the 19th century the mythologized event became a symbol of German nationalist pride. Like all pride it comes before the fall, as Kiefer shows, especially when it becomes brutal arrogance — the Nazis' will to absolute power and total dominance.

Kiefer is a latter-day Symbolist. The objects and images in his pictures are emblems of enigmatic states of mind as well as relics of historical reality. That is, like a Symbolist, he uses outer reality to express inner reality. Social history is the objective correlative of emotional truth, to use T. S. Eliot's term. Like dreams, Kiefer's pictures call for interpretation, and like dreams they offer cultural clues to deeply personal meanings. Perhaps nowhere is Kiefer more the symbolist than in his approach to Auschwitz. The railroad tracks that brought the Jews to Auschwitz — I don't know whether Kiefer has visited Auschwitz, but he probably knows the famous photograph of the tracks that lead to its entrance — begin to appear in his work as early as 1977, where they are associated with Siberia, another huge concentration camp. *Iron Road* (1986) is the climactic picture: the tracks unmistakably lead into oblivion — the negativity of death. At Auschwitz it was an everyday event — the abnormal was normalized — and railroad tracks are an everyday means of transportation. Again and again Kiefer shows that everyday roads lead nowhere. They disappear on the horizon, where all is lost in the unknown — the unforeseen. All of his roads lead to the reality of Auschwitz, final proof of profound indifference to life. Even the furrows are roads to oblivion and ignorance. They march in order, obedient even in death, like good German soldiers. A road appears on the deserted *Mark Heath* (1974), as though there was a way out of its history — a way to recover the Mark Brandenburg, lost to Germany forever as punishment for the sins of the Nazis. Each of the many roads in *Ways: March Sand* (1980) is an illusory Appian Way in a German empire that no longer exists. They disappear in the sand of time, which has run out for Germany. Each is the same road of destiny — of futile, lonely destiny. For Germany lost credibility for all time at Auschwitz — lost its soul. It will always be haunted and tainted by Auschwitz — the dirty fly in its ointment, the fatal flaw in its identity, suggesting that its great music and philosophy were all in vain, glorified expressions of hubris — even when the Nazis have faded into the past. But they will never be forgotten. They will survive as symbols of absolute darkness, which is what they have become in Kiefer's art.

The New German Expressionism revives figuration and painting at a time they were discredited by the American version of abstraction and language art, otherwise known as conceptual art. (It begins with Duchamp, whose work incorporated language and lived in an aura of theoretical language, espe-

cially his own. He was the puppeteer of his own works, which needed to be pulled by the strings of theory to come to life.) Kiefer's paintings contain few figures, although figures are suggested — ghostly figures appear in a number of works, their insubstantiality confirming that the figure is more a morbid memory than a living presence — but the figure is front and center in the works of other German artists. It is always in sharp focus, however distorted its appearance. Sometimes it is schematic and obviously symbolic, as in Penck's so-called Standart works, at other times it is rendered with a kind of social realism, as in Immendorf's Café Deutschland paintings, and at still other times it is weirdly and violently visceral, as in Baselitz's pictures. From the beginning of his career, in his so-called pandemonium paintings (1961-62), his troubled, often grotesque figures, wounded yet virile, set the vigorous pace of the New German Expressionistic figuration. Baselitz revitalized the Old German Expressionistic figure by conceiving it in abstract expressionistic terms. But in his hands gestural energy conveys the pressure of history as well as emotional intensity. His figure seems to disintegrate under both inner and social pressure, even as it remains stable, solid, and intact — a symbol of integrity as well as suffering, heroism as well as defeat. However much it is defeated by powers greater than Germany, it also suffers from German self-defeat. Baselitz's figure is a strange mix of splendor and pathos, grandeur and ruin — a triumphant victim, as it were, at once arrogant and self-pitying. His figures have a certain affinity with those of Francis Bacon, as well as Lucas Samaras's *Autopolaroids* (1971). All are inwardly disturbed and outwardly distorted: the distortion makes the disturbance explicit. Angry and emasculated at once, they seem to tear themselves apart in the act of asserting themselves.

Baselitz's figures and scenes are famous for being upside-down. He has said that this makes them abstract. We presumably attend to their form and handling rather than their meaning. But the figures remain very particular and human, as *Male Nude* (1975) and *Elke V* (1976) — a self-portrait and portrait of his wife — make clear. Nonetheless, something has clearly changed: a world upside down is an absurd, insane world. It is a world in which the apocalypse is occurring: judged a failure, it is in the process of being annihilated. It is a world that has been devalued — a world whose values have been discredited, a world that has been shown to be anti-life, which is why it must be destroyed. Baselitz paints the ancient metaphor of the world turned upside down — the world disintegrating in apocalyptic chaos. It is the German world, as his use of such German themes as the eagle and forest make clear, and it is a world that has come to an abrupt apocalyptic end. It ended in the big bang of a world war — signs of its destructiveness are everywhere in Baselitz's paintings, evident even in their texture — rather than a whimper of cultural exhaustion. Baselitz has said that his idea derives from the image of St. Peter crucified upside

down, implying that Germany was also crucified upside down, as though to mock its faith in itself. Chaos is evident in his gestural handling — an even more violent gestural delirium than in Pollock's all-over paintings, which have also been thought of as chaotic — and morbidity in the blackness, however alleviated by dramatic flashes of color and light. They highlight a figure that seems more dead than alive, that seems conscious of its death, indeed, to live death, as *Bomb-Site Woman* (1978) — bloody woman and the apocalyptic explosion that created her grave fused in one grotesque figure — suggests. She did not escape death, and while Baselitz's other figures have they remain infected by it — diseased by the thought of it, by near death experiences in the war, by living in the dregs of a country that has died, spiritually as well as literally. *The Hand — The Burning House* (1964-65) makes the fatal point succinctly, suggesting that Germany has its apocalyptic fate in its own hands.

Just as Kiefer's empty landscapes and abandoned buildings are worlds of death, so Baselitz's figures are personifications of death, indeed, embodiments of death-in-life. They may be heroic, but they are also wounded, like *The New Type* (1965). A monumental, conspicuously masculine figure — probably based on the statues of soldiers, memorials to the war dead as well as sculptural paeans to victory, that proliferated in Communist East Germany, where Baselitz grew up — he bears the sign of the stigmata on his left hand, suggesting that he has been socially stigmatized as well as crucified by history. Like many of Baselitz's epic figures, the new type of man — an ironical synthesis of the new man Communism hoped to create as well as the old type of German epic hero who suffers and dies tragically — is a valiant victim, isolated in the wilderness that Germany had been reduced to by war. He remains brave and strong, suggesting that his German identity is intact, and he may still be able to have an erection, out of all proportion to his body, confirming his power. But his penis, however gigantic, is grotesquely misshapen, as though diseased, like the famous penis — it looks like a piece of whittled wood, suggesting that it is a prosthetic device, that is, the dildo of a eunuch — of the diseased little human monster in *The Big Night Down the Drain* (1962-63). (This seminal work, censored by the German police when it was first exhibited, shows the strong streak of satire in Baselitz's works.) Baselitz's figures are a critique of German masculinity, even as they mockingly endorse it.

In my opinion all of his figures, particularly the fragmented figures — figures divided against themselves, such as *The Hunter, The Hunter (Four Stripes)* and *Four Stripes Idyll* (all 1966) — are representations of the narcissistic injury Germany has suffered by its defeat. Baselitz's gestures may look like dueling scars, but they also resemble streams of dirty tears. They are self-pitying as well as harsh. His figures are proud abortions — arrogant anomalies — suggesting his disillusionment with Germany. They are as vulnerable as they are tough. Nonetheless, he seems to admire Germany's fabled barbarism,

strength and authoritarianism, as his brutish if wounded and oddly castrated figures — epitomized by the deceptively fairytale-like allegorical *Tree I* (1965-66), bleeding from its amputated limbs — suggest. (The tree is, implicitly, the dead, barren one on which Christ was crucified in German medieval myth. It is pictured in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, undoubtedly an influence on Baselitz as well as on other German Expressionist masters of modern suffering and horror.) According to Adorno, in a statement that hyperbolically privileges art, "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice . . . without being immediately betrayed by it."⁸ This is a German expressionist idea, giving art human purpose, indeed, finding human purpose in its formal revolution, as Adorno argues. It suggests the reason for the revival of German Expressionism — amplified by American Abstract Expressionism, with its sublime sense of scale and gestural fantasy — in the postwar period. But the suffering Baselitz boldly voices is the suffering of Nazis, or at least of people who once served the Nazi cause, passively or actively.

There is a lightness to Baselitz, for all the gravity of his figures and themes. The lively, iridescent reds and greens of the figure in *Ornamental* (1966) make the point clearly. This colorful painting has been connected to his interest in folk art and primitive art, and more broadly the decorative art of Eastern Europe, more particularly, Slavic culture. It is also, however indirectly, a homage to Fauvism as well as Kandinsky. As many other paintings do, *Ornamental* reminds us that Baselitz grew up in the east, and that Germany once extended far eastward, long before Hitler conquered Poland, eastern Russia, and the Baltic states. Lurid splashes of red — they're at once erotic and aggressive, traces of blood as well as quixotic desire — ornament such neo-primitive limewood sculptures as *Elke*, *The Eccentric* and *Female Torso* (all 1993). (There is a tradition of limewood sculptures in Gothic Germany.) They are carved with gestural energy, as the slashing cuts that cover them indicate. Deep gouges invade the bust titled *Women of Dresden — The Heath* (1990), painted in bright yellow and perhaps the ghostly portrait of the spirit of those who perished in the firebombing of Dresden in World War II.

Going against the Constructivist concept of pure, unpainted geometrical sculpture — the modernist belief that one cannot combine different mediums without destroying the autonomy and integrity of each — Baselitz restores the figure, freshly expressionistic, to its place as the fundament of sculpture. He restores wood carving, and integrates forceful gesture and monumental figuration. Sometimes he flattens objects, so that they become shadowy silhouettes — for example, the bottle in *Still Life* (1977) — and sometimes he uses pure geometry, as in the case of the white square in *Eagle* (1978). One wonders whether Baselitz was familiar with Hans Hofmann's late paintings, which also embed simple geometry in a gestural matrix. The work is a homage to Malevich's Suprematism, just as *Supper in Dresden* (1983) is a homage to

the artists of *Die Brücke*, which originated in Dresden. In both works vivid color and deep black merge to dramatic effect.

Baselitz's paintings and sculptures can in fact be regarded as series of homages to the modern tradition as well as traditional German art, restoring and integrating their ideas in a postmodern dialectic. Thus the nostalgic look of his paintings, for all their nihilistic intensity. The sense of "no more hope" that he described in his Pandemonium manifesto remains, however much "the sexual fantasticality" he also mentioned increases. "Instead of an abstract idealism we claim a sincere nihilism," he and Eugen Schönebeck, his companion in Pandemonium, wrote, but his sincere nihilism became idealistic, and was always abstract. Baselitz's art is in fact an art of memory and mourning, a melancholy archaeological art, but it brings the bones of the past to life. He has great faith in art, indeed, restores the faith in itself — more particularly, its will to expression — that it seems to have lost in Conceptualism. Minimalism, with its loss of faith in the expressive power and adequacy of art — that is, its ability to tap the resources of the unconscious, making it manifest in the process — was a prelude to that complete loss of self-confidence and self-respect. Thus art once again becomes the religion it was for the Postimpressionists and pioneering abstractionists — another sign of his traditionality. Baselitz in fact grounds his originality on tradition — like a traditional artist — rather than assuming that it is an automatic consequence of breaking with tradition, as many avant-gardists had convinced themselves it was. In fact, there was more continuity with tradition in their work than they cared to acknowledge.

There is a sense of *déjà vu* in Baselitz's art, but also the sense that familiar ideas have been reworked to fresh existential effect. All Expressionism is fundamentally existentialist. Baselitz's expressionistic figures are no exception. Indeed, they renew, even deepen, the sense of existential urgency once original to German Expressionism, the edge of emotional conviction and power that seemed to have been dulled when it became a standard mode of artistic operation, a fate that befell every avant-garde art once it was no longer a novel breakthrough. Perhaps more than his gestural complexity, the manneristic character of his figures confirms their existential character. As Arnold Hauser argues, Mannerism, with its sense of contradiction and absurdity — dialectic and paradox — was the beginning of the existential sensibility inseparable from modern self-consciousness. Baselitz takes us back to a beginning that has not yet found its end. (He was in fact influenced by Mannerist prints, which he collected.)

Baselitz's work is a masterful union of bleakness and sensuality, mirage-like illusion and direct abstract painting, intensity and irony, introspection and irrationality. His works are grimly historical as well as personal confessions — socially as well as humanly authentic. Above all, they are that difficult and rare thing, an uncanny, dynamic mix of ugliness and beauty, vul-

gar in their perfection and perfect in their vulgarity. They have a kind of graceful, lyric crudity, transforming what Cézanne called “vibrating sensation” into grotesque, “Gothic” sensation. The series of *6 Beautiful, 4 Ugly Portraits* (1988) — sublime and infernal, noble and grisly, disintegrated and reintegrated, estranged and haunting, intuitive and urgent — makes this very clear.

Perhaps the best way to understand the difference between the German sense of identity and the American sense of identity is to compare Werner Büttner’s expressionistic *Self-Portrait Masturbating in the Cinema* (1980) and Chuck Close’s Photorealist *Self-Portrait* (1976-77). Büttner is what Baudelaire called an “imaginative,” Close what he called a “positivist.” That is, Büttner paints a subject, Close paints an object. Close is matter-of-fact and emotionally empty, Büttner is grim, explosive, hostile. He points to his penis with a certain mocking anger, as though saying “I dare you to stop me,” while Close has no sexuality worth speaking of, and no sense of the body in which it is embedded. Büttner portrays himself in a dangerous situation — performing a private act in a public situation, he may be discovered and arrested — while Close is safely in the studio, copying a photograph of himself with pseudo-scientific precision. Büttner’s self-portrait is a visceral fantasy, probably based on real experience, while Close’s self-portrait, however self-conscious, is not based on lived experience of the self. The difference is stark, and extends to the handling. Close meticulously records the details of appearance, with a naive trust in verisimilitude, while Büttner paints with bold, sweeping gestures in order to convey the emotional truth, in all its turbulence, behind ordinary appearance. Like the German New Objectivists of an earlier generation, Büttner is a master of body language, particularly the expressive language of the hands and face — the language of the self at its most unguarded. He renders the changing movement of the hands and the mercurial expression of the face with a similar primitive, agitated realism, and with an even greater show of emotional violence. Close’s realism is dehumanizing in comparison, not only because it is based on mechanical reproduction, but because indifference is built into it. It may be a technical tour de force, but it lacks conviction.

Walter Benjamin believed that mechanical reproduction would eliminate expressive aura, which was in any case obsolete in modern society, but Büttner’s self-portrait shows that aura is existential in import, and will continue to exist as long as sexuality and aggression do. Aura has more to do with emotional than social reality — the emotional reality that underpins and informs social reality. Thus Close depicts the facade of himself, enlarged into a media spectacle, while Büttner goes behind the social facade to the existential reality of the self, charged with instinctive sexuality and aggression. Perhaps Close is superficial because he has nothing to hide — or else he has hidden his inner life so well he doesn’t know how to find it. He is not so much dispassionate, as lacking in passion. Büttner couldn’t be superficial if he tried, because

he has never learned to hide his passion behind any social identity. Like Baselitz's pictures of men with giant, grotesque penises, Büttner's phallic self-portrait is implicitly antisocial, while Close enlarges himself into a celebrity — they're often shown full face and in-your-face in media close-ups — although not as glamorous and ingratiating. Yet the raw, tough, unpleasing face is also a Hollywood stereotype. And, like Baselitz's various portraits of the artist, Büttner's painterly self-portrait as artist indicates his engagement with the emotional and existential fundamentals of life — indeed, his presence is formed by them and expresses them, with as much forcefulness and directness as possible (all the more so because he ironically suggests that painting is sublimated masturbation) — while Close depicts himself as a facile, banal narcissist.

A similar comparison can be made between Rainer Fetting's *Self-Portrait as Indian* (1982) and the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious 1978 self-portrait in leather, with his back to the audience — and he clearly wants an audience. The handle of a whip — doing double duty as the symbol of a penis — sticks out of his anus, and he turns his head to look at the spectator, eager to see his reaction. Both artists are homosexuals, but Fetting presents himself as an ironically heroic grand personage, his body as transcendently blue as Franz Marc's famous horse — Fetting's body is theatrically painted in mock preparation for war, as the obsolete weapon of bow and arrow suggest, and he stands alone in a dark landscape, with a blazing sun (klieg light?) behind him — while Mapplethorpe presents himself as a pervert. Both strike poses, but they're somewhat different. Fetting's self-portrait has an allegorical aura, perhaps alluding to homosexuality — his figure belongs to the tradition of what might be called the high male nude, involving fascinated fixation on the beauty of the muscular body — while Mapplethorpe's portrait repackages the tired cliché of the aberrant homosexual, defiantly exhibiting his outrageous behavior.

Mapplethorpe does not so much come out of the closet as bring the spectator — presumably heterosexual — into the closet, hoping to shock him, perhaps in acknowledgement of his unconscious homosexuality. But what he sees is not exactly shocking, for it confirms his assumptions: in its flagrant, offensive homosexuality, Mapplethorpe's picture lives up to social expectations, while Fetting's picture deftly sidesteps them, suggesting a subtler defiance of social norms — emotional defiance as distinct from sexual defiance. Mapplethorpe reduces the obscene to another everyday scene, while Fetting makes the scene aesthetically seductive, ingeniously suggesting its absurdity as well as perversity. It is the Three Penny Opera strategy of Weimar Republic art — of Beckmann, Dix, Grosz and German Expressionist film: the scene presents itself as inherently obscene. The normal is abnormal, the abnormal is normal — and both may be a pretense. What looks uncensored may be make-

believe. Thus the boundary between public spectacle and private experience — acting a role and compulsive enactment — blurs. Mapplethorpe is playing to the audience as much as he is fucking himself. It may be a way of telling the public to fuck itself. He is not simply satisfying a perverse need, but telling the public it is perverse to watch him do so. Reducing himself to a sexual performer, Mapplethorpe loses credibility as a person — he has little or no self apart from his performance — while Fetting is clearly a person, emanating strength and autonomy, whatever his erotic aura. Indeed, Fetting's portrait is about the subtlety of eros — is it an ironical self-representation as Cupid? — rather than explicit sexuality.

Fetting's self-portrait has less to do with homosexuality than with art. It is an ironical image of the artist as outsider, at once poseur and transgressor. But we know it's all amusing theater — while Mapplethorpe's picture, however theatrical, is deliberately provocative, all the more so because of its journalistic realism. It is though Mapplethorpe thinks he's newsworthy, or that perversion is newsworthy, instead of commonplace. Fetting's self-portrait in flamboyant Native American costume — it's as though he's ready for carnival — is an ironical update of Gauguin's noble savage. In Fetting, all the sensationalism is in the handling — in the stark contrast of colors, the flashes of brightness in the dark landscape, the ingenious juxtaposition of the curves of the sun and bow, the upright figure and the steep diagonal behind it — while in Mapplethorpe it is in the subject matter. And yet, as I have suggested, it is an ordinary subject matter. Once exposed — once the exhibitionist exhibits himself (without shocking anyone) — it fades into insignificance. What remains convincing is Mapplethorpe's backward glance not his sadomasochism. That tells us more about his psyche — and is in fact more perverse — than his behavior. It reveals his dependence on the spectator. Mapplethorpe loses his identity as pervert once he catches the eye of the spectator witnessing his behavior. He can then pick up the tools of his sexual trade and leave the stage: the performance — which has something comic about, no doubt because, like a bad little boy, he's looking for the spectator's approval as well as trying to unsettle him — is over.

Fetting's psyche is much more complex. His face is an obscure painterly blur, half dark, half light, suggesting inner conflict. Similarly, his loincloth is a luminous painterly patch between two shadowy thighs, suggesting a conflict about sexuality. Color becomes an aura around his body, making him humanly as well as sexually mysterious. There is an aura of enigma about him — a sense of indwelling intensity, conveying some obscure depth of feeling. Fetting's painting also has a tenebristic quality — the figure looms out of the darkness — adding to its mystery and spiritual import (like the blue). There is a peculiar poignancy to Fetting's self-portrait — it seems self-questioning as well as self-assertive, as though he was perplexed by his identity — which

Mapplethorpe's self-portrait lacks. This has nothing to do with the difference between painting and photography — the photographic manipulation of shadow and light can be as expressive and emotionally evocative as painterliness, and as fraught with existential import — but rather with attitude. Like Close, Mapplethorpe is a positivist, even at his most imaginative — an observer rather than a fantasist. He never abandons empirical detail to make an expressive point, as both Büttner and Fetting do. Mapplethorpe may be declaring his homosexuality, but he does so in a way that suggests that it has no deep meaning for him, just as Close's self-portrait — also straightforward — implies that he has no deep emotional life. Mapplethorpe's emotional life also seems rather limited — more exciting than Close's, but limited to one emotion. His self-portrait enacts his limitation — his entire identity seems subsumed in his homosexuality — while Fetting's self-portrait has more depth and emotional dialectics. So does his famous *Large Shower (Panorama)* (1981) — also a display of male flesh — which for all its homoerotic import suggests a troubled sense of self, as its overwhelming blackness (typically German) suggests. Bodies flicker in the darkness, which seems less a place for sexual activity than a kind of emotional hell.

Unlike the German artists, American artists aren't given to self-dramatization, but rather to social drama. And their expressionism seems lukewarm in comparison: Philip Guston and Susan Rothenberg look superficial next to Büttner and Fetting. Their figures — cartoony in Guston's case, ghostly horses in Rothenberg's — lack the expressive tension of Büttner's and Fetting's figures. Next to Helmut Middendorf's flamboyantly anarchistic expressionistic paintings, the "Bad Painting" exhibited at the New Museum in 1978, much of it quasi-expressionist, looks like a bad joke. Duane Hanson's banal figures are more to the American point: they carry Social Realism to a depressing extreme. Shedding the bumptious sentimentality and innocent propaganda of '30s Social Realism, they show a side of American life — a mood — rarely represented in American art. Hanson's figures are dazed by life, indeed, terminally depressed. They live life, but their lives are at a stand still. What strikes me about Hanson's figures is their frozen quality—the outward expression of their inner deadness. They convey the inner lifelessness of everyday American life, for all its outward busyness. Their existence and identity are completely defined and circumscribed by their social situation. Hanson's sculptures are a profound critique of everydayness, suggesting its emptiness. His people are ordinary, but the emotional state of ordinary Americans is not usually represented in American art, certainly not with Hanson's directness. His sculptures strip the big lie from American life, exposing its hollowness. It is a dazzling achievement, all the more so because his mannequins are completely descriptive, down to the last detail. But their matter-of-factness is as manufactured as the lives it records. Hanson uses a deceptively plain-spoken realism to convey

the morbid inner reality of America.

Hanson's *Security Guard* (1975) is in a dead-end job with no future. He's an existential vacuum, like all of Hanson's figures. They're puppets on a social string, even in their introspective moments. Hanson's work is a devastating critique of American society, a pathetic place full of lost souls. Hanson is a social existentialist, as distinct from the personal existentialism of the German expressionists. For him human existence is determined by social function and role rather than instinctive force and inner conflict. Both society and instinct may be enslaving, but instinct offers the promise of creative rebellion from society — in the act of revealing its character — while Hanson's Americans have lost their instinctive nerve and are far from creative. They are monstrosously commonplace — frighteningly banal.

The difference in attitude between German identity art and American identity art is a constant of seventies art. It is the difference between the sculptural figures of Markus Lüpertz and John de Andrea, the geometrical abstractions of Imi Knoebel and Brice Marden, the hallucinatory imagery of Karl Heinz Hödicke and Robert Moskowitz, the shaped canvases of Peter Bömmels and Elizabeth Murray. On the German side there is what Georg Jiri Dokoupil called "powerful content" and Penck called "dialectical representation." This is perhaps most obvious in Immendorf's *Café Deutschland* paintings, which deal with the coexistence of East and West Germany. Re-union is possible, but the thick wall between them implies they will always be different — they have become spiritually and ideologically irreconcilable. On the American side there is Sam Gilliam's realization that "one of the real ways of getting away from the stretcher was to take the canvas out of it and just attach it to the wall." He continues "the dialogue with what was happening with Pollock and Louis working on the floor, but I am taking that dialogue to the wall." Formal and technical problems are foremost for Gilliam, as they were for many American artists: American art identity remained bound to Greenberg's theory of modernism, which privileged the medium over content. Clever manipulation of form counted for more than imaginative transformation of content. Pollock and Louis were abstract painters — for Greenberg they "clarified" painting's autonomy by using paint more "frankly" than it had ever been used (Greenberg was all but indifferent to the expressive and evocative power of their paintings, and the traces of illusionism that remained in it). Gilliam wanted to take the "next step": interweave painting and sculpture. He was a painter who wanted to "establish as much facticity as possible, but keep certain elements of illusion," but he was "also carrying on a dialogue with sculpture." Thus his use of "great masses and gestures of cloth [that] would shift from density to openness depending on one's perspective."⁹ From the German point of view, Gilliam is altogether indifferent to emotional content — universal feelings evoked by such universal content as "mother, father, life, death," as Dokoupil said. From

the American point of view, the German artists are poor artists — as Judd explicitly said — because they were indifferent to modernist aesthetics.

But they wanted to get beyond it, which is why they trivialized it: the point made in 1968 by Polke's *Carl Andre in Delft* was repeated, in different terms, in 1980 in *Robert Ryman, Can You Hear Me?*, a collaborative drawing by Dokoupil and Walter Dahn. Once again modernist abstraction was mocked as a hollow, sterile aesthetics — an aesthetics with no existential content, especially in its final Minimalist form. For the Germans, modernist abstraction was an exercise in futility, for the Americans, existential expressionism was an exercise in subjective excess. As Greenberg said of the paintings of van Gogh and Soutine, they failed as art however much they succeeded as feeling. There was a standoff: the German artists got their identity from their existential — and German — content, the American artists got their identity from their manipulation of the medium and the pieties of pure form. Each was decadent from the other's perspective. Each believed the other was stuck in a historical rut. The Americans dug the grave of abstraction, the Germans resurrected the corpse of Expressionism. Without saying so, each regarded the other as "postmodernist," that is, each reworked a clichéd fragment of avant-garde art, mistaking it for the whole avant-garde truth, or at least its only valid aspect, indeed, the only artistic advance that had staying power. Both were in effect excavating and reconstructing, in terms that suited their identity, an avant-garde art that had become history. They were looking backwards — back to the beginning of the century: Expressionism and Abstraction — the pursuit of existential authenticity on the one hand and aesthetic purity on the other (each claimed it was artistically authentic, that is, articulated the essence of art, and disparaged the other as inadequate) — were the seminal movements of 20th-century avant-gardism.

Both German identity art and American identity art returned to the fundamentals of avant-garde art. It had been at odds with itself from the start, as the difference between Expressionism and Abstraction indicates. The attempt to reconcile their differences was also there from the start, as Kandinsky's *Abstract Expressionism* shows. Gilliam's painting is clearly abstract expressionistic, if lighter in mood than the New German Expressionism, and Dokoupil's painting is eccentrically abstract however little it has to do with modernist eccentric abstraction. The decorative pattern art that appeared in New York in the '70s—for example, the work of Robert Kushner, Joyce Kozloff and Miriam Schapiro, which not only has nothing morbid about it but conveys a kind of joie de vivre (it is the American version of "luxury painting," to use the term that Greenberg used to describe the hedonistic painting that emerged in Paris after the first world war) — exemplifies the upbeat American attitude. In the case of Kozloff and Schapiro this is an aesthetic as well as emotional triumph, especially because a good deal of feminist art sacrifices aesthetics to ideology. Much of it also tends toward morbidity and violence, as in the case

of Nancy Spero's polemical documentary work, as though identifying with the male aggressor rather than asserting femininity, understood in libidinous terms, as a positive identity in itself, which Kozloff and Schapiro do. In contrast the bizarre surreal imagery of the Muhlheimer Freiheit conveys, with manic cunning and wit, the nightmare of being German. Hans Peter Adamski, Bömmels, Dahn, Dokoupil, Gerard Kever, Martin Kippenberger, Gerhard Naschberger, Albert Oehlen, Volker Tannert, among others, convey — with varying degrees of black humor and existential irony, not to say a certain vicious sense of absurdity — the German sense of traumatic identity. It is an identity haunted by the Nazi past, as Dahn and Dokoupil's *German Forest* (1981) — the tree has swastika wheels and a swastika mouth — makes clear. (It is reminiscent of Heartfield's *Little German Christmas Tree*, made in 1934 at the beginning of the Hitler period in German history rather than in its aftermath.) Morbidity becomes comic, which does nothing to change the German tragedy — the German New Expressionism in general tends to be tragicomic, or rather tragic satire — but makes it more bearable, emotionally if not socially. The only American artist who can match them in morbid humor is Robert Arnason, whose self-portraits are also full of tragic rage, however modified by funky irony, and who also has an apocalyptic style, as his *Fragment of Western Civilization* makes clear.

It is not only the Germans and Americans who differ in sensibility and history, but, more broadly, Americans and Europeans. The point is made clearly by comparing the figures of Philip Pearlstein and Francesco Clemente. But the comparison is not so simple, for it shows the inescapability of the existential in formalist art, and the inescapability of formalism in existential art. Pearlstein claims to be a formalist — his abstraction is mannerist, as his steep spaces, exaggerated perspectives, and oddly elongated figures indicate — but his naked figures clearly have psychosexual import, and are in troubled relationship. They are victims of life as well as intriguing arrangements of surfaces and shapes. Clemente's paintings are routinely narcissistic, and full of sexual fantasies, but they are also field paintings, sometimes explicitly. His ground is usually flat and non-illusionistic, or minimally illusionistic, and his figures are usually flat and sketchy, like mirages about to evaporate. He has also made a series of works inspired by Indian design, as cosmic in import as field painting.

Slick, eye-biting American Photorealist surface and crude, tactile German painterly surface highlight the differences between the two identities, but they again show the inescapability of existential emotion in formal brilliance and the formal brilliance necessary to make existential emotion convincing and urgent, and above all to convey its subtlety. Thus the Photorealist paintings of Don Eddy and Richard Estes can be read as purely formal constructions but they are also profoundly introspective. Eddy's objects symbol-

ize states of mind — sometimes manic, as in his paintings of glass, sometimes depressing, as in his paintings of automobiles — while Estes's urban spaces are labyrinthine voids, from which there is no exit. Some are marked by token figures, even more isolated than those of Hopper. In Estes, human space — space made by human beings for human beings — becomes inhuman, while in Eddy inhuman objects become subtly human. Both painters are masters of reflected light — their surfaces mirror the world they are part of — and in both reflection becomes emblematic of curiosity and cogitation. It is a symbol of human consciousness as well as their own remarkable powers of observation. Indeed, Eddy and Estes are meditative, contemplative artists. There is an aura of wonder in their works, the wonder which makes the most ordinary things seem exquisite, and in which knowledge begins. But this aura of wonder exists in uneasy, compensatory balance with the aura of disillusionment — the disenchantment inherent in the sense of ordinariness (“reality”) that inevitably settles over things—that also informs their works.

Perhaps the case par excellence of the tricky dialectic of pure form and existential emotion are the figures of George Segal. They are melancholy presences, at once ghostly abstractions — nothing but molds, usually painted white — and depressed human beings, implicitly, and literally, hollow. They are often placed in abstract arrangements isolated in public space. These installations are complex formal arrangements, in which familiar things, used for their geometry as well as function, are integrated with the figures, conceived as grand organic gestures. Many of the installations form patterns of primary colors as well as three-dimensional objects. Segal acknowledges a debt to Mondrian, and, like Pearlstein, thinks of himself as a formalist, but, like him, is an existential formalist, in contrast to Mondrian, who is a transcendental formalist. Segal's installations are clearly theatrical, but it is a theater of the everyday absurd, revealing the inherent vulnerability of human beings and the underlying pathos of American life. In their different ways, and with different means, Hanson and Segal, as well as Eddy and Estes, suggest the lives of quiet desperation that most men lead, as Thoreau said. Or, as I would say, their sense of inadequacy, bringing with it a sense of failed individuality and faulty identity.

The environmental paintings of Eddy and Estes have a numinous, indwelling radiance, and the figural sculptures of Hanson and Segal have a monumental presence — however understated, as befits the everyday types they render — but all four artists deal with a world that remains incorrigibly banal, and with the unfortunate existential consequences of being in such a world. Only its artistic transformation redeems it from mediocrity and meaninglessness. However imaginatively enlivened, the environment and people they depict remain emotionally ruined — existentially catastrophic, by reason of the ordinariness ruthlessly imposed upon them by modern life. This remains

so, despite the sensibility that enriches their presence with its own sensations, reflecting the artist's determination to feel alive even as he remains empathically bound to the deadness around him.

The German New Expressionists deal with the same tragic thing, suggesting that it is a universal feeling in late modernity, and rampant in postmodern society, but they deal with it in a more angry, rebellious way, as though wanting to throw it off, but, being unable to do so, show it corroding the skin of their painting. The German artists have a strong sense of personal identity, the Americans of social identity. The identity of the German artists seems unstable and insecure, the identity of the American artists seems stable and secure. The former seem delirious — raving, disrespectful maniacs. The latter look like sober citizens in comparison; on the surface, their work seems coldly objective. But both are at their wit's end, for they realize that the personal and social are in a fight to the bitter end, however dependent each is on the other for its credibility and character. The important thing is that both the Germans and Americans are able to make the artistic best of the conflict between the social and personal sides of their identity. That is, they reconcile the opposition through artistic means, establishing an uneasy aesthetic peace. All aesthetic victories may be Pyrrhic victories, but they bring peace with them. Both Germans and Americans turn psychosocial entropy into an optimal experience of art, whether it be conceived as quintessentially formal or existential, purifying or dithyrambic, to use the word Lüpertz used to describe his painting. "Dionysus dithyrambos" means "Dionysus, who stands before the double door" that leads to the underworld.

Notes

¹ Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Dilemma of Human Identity* (New York and London: Jason Aronson, 1977), 13-14.

² Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975), 20.

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 37, 39.

⁴ Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 362.

⁵ Theodore W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 34.

⁶ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 82.

⁷ H. I. Schvey, *Oscar Kokoschka: The Painter as Playwright* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1982), 7.

⁸ Theodore W. Adorno, "Commitment," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1985), 313.

⁹ Quoted in *Planar Painting: Constructs 1975-80* (New York: Alternative Museum, 1980; exhibition catalogue), n. p.

Chapter 9: Aspirational Aesthetics and Empathic Painting: The Search for Authenticity and the Rebellion against Conceptual Pseudo-Art; The Ninth Decade

Every art that philosophizes is lost.

Theodor Lipps¹

The aesthetic object is nothing more than the sensuous in all its glory, whose form, ordering it, manifests plenitude and necessity, and which carries within itself and immediately reveals the meaning that animates it.

Mikel Dufrenne²

The belief that the organic is the chief criterion of what is authentic in art and life continues, it need hardly be said, to have great force with us, the more as we become alarmed by the deterioration of the organic environment. . . . In an increasingly urban and technological society, the natural processes of human existence have acquired a moral status in the degree that they are thwarted.

Lionel Trilling³

Those wishing to be called artists, in order to have some or all of their acts and ideas considered art, only have to drop an artistic thought around them, announce the fact and persuade others to believe it. That's advertising. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, "Art is what you can get away with."

Allan Kaprow⁴

The last artist who successfully blurred the boundary between art and life, in effect — if not in principle — reconciling them, was Joseph Beuys. What Allan Kaprow hoped to do, and did abortively in his happenings, Beuys did brilliantly in his performances, largely because he had a healthy respect for the evocative power of sensuous detail that Kaprow lacked and a tragic sense of life that was altogether beyond Kaprow. For Kaprow life was ordinary, for Beuys, who had experienced the Second World War firsthand, it was extraordinary because it was inseparable from death. Beuys had sensibility and suffering on his side, Kaprow plunged into everyday life, which he even claimed, with Pollyanna-like fervor, was dazzling. He was looking for the old surprise/shock of the new, but his "discovery" of the everyday seems somewhat forced

and labored — hardly a spontaneous epiphany — suggesting his false consciousness, and his submission to the false consciousness that dailiness represents. Kaprow seemed to be struggling to overcome *tedium vitae*, while Beuys was defiantly vital in the face of the living death which was everyday social life. Nothing was “just” everyday for Beuys — everyday life as usual could never be taken for granted, certainly not after its Nazi and capitalist control, standardization and regimentation — while for Kaprow the everyday was never questioned nor for that matter seriously investigated. The status quo was always suspect for Beuys, while for Kaprow it was an indisputable fact of life. He was critical of art, but he had no critical awareness of the ideological and emotional underpinnings of everyday life. Unlike Beuys, he had no understanding of it as a kind of existential straightjacket, inhibiting human nature and stifling natural process. He did not understand that the artistic disordering of the senses that Rimbaud advocated and that Beuys carried to an expressionistic extreme, was an attempt to counteract the social ordering that had deadened them, thus restoring them to the healthy perceptiveness that everyday socially pathological life had robbed them of.

For Kaprow art could not keep pace with technological innovation — he lavished praise on it, as though it was infallible — which was the driving force of society. He was clearly awestruck by technology, which cast its shadow over art to the extent of trivializing it. He may have admired its ambition, but trashed it, as George Segal said. Technology put creative individuality to shame, as his many ironic comparisons of the products of the former to those of the latter suggest. Technology was sublime, art ridiculous in comparison. Kaprow is perhaps the climax of a long line of modern artist-thinkers who preferred the “swiftness . . . of the mobile machine” to “the gradual processes” of organic existence.⁵ Marinetti was his ancestor, and conceptual pseudo-art is his legacy. In contrast, for Beuys art was a means of achieving and asserting even creating individuality in a society indifferent to it — initially the Nazi society he grew up in, later the wealthy society that post-Nazi Germany became, more broadly technocratic-bureaucratic modern society, which demanded complete subservience from the individual. He understood how completely the fate of the individual hinged on the character of society. Beuys regarded his work as “social sculpture”: it was his way of being actively involved in reshaping society, or at least its attitude to the individual. Instead of Duchamp’s indifference, which Beuys famously said was “overrated,” he was empathic and socially concerned, to the extent of actively participating in politics. Indeed, Beuys understood the political realities and economic structure of society as Kaprow never did. At the Düsseldorf Academy Beuys accepted every student who applied — leading to a legal action against him by the other professors, presumably more discriminating — in recognition of the student’s individuality and creative potential. He eventually founded a Free International University as an alterna-

tive to the conventional academic environment, all the more so because it was openly concerned with social change, or, as Beuys said, tried to fuse individual and social evolution and revolution. Kaprow's attitude to society, individuality, and creativity was superficial in comparison.

One only has to compare Beuys' performance *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare* (Nov. 26, 1965) to Kaprow's happening *Fluids* (1967) to see the difference between Beuys' profundity and Kaprow's shallowness. Beuys performed in a gallery. It is a space apart from the everyday world. In Beuys' hands it became more of a sacred space than commercial showroom, however much it remains ambiguously both. Kaprow's happening occurred in urban space. It was an impersonal event: like a puppeteer or impresario, Kaprow sent various "actors" out into the city, assigning them different tasks — all banal — to "perform" at different locations. They were anonymous participants in a mass event rather than desperate individuals — world-weary and above all war-weary — attempting to renew themselves and communicate with others through art, and perhaps failing at both. Kaprow's "happeners" were not creating art and themselves, but ironically involved — however tame the irony — in the everyday world that created them and which they blindly accepted as the theatrical truth about life.

Beuys' performance was no doubt narcissistic, but it was also idealistic and despairing — full of self-doubt as well as self-assertion. It was emotionally and sensuously rich and subtle. His shaven head anointed with honey and crowned with gold leaf, and cradling a dead hare in his arms, Beuys walked from painting to painting, touching each with the hare's paw. He then sat in a chair and explained his works to the hare "because I do not like to explain them to people." Art is meaningless to society — except, perhaps, as an especially entertaining spectacle, that is, an unusually novel performance — however instinctively meaningful. Indeed, it is more meaningful to a dead hare than to living people. Beuys could achieve greater intimacy with a dead hare — an unconscious animal — than with conscious people. Art was a shamanistic activity for Beuys — a way of awakening people to such existential inevitabilities as death and suffering, especially the suffering of not being understood and respected. Society's way of dealing with such "organic" truths — truths inherent to the process of human life — was of crucial importance to him. If it did not seriously acknowledge existential truths — and for Beuys, who began his career making religious art, art was the religion in and through which society could acknowledge, contain and accept them — it had a disintegrative effect on our sense of self. If it helped us to recognize them, and set aside a special space in which they could be contemplated, it made the annihilative emotions they induced less terrifying — more tolerable — if not less painful.

Honey had a special meaning for Beuys: it is the most nourishing of

foods, and can be stored in a solid state until needed, which is what bees do. (For Beuys they had an ideal society, implicitly socialist however matriarchal. Beuys acknowledged a debt to the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner's lecture on bees.) Readily changing from fluid to solid and back again, and being sublimely nourishing, it shows natural process at its most constructive and life-supporting. The hare also had a special meaning: it was a mercurial messenger from the underworld, that is, the unconscious. In a kind of trance-like state, Beuys makes direct contact with the lower animal powers, as though in search of unconscious inspiration — or rather to be reassured by them that his paintings are in fact inspired, that is, rooted in the unconscious, and as such authentic and “natural.” The dead hare is Beuys' ideal spectator, authenticating his works by his unconscious understanding of them. It is also implicitly Beuys: like the dead hare, he is in contact with the unconscious of nature — the organically given unconscious. The performance is Beuys' medium; indeed, he functions as a medium between the world of the unconscious and the everyday world.

The fact that he is able to explain his paintings to a dead hare — they are not incomprehensible to the animal, as they are to living people — indicates that they are in fact inspired. The hare symbolizes the unconscious inspiration that makes Beuys an authentic artist — a person able to descend into the underworld, where he learns the existential truth about life. He tells the Faustian tale in his art, which is where he really lives. Alive to the truth in his art, he is more fully alive than he can ever be in everyday life. Creativity is rooted in the depths of unconscious nature rather than in the kind of everyday consciousness society creates. *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare* is a modern mystical version of Albrecht Dürer's more traditionally mystic *Melencolia I* (1514), which uses a different set of symbols to make the same point about the melancholy situation of the artist: he is bound to the underworld of the unconscious even as he aspires to the higher world of self-conscious spirit. But there is an important difference in Beuys' work: for him the spirit is in the unconscious — in organic human nature and nature as such — rather than in any higher world, to which it is defensively displaced. Also, for Beuys the artist is not trapped between the animal and the spirit, but finds the spirit in the animal. It is the inspired animal in us that aspires to become self-conscious spirit, that is, ideal being. The artist is trapped between the everyday world and the inspired world of natural animal or instinctive knowledge, which is a higher world of insight compared to the everyday world. Beuys' explanation is not in vain, because he and the dead hare have the same unconscious knowledge. They are attuned to their unconscious nature which is why they can attune to each other.

Everyday people find Beuys' paintings — and behavior (performance) — inexplicable because to be everyday means to be uninspired, that is, to lose

contact with the spiritual animal in the unconscious. Kaprow's so-called art — his conceptual pseudo-art — is entirely a matter of everyday consciousness and consciousness of the everyday, which is why it is uninspired, which means to be banal. It is not an art of inspiration, altering our consciousness so that it makes contact with the ordinarily unconscious animal spirit within us. It is only this animal spirit — Beuys' hare — who can safely guide the self through the unconscious, the way Virgil guided Dante. It is the only realm in which we can learn, by firsthand experience, the organic truths of existence. Seeing through animal eyes, as Beuys did, or seeing through Virgil's eyes, as Dante did, one is not blinded by what one sees. In contrast to Beuys' performance, Kaprow's happening looks like a simpleminded reification of everyday life. That is why it is pseudo-art — one-dimensional art, that is, art without any unconscious depth. The unconscious is the most uncanny, imaginative of dimensions, which is why Kaprow's happening is matter-of-fact rather than uncannily imaginative. Kaprow claims a debt to Pollock's "action paintings," arguing that the action mattered more to Pollock than the painting, but Kaprow's happenings reify everyday actions, which is to deny that they can ever be transformed into uncanny art.

Beuys' art is aspirational: it aspires to self and social transformation. His famous fat and felt — the former stores energy, the latter insulates and warms (both are in the service of life) — are part of an expressionistic process of performance. Beuys performs his self-renewal, emblematic of the renewal of German society. He is in fact on a rescue mission, as his sleds make clear. Rescuing himself, he can rescue German society from itself, from its past: it is Beuys' social fate to be a German who experienced fascism firsthand, who was unwittingly victimized, body and soul, by fascism. His art is a heroic attempt to save himself and German society from their history by a kind of return to the basics of human existence — in effect a return to nature under the auspices of organic existential experience. Art for him is a therapeutic enterprise, or at least has therapeutic potential, for both the individual and the collective. If the gist of romanticism is the belief that art can effect profound human change — ironically by acknowledging what is inevitable in human nature and the unconscious, which is what makes the process of change dialectical — then Beuys is a romantic artist.

In contrast, Kaprow's art has no healing intention — it does not offer the individual the possibility of self-transformation, and with that, implicitly, transcendence of inorganic everyday society and mechanically collective consciousness — but rather affirms that the individual is rooted in inescapable everydayness. Kaprow participates, with a naive responsiveness, in the everyday world, in effect losing himself in it — which is one way of reconciling oneself to it — rather than struggles to transcend it through self-transformation. As Kaprow says, in what might be called a mystical vision of everyday

life — a sense of harmonious merger it, in which the self loses its independence, individuality, critical consciousness and creative power of transformation — “The actual, probably global, environment will engage us in an increasingly participational way. . . . we’ll act in response to the given natural and urban environments.”⁶ Kaprow was unwittingly descendental because he had no idea of what it meant to ascend artistically by plunging into the unconscious depths. He leveled art until it could no longer be said to exist as a transformative activity.

Beuys is the ancestor of the aspirational aesthetic painting that emerged with a desperate vengeance in the 1980s and Kaprow is the ancestor of the conceptual pseudo-art that also emerged, largely in the form of appropriation art. It at once valorized the rhetoric of objects out of which everyday life is constructed and used those objects as art, often in installations. (Appropriation art is rooted in Duchamp’s appropriation of everyday objects which he “assisted” into becoming art by giving them witty titles and installing them in art contexts.) Where the painters struggled to sustain an inspired response to social and personal reality — to make contact with and sensuously and imaginatively express their unconscious sense of reality — the conceptual pseudo-artists reduced art to the condition of everyday life and treated it as just another social event, indeed, used art objects in social spectacles, in effect de-individualizing them. The Neo-Expressionist work that first seriously appeared in “A New Spirit of Painting” exhibition (London, Royal Academy, 1981) and Joseph Kosuth’s Neo-Conceptual “Play of the Unsayable. Ludwig Wittgenstein” (Secession, Vienna, 1989) exemplify these extremes. Neo-Expressionism is also apparent in the social expressionism of Jörg Immendorff, in which his individuality as well as German society are at risk (both are divided against themselves), and the personal expressionism of Francesco Clemente, in which the mythic fiction of the self and his highly idiosyncratic sense of self converge. John Baldessari’s and Gerard Richter’s de-individualizing and de-authenticating portraits are examples of Neo-Conceptual appropriation. However individual and authentic the persons portrayed, these pseudo-artists’ techniques deny their personhood, individuality and experiential reality in a manner reminiscent of Warhol. (Baldessari often blocks out a face and Richter blurs his figures and scenes.)

Neo-Expressionist painting involves an empathic response to its subject matter, Neo-Conceptualist appropriation art is completely unempathic to its medium as well as subject matter. Neo-Expressionism is a spirited re-assertion of art’s commitment to the unconscious — gospel since Surrealism, and already explicit in Symbolism. It shows that it is still possible to make inspired art, affording an unadministerable sensuous and personal experience, evocative of unconscious feelings and fantasies, in aesthetic defiance of the leveling and appropriative tendencies of the administrative society, to which Neo-Con-

ceptualism capitulates. Indeed, Neo-Expressionism is an art of feeling and fantasy, rather than an art that emulates the indifference ingrained in everyday life, which is what occurs in Neo-Conceptualism. It strips art of unconscious import, reducing it to institutional site specificity and social objectivity, indeed, into a token case of an ideological or theoretical position. Neo-Expressionism represents the rebellion and possibility of being a True Self in a false world, to use Winnicott's idea. Embedded in and emboldened by viscerality, the True Self expresses its vitality in personalized ideas and spontaneous gestures. Its creativity makes it feel real and alive. In contrast, Neo-Conceptualism unwittingly complies with the false world by intellectualizing it, declaring art to be false in the process, and thus contradicting itself to the extent it claims to be art.

Functioning as a curator, Kosuth appropriated works by more than 100 artists, all of whom had at some point been influenced by Wittgenstein. There were familiar avant-gardists, such as Malevich, Picabia and Man Ray, all historical figures, and such contemporary neo-avant-gardists as Daniel Buren, Robert Gober, Imi Knoebel and Sherrie Levine, all of whose works, however "intellectually" interesting — as with Duchamp, it depends on what one means by "intellectual" — derive from and manipulate traditional avant-garde ideas. But they were all leveled in the context of Kosuth's grab-bag installation, which had the tacky nihilistic look of a mass society spectacle. Indeed, they all lost in auratic value what they gained in exhibition value, to use Walter Benjamin's distinction. They lost their artistic reality and became social appearances. All lost their individual meaning and particular identity subserving Wittgenstein, with whom Kosuth clearly identifies, and certainly tries to emulate. Completely subsumed by Wittgenstein and Kosuth — the point was made explicit by the fact that Kosuth copied sentences from Wittgenstein's writing, locating them at ground level, while the works were grouped together on the wall above, as though the sentences were the pedestal that elevated them to the dignity and status of art — the works became empty examples of Wittgensteinian thought. It was as though each was a toy tail pinned on the philosopher-donkey Wittgenstein, the only common thread in what was otherwise a chaotic (however superficially organized) demonstration of the humbling of art by philosophy — Kosuth's overriding idea from the beginning (1965) of his supposedly thinking man's art.

Kosuth, who has attacked and repudiated painting, stripped the paintings he used of the painterly particularity that gave them sensuous individuality — most notably in the case of Robert Ryman, who was probably included in the installation as an ironical foil to the more "conceptually advanced" works. He not only appropriated art for his nihilistic purpose but also the museum and Wittgenstein. He became artist-curator-philosopher-art historian in one — a pseudo-artist, pseudo-curator, pseudo-philosopher, pseudo-art histo-

rian. Blurring the significance of each by synthesizing them in his person without understanding their significance and relationship, he demonstrates the arrogance, grandiosity and ignorance of appropriation art. Resold as an intellectual bill of goods, art that is intellectually appropriated automatically becomes stale and second hand — used (and abused) art, and as such peculiarly inauthentic and impotent. It is in effect discredited and “dematerialized” by being intellectualized — or rather victimized by a pseudo-intellectual act of appropriation.

But the act of appropriation is itself a sign of creative impotence — of artistic inadequacy and failure — and its result is pseudo-art, that is, conceptual art. Kosuth in fact never made creative art — as distinct from manufactured conceptual pseudo-art (or what Kaprow called “postart”) — and was probably incapable of doing so. (He hides his incapacity behind his pseudo-intellectualizing, and probably preferred language as his medium, as he said, because, like Duchamp, he could not paint creatively. But Kosuth is not even particularly creative with language, as Duchamp was, in however limited a way, with his puns. He was inspired by Jules Laforgue, indicating that he had a poetic streak, while Kosuth is prosaic all the way.) Nor was Kosuth philosophically original and insightful, and his exhibition offered no unusual insights into the history of art. He was also a failure as a curator. For instead of freshly differentiating works by contrasting and comparing them, he simplified their meaning by reducing them to illustrations of Wittgenstein’s ideas — presented in another grab-bag, so that no particular connection was made between this particular work and that particular idea — much the way he had earlier said that Smithson’s material works were dispensable illustrations of his writings, which were his real indispensable “art.”

Kosuth, incidentally, offered no new insight into the works, nor for that matter into Wittgenstein, for he simply quoted Wittgenstein and accepted the artists’ assertion that they had all been influenced by Wittgenstein. The exhibition involved virtually no “research.” Nor for that matter, did it offer fresh insight into the complex relationship between visual art and philosophy. What is the effect of each on the other? What happens to visual art when it is regarded simply as an illustration of philosophy and what happens to philosophy when it is visually illustrated? What happens to seeing when one “sees” a philosophy and what happens to philosophy when it becomes “visible?” Is there the one-to-one fit that Kosuth seems to think there is? There was a certain intellectual shabbiness and immaturity to the exhibition, which seemed to have more to do with adulating a celebrity philosopher than with critically understanding his ideas and the art that was supposedly influenced by them.

Neo-Expressionist painting has been called decadent because of its revival of an old, indeed, pre-World War I, idea of modern painting, but it integrates all the abstract painting, both gestural and geometrical, that has de-

veloped since then, complicating and changing painting, and making it once again a serious experience — aesthetically shocking. But if there is an aura of *déjà vu* — the already painted — hanging over Neo-Expressionist painting, there is an aura of Duchampian Dadaism and Surrealism hanging over Neo-Conceptualism, suggesting that it also is decadent, that is, reiterates, with whatever cleverness, the old idea of art in the service of the mind (the same old ironical mind). As has been said, the modern “new” has become the postmodern “neo” — which, depending on how one conceives decadence, means decay or preciousness, perhaps decay into preciousness, implying Alexandrian codification and polishing of artistic gains rather than inspired aesthetic innovation. But the real tragedy of the ‘80s situation is that it suggests the ongoing dissociation of sensibility — the separation of feeling and thinking — that T. S. Eliot thought was the modern disease (a virtual plague in postmodernity) and that a number of psychoanalysts, particularly Gilbert Rose, thought that it was art’s task to remedy. The flexible unity of affect and idea is in fact one of the signs of mental health, suggesting the unhealthiness of modern and postmodern art as a whole. But the Neo-Expressionists claimed to be making conceptual painting — painting that was at once intellectual and empathic without being fixated on one at the expense of the other and without reifying either — suggesting they were determined to heal the split between feeling and thinking. (The German Neo-Expressionists have convincingly done so.) In contrast, the Neo-Conceptualists maintained an attitude of ironic indifference to feeling — a seemingly intellectual detachment from and skepticism about it — however much their ostensible feelinglessness is itself an expression of feeling. Indeed, their emotional nihilism — their militant eradication of all sensuous-affective expressive traces from their work — is inseparable from the feeling of self-defeat and self-loss. In contrast, the Neo-Expressionists tried to retrieve, repair, and recapitulate, in an excruciatingly personal, experiential way, the feelings of self-defeat and self-loss — the sense of the meaninglessness of the self (implicit in the idea of the split between feeling and thinking, that is, the self-division which announces the impending disintegration of the self) — endemic to modern society and epidemic in postmodern society. They were particularly evident in post-war Germany and post-war Europe in general. One might say that European Neo-Expressionism was an attempt to counteract them by an angry *joie de vivre*, however subliminally conveyed, without denying their depressing, disorienting character.

Rhapsodic, rapturous painting, sometimes morbidly oppressive, sometimes violently grotesque, emerged in the ‘80s in Europe and secondarily in the United States. Much of it was figural, some of it dealt with unspoiled landscape. Sometimes the atmosphere was gloomy, as though perpetually overcast, at other times it was colorful and luminous. Everyday life was ironically rendered, more often the works had a dreamlike, even hallucinatory quality

and sensuous directness. They seemed to spring from some altered state of consciousness. Many seemed like newborn infants still attached to the umbilical cord of the unconscious. Bursting with life, they had a raw, fresh excitement, as though driven by forces beyond their control. They tended to be manically intense, as though in a process of perpetual self-transformation. The labile new painterliness and the dramatic new images often bordered on the bizarre. The Berlin Neue Wilden were notoriously intense, the Cologne Mühlheimer Freiheit notoriously absurd. Some Neo-Expressionists seem like caricaturists, others are profoundly humanistic. All the Neo-Expressionists have an urgent seriousness. The self seems at risk in their images; it often seems to be taking pleasure in pain. There is an aura of unprocessed feeling and sensation, however much they are artistically processed. Neo-Expressionist painting does not completely perform what the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion calls the alpha function — transform incomprehensible, painfully primitive feelings and sensations into manageable memories, containing them so that they can be analyzed and mastered — but it nonetheless is imbued with memory and organic cognition (as distinct from the routinized intellectualism — a kind of pseudo-knowledge — of Neo-Conceptualism). There is even a hint of idealism — perhaps most noteworthy in Markus Lüpertz's so-called dithyrambic paintings (heavy objects lyrically rise, defying the gravity of history) — however down to emotional earth the works tend to be.

Martin Disler seems to revive Nolde, but with much more expressionist ferment — clearly influenced by American Abstract Expressionism — and a greater sense of Germanic grotesqueness, and, one might add, picturesqueness, as numerous untitled paintings made between 1981 and 1985 indicate. Stefan Szczesny seems to revive Matisse, but his landscape is Northern rather than Mediterranean, as *Red Bather* (1985) makes clear, and his scenes have an aura of morbidity and absurdity that is at once Germanic and surrealist, as *Remarkable Still Life II* and *In the Shadow Of The City* (both 1984), indicate. Rainer Fetting's *Paul Mäuser* (1984) and *Lighthouse* (1985) dramatize isolation, or rather show, through their clash of gestures and pungent colors, the conflict within the feeling of social isolation. The male figure in Sandro Chia's *Youth and Dog* (1983) is at once heroic and everyday, and *The Woman and the Hero* (1983) are ghosts from an old mythology. They exist in a vertiginous, hallucinatory swirl, suggesting that the picture is a dream. They are in effect mirages in an emotional desert. Even landscapes have a dreamlike — nightmarish? — quality, as Bernd Zimmer's *Rushing Stream* (1981) and *Yellow Cloud* (1983) make clear. Bold evocations of the uncanny, like so many of the Neo-Expressionist paintings, their aggressive handling serves a mystical purpose: excited immersion in nature, still a source of inspiration. The expressionistic/organic sublime, as it might be called, is evident even in Peter Bömmels' surrealist figures, as *Three Chalice, Which Mean the World* and

The Return of the Happiness Maker (both 1982) show. Alois Mosbacher's *Creeperhead* (1984) and *The Dare* (1985) integrate the human and the natural, suggesting that each is part of the narrative of the other, sometimes tragically, sometimes comically.

Hans Peter Adamski, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Walter Dahn and Volker Tannert, among others, manage to breathe organic life into imagistic stereotypes, perversely bringing them to life in the act of artistically exploiting their clichéd character. For a stereotype may be a fatalistic embodiment of an existential truth. Dokoupil's *Death and Clown* (1981) — the former fiddling, the latter grimly melancholy, both mythically set among the stars — makes the point succinctly. It is a brilliant addition to the German tradition of Triumph of Death images, which seem to come spontaneously to the Germans, perhaps because of their history. Indeed, almost all German Neo-Expressionist painting is death-infected, suggesting that for the Germans death is the most existentially relevant issue of life. Dokoupil is a master of incongruity, as many modernists have been, contrasting figures and moods as well as colors and shapes. His juxtapositions, like those of David Salle, make us aware of unconscious truths we'd rather forget — truths that aren't as convincing in words as they are in dreamlike images.

In general, there is an aura of ironic misery to German Neo-Expressionist painting, as Dahn's *You Are Guilty* and Tannert's *Self-Help* (both 1981) show. These mocking works, at once cartoonlike and expressionistic — they might be called expressionistic cartoons — take on the self-absorption of the times. The penis is guilty in Dahn's work, but also a joke — a cartoon figure, rescued from clichédism by Dahn's wild, mock-spontaneous handling — and self-help is a kind of joke one plays on oneself, especially when one thinks one can help oneself by becoming a painter, like the little figure at work in the upper right corner of Tannert's image. Neo-Expressionistic paintings are more absurd fantasies than social representations, whatever social point they ironically make. Enzo Cucchi's works, particularly the untitled paintings he made in 1985, convey a sense of being adrift in a sea of stormy emotions, whether symbolized by the compulsive repetition of anonymous objects or painterly gestures. The landscape is always brooding and morbid, the paintings unsettling and dramatic, and the sense of the tragic palpable. Perception of emotion is not compromised by politics, even when there is a politically correct point being made subliminally, as in Elvira Bach's images of women, particularly the ironically lurid fantasy of sexual liberation pictured in the triptych *When It Is Night in Berlin* (1983), a polymorphous perverse nightclub scene become a polymorphous perverse painting. Similarly, *Dark and Pale* (1986), depicting two women, one black, one white, both naked, both with demonic tails emanating from their heads, and making love, has a certain self-mocking irony as well as confrontational vigor and erotic daring.

There is a sense of existential desperation to German Neo-Expressionist painting, broadly conceived as a mode of imagery as well as a style of handling. It may have to do with Germany's self-destructive history. Many paintings suggest this, among them Karl-Heinz Hödicke's *Beauty and the Beast* (1979), a dream picture of the Berlin Wall and glamorous legs, with dark space on the East German side, bright space on the West German side. The difference between the West's sexual liberation and the East's social repression is all but explicit. Similarly, Dieter Hacker's *The Boundary* (1983) shows a pitch black Berlin Wall, virtually impenetrable. It is a symbol of the tragedy that Germany has become — a tragedy that poisons its life down to the erotic depths, as Hacker's *The Black Room* (1985), the image of a voluptuous black nude asleep in a brilliantly illuminated prison cell, suggests. As in so many German Neo-Expressionist paintings, libido surges in the tormented Promethean painterliness, but the over-all mood is black — depressing and oppressive. Dahn and Dokoupil's *German Forest* (1981) shows a comic German figure with legs that are swastika wheels — a vulgar little Hitler with a swastika for a moustache — cutting through the forest like a juggernaut. Hitler may be a figure of fun, but there was nothing funny about his destructive effect on Germany, which he left divided and in ruins. There seems to be an echo of Heartfield's Hitler cartoons, made inwardly dramatic by the painterly handling, but the nightmare of Hitler has become real and done its dirty work.

Already in Lüpertz's *Black-Red-Gold—Dithyrambic* (1974), with its Nazi helmet mounted on armor, standing abandoned in an empty field, there is a sense that the Nazi past has to be dealt with. The German war machine has been stopped and is in ruins: Lüpertz's painting is a memento mori. The psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich famously argued that the Germans were unable to mourn for their destructive deeds because of their blind obedience to the state, internalized as the absolute authority and power, but the German Neo-Expressionists seem to be trying to mourn, with whatever difficulty and however awkwardly — and mourning is socially disruptive and awkward, and hard emotional work. Kiefer's *Mark Heath* (1974), *Ways of World Wisdom* (1976-77) and *The Mastersingers* (1982) are also awkward with mournfulness, however tempered — defended against — by irony. Even earlier, Baselitz's *The Great Friends* (1965) — two gigantic manneristic figures with signs of the stigmata standing amid the ruins of Germany, reminding us that in World War II the Germans were as much the victims of themselves as they were of the allies who defeated them — suggests the process of mourning, or at least the need to mourn. But it seems to turn into mourning for the German losers, who look rather heroic however tarnished. What happened to the victims of Germany? Has the Jewish Holocaust become the German Holocaust? All these works are allegories of German history, nationalism and imperialism, carried to a self-destructive extreme by the Nazis. It is the fascination with the Ger-

man self that is at it issue in these paintings — its misery and suffering, rather than the misery and suffering it inflicted on the world. Nonetheless, Neo-Expressionist paintings are clearly a rebellion against the authority and power of the state and the complacent status quo of postwar German society, as well as the status quo of art at the time, dominated by American Minimalism and Conceptualism.

The Nazi epoch clearly haunts postwar German painters, who find themselves the unwilling heirs to the Nazi past. They seem to be working through it and its consequences with painterly fury and irony. But painting is not equal to history, and the problem is ultimately more personal and existential than particularly German, although being a German makes it more difficult: the problem is the meaning and place of the self in a world that is indifferent to it. It is pointless to have a self in a society that regards people as instruments, however much one must have a strong sense of self to avoid becoming an instrument. The German self is one ambiguous case in point. But the morbid self that appears in Fetting's *Self-Portrait as Indian* (1982), Helmut Middendorf's *Floating Figure—Red* (1981), Salomé's *Blood Bath* (1979), Werner Buttner's *Self-Portrait Masturbating in the Movies* (1980), Dokoupil's *Portrait of a Young Musician (W.D.)* (1982), Gerard Kever's *Dance in the Kitchen* (1980), Immendorf's *Cafe Deutschland III* (1978), and even earlier in Horst Antes' famously grotesque *Kopffüssler* figures, begun in 1962-63, and Baselitz's notorious *The Big Night Down the Drain* (1962-63) is more universally existential than particularly German, however much it grew like a weed in the decadent soil of postwar German society. The war forced German artists to face themselves, but the self they faced was more generic than particularly German: being German became a springboard for conveying the tragic sense of life, which American Pop art as well as Minimalism and Conceptualism denied. After all, there is nothing tragic about America, however ironically pathetic it may be, which is the point Warhol's death imagery — including his death masks of the socially successful, their self-deception on ironic display — makes. No tragic depth in America, only shallow self-consciousness to accompany a shallow sense of self, however much suffering there is in America — a suffering hidden by its pursuit of success.

The problem of the self is the "metaphysical" problem of all art that is convincingly modern, as Harold Rosenberg argued. The self is at risk in modernity: it has fewer and fewer social supports, and no transcendental ones at all, and thus little to facilitate its development and give it strength and self-belief. It must address its own riskiness if it is to survive, if only in a risky art. The self — and the art that supports and even seems to invent it in the course of dealing with the annihilative anxiety aroused by its awareness of its riskiness — is a tightwire act over a social abyss. It must realize its precarious social position — acknowledge its suffering — if it is to find the courage to

continue its act of being a self. German Neo-Expressionistic painting is urgently modern because it presents the self at its most nihilistic — dangerously defiant and above all outraged by the world, whose violence and death wish are satirically mimicked by its artistic violence. It is as though it is compulsively expelling the world's violence in the act of angrily assimilating it. Neo-Expressionist violence is a kind of Pyrrhic victory over the world's violence, artistically transcending it in the act of emotionally submitting to its inescapability. The Neo-Expressionists are angry fatalists, acutely aware of death. But their consciousness of death is a source of self and artistic renewal — indeed, the only consciousness that prods them to ecstatic life. Underneath their sardonically violent surface and seemingly ridiculous images, they are eschatologically serious and sublime artists.

Their means are familiar: flatness and gesture, tongue-in-cheek irony and callous black humor, distortion and improvisation, *épater le bourgeois* vulgarity and ecstatic aestheticism. But they are used with a fresh dialectical flair that restores their avant-garde unfamiliarity. The larger point is that old avant-garde means of artistic differentiation and individuation are enlisted in the service of self-differentiation and individuation. The unresolvable problem of being a unique self in the ever more anonymous modern world is articulated through avant-garde methods that make a fetish of unresolvability. They continue to be the best means of artistic and self survival in the postmodern world, where empathy has become rarer and rarer because administration has become total — including administration of the self (perhaps the ultimate administrative feat). Avant-garde means continue to de-administrate art, even as the avant-garde — and art in general, like the self — has become overadministered in the postmodern world, intensifying the malaise of the self and subverting creativity while seeming to support it. Thus the avant-garde remains a symbol of alienation, even when it is no longer aesthetically and emotional alien. It continues to testify to the incompatibility of self and society in a world in which each seems to have outgrown the need for the other.

The self that appears in German Neo-Expressionist painting, perhaps most compulsively in Dokoupil's 1983 series of depressing portraits — and also in such American Neo-Expressionist works as David Wojnarowicz's *Rimbaud in New York* (1978-79), Eric Fischl's masturbating *Sleepwalker* (1979), Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump* (1982), Julian Schnabel's melodramatic *King of the Wood* (1984) and Cindy Sherman's theatrical representations of women, 1977 ongoing, among many others — suffers from what the psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl calls existential neurosis. While these artists ironically address particular social issues — homosexuality in Wojnarowicz, adolescence in Fischl, racism in Basquiat, the social status of the artist in Schnabel, the social role of women in Sherman and, in the Germans, social reality at its most horrifically banal — the deeper, more pressing

issue that haunts their work is the problematic character of the self. Wojnarowicz and Basquiat are street-smart, Fischl and Sherman are wise to the ways of Hollywood sensationalism, Schnabel's plate paintings are abstract expressionist collages, and the Germans are virtuosos of gesturalism, suavely mingling garish, raw and refined, even elegant brushwork — but their artistic know-how and ideological interests are the means to a bitter end: the representation of the Tragic Self. An identity is artistically performed — a social role is played, with whatever irony — to hide the absence of a True Self. This is the case even when the True Self seems viscerally expressed and spontaneously performed, as in the German painters: they invoke it with their painterliness, but what arises from the passionate depths is the Tragic Self — the ghost of a True Self that has lost its bearings and meaning in a false world. On the surface Neo-Expressionist works are social critiques of standard modes of prejudicial representation, but underneath they enact the emptiness of a self that has no meaning to itself. The defensive irony of the Neo-Expressionists gives the game away: there is nothing behind the irony but a void of human meaning. Irony is the intellectual filler of the empty self. It is a weak finger in a poorly built intellectual dam holding back a world that seems overwhelming in its insanity.

For Frankl, the will-to-meaning is more fundamental than the will-to-pleasure and the will-to-power. “The will to meaning is the most human phenomenon of all, since an animal certainly never worries about the meaning of its existence.”⁷ “Frustration of the will-to-meaning” or “existential frustration” is a “spiritual” sickness, Frankl says, where “‘spiritual’ does not have a religious connotation but refers to the specifically human dimension,” namely, the human need for meaning. German Neo-Expressionism is obsessed with spiritual sickness, masquerading as physical sickness, compensated for by the pursuit of pleasure and power. Adamski's *The Appeal of the Little Illness I and II* (both 1982) makes the point clearly, along with the two macabre heads, bloody and blackened, as though buried alive, that he painted in 1983. So does, in their different ways, Middendorf's *Loneliness of the Heads* and *The Insane Ones—Yellow* (both 1983), Bömmels' *The Self-Eater* (1982) — an ironic reference to Kafka's story *The Hunger Artist?* — and Dokoupil's *The Incurable Metamorphosis of the Russian People* (1982), as well as Kiefer's earlier *Painting is Sick*. The very bizarreness of these works conveys incurable spiritual sickness.

What is the meaning of the self in post-Nazi Germany?, the Neo-Expressionists ask. More broadly, they deal with the self's loss of the will-to-meaning — its will to give itself meaning — in contemporary society. Neo-Expressionism shows the failure of heroism in modern life, to recall Baudelaire's phrase, or rather the meaninglessness of heroism in modern life — certainly in view of the grotesquely distorted form it took in Hitler and the Nazis. (For the Neo-Expressionists fascism seems to be a perverse longing for

a perverse version of the mythical hero. The Aryan hero is a perversion of the classical heroic ideal, just as Aryan architecture is a perversion of heroic classical architecture.) In short, the self portrayed in Neo-Expressionism is a self in the throes of an existential crisis of meaning. It is struggling to keep its meaning and spirit, to make its existence meaningful and vital — to will its own meaning, and with that give life meaning — but it seems to be a losing battle. The Neo-Expressionist self struggles to be meaningful, but it knows it has no meaning in society, which is the ultimate arbiter of the individual's meaningfulness. Because of this life seems cheap and existence absurd in Neo-Expressionist painting, however much their meaninglessness is rationalized by irony.

“Men give meaning to their lives by realizing . . . *creative values*, by achieving tasks,” writes Frankl. For the Neo-Expressionists the dialectical task of art is to transform a meaningless self into a meaningful self — to work through the meaninglessness that the self experiences in the world in order to generate a sense of the individual's meaning. The intense painterliness, ambivalently libidinous and aggressive — inherently absurd — of the Neo-Expressionists suggests vigorous working through. It generates a kind of atmosphere of meaningfulness in what otherwise seems an ironically meaningless scene. It forms an aura of meaningful activity around peculiarly meaningless figures — silly token human beings, sometimes bizarrely distorted so that they seem nonhuman, sometimes abandoned or thrown in space, as though to suggest their irrelevance. The Neo-Expressionist self transforms meaninglessness into meaningfulness through a process of suffering, expressed by the turbulent painterly process itself, with its self-conflicted Dionysianism, throwing all aesthetic caution to the winds in an effort to achieve a new aesthetic urgency and poignancy. The most annihilative suffering is the experience of the loss of meaningfulness — of overwhelming spiritlessness. Ironically, Neo-Expressionist painterliness makes the loss of meaningfulness vividly meaningful, as though the resulting emotional vacuum had special existential presence. One might say that Neo-Expressionism gives meaningless existence meaning by artistically recreating its meaninglessness in art. Acquiring absurd artistic value, it becomes creatively valuable.

The artistic will-to-meaning — or is it the will to artistic meaning? — is the last hope of the will-to-meaning. Neo-Expressionism suggests it may be the last gasp — the final tragic expression — of the will-to-meaning. It strongly suggests that in the modern world one must create one's own meaning or have no meaning: the only source of meaning is the self that feels it has none — the paradoxical modern self. In modernity, which has demystified the world, there is no stable sense of human meaning. Is it possible to believe that human existence is unquestionably meaningful when it ends in death? Nonetheless, the self must heal itself of the will to meaninglessness that has become epidemic

in modern society, if it wants to enjoy its life. The world's demystifying knowledge can't cure the disease of meaninglessness; only the self's own mystifying — and necessarily narcissistic — art can do so. For the Neo-Expressionists, artistic expression of the self's inexpressible suffering — fear of annihilation — is the only way to give it meaning and value.

The point that Frankl is making is deceptively simple and paradoxical: there is no guaranteed foundation of meaningfulness in modern society, which is why the self is forced to create the meaning of existence, including its own, or become sick unto death, that is, spiritually hollow to the extent of losing value to itself and others. The young German artists who emerged after the Second World War realized that the existence of Germany was no longer meaningful. There was no foundation of existential meaning in defeated Germany. To be German was to be existentially absurd. Nazi Germany had already demonstrated profound annihilative indifference to existence — ultimately to the existence of Germany itself. It systematically attempted to break the will-to-meaning — the human spirit — of whomever it believed did not measure up to Aryan standards of human existence. Thus Germany, which had sacrificed itself to the will-to-power, dehumanizing itself in the process — ironically it was projecting its own non-humanity into its victims, whom it regarded as subhuman — was spiritually bankrupt before it lost the war. Thus the Neo-Expressionists were born into an existentially frustrated society. They wanted existential satisfaction because they grew up in a society that had lost its reason for existing, and with that its spirit. (The Nazi annihilation of subhuman — non-Aryan — existences ironically heralded Germany's own annihilation. After the Nazis, Germany no longer had to be anxious about the meaning of its existence because it lost the right to exist.)

At its deepest, Neo-Expressionist painting is an attempt to integrate the tragic sense of life, which is the inner truth of history in general and German history in particular, with the aesthetic sense of life, which is the inner truth of art and existence at its most ontologically meaningful. More broadly, it is an attempt to fuse serious human interest and serious aesthetic interest to create a serious artistic-existential experience. Middendorf's *Airplane Dream* (1982) — a haunting memory of the Berlin Airlift, and thus of survival despite adversity — makes the point brilliantly. It is at once tragic and aesthetic — existentially unsettling and sensuously rich. Middendorf transforms the mechanical reality of the airplane into the organic fantasy of the dream image, signaling Neo-Expressionist rebellion against technology — a futile but nonetheless artistically fertile rebellion. Neo-Expressionism reasserts organic feeling and organic art in a mechanical world and in rebellion against the inorganic "engineered" art of Minimalism and Conceptualism. (The latter uses the machine of language to manufacture pseudo-artistic products.) For the Neo-Expressionists art is an organically open system, responsive to the dialectic of

society and self, rather than a closed system obsessed with its own medium, as though searching for its own essence, which is what Clement Greenberg understood it to be, and what it is in Minimalism and Conceptualism. Neo-Expressionism incorporates the emotionally and socially ugly to achieve lurid beauty, confirming the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal's theory of creativity as a tragic enterprise in which the ugly is contained by and assimilated into the beautiful, resulting in an aesthetic integrity emblematic of the existentially undivided self. Middendorf turns a traumatic scene into an exquisite image: the threatening airplane, dominating the scene, has become a symbol of his new self, able to master the trauma by giving it aesthetic significance. The child in Middendorf no longer feels helpless and powerless, however awed he remains by the airplane. Thus Neo-Expressionist creativity is a symbolic self-healing through the artistic internalization of a traumatic historical reality. Artistic illusion gives one aesthetic power over one's feelings, if not over the horribly real world.

The Neo-Expressionist concern with the self has its precedents, particularly in the Auto-Polaroids and Self-Transformations of Lucas Samaras, and perhaps most of all his early boxes, which were known in Germany. Aesthetically ingenious, they show a tragic self emerging from the depths — a sort of jack-in-the-box popping out of a hell of its own making. Samaras, a kind of imp of the perverse, is implicitly a model for the Neo-Expressionists, and their perverse attitude to everyday life and society. Clemente's sense of self owes a great deal to Samaras, particularly in its idiosyncrasy, irony and playfulness, although Clemente does not have the same emotional depth, intellectual complexity, and for that matter artistic versatility and aesthetic skill, as Samaras. Similarly, Arnulf Rainer's *Face Farces* (1973) owe something to Samaras. From the Neo-Expressionist performances of the Viennese action artists (most notoriously Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Hermann Nitsch, who assiduously mixed mysticism and violence, ecstatic self-destruction and manic self-glorification) through Maria Lassnig's *Sciencefiction-Selfportrait* (1980) and beyond, the Austrian Neo-Expressionists have been consistently preoccupied with healing the narcissistically injured self. Rainer's *Face of an Unknown Dead Man* (1980-81) — like Samaras, Rainer works over photographs — is a startling existential-aesthetic work, confirming the Germanic fascination with death, evident also in the death's-heads that seductively proliferate in many Neo-Expressionist works. Death is implicit in Samaras' X-ray self-portraits, and in their atmosphere of violence, and, more subtly and dialectically, in their aesthetic mysticism: aesthetically transfiguring his body, Samaras resurrects himself as a god (dying flesh becomes eternally vibrant, alive color). Samaras' obsession with the body and color, and the performative character of his images — he performs himself, as it were, exposing his wounded self while healing it by intensive artistic care, reverberates in Austrian and German Neo-Expressionism.

Certainly Samaras and the Neo-Expressionists offer a more penetrating sense of self — a greater awareness of its inner dynamics, its constant psychodramatic process — than any portrait produced by Duane Hanson and Chuck Close, however much there is an unnerving, all-American pathos — a sense of disillusionment that falls short of existential frustration and the melancholy of meaninglessness — in their depersonalized, not to say dehumanized figures and faces.

The work of the so-called Neo-Geo painters who emerged in the '80s, perhaps most noteworthy Peter Halley, with his clever use of the computer chip as a geometrical form, pale in comparison to the paintings of the Neo-Expressionists, even when the Neo-Geo painters use glow-in-the-dark type colors. Similarly the conceptualist installations of Hans Haacke and other social activists — whatever their cause — look aesthetically and existentially inadequate next to the Neo-Expressionist paintings, whatever critical points the former score on the side of sociopolitical correctness. Sociopolitical activism is not the issue of art; aesthetic-existential creativity and impact is. Social critique is embedded in Neo-Expressionism; it does not compensate for the failure of creative nerve: art becomes the platform for an ideological message when it is unable to make an aesthetic-existential difference. The message compensates for artistic weakness — artistic amateurism. Indeed, social message art is built on a shaky artistic foundation, which is why it is bad art whatever good it intends. Haim Steinbach's conceptual installations are meant to criticize consumer society, but exhibiting consumer products — ostensibly well-made but existentially trivial and aesthetically simplistic — as art mocks art as much as it mocks them. Steinbach's pseudo-art is as exploitive and superficial as the consumer society it exploits. Incapable of offering imaginative insight into the commodity — of grasping its unconscious meaning and existential import — he glamorizes its superficiality with superficial irony. His installations are ingratiating artistic embarrassments — conceptual art at its most flamboyantly nihilistic.

Neo-Expressionist paintings work both as social critique and aesthetic-existential experience, while social activist conceptual installations tend to look like propaganda — ironically for what they're criticizing as well as for the particular theoretical and ideological perspective they're advocating. Steinbach, for example, endorses what he attacks, however unwittingly: exhibiting commodities as art, he makes them more meaningful — he apotheosizes them — than they were when they were sold on store shelves. He legitimates rather than undermines consumer society: He plays into its hands, revealing his critical inconsequence, especially because his art takes on the identity of the commodity it supposedly criticizes, thus losing whatever aesthetic and existential edge it might have had. The aesthetic and existential are in themselves radical critiques of everyday consumer society.

Social activist conceptual installations fit society into a procrustean bed of ideology rather than offer new insights into it. They tend to conform to preexisting, not to say obsolete agendas for social revolution, thus short-circuiting consciousness of the complexity and subtlety of social experience. They are peculiarly naive, for all their theoretical grandiosity. It may be that Charles Saatchi and Peter Ludwig use art to whitewash their capitalist manipulations, as Haacke suggests in several works, but it is not clear that the art they collect is reducible to “boutique” status, as Haacke once publicly said it was. Haacke discredits art in general, not only by showing its links to exploitive capitalism, but by reducing it to another media phenomenon, which plays into the hands of capitalism by denying it humanizing aesthetic and existential meaning — just as capitalism and its media undermine them. Haacke — along with Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, to mention two other prominent pseudo-artists who make social activist conceptual installations — have the same degraded cynical consciousness of art as the capitalist media he ironically uses to make his critical point.

From Ana Mendieta to David Hammons, ideologically inclined artists tend to make aesthetically and existentially simplistic art, however unexpectedly moving it may sometimes be — for reasons that have nothing to do with its ideological stance. It is the interplay of Mendieta’s thin naked body, all the more organic and vulnerable covered in mud, with her arms raised as though crucified, and the huge tree she leans against — adding its organic majesty to her flesh, which seems to have risen from the grave — in her *Tree of Life* series (1977) that makes her earth-body work aesthetically and existentially convincing, not her feminist ideology. Her work is authentic not because of its ideology but because of the existential aesthetics that give it evocative power — that make it resonate in the unconscious. Like Frieda Kahlo’s work, Mendieta’s work deals with life and death more than it deals with woman’s rights. Similarly, it is the black hair that becomes ironically expressive in Hammons’ performative works — organically alive hair that suddenly becomes abstract expressionist art — that makes it aesthetically and existentially convincing, not the ideological import it has because it is an African-American signifier.

The abysmal black and morbid luminosity of Rudolf Baranik’s *Napalm Elegies*, with their ghostly head that looks like a moonscape, makes them aesthetically and existentially important, not their anti-war rhetoric. Dramatic chiaroscuro, also emblematic of annihilative anxiety, also makes May Stevens’ paintings of her emotionally disturbed working class mother and the Communist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg — they sit side by side, in different historical, social and emotional spaces — an upsetting nightmare. Stevens’ feminism and leftism seem beside the point of her poignant image, however much they inform it through her iconography. Like Baranik, Stevens transforms a

traumatic, memorable photograph — her schizophrenic mother as she looked in the mental hospital in which she spent the last two decades of her life — into aesthetically and existentially memorable art. Stevens' hallucinatory work is a human document before — and after — we recognize its feminist import. For Stevens, both Luxemburg and her mother were murdered by patriarchal society. But it is her aesthetics that makes their lives existentially meaningful, not their tragic deaths. The bitter black atmosphere is death — and depression — incarnate, but it is death in general not her mother's and Luxemburg's particular deaths. A work of art is not a social statement — it is not just another way of taking a social stand, a soapbox from which one can preach to the unconverted and indifferent — but a dream in which the self registers through its emotions the unconscious meaning of being in a world not of its own making, the existential effects of traumatic experience that expressively linger in aesthetic traces.

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Mark Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.
- ² Mikel Dufrenne, *In the Presence of the Sensuous: Essays in Aesthetics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1987), 5.
- ³ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 127-28.
- ⁴ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 109.
- ⁵ Trilling, 132.
- ⁶ Kaprow, 108.
- ⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy* (New York: Bantam, 1967), x-xii.

Chapter 10: The Decadence Of Advanced Art And The Return Of Tradition and Beauty: The New as Tower of Conceptual Babel; The Tenth Decade

Satire is the last flicker of originality in a passing epoch as it faces the onroad of staleness and boredom. Freshness has gone: bitterness remains. The prolongation of outworn forms of life means a slow decadence in which there is repetition without any fruit in the reaping of value. There may be high survival power. For decadence, undisturbed by originality or by external forces, is a slow process. But the values of life are slowly ebbing. There remains the show of civilization, without any of its realities.

Alfred North Whitehead¹

"Decadence" . . . has always broadly meant a backward movement or sterile arrest, the mulling over and taking to the self materials and actions that have been surpassed or left behind by society, a dwelling on values that are thought infertile and a consequent refusal to 'advance' . . .

Richard Gilman²

Perhaps somewhere right now there are obscure artists, preoccupied with intellectual research and picturesque wonders, willingly shut up in miserable studios . . . who ponder emptily, unhappily, the universal thought in order to express it in a language intelligible to all. Fiat lux! Because what is important now is . . . to leave the Babel of confused tongues and to create, by virtue of a common thought, a common language, a common form disengaged from all the shadows cast on human nature by all the high borders of absolute systems, by local prejudices, by all sorts of errors which still divide the family of nations.

Théophile Thoré³

Part 1

"The boundaries between the artistic and the non-artistic have been blurred," the Marxist aesthetician Stefan Morawski wrote in 1972,⁴ without realizing that this was the cause of artistic decadence. How could he, considering that it was the enlistment of art in the service of social revolution — there is nothing more non-artistic than social revolution, unless it is popular culture

— that led to its decadence in modernity.

The question that haunts Marxist aesthetics is, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, another Marxist: “[W]hy has the biological and existential content of ‘aesthetic’ been sublimated in the unreal, illusory realm of art rather than in the transformation of reality?”⁵⁵ If the aesthetic “belongs to art as art” rather than being “brought to bear on art ‘from the outside,’” then bringing the aesthetic to bear on reality outside art desublimates the aesthetic so that it no longer belongs to art. Marcuse erroneously thinks that art is an unreal, illusory realm rather than a realm with a reality of its own: a unique “meta-real” realm in which the reality of the aesthetic — which Marcuse admits is biologically and existentially real — becomes transparently clear, with whatever degree of epiphanic visibility, expressive force and transcendental self-containment. “Art as art” brings the aesthetic into focus, the sharper the focus, the more authentic the art. The desublimation of the aesthetic, which results from the use of art as an instrument of “fundamental social change” and a “guide [to] the construction of the new society” — “the realization of art as a principle of social reconstruction”⁵⁶ — seems to reconstruct art itself, but in doing so it undermines art as art, that is, art that is aesthetically relevant, and with that, organically and existentially influential.

The tearing down of the aesthetic wall between non-artistic and artistic reality — between social life and artistic reflection, or, more basically, between blind attachment to everyday life and insightful detachment from it — seems to inaugurate an advanced new aesthetics. But this supposedly unfamiliar, radical aesthetics is the familiar quasi-aesthetics of everyday life in artistic disguise — a sort of artistic Emperor’s New Clothing on ironically naked banal objects and materials. They are asserted for themselves even as they are superficially transformed by being “considered” as art, suggesting the artist’s double identification, and perhaps above all, the impossibility of complete artistic transformation in modernity, with its all-encompassing secular everydayness, that is, its resecularization of reality, which is its real revolution: the banalization of perception. Instead of imaginatively distilling the aesthetic juice of the ordinary so that its inner extraordinariness becomes evident, its ordinariness comes to matter more than its aesthetic revelation through sanctified sensation, which is all but meaningless in a secular world.

This exciting new avant-garde aesthetic, however associated with Duchamp, began with Picasso’s invention of collage and Braque’s invention of papiers collés. These incorporate — ironically, but also with aesthetic seriousness — pedestrian materials, e.g., newspaper clippings, into art works, as though in rebellion against their traditional, tired refinement. Supposedly, these familiar materials are aesthetically transformed into unfamiliar — innovative — art, ironically rejuvenating art with their crass, unaesthetic reality, made quasi-aesthetic by being incorporated into art. But the incorporation is always

ambiguous: A newspaper clipping may be as flat as a canvas, and the artist may establish a formal reciprocity between them while maintaining their difference, but the moment one reads the newspaper clipping, as one is invariably tempted to do, it is removed from the realm of art it seems to "conceptualize." But the unwitting main point is that the fragment of everyday life signals its power over art, which submits to it by unequivocally identifying with it. This emotional unequivocalness is signaled by the fragment's own unequivocal assertion of its everyday identity and presence. It is, after all, only superficially or relatively transformed: Recontextualization in the art work is only nominally a transformation — a transformation depending on a willing suspension of disbelief. Lightly veiled by formal treatment in the collage and papier collé, the evidence of the everyday remains intact, however much it may be a small indexical trace of it — a synechdochic stand-in for its power of totalization.

Thus the interaction of high art and low life, the low supposedly giving the high new life, the high supposedly showing the inner sublimity — aesthetic uniqueness — of the low, remains peculiarly unresolved and artistically abortive, however creatively innovative it may look. This failure of artistic transformation becomes increasingly evident in the junk art, assemblage and installation art that developed from collage. It is especially clear in the environments of everyday life, usually casually (not to say chaotically) organized, that have multiplied in the '90s, perhaps most obviously in Pippilotti Rist's installations. The aesthetic has been mutilated in these works, however ironically aesthetic they sometimes seem, by reason of their garish color and bombastic theatricality. There may be moments of aesthetic perception in everyday life, but they flash by inconsequentially, as though beside the point of life, but then everyday life is blind to the biological and existential subtleties of life, which become seriously evident in the artistic mode of reflection.

'90s installation art precludes aesthetic perception by dogmatically validating the everyday environment, giving it an aura of inevitability that makes it seem beyond analysis and criticism. The everyday mode of perception is absolutized and apotheosized, and everyday perception becomes the unquestionable truth: Reconceived and reproduced as art, the everyday becomes fate. It becomes convincing rather than naively the case. That the everyday may be more of an illusory, unreal realm than art — that it may obscure reality more than art, because it is more ideological than art — never occurs to the installation environmentalists. (Indeed, art imaginatively deconstructs the ideological stereotypes that everyday perception dogmatically constructs, indicating that the everyday is a house of cards, a Babel of incommensurate beliefs unintelligible to one another. In the process, it reveals the subjective underpinnings that the supposed objectivity of everydayness denies. Marcuse and other Marxists regard art as an illusory, unreal realm because they regard the subjective as illusory and unreal — a kind of shadow of the objective,

rather than a substance with its own reality. For them, it is a false oasis in the harsh desert of social reality. More generally, it is the useless byproduct of productive understanding of the real, resembling the phantom-like gas burned off when oil is successfully extracted from the solid earth.)

There has been a slow but steady erosion of the aesthetic in art — its organic element, the factor that brings it alive as art — climaxing in the devaluation and finally destruction of the aesthetic itself. Ironically, this destruction occurs in the name of artistic progress — the myth of artistic advance, which has dominated the 20th-century idea of artistic value. It has been reified in late avant-gardism, becoming a hollow cliché, however much it inspired the early avant-garde, when it seemed a liberating truth. It is the decadent, self-destructive aspect of avant-gardism, the hidden canker in its creative blossoming, the worm ironically lurking in its fruit from its beginning. In stripping art of the aesthetic, the so-called left wing of avant-garde art, represented by Duchamp and Kosuth, undoes art's inner connection to the organic and existential. "Leftist" art argues that it is "advancing" art by purging it of the aesthetic, presumably making it a strictly "intellectual expression," to use Duchamp's term, but this "conceptualization" of art puts it in the hands of the everyday, as Duchamp's readymades and the many so-called conceptual works that follow in its wake indicate. If art's whole point — to the extent that it is art — is to imaginatively transcend the everyday (non-artistic), aesthetically disclosing the organic and existential horizons that subsume it, then the regression to the everyday is decadent and dehumanizing. There is a "right wing" of avant-garde art, represented by Monet and Matisse — all those whom Duchamp dismissed as "sensual" painters guilty of "animal expression" ("the more sensual appeal a painting provided . . . the more animal it became") — who advocate and refine the aesthetic to a perceptual extreme, but they have increasingly lost ground to facile Duchampianism, with its pretensions to intellectual superiority. They have been labeled decadent by the Duchampians because of their unremitting sensuousness, but it is just that organic sensuousness that is the core of art as art, and as such more existentially purposeful than the conceptual pseudo-art that trivializes it as the "physical side of painting."

From Dadaism on, as Morawski demonstrates — and one may recall that Duchamp said that "Dada was very serviceable as a purgative," "a sort of nihilism"⁷⁷ — art was subliminally concerned with changing the existing social order by undermining its presuppositions about itself as well as art. Subversion became a nihilistic end in itself, with the "new society" a distant vision that never comes into clear focus: Avant-garde leftism was always more negative than positive — more destructive than reconstructive. Marcuse regards "political art"⁷⁸ as a "monstrous concept," and asserts that "art by itself could never achieve [social] transformation, but it could free the perception and sensibility necessary for the transformation."⁷⁸ But the moment art leaves the realm

of transcendental illusion — illusion that transcends social reality by aesthetically transforming it — it loses power and becomes decadent. Slaves of politics, perception and sensibility become blunted.

Aesthetic perception by definition deviates from social perception, and is ultimately incommensurate with it, not to say radically different in kind: To compel it to conform to social perception, or to reduce it to an instrument of social perception, is to deny its creative non-compliance, and with that, to falsify and de-transcendentalize it, rendering it decadent and impotent. Marcuse is as naive about aesthetic perception and sensibility as he is about the new society — which is not to deny the less-than-utopian character of existing (capitalist) society. Like Morawski, he does not seem to realize that aesthetic consciousness is a radical mode of critical consciousness — consciousness critical of whatever tends to de-organicize and de-existentialize the lifeworld, which is to devitalize and dehumanize it: “decadentize” it, as it were. Like Duchamp, the Marxists attack the aesthetic gains of sensual painting — as though it was possible to undo art history (and the abstract painting that is the grand climax of sensual painting) — without realizing their import.

Thus, when Marcuse treats “art as technology and technique,” so that it serves “the emergence of a new rationality in the construction of a free society, that is, the emergence of new modes and goals of technical progress itself,”⁹ he subsumes it in instrumental reason, which as Adorno has said is the symbol of dominance. Not only does this deny its aesthetic autonomy and the critical and evocative power of the aesthetic, but the dialectical character of sensibility — a serious error for a dialectical materialist. Marcuse has a clichéd idea of sensibility as passively and neutrally receiving sensations rather than actively transforming and evaluating them in the course of receiving them. Genuine sensibility is concerned with the quality and value of sensations, however few or many it focuses on: They garner value through the aesthetic intuition of their organic and existential quality. Everyday sensibility is unconscious of these qualities, an unconsciousness masked by and taking the form of indifference. Using art as an instrument of social transformation — also the implicit goal of Duchamp’s Dadaistic use of it in the service of what he misrepresents as mind (the clever construction of ironies) — is another expression of this decadent, self-defeating indifference, for it involves the “everydayification” of art.

It was its revolution in aesthetics that was the significant avant-garde achievement, for it added meaning and value to perception, not avant-garde sniping away at the social status quo by way of its nihilistic attack on the artistic status quo, whatever that might currently be. Indeed, I would argue that conceptual nihilism is counterrevolutionary to the extent that it viciously degrades — as Duchamp does — the aesthetic revolution initiated by the 19th-century sensual painting of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism by attack-

ing it as “animal expression,” as though animals were seriously capable of it. Some anti-painting Duchampians have suggested as much by ironically exhibiting paintings made by chimpanzees as though they were Abstract Expressionist, which is not only to sell the visual complexities and subtleties of Abstract Expressionism short but to degrade art as such. (Duchamp’s distinction between the “animal” and the “intellectual” echoes, in clichéd form, the obsolete Cartesian distinction between body and mind, more particularly, between feeling and thinking. The latter is assumed to be inherently superior to the former, and able to expunge it — or at least deny feeling, which Descartes did by regarding it mechanically, so that it no longer seemed inherently organic. Duchamp’s enlistment of art in the service of his version of mind carries Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*” to its logical conclusion. Both absurdly imply that one’s being is reducible to one’s thinking, and that thinking — and with it being — has nothing bodily and animal about it. Art is also reduced to thinking, implying that it has little or nothing to do with feeling.)

The aesthetic revolution was the only psychosocially constructive avant-garde revolution, for it undoes the numbing effect on sensibility and existential stultification of secularizing technological society, thus preserving a place for organic individuality and the creation of humanness in increasingly inorganic and humanly indifferent society. Pop art, which Morawski suggests “absolutely” wipes out the boundaries between art and non-art,¹⁰ reifies and endorses the indifferent, inorganic character of technological society, manufacturing an art which is as indifferent, inorganic (mechanical) and existentially shallow and superficial as it is — a socially rather than aesthetically “sensational” art. Pop art is the decadent climax of the artistic decadence that began with Dadaism and Duchamp. The touch of irony that supposedly gives Pop art intellectual cachet does nothing to disturb its look of facile efficiency (the equivalent of Duchamp’s facile intellectualism), which is a long way from the aesthetic intricacies, intensities and revelatory concreteness of sensation in abstract art. The moment the aesthetic loses its transcendental position, which it does when the boundaries between art and non-art blur — abstract art defiantly reasserts and sharpens those boundaries, carrying the aesthetic to a new extreme in which perception becomes more incisive, intense and fresh than ever — art as a whole becomes decadent, not to say perverse. Indeed, the everyday’s ironical takeover of art, which began as an impingement and ends as an invasion, is a suicidal inversion of art’s transcendental purpose. It doesn’t require as much “mind” to carry out the takeover as Duchamp thought — certainly not as much as the aesthetic transformation of reality does. And the quality of mind is different: Instead of intellectualizing irony downplaying feeling — mind split against itself — true aesthetic consciousness offers the integration of feeling and thinking in a consummate moment of consciousness; instead of the depreciation of subjective reality, the integration of subject and

object in a singular act of “real-izing” perception.

If one way art becomes decadent is by capitulating to the everyday, another way is by making a spectacle of itself. If Tracey Emin’s exhibition of her unmade bed is a trendy example of the former, then Ann Hamilton’s Venice Biennale conceptual installation *Myein* (1999) is a trendy example of the latter. The former is somewhat cluttered, the latter ironically empty. In both cases, art satirizes itself, however unwittingly, that is, it theatrically repeats once timely ideas — the ironical readymade in Emin’s case, the ironical dematerialization of art in Hamilton’s case — until they seem self-ridiculing and senseless. What once seemed cogent and transformative (if not for the best, in my opinion) is fetishized as rhetorical performance. In modernity, the direct incorporation of irony into art made it unintelligible, intellectually intriguing if emotionally sterile. In the postmodern works by Emin and Hamilton, art has become too ironical and unintelligible for its own communicative good: It only speaks to those in the esoteric know — those willing to play the art game. Narcissistically fetishized, advanced art loses relational purpose. Caught up in itself, it forgets the audience, which is expected to accept it on its own terms, uncritically: Whatever common ground existed between advanced art and the audience collapses. Holding up a mirror to itself rather than to the audience — as art has done since Aristotle noted the cathartic effect of the insight it afforded — art loses its audience. Thus, advanced art loses its foundation in human experience.

The fairer it seems to itself, the more unfair the audience seems: Why doesn’t the audience understand its reason for being? But it itself no longer knows why it exists: hence its exaggerated, overly defensive narcissism. Advanced art exists only to be itself. That should be reason enough to be. The audience is expected to idealize it, not to question it — even though it has made a question of itself. In short, failing to make inner contact with the audience — except perhaps after an elaborate explanatory rigmarole — which therefore becomes estranged, advanced art becomes defensively involuted. It becomes a minor epistemological problem rather than the major horizon of understanding it once claimed to be. It becomes meaningless except to those who find meaning in puzzles, however much the “advanced” point is to be puzzling: Solving the puzzle — and the conceptual puzzle, which reduces art to readymade status (as Kosuth’s *Secession* installation did), is meant to be unsolvable — one learns nothing new. The eureka moment of consciousness — what Winnicott calls an “ego orgasm” — is slow in coming, and when it comes it is more of a whimper than a bang.

Advanced art, then, has less and less to say for itself because it has less and less to say to the audience. Indeed, advanced art is unable to “advance” its audience — to make the unconscious conscious and to catalyze transcendental consciousness. Losing connection with the audience’s uncon-

scious, it dead-ends in self-consciousness. Thus, every new breakthrough becomes a communicative and relational breakdown. The audience no longer trusts it, and is unwilling to become intimate with it. The so-called "advance" of art turns out to be a narcissistic mirage, that is, an expression of advanced art's self-satisfaction. No longer doubting itself — and it was its self-doubt that made it creative — it becomes complacent and self-congratulatory, and disregards the audience's complaints and doubts about it. The self-critical self-absorption that Greenberg thought was necessary for the survival of avant-garde art has become narcissistic indifference to the humanity of the audience. Climbing out of the abyss of self-doubt by transforming it into self-criticality, avant-garde art lapses into intellectual arrogance — the exaggerated pride that is a prelude to decadence, indeed, already a form of decadence and uncreative indifference.

This decadent indifference may have been latent in avant-garde art from the beginning, as its audience's initial resistance suggests, but it was soon able to reach and deeply engage the audience. It wanted an audience, and the audience had a need for it. Today, it is not clear that it wants an audience, and that the audience has a serious need for it — that it gives the audience something it doesn't have, even makes up for deficits in its experience and consciousness. Indeed, people can live without it. As the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck wrote, "the dada protest was based on a false premise, i.e., the assumption that mankind would not be able to survive without the artist. Yet it can get along without art as easily as without religion despite all assertions to the contrary."¹¹ Indeed, "mass man proves that without the slightest contact with [creative] quality one can not only live an excellent life but also attain a much greater age than our forebears."

Advanced art slowly but surely loses significance; it no longer becomes the "significant other" it once was for many socially disillusioned people in search of their lost individuality. No longer having any significant transformative effect on the audience — all the more so because the terms of advanced art have come to be understood (critics and scholars are able and ready to interpret it instantly), so that there is no chance for it to work its magic, sink in deeply enough to change the psyche, however temporarily (but lacking depth, advanced art floats on the surface of consciousness these postmodern days) — it becomes clever entertainment. It is not only that "the ruling mass man . . . persistently confuses entertainment . . . with art," as Huelsenbeck writes,¹² but art is eager to be entertaining. If entertainment demands no psychic work, as Hanna Segal says, then advanced art has become existentially undemanding, and thus betrayed itself. "The most brilliant of all revolutions is about to dissolve in thin air because, by being cheerfully accepted by all the world," it has been "integrated in the mass life of our time," Huelsenbeck notes.¹³ '90s postmodern art is the final ironical act of this dissolution and integration, that

is, the final stage of advanced art's transformation of itself into advanced entertainment, in hope of reclaiming an audience — even a not particularly serious audience.

Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series is perhaps the best illustration of this self-defeating transformation — it certainly shows that spectacle has become a substitute for intimate communication — but Hamilton's Venice installation is the clearest illustration of the hyper-irony that informs advanced entertainment art. It is also the climactic demonstration of the complete loss of "interactional synchrony" with the audience (the psychoanalyst Victoria Hamilton's term) that occurs in postmodernity. The artist may be attuned to the audience's conscious expectations, as Barney is — its wish to be entertained (distracted from its own existence), indeed "awed and shocked" by a spectacle (to refer to the effect of the American blitzkrieg on Iraq) — but that is not the same as being attuned to its inner life. What Hamilton's installation shows is that there is no bridge of intelligibility linking art and audience. Indeed, she strongly suggests that advanced art cannot build such a bridge — construct an intelligibility which allows for mutuality — and that it is perhaps impossible to do so in the postmodern world. Her installation demonstrates the standoff that has developed between artist and audience — a willful standoff on the artist's part, resulting in the audience's baffled disengagement — in self-styled advanced art.

Hamilton lets the audience know the conceptual point of her installation, but that hardly makes it a living experience. It may be intellectually cunning and politically correct — intellectually labored and politically simplistic, I would say — but that hardly makes it emotionally and existentially uncanny. Ironically uncommunicative, it signals the relational failure that has plagued advanced art from the start: As it "advances," it seems to leave its audience behind — until it becomes entertaining enough to gain a mass audience. Hamilton doesn't want one: Her installation is meant for intellectuals — it is an ironic construction of unintelligibility — but that makes it intellectual entertainment rather than an imaginative achievement. She hides her politics behind an aesthetic veneer, indicating that her installation is meant to appeal to the aesthetically indifferent as well as politically disaffected. For her, aesthetics is deceptive. In fact, she is anti-aesthetic, however ironically aesthetic. Her visual thinking is puritanical (and dubiously visual), as her trivialization of the sensuous — it literally seems to turn to dust in her installation — and the barren state of her space imply. Thus, she is indifferent to art as art, however much she exploits the aesthetic for conceptual purposes, using irony to rationalize its use.

I would like to analyze Hamilton's *Myein* in detail — the title comes from a Greek word that means "to shut the eyes," which Hamilton connects to "myosis," an abnormal contraction of the pupil of the eye — for in my opinion

it is the decadent theatrical climax of conceptual irony. It is hard to imagine an installation that could be more intellectually pretentious and less interactive — and more anti-visual and forced in its esotericism. I will argue that the irony with which Hamilton surrounds her idea — the cliché that America is blind to its own violence and imperialism — is overblown, as though to distract us from the shortsightedness and one-sidedness, indeed, simple-mindedness of her idea. It is hardly the original insight into America it claims to be, and in fact, it is a facile generalization about it, not to say a one-dimensional stereotype.

This suggests that Hamilton's mind — the conceptualist's mind, which the arch-conceptualist Duchamp thought had the poet's intelligence rather than the "stupidity of the painter"¹⁴ — is, after all, conventional and average. "The artist," Breton wrote, "ceases to be an average human being . . . he himself is caught up in the drama being enacted" by his art.¹⁵ It begins an "unpredictable adventure" from which he can never return to the safety of averageness. Breton's example is Rimbaud, who wrote that "terror came" while "analyzing his own experience in *Alchimie du verbe*." It was a terror which was uncovered by art, and which could be explored by it, but which it could not expunge. Hamilton's *Myein* is not an imprudent adventure the average human being dare not risk — and is unlikely to conceive — but a rather average view of America, indeed, the typical view of the average intellectual, or rather the pseudo-critical view of the pseudo-intellectual quasi-leftist artist. Its simplistic condemnation sweeps all complexity aside, which is why it lacks analytic credibility.

Nor is Hamilton the seer or visionary that Rimbaud thought the artist could become by disordering her senses, as the sensuous irony of her installation suggests she is. Aesthetic trickiness — red dust pours down the white walls, casually accumulating on the floor — is not the same as sensuous terror: The terror one feels in one's senses as one stretches them to the perceptual limits. The sensuous superficiality of Hamilton's installation confirms the superficiality of her concept of America. Unlike Rimbaud, she does not expand and deepen sense experience, but narrows and trivializes it, and with it, the world that as its object. Hamilton's dust is a mote in the eye, rather than the catalyst of visionary insight. Her simple-minded generalization about America shows a certain blindness towards it. Indeed, the whole installation is an exercise in self-blinding, all the more ironical because it claims to be about America's blindness to itself. Where Rimbaud offered "illuminations" — perceptual and conceptual epiphanies — Hamilton offers blindness, her own more than ours. Her installation lacks the psychological depth and intensity of Rimbaud's visionary poetry, indicating that art can be quite prosaic underneath its visionary appearance. This is no doubt another example of conceptual irony, however unintended. In short, Hamilton's sensuousness is as inadequate as her concept of America.

Myein occupied the four rooms of the American pavilion, which were kept empty, except for the red dust. At first sight the installation seems neo-aesthetic — a kind of revival of decadent aestheticism, as though Hamilton, sensitive to her site, was trying to distill the seductive colors and atmosphere of Venice. That atmosphere, which constantly changes, depending on the restless luminosities of sky and sea mingling in it, made Venice an Impressionist delight, as in Whistler's *The Riva, Sunset. Red and Gold* (1879-80), Renoir's *Fog in Venice* (1881) and Monet's *The Grand Canal, Venice* (1908-12). These painters materialized the Venetian atmosphere in a material that seems as fluid as it is. Perhaps Hamilton's drifting red dust was meant to be an ironical materialization of the seemingly immaterial free-floating color of pure abstract painting. Was she exploiting the mystique of Venice to offer an appreciative reprise of modernist colorism? Was her installation a "spectacular" attempt to revive Lyrical Expressionism, an optimistic offshoot of tormented Abstract Expressionism?

Nothing so art historically subtle was involved, however much there was a certain amount of postmodern appropriation of modernist colorism. It was all ironical facade, adumbrating the conceptual and politically correct point. As Hamilton stated, and had to state if she wanted the audience to get the critical point of her spectacle rather than swoon away in the delirium of its color — "I wanted to make something big and yet something almost humble and empty, to comment on American domination. . . . There is so much in our history that we cannot look at, that we refuse to see."¹⁶ The only people who can "see" Hamilton's "comment" are blind people, or at least the few who can read Braille (ten to fifteen percent), for the pavilion's white walls were covered with a Braille translation of Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States, 1885-1915: Recitative*, a book of poems addressing American violence. Associated with this was a recording of Hamilton's voice whispering Lincoln's second Inaugural Address, which called for healing during the Civil War. Like Reznikoff's poems, Lincoln's speech is presented ironically in the phonetic alphabet used by pilots ("Alpha" for a, "Bravo" for b) — an esoteric language unfamiliar to most people — making it all but impossible to understand.¹⁷ (Pilots are probably purveyors of violence for Hamilton.)

We now get the point — or think we do — of the dust falling from tanks hidden in the ceilings: It supposedly symbolizes pollution, yet another American crime, against the environment, as well as humanity. The powder, presumably toxic, also symbolizes America's insidious power, as Hamilton suggests: "My materials are beautiful, and I do want you to look at it. . . . But part of the piece is about American culture insidiously filtering out into everywhere, like the powder."¹⁸ Perhaps the red dust also symbolizes the blood America has shed — its own and other nations. It's an old story: The ugly American who superficially looks good. Hamilton's materials are contami-

nated and contaminating, their beauty is poisonous rather than sublime, fatal rather than vital: deceptive in their seductiveness, ironical in their innocence. Hamilton's dust has more in common with the dust that once covered Duchamp's *Large Glass*, as though entombing it, rather than with Venetian sensuality. Accumulating in empty space, the dust signals the spiritual desert that America is for Hamilton. "Dust to dust" is Hamilton's seemingly tragic point.

Coyly ironical, *Myein* is a deceptive pastiche of allusions and quotations. The Braille is impossible for even the most open-eyed viewer — willing to suspend disbelief to fathom the meaning of the work — to comprehend. The blind people who can read it are unlikely to come to the exhibition, which is, after all, supposed to be visual art: Nobody can "read" the piece, which makes it obscure and frustrating indeed. Indeed, even if a blind person who knew Braille did visit the exhibition, she would not be allowed to touch the walls in order to read the text, for they have become consecrated by becoming art. No one is allowed to touch the art in a museum, which is what the pavilion became the moment Hamilton's work was installed in it. Similarly, since the text is whispered in an obscure language, very few people will understand it, or for that matter, hear it clearly. One might as well be deaf, dumb and blind — which is what Hamilton tells the public it is, in effect heaping contempt on it. The installation is memorable for the ignorance and stupidity it bestows on the audience, not for its sociopolitical meaning or artistic means.

Supposedly, Hamilton is deconstructing "seeing," that is, showing the blindness within it, but she is also deconstructing reading, showing the unreadableness in it, and listening, showing the silence within sound. Thus, the dead-end is compounded: Hamilton's work can neither be seen nor read nor heard, leaving it a nihilistic limbo. Claiming profound meaning, it becomes meaningless because it doesn't communicate. Left hanging, the viewer can only relate to the assumption that it's "art" — a minimalist performance: But of what and so what? — until Hamilton's explanation comes to the rescue. But one doesn't have to accept her word — it's just her interpretation, presumably privileged because she's the artist. But then, the artist doesn't necessarily have the last word and know what her work is about. Indeed, it will change meaning with the times and audience: No reception of any work is the guaranteed truth about it. The viewer is forced back on the peculiar emptiness of the work, leaving her feeling empty: The installation is, after all, only "art" — only has an art meaning, whatever that is. It has no other experienced meaning: It is its lack of meaning — the sense that it has been emptied of meaning — that is experienced. In fact, Hamilton ironically undermines her own critical intention — subverts the sociopolitical meaning her work is supposed to have — by hiding it so well behind her "art." Her installation has a secret we never actually know, and when Hamilton reveals it, we realize that it is a secret everybody knows. There's something anti-climactic about her explanation that

the installation is about America's domination. Explained, the work loses mystery and becomes a wasteland, and a not especially artistic one. Hamilton is too clever for her own good.

Supposing one is blind and knows Braille and is allowed to read the wall-written text: One still misses the color. One always misses something. One may see the color, but not hear the whispered spoken word very well, or, hearing it, one may not understand the language in which it is spoken. The installation is about fooling the viewer, which may be appealing if one likes to be made a fool of. The treacherous irony begins as one approaches the American pavilion, which one sees through a glass wall that distorts and blurs its appearance, so that it seems abnormal — like America. Thus, Hamilton's installation is not about healing "myosis" — however much her explanation finally let's us "see" properly — but creating it. Perhaps the most significant irony is that the installation attacks and damns Hamilton's sponsor, the American government. Hamilton bites the hand that feeds her, supposedly showing her dissent. America, which has always been susceptible to guilt and *mea culpa*, because of its utopian aspirations, is no doubt grateful for the artistic opportunity to learn the violent truth about itself, which presumably it didn't know until the artist came along to state it, however obscurely. But once we get beyond the artist's process of obfuscation — and it is the process of obfuscation that is the art — the truth she tells is banal and familiar. Americans know about America's violence, and deplore it, and want to remedy it, even if they disagree how to do so. But the artistic point is that it is ironically hard to be enlightened by Hamilton's installation — to read the text, to get the ulterior motive of the red dust (adding an aura of profound import), without the help of her explanation, that is, her superficially topical concept. Without the concept, the installation is boring, and with the concept, it's simply a text that has been made superficially exciting by being written in a language most people can't read. The installation is really about her own estrangement from America, not about American violence.

Hamilton's installation has a certain sociological significance: It takes place on foreign soil. It wouldn't have the same critical carrying power in America, whatever the radical chic of its anti-Americanism. It caters to European prejudice against and envy of American power. Europeans are more likely than Americans to visit the Venice Biennale — a major stop on the cultural tour. Europeans like to blame their problems on "Americanization," as though they were forced to watch American movies and listen to American popular music, two of America's biggest "cultural" exports. Isn't Hamilton's installation another such cultural export — a high culture rather than popular culture export — and as such yet another example of American cultural imperialism? Isn't it a carpetbagging American art looking for European credentials to confirm its sophistication? The European audience has an American artist who

agrees with its worst fears about America — who sees corrupting American influence everywhere and condemns the violence that seems endemic to America. What ironical luck to have such a self-critical artist in the American pavilion! All the more so because she's so self-righteous.

The opposition between the body's eye and the mind's eye — between seeing and knowing — is the ironical substance of *Myein*. Within this grand governing irony there are many subsidiary ironies, all variations on the primary irony: The opposition between seeing and blindness, seeing and touching, seeing and reading, color and whiteness, the physical and conceptual, matter and idea, the visible and invisible, English and Braille, English and a phonetic language, the minority who can read Braille and the majority who cannot, the specialized few who can understand a phonetic language and the great majority who cannot, exclusivity and spectacle, the idea and its implementation (that is, the mechanics who installed the 24 electric motors that generated the dust), Europe as the site of the installation and America as its subject matter, the American pavilion's classical facade and its stark modernist interior, the in-the-know artist and the ignorant public . . . and so on. The ironies cynically proliferate, as though to hammer home the installation's nihilism, and the raw hatred of America it implies, however intellectually sophisticated it may be. Hamilton subtly annihilates the violent country she regards as the major threat to world peace.

The cynicism — about art as well as society — implicit in Hamilton's installation is vividly explicit in Emin's bed and the tent inscribed with the names of everyone she ever slept with, as well as in the work of the Young British Artists of the so-called Sensation and Neurotic Realism movements. These '90s artists are all too knowing about what the public wants, whether that be intellectual entertainment, in the form of a conceptual Babel, or more obviously sensational entertainment, such as Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995), an enlarged mugshot of Myra Hindley, the notorious serial killer of children. Both Hamilton and Harvey exploit the newsworthy — the currently hot social issue, usually having to do with crime, war, dysfunctional families, perverse sex, etc. Harvey may be more straightforward and blatant (he seems to have a tabloid mentality) and Hamilton more intellectually cunning (*Myein* is not exactly a one-liner, like Harvey's picture), but both ironically manipulate public perception — like the media. A good part of their cynicism — conscious in Harvey's case, unconscious in Hamilton's case — also has to do with the Duchampian ease with which they get the public to believe that what they exhibit is art (if not aesthetically adequate art), all the more so because so much of it is explicitly amateurish. Indeed, the de-professionalization of artmaking — in part a consequence of the indifference to craft cultivated by Conceptual Art — is a byproduct of postmodernism, with its "anything goes" attitude.

So long as there is explicit violence and explicit sex — as in the works of Dinos and Jake Chapman and Sarah Lucas, respectively (Marc Quinn's self-portrait, a frozen head made from his own blood, and Chris Ofili's *Virgin Mary* accompanied by elephant dung and female genitals cut out of pornographic images, are even more ingeniously voyeuristic) — the work satisfies the mass public's preconception of art. Entertaining low art, perhaps, with a certain affinity to wax works, horror films, and pornographic movies, among other modes of public entertainment, but nonetheless art. The art the mass public wants must afford a momentary thrill, offsetting everyday dullness, however much it derives from everyday life. It must show something exceptional — a serial murder, for example, or the mutilation of bodies — however much such exceptions are the everyday rule. The Young British Artists traffic in everyday grotesqueness and suffering.

The attempt to fuse entertainment and art — to create an entertaining avant-garde art that will appeal to the masses — by putting an artistic veneer on everyday entertainment imagery, and/or theatrically exhibiting it in an art context, suggests that to be a postmodern artist is to be an ironical poseur. Lynn Somers calls Barney an “international poseur,” observing that he is “obtusely ironic” and describing his sexual and narcissistic hipness.¹⁹ “His recurring use of the satyr or Pan figure evokes both homosexuality, sadomasochism, aggression, bacchanalia, as well as Nietzsche's all-powerful *Übermensch*.” Barney is an implicit role model for artists as different as Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Jason Rhoades, Charles Long and Tony Oursler, among many others, whatever their medium (often video and kitsch materials) and concerns (usually psychosocial, like the tabloids).

All these artists cynically mix a media journalistic manner and dadaistic shock tactics in an obsolete *épater le bourgeois* offensiveness. They are all satirists, wittingly or unwittingly. They satirize and exploit the public's fascination with sensationalized information, entertaining spectacle, and its art gullibility. The willing suspension of disbelief that has led to the acceptance of anything as art — democracy in ironic and moronic action — is one small detail of the self-deception capitalism depends on. Its function is to distract the individual from the world's indifference to her existence, more particularly, from the feeling that she has no effect on and value in the world. Nothing can be changed, which means there is nothing to change: Certainly not art, which is, after all, only another ostrich hole of entertainment in which one can hide one's feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness — one's narcissistic suffering. Entertainment is the opium of the emotionally downtrodden masses, and art is the most expensive opium. Thus, the public is mindlessly accommodating — and the entertaining artists are cleverly obliging: There's no business like art show business.

Perhaps the biggest poseur — con artist? — in the art entertainment

business is Damien Hirst. The following episode epitomizes his cynicism and irony. It is an exemplary case of the artist pulling the public's leg, and the public's eagerness to have its leg pulled. Taken in by the farce — satire at its most nihilistic — the public has only itself to blame for allowing itself to be defrauded. Hirst once said "Integrity is bullshit. . . I'm not anything at heart. I'm too greedy."²⁰ So is his public. The familiar advice "buyer beware" seems to have been suspended when it comes to capitalist-inspired art — art with no integrity:

An installation that the popular and pricey British artist Damien Hirst assembled in the window of a Mayfair gallery on Tuesday was dismantled and discarded the same night by a cleaning man who said he thought it was garbage. The work — a collection of half-full coffee cups, ashtrays with cigarette butts, empty beer bottles, a paint-smear palette, an easel, a ladder, paintbrushes, candy wrappers and newspaper pages strewn about the floor — was the centerpiece of an exhibition of limited-edition art that the Eyestorm Gallery showed off at a V.I.P. preopening party. . . . Mr. Hirst, 35, the best known member of a generation of conceptual artists known as the Young British Artists, had put it together and signed off on it, and Heidi Reitmaier, head of special projects for the gallery, put its sales value at "six figures" or hundreds of thousands of dollars. "It's an original Damien Hirst," she explained. . . . The cleaning man, Emmanuel Asare, 54, told The Evening Standard: "As soon as I clapped eyes on it, I sighed because there was so much mess. It didn't look much like art to me. So I cleared it all in bin bags, and I dumped it. . . . Far from being upset by the mix-up, Mr. Hirst greeted the news as "hysterically funny," Ms. Reitmaier said. . . . "since his art is all about the relationship between art and the everyday, he laughed harder than anyone else."²¹

Thus, the viewer completes the work, as Duchamp said he did, showing that he is just as capable of what Duchamp called a "creative act" as the artist — even more, as Duchamp implied. What he doesn't say is that the ironical completion of the work by the viewer plays into the artist's cynical hands, making his work look more original and significant than it is, and making him seem profoundly creative. But he is neither fanciful nor imaginative (to use Coleridge's distinction between the two kinds of organic creativity), only manipulative and matter-of-fact. Hirst's work is another triumph of media hype, and the media cater to it. It is a species of fun and games for the idle rich — conspicuous consumption carried to *reductio ad absurdum*. It is amateur Dadaism — Dadaism without its critical cutting edge, Dadaist nihilism as ironically high style — and a demonstration of capitalist cynicism, and of its

debilitating effect on art. Profitable for the artist and his investors, it is yet another case of diminishing existential returns for the viewer. It is a demonstration of the fashionable farce that so much art has tragically become.

Part 2

Is there any alternative to this art-as-entertainment entertainment-as-art decadence — to the poseur artist and the ironical pose of art? Was there any alternative in the '90s to the fetishization of technology and cynical reproduction of old avant-garde ideas in novel mechanical translation? Was there an art that did not try to ingratiate itself with spectacle and that was more concerned to be reflective than facilely provocative?

I think so: I call it New Old Master art. It is an attempt to return to the more complete, balanced idea of art offered by tradition. It is an attempt to build a bridge of intelligibility between artist and viewer. In the new traditionalism, the material medium and the artist's concept are reintegrated into an organic whole. So are the work and the viewer: Synchronic interaction, increasingly problematic in advanced art, once again becomes a serious possibility. Significant communication is a relational goal not left to chance.

The Young British Artists tried to force it, but they failed, not because their art was advanced — if submitting to the everyday is to advance art — but because the interaction and communication of their works are socially programmed rather than achieved by contemplative work. One relates to the “sensational” work the same unreflective way one relates to “exciting” news: Neither exactly turns one inward (however much they temporarily turn one on) — that is, makes one aware of one's own consciousness engaged in an act of creative apperception. One never gets beyond the initial sensational communication to its relational significance — its meaning for one's own particular existence as well as in the lifeworld at large. It has no catalytic effect on consciousness, generating insight, but quickly flows down the drain of everyday time, like every other instantly accessible fact. Indeed, it marks time, signaling the meaninglessness of existence.

But in the New Old Masterism, what is aimed at is subjective and objective depth and insight in a well-crafted, aesthetically resonant image — Conceptualism's hierarchy, which privileges concept over medium, collapses. The New Old Master work may be ideological on the surface, but its effect is existential. Conceptualism and Minimalism eschew unconscious fantasy and intense feeling — the sense of the uncanny that subtly erupts in everyday life and the passions that unexpectedly disrupt it — which dramatically return in the New Old Masterism. Feeling is reduced to the dust of Ann Hamilton's Venice installation: The empty space, white walls and political concept are what seriously matter. It is the Minimalism and intellectual righteousness of

the installation that have effect: Its depleted look — underlying miserabilism, to use Breton's term — is depressing, not the lively, colorful dust. Both Conceptualism and Minimalism have an aura of emotional emptiness, while the New Old Masterism aims at emotional fullness. Vital feeling replaces conceptual irony: The celebratory exploration of emotion replaces its nihilistic denial. Conceptualism and Minimalism offer intellectual compensation in exchange for emotional sterility — for what seems like the failure to feel, perhaps the inability to feel (the ultimate pathology) — while the tragic aesthetics of the New Old Masterism evokes the fertile emotions of the lifeworld, not always apparent in the mode of everyday consciousness, with its defensive indifference and insensitivity. Indeed, there is a new sensitivity to art and life in the New Old Masterism, in contrast to the insidious insensitivity to both in Conceptualism and Minimalism.

In the Old Masters, material and feeling are indistinguishable — experientially identical. The material medium seems alive with feeling the way a body is alive with movement. Feeling seems embedded in the medium, and the medium seems to embody feeling. Feeling is a current that charges the medium with life, and the medium seems a direct expression of feeling. The '90s return to Old Master models of art, or at least the Old Master humanistic idea of objective and "interpersonal" art, is implicitly a critique of Conceptualism and Minimalism. They are the last gasp of a spent avant-gardism. The New Old Masterism may seem conservative, even reactionary compared to them, all the more so because avant-gardism has become a cultural habit, uncritically accepted as the standard by which all art is measured. Indeed, to a mind accustomed to avant-garde irony, New Old Masterism looks ironical. Its historicist and narrative character can be understood as an ironical postmodern rebellion against modernist abstraction.

Thus, the New Old Masterism becomes the latest avant-garde strategy. But avant-garde art is no longer revolutionary, however much its revolution is perpetuated by neo-avant-garde art. What looks like advance is reification — hardening of the avant-garde arteries. Neo-avant-garde art — particularly '90s conceptual installation art — turns avant-garde art into a pillar of salt in a desert of its own making. It apotheosizes avant-garde art into a self-aggrandizing spectacle.

Theatricalized Conceptualism (and Minimalism) institutionalizes avant-gardism, implying that its radicalism has become passé and mannered. Today, the distinction between revolution and reaction has blurred. What was once revolutionary is now reactionary, what was once reactionary is now revolutionary. As the Conceptualists insist, art depends on context — it is relative and timebound — and the times and context have changed. Indeed, they seem more relative than ever, which is part of the postmodern point.

The New Old Masterism, then, restores everything Conceptualism

devalued and repudiated. It struggles to repair the serious connection to tradition broken by avant-gardism. At the same time, it does not discard avant-garde aesthetics, but integrates it with Old Master aesthetics. The New Old Masterism involves a return to the personal craft of object making, and, more crucially, to the human object and human condition, art's perennial themes. What Greenberg contemptuously dismissed as "human interest" once again becomes of serious interest. Sol LeWitt dogmatically declared that "[w]hen an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art,"²² but for the New Old Masters one can never learn one's craft too well, and when one does the result is not slick but uncanny.

Superior craft intensifies vision so that it becomes insight, which is what happens in the best Old Master paintings. Superior craft and the restoration of the human figure — often mangled and mocked in avant-garde art so that it seems like an unhealthy agglomeration of abstract parts from a junked machine — to organic integrity and bodiliness are the essentials of New Old Masterism. The ideal is a sustained work of art rather than the ironic expression of a concept. The New Old Master work is meant for meditation, not shock. Surprise occurs through discovery, not facile novelty. Shared perceptions and even common sense intelligibility are involved, with the proviso that they result in a nuanced, individualized work of art, indicating an existentially intimate relation with its theme. The New Old Master artist attempts to find a common ground with the audience, rather than bludgeon it with a concept. She doesn't claim to be superior to her audience, nor does she cater to it, but rather establishes a differentiated relationship with it by creating a differentiated work of art.

All is not lurid inauthenticity, routine irony and aesthetic bankruptcy within the modernist mode. There is still aesthetic-existential depth and urgency: Hans Breder, Gary Hill and Bill Viola in video; Tony Cragg, Wolfgang Laib, David Rabinowitch and Kiki Smith in sculpture; the abstract paintings of Herbert Brandl, Helmut Federle, Michiko Itatani, Imi Knoebel, Eugene Leroy, Sean Scully and Pierre Soulages; the realist paintings of William Beckman, Richard Estes and Philip Pearlstein; the surrealist imagery of Louise Bourgeois, Günter Brus, Bruno Gironcoli, Maria Lassnig and Rona Pondick; and Christian Boltanski and Christo in installation and Bernhard and Hilla Becher, Lynn Stern, Thomas Struth and Jeff Wall in photography.

In Gerald Ferguson's drop cloth paintings, ironic chance becomes unexpected beauty, and there is poignant beauty in Włodzimirz Książek's massacred surfaces. James Turrell's light installations epitomize the "meta-physical" and mystical aspirations of modernism, and Gillian Jagger's installations of animal skeletons epitomize its existential thrust. Sardonic spectacle is not the rule, however much it rules the postmodern mainstream. But the New Old Masters hold the key to the future — and beauty.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Marinetti declared that an “old [Master] picture” was a “funeral urn.”²³ It took the New Old Masters to resurrect them — to find fresh life in them. “Admiration of the past” is “useless,” Marinetti said, but the New Old Masters realized that the past alone is useful — the only hope for art — in the decadent present. The “violent gushes of action” that Marinetti celebrated have exhausted art — the modern itself has exhausted art — but the beauty of past art is inexhaustible. Beauty is a phoenix that rises from past art however much it looks like ashes to avant-garde eyes. Duchampian avant-gardism repudiated beauty — Newman thought that modern art sacrificed physical beauty (sentimental) to “metaphysical” truth — but the New Old Masters realize that the return to beauty is the only way out of decadence. Aspiring to beauty is the only alternative to postmodern cynicism.

As Kant wrote, in the state of disinterestedness called beauty we experience the “free and unimpeded interplay of imagination and understanding . . . the mutual subjective harmony of our cognitive powers”²⁴ — just that interplay and harmony that are lost in decadence. In the Young British Artists, imagination degenerates into parasitism — predatory exploitation of the popular imagination — and in Conceptual Art understanding becomes a matter of deploying simple concepts in an oblique way that makes them seem profound — a form of intellectual degeneration. Split apart so that they seem irreconcilable, imagination and understanding become narrow and uncreative.

The result is an art of social and cognitive conformity rather than nonconformist insight. The result is an art that is neither beautiful nor ugly but eschatologically indifferent. It lacks both the “primordial content” that gives art its “arousal potential”²⁵ and the apocalyptic potential — premonition of death and catastrophe — that makes beauty strangely tragic, indeed, subliminally depressing. These things give art its edge of uncanniness — the uncanny beauty that picturesque sensationalism and intellectualized objects lack. Beauty is an existential insight into fate achieved at a great emotional cost, but neither the Young British artists nor the Conceptualists want to pay the cost — which is why their art is beside the human point and aesthetically worthless.

In disinterested beauty, imagination and understanding integrate into a singular insight into fate. Fate is what has been lost sight of in the modern pursuit of transient novelty — the result of the demand “to make it new,” as Ezra Pound said, or to be part of “the now generation,” as an advertisement put it — and that the New Old Masters ponder through their creation of beauty. Beauty is experienced as fate — it seems inevitable, impersonal and universal once it is created — because it mediates fate, even as beauty seems to make fate less harsh and more tolerable than it would otherwise be. Fate is the ugly underpinning of life, but beauty, which creates the illusion that fate is caring rather than indifferent, thus hiding the truth while suggesting it through its own impersonal quality, also creates the disinterestedness and detachment that coun-

teract the feeling of futility aroused by the revelation of fate's indifference and "irresponsibility" — the feeling of being cheated of ourselves and our freedom when we become aware of the workings of fate in our lives.

Fate, which is usually invisible, has a disastrous emotional effect when it becomes visible through beauty. Nonetheless, beauty is the conscience of fate. Beauty is the sugarcoating on the bitter pill of fate, but it is also the antidote to the poisonous feelings fate induces — sullen feelings of meaninglessness that poison the water of life, so that it seems to lose all taste, and finally destroys our appetite for life. I am suggesting that the New Old Masterism is a dialectic of fate and beauty — a meditation on fate as it manifests itself in beauty, which becomes a defense against it, and the only alternative to it. There is something strange in beauty, as has been said, but also something redeeming in its idealism — its ability to find the ideal in the ultimately real.

David Bierk, Vincent Desiderio, April Gornik, Karen Gunderson, Julie Heffernan, F. Scott Hess, David Ligare, Odd Nerdrum, Joseph Raffael, Paula Rego, Jenny Saville, James Valerio, Paul Waldman, Ruth Weisberg and Brenda Zlamany are important New Old Masters. Don Eddy and Eric Fischl have evolved into New Old Masters, and Avigdor Arikha and Lucian Freud are the Deans of New Old Master painting. They are visionary humanists with complete mastery of their craft. They integrate traditional and modernist ideas without slavishly imitating them. Old Masterism is not a mannerism in their work, but a mode of inspiration. For them the Old Masters are not dogmatic academic models — procrustean standards of perfection. Nerdrum looks to Rembrandt, Fischl to Caravaggio, Saville to Mannerism, Heffernan to Baroque allegory, and Rego, Valerio and Zlamany paint their pictures with a realist precision and intensity that harks back to Velazquez, while Weisberg looks back to the Italian Renaissance. Raffael looks to Impressionism.

Gornik's work encapsulates the history of romantic landscape painting, Gunderson's black paintings touch every register of texture, and Bierk mournfully explores the whole history of art. Idiosyncratically integrating Western and Eastern as well as modernist and traditional ideas of art, Eddy and Waldman are in an aesthetic class of their own. So are Freud and Arikha, masters of perceptual dialectics. The former uses expressionist means and the latter linear means to "leaven" reality, as it were, lifting it out of the everyday by excruciating observation, down to the least nuance of concreteness. They preserve the gains of the "sensual painting" Duchamp attempted to destroy with his indifference by incorporating them in a new spiritual painting. They bring love back into art, in whatever strange form, counteracting the hatred — of existence as well as aesthetics — implicit in Duchampian anti-art.

But, to reiterate, these New Old Masters are not submissive copyists: They study the Old Masters for insight into the process of beauty, as it can be called, not to appropriate forms and images — certainly not for the sake of

their novelty in the avant-garde context. They want to understand the intuitive art inherent in the Old Master transformation of the ugly truth of fate (the irreversible power of innate determinism) into strange beauty (sublime aesthetic truth), an ideal reality that makes the enigmatic reality of fate manifest while changing our attitude toward it. If "it is one of the aims of man to increase his capacity for choice and to decrease determinism in every possible way," thus creating a "margin of freedom" in human life, as the psychiatrist Silvano Arieti argues,²⁶ and if such opposition to "the limitations of nature" — the refusal "to be subjugated and blindly obedient to the constraints imposed by the biological factor (race), the sociological factor (class), or the psychological factor (characterological type)" — is the profoundest expression of the human spirit, as Frankl states,²⁷ then the dialectical transformation of fate into beauty is a spiritual act, and the aesthetic consciousness that affords the margin of existential and creative freedom necessary to effect the transformation is spiritual consciousness at its most dynamic. The aesthetic dialectic reconciles fate and beauty, which is why beauty always has a tragic aura and seems truthful, however illusory, even as the artist's creation of beauty and the audience's enjoyment of it is a way of accepting fate without despair.

The Old Masters taught themselves to welcome fate, which opened their eyes to the beauty in its necessity: They came to experience its implacable logic as exalted aesthetics. Consciously processed rather than unconsciously submitted to, fate manifests itself as beauty. Pure aesthetics, the inevitably indwelling element in art as art, evokes the inevitably indwelling element in existence as existence. We tend to forget fate in our fantasy of freedom. But the paradox of the fantasy is that it is a way of resisting fate. In short, the aesthetic revelation of fate makes us acutely conscious of its unconscious hold on us. We all experience fate, however unconscious of the experience we may be — the experience of limitation implicit in life — but through aesthetics, we can become conscious of its absolute power. In short, the aura of inevitability emanating from pure form is as close as we can come to experiencing the inevitability shaping our own emotional and perceptual experience, and thus to freedom from fate — the paradoxical experience of escaping the inescapable in the act of acknowledging it.

The New Old Masters want to learn the emotional and creative secrets of the Old Masters — the secret of the transcendental beauty of their art. They are concerned with the creative process of discovering the beauty in the inevitably given, not in any special tradition of beauty, however dated or new, whatever particular tradition becomes the springboard for their own dialectical transformation of fate into beauty. Moving beyond the perversity of irony and the modern grotesque, both equally disintegrative in import — evident in Picasso's figural constructions and Surrealist incongruity, Francis Bacon's faces and Hamilton's equally morbid, aesthetically grotesque installation — the New

Old Masters struggle to produce works with a fresh sense of wholeness: works with the stamp of authenticity. They struggle to produce works whose "silent charm operates with the same force and seems to increase every time you cast your eyes upon them," which is the way Delacroix described a masterpiece.²⁸ New Old Masterism signals the return of the aesthetic masterpiece — the well-built work of art, integrating sensuous immediacy and imaginative understanding in an ontological epiphany — and with that, the raising of creative apperception from the grave of Conceptual and Minimalist decadence.

Allowing "access to the substratum of all the emotional colors of life," which Conceptualism and Minimalism lost contact with and never respected, the New Old Masterism offers a fresh "revelation" of the "emotional significance" of our "existence," to use Roger Fry's words.²⁹ It thus repairs the damage done to art by Conceptualism and Minimalism. They are the artistic symptoms of the emotional damage inflicted by modern life, confirming and contributing to its indifference. In them, what was once a margin of avant-garde freedom has become spiritual failure. Their aesthetic indifference suggests that the damage is irreversible.

But the New Old Masterism promises transcendence of indifference in the act of mithridatically acknowledging it. Acknowledging that art and life have become unhealthy, the New Old Masterism helps restore them to health. The best Old Master art does the same thing: The promise of aesthetic transcendence is inherent in art at its healthiest. The happiness that Stendhal thought art promised — that is, the emotional health that results when one rises above what Freud called "normal unhappiness" — is the existential consequence of aesthetic transcendence.

In a sense, Old Master art heals the wounds of life by aesthetically caring for them — draws the poison from life by applying an aesthetic poultice to it. New Old Master art revives this aesthetic healing process instead of artistically aggravating and aggrandizing the wounds of life, as a good deal of avant-garde art does.

"Closer to the human heart for seeming to be more material" — the masterpiece's material as well as expressive achievement according to Delacroix — the New Old Masterism restores art to the material richness and heartfelnness that Conceptualism and Minimalism mocked. It rises on the ruins of the tower of conceptual Babel that has collapsed under the weight of its absurdity. It appears in the desert of Minimalism like a mirage of life. It is the saving grace in a decadent situation.

Art lost aesthetic and existential substance through its Conceptualist dematerialization and Minimalist depersonalization. The New Old Masterism rematerializes and repersonalizes art, hoping to restore it to the human and aesthetic meaningfulness and integrity it once had.

Notes

- ¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, Mentor Books, 1955), 277.
- ² Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 137.
- ³ Théophile Thoré, "New Tendencies in Art" (1868), in Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, ed., *The Art of All Nations 1850-1873: The Emerging Role of Exhibitions and Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 155.
- ⁴ Stefan Morawski, "What Is a Work of Art?," in Lee Baxandall, ed., *Radical Perspectives in the Arts* (Harmondsworth and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 329.
- ⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 60.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ⁷ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 394.
- ⁸ Morawski, 60-61.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁰ Morawski, 348.
- ¹¹ Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (New York: Viking, 1974), 178.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 177.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), x.
- ¹⁵ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 77.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Steven Henry Madoff, "Codes and Whispers," *Time*, July 12, 1999, 75.
- ¹⁷ Madoff, *ibid.*, writes that Hamilton's "recondite Braille and phonetic whispers work too well perhaps: she leaves viewers with little to grasp easily. When a visual work rests so heavily on literary means, its impact is inevitably blunted."
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Peter Plagens, "A Visionary Hits Venice," *Newsweek*, July 12, 1999, 65.
- ¹⁹ Lynn Somers with Bluewater Avery and Jason Paradis, "From Corporeal Bodies to Mechanical Machines: Navigating the Spectacle of American Installation in the '90s," *Art Criticism*, 14/2 (1999): 68.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, *Supercollector: A Critique of Charles Saatchi*, 2nd ed. (London: Institute of Artology, 2003), 37.
- ²¹ Warren Hoge, "Art Imitates Life, Perhaps Too Closely," *New York Times*, October 20, 2001.
- ²² Quoted in Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 175.
- ²³ Quoted in Chipp, 287.
- ²⁴ See my essay "A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Esthetic Disinterestedness," *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Post-Modern Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 337.
- ²⁵ Colin Martindale, quoted in Hans Eysenck, *Genius: The Natural History of Creativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69.
- ²⁶ Silvano Arieti, *The Will to Be Human* (New York: Quadrangle, 1972), 47-48.
- ²⁷ Frankl, 17.

²⁸ Quoted in Michele Hannoosh, *Painting and the Journal of Eugène Delacroix* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 30.

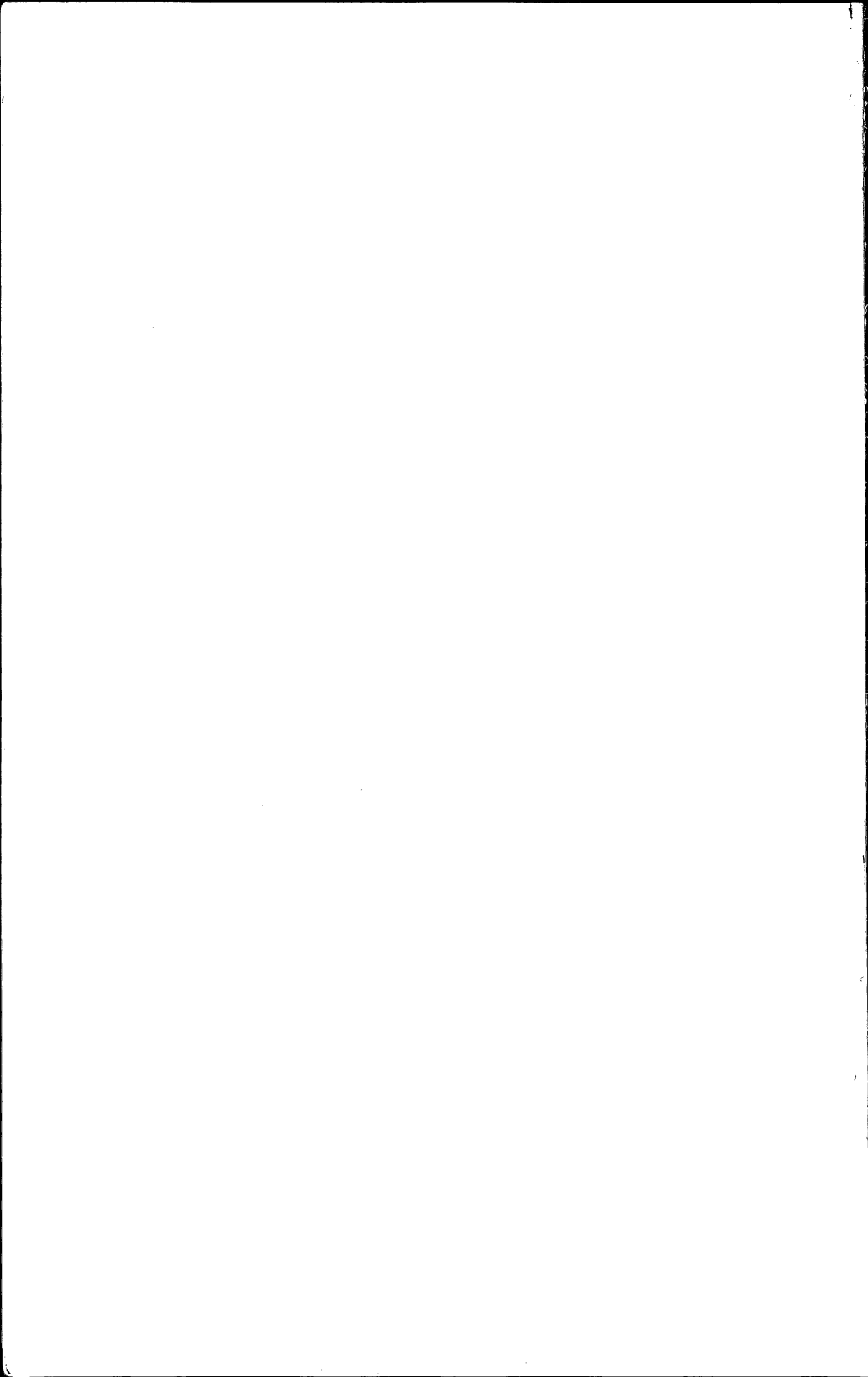
²⁹ Roger Fry, *The Artist and Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), 19.

Contributer

Donald Kuspit is an author, art critic and distinguished professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He has doctorates in philosophy (University of Frankfurt) and art history (University of Michigan), as well as degrees from Columbia University, Yale University, and Pennsylvania State University. He completed the course of study at the Psychoanalytic Institute of the New York University Medical Center and has also received honorary doctorates in fine arts from Davidson College (1993) and the San Francisco Institute of Art (1996). From 1991-97 he was the A. D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design gave him a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California, and in 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. The numerous fellowships and awards he has been awarded include the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism (1983), given by the College Art Association, and more recently the 2008 Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Cultural Studies Center. He is a contributing editor at *Artforum*, *Sculpture* and *Tema Celeste* magazines, the founding editor of *Art Criticism* and the editor of a series on American Art and Art Criticism for Cambridge University Press. Kuspit has written more than twenty books, including *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (2000), *Idiosyncratic Identities: Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde* (1996), *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late 20th Century* (2000), *Psychostrategies of Avant-Garde Art* (2000) and *The End of Art* (2004).

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