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Art Criticism

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With respect to the color of the cover:
If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality.

T.W. Adorno, "Black as an Ideal," *Aesthetic Theory*.

Art Criticism

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Robert Morris's Latest Works: Slouching Toward Armageddon

MATTHEW BAIGELL

Robert Morris's works shown at the Sonnabend and Leo Castelli Galleries in January 1985 are among the handsomest and well-crafted produced by any artist in the last several years. They are fully formed statements rather than examples of works in progress or a set of ideas still in the process of development. Certainly they represent a major effort on Morris's part, and one senses in them the artist's desire to create a series of masterworks that sums up his recent thoughts on the subject of human annihilation. Undoubtedly, they will be discussed from several points of view and fitted into different readings of Morris's art, of the art of the present moment, and to that of the past several years. The point is—they are important works.

I am referring particularly to those pieces in which Morris combined images from the Firestorm series with those of the Hypnerotomachia series, the former composed of solid, densely drawn but indistinct forms in pastel centered in and framed by the hydrocal

reliefs of the latter. They are large, as much as six and more feet in height and length. Of course, any number of works by other artists exist in multiples of six feet, but the amount of visual incident in Morris's works—which have not been given an overall name or specific titles—provides them with a massiveness not measureable in feet and inches.

The pastels, averaging about three to five feet square, are set within thin metal frames. Just beneath the bases of several frames and largely hidden from view Morris has added sentences stamped on thin metal strips that refer to the firebombings of German cities. The pastels seem cut right into the centers of the hydrocal reliefs which act as large frames. Cast skulls, hands and genitalia cover the surfaces of the frames. These do not provide, however, a consistent rectangular support for the pastels but contain notches, openings and even separate units that might recede or project from the plane of the pastels. For the most part, the frames are several inches wide. In one work, the reliefs are constructed to form rectangular legs that are joined by an apron of cut felt pieces. In most works, as in this one, the swirling forms of the pastels are continued onto the reliefs, suggesting a baroque continuity of movement from painting to sculpture and back again. Colors that emerge in the pastels also splash over onto the generally dark reliefs and warm their surfaces with dull reds and purples. Especially with the larger pieces, it is easy to read the combination of the central pastels and the surrounding frames as components of altar pieces; the subject of worship, however, is destruction rather than resurrection.

As in Morris's recent exhibitions, the added texts orient the viewer toward the meaning of the works. In this exhibition, he included eight statements concerned with the firebombings.

On the night of July 27, 1945, the R.A.F. bombed Hamburg with incendiaries. Temperatures reached 1000 degrees centigrade. High winds were produced, 8 sq. miles were incinerated and 40,000 killed. The first deliberate manmade firestorm.

What would burn was ignited. For a week the city glowed and ashes filled the sky. A place, a population, a certain way of life had come to an end.

The center was a handful of energy never understood. Moments within an emptiness stretching to the stars where the heart beats for nothing.

Firestorm winds of hurricane force collapsed walls and sucked away the oxygen. Its heat melted metal roofs and blew showers of molten sparks which burnt holes in the corneas of their eyes.

Concussion waves (which leave no marks on the body), incineration, fragmentation devices, asphyxiation, flying glass, and melting roofs that create a rain of molten lead and copper on those below.

None will be ready when it touches down. Yet we have seen it gathering all these years. You said there was nothing that could be done.

In the snow at 60 below zero, while the city burned, General Holder wrote, 'We have reached the end of our human and material resources.' The massive counterattack came without warning.

In Dresden it was said afterward that temperatures in the Altstadt reached 3000 degrees. They spoke of [many thousand] dead. Wild animals from the destroyed zoo were seen walking among those leaving the ruined city.

The central panels in each of the works suggest but do not describe the fire bombings. Areas of intense red obviously refer to burning objects, and the great swooping arabesques to tornado-like firestorms. Sparks of fractured colors play through the broad circular forms and whole sections of brightly colored marks are momentarily halted as they bounce through the heat of the infernos.

Although Morris is portraying chaos, he does so in an altogether controlled way, without any sloppiness. There is no Abstract Expressionist raggedness nor layers of Turner-esque translucence, but a controlled expressionism that communicates the implied content of the works without provoking strong empathetic responses. The surfaces are—well—just too beautiful and deflect one's raw emotional reactions to firestorms, and the paths of movement are too certain to suggest the frenzy of incendiary holocausts. Morris is clearly not presenting topical views but is commenting on the idea of firestorms. In this regard he created, in effect, examples of the Kantian sublime. For Kant, the sublime was "to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, yet its totality is also present to thought."¹ That is, the sublime cannot actually be visualized, but is available instead to the imagination. No object in nature is of itself sublime, since an "object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found [only] in the mind, for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so called."² As Samuel Monk in his book *The Sublime* has suggested concerning Kant's interpretation of the sublime, "in experiencing the sublime, the imagination seeks to represent what it is powerless to represent, since the object is limitless, and thus cannot be represented. This effort and this inevitable failure of the imagination are the source of the emotions that accompany the sublime. Which achieves its effect by the opposition between the object and our faculties of knowledge."³

For Morris, the firebombings represent an experience beyond visualization, but which he imagined in forms boundless and limitless. This is a different order of sublime from that associated with Edmund Burke, for whom specific objects, forms or events were essential to stimulate feelings of the sublime,⁴ or even the later English writer on landscape William Gilpin, who suggested that "many images owe their sublimity to their *indistinctness*; and frequently what we call sublime is the effect of that heat and fermentation, which ensues in the imagination from its ineffectual efforts to conceive some dark, obtuse idea beyond its grasp. Bring the same within the compass of its comprehension, and it may continue *great*, but it will cease to be *sublime*...."⁵ Clearly, Morris preferred his pastel images to remain indeterminate rather than to be brought up to the level of indistinctness. His are not, as has already been suggested, Turner-esque concoctions.⁶

In this regard, Morris seems to have understood, knowingly or not, Barnett Newman's criticism of the failure of European artists to achieve the sublime. In a symposium on the subject published in *Tiger's Eye* in 1948, Newman wrote, "the failure of European art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted or pure) and to build an art within the framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface or a classic stable one)."⁷ But unlike Newman who located the desire to achieve the sublime within his own being—"we are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions"—Morris created his works in response to past and potential holocausts. His controlled surfaces were not created in answer to the ecstasies of sublime feelings triggered by natural sights and events or one's inner sense of transcendence, but in grim contemplation of total annihilation. He did not depict explosions of Mt. Vesuvius or expulsions from Eden, but images that peer into the abyss of our civilization.

It is also quite obvious that these new pieces reflect points of view different from those Morris held in the 1960s and 1970s. But consistency is no virtue, and any person, let alone an artist, who maintains the same attitudes over a 20-year period is probably dead from the neck up. This is certainly not Morris's problem; he continually demonstrates a genuine inventive spirit as well as an openness to new ideas. For these new pieces, the questions that need to be asked is not how they differ from his earlier works, but what are the continuities within his art that would help define its personality. Nothing short of a full review of Morris's career would allow us to position these works in his oeuvre, but a few observations can be made.

Most basic, it now seems quite clear that a didactic element has always asserted itself in his art, whether it concerned the nature of Minimalism during the 1960s or the prospect of annihilation in the 1980s. That is, Morris yoked his art to an idea or a set of ideas of which the particular works were illustrations. When he wrote in 1971, for instance, that "it seems a truism at this point that the static, portable, indoor art object can do no more than carry a decorative load that becomes increasingly uninteresting,"⁸ I do not think he meant to condemn all indoor portable pieces, but those that were merely decorative. His own work, whether indoor or outdoor pieces, contain few such elements. This is not to say that he is uninterested in quality of finish or design, but that it is difficult to isolate elements in his work that have purely decorative functions. Morris is, at heart, a moralist.

In a career as varied as his, it is difficult to pick out a consistent mode of compositional organization, but one of the recurring motifs in this aspect of his work is the particular way he relates forms to surrounding fields. Especially in the scatterpieces of the late 1960s, he diffused focal points to the extent that figure and field were not so

much interchangeable as in a painting by, say, Cezanne, as they were continuous. As Morris once indicated, accumulations are closer to our true readings of visual fields.⁹ Even though he originally argued this point in regard to art as energy, as process and as flux, the point remains that he was quite willing to ignore traditional compositional elements such as dominant and subordinate relationships or centers of focus. In the new works, the colors that swarm over the pastel surfaces also lack hierarchies of interest and, to keep the pastel sections from becoming dominant forms of focus within the relief-covered frames, Morris allows the movements and colors generated in the centers to spill over the frames to their edges. Although these works are not as rigorously wholistic as, say, Barnett Newman's mature paintings or Jasper John's early pieces, they clearly continue a mode of visual investigation traceable throughout Morris's career.

Morris has also inserted himself actively into his work, and not only in performance pieces on a stage with dancers or over an open field on horseback. As early as his *I-Box* of 1962, in which a nude photograph of himself appears behind an opening in the shape of the letter "I" and later in 1974 in his poster of himself in a German helmet and chains, his presence has been apparent. And now, in one of the new pieces, the forms and colors of an attached childhood drawing of a human aircraft coupled with a death's head serve as the basis of its design. Whatever the larger meanings that might accrue to the connection of a youthful drawing with a mature work, combining images of Walpurgis Night with *Gotterdammerung*, Morris does not see himself as a passive, anonymous spectator to the gestation of art movements or the passing of civilizations.

Another theme that recurs in Morris's work is that revolving around destruction, disappearance and entropy. This can be seen in his scatterings and felt pieces as well as in his monumental pilings of lumber and concrete, and, particularly, in relation to the new pieces, in several works made since 1979. A major difference between the earlier and more recent pieces is, of course, the concentration on human destruction.¹⁰ The earliest instance of this new concern emerged in the drawings of tombs for victims of hurricanes, mining disasters, drownings and air crashes in 1979. These lead to the Cenotaph Series, eight drawings with typed explanations, which, in turn, served as the basis for the *Preludes (for A.B.)* of 1980. This set included onyx stones topped with a death's head on each piece and covered with silk-screened statements describing those commemorated: the victims of industrial poisoning, economic imperialism, materialistic decadence, floods and air crashes. Some of the texts presented scenarios describing how the event of death might take place. There is a curious conflation in them of present and future time.

Following the *Preludes (for A.B.)*, Morris exhibited in 1980 a piece called *Orion*, a silvered human skeleton hanging from the ceiling entwined with tangled aluminum wires. In the next year, he de-

signed the startling environmental piece *Jornado del Muerto* (from "The Natural History of Los Alamos"), which reviewed the development of the atomic bomb and the destruction of Hiroshima. Its major features included black-painted skeletons astride missiles, a mural of a mushroom cloud, photographs of the creation of the first atomic bomb and of the burn victims in Japan, copies of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of the Deluge and "two large flags of thick felt with three-dimensional stars and stripes hanging leadenly against a wall."¹¹

In the same year (1981) Morris created *Restless Sleepers/Atomic Shroud*, silkscreened linen and pillowcases in the form of a bed with the top sheet turned back. The texts on the pillow cases include the following: "It would be difficult to achieve erasure with a single thermonuclear device, given the present state of technology," and "more practical and more certain would be the utilization of several dirty, fairly high megaton yield devices."¹²

Altogether, these works might be considered a high form of agitprop, in their ways not too dissimilar from, say, Ben Shahn's *Lucky Dragon* of 1960 in which he portrayed a victim of American nuclear tests in the Pacific, a sailor whose ship was dosed by fallout. The text in that painting reads: "I am a fisherman Aikichi Kuboyama by name. On the first of March 1954 our fishing boat the Lucky Dragon wandered under an atomic cloud eighty miles from Bikini. I and my friends were burned. We did not know what happened to us. On September twenty third of that year I died of atomic burn."

With the development of the Psychomachia (also Psychomania), Firestorm and Hypnertomachia Series in 1982, Morris substituted abstract statements about destruction for the agitprop of the immediately preceding pieces. The Psychomachia drawings included stenciled images of men spun about the surfaces of each sheet. The Firestorm drawings evoked images of atomic blasts. Although Morris acknowledged the influence of Leonardo's drawings of the Deluge, his more shattered, explosive and centrifugal forms also evoke some of Jackson Pollock's drawings of the mid-1940s (the drawings strongly influenced by Kandinsky).

The Hypnertomachia Series, whitened reliefs made of hydrocal, included body fragments, organs and genitalia. Of the three sets, texts were added to the Firestorm pieces. At least one recorded Morris's own thoughts. "Working with blackened hands in a dark overheated room and thinking about an approaching firestorm that is consuming the city, an attempt is made to recall the motion in one of Leonardo's last Deluge Drawings."¹³ The others, however, describe events in Hiroshima. "Around 11 a.m. the in-rushing air developed into a whirlwind and a firestorm began sweeping toward the hypocenter incinerating everything in its path. The sky became dark with clouds of ashes which fell later in the day as a lethal black rain," and "There is no record of those who gathered that morning at the Miyuki Bridge. Some died on the pavement from their burns before they could cross. No one had any comprehension of what had hap-

pened. Many who managed to cross that day came to wish they had never survived.” By late 1983, color had been added to the black firestorms and white hydrocal reliefs, and elements of both series had been combined into integrated units. The most recent works are further examples of the combination of firestorms and hydrocal reliefs.

But there is more to say about them than just pointing out their provenance in Morris’s work. An essay by Morris published in 1981 is quite suggestive of his state of mind then and perhaps now.¹⁴ In it he suggested that American art could be divided roughly between four attitudes or positions, the aggressive, expansionist abstract (Pollock); the cynical, ironic concerned with systems (Duchamp); the realistic, reflecting alienation (Hopper); and the decorative, accumulative, repetitive (Cornell). He found the last to be the most mindless and least challenging, but the one, unfortunately, to be dominant in American art. He associated its popularity with the exhaustion of modernist forms and the condition of modern life.

An emotional weariness with what underlies them [the exhaustion of modernist forms] has occurred. I would suggest that the shift has occurred with the growing awareness of the more global threats to the existence of life itself. Whether this takes the form of instant nuclear detonation or a more leisurely extinction from a combination of exhaustion of resources and the pervasive, industrially based trashing of the planet, that sense of doom has gathered on the horizon of our perceptions and grows larger everyday. Concomitantly, credible political ideologies for the ideal future no longer exist and the general values underlying rationalist doctrines for an improved future through science and technology are crumbling fast...In any case the future no longer exists and a numbness in the face of a gigantic failure of imagination has set in. The Decorative is the apt mode for such a sensibility, being a response on the edge of numbness.¹⁵

This is strong language, rarely matched by an American artist. One thinks of Thomas Cole’s prediction in 1835 of the breaking up of the United States and of his five paintings titled *The Course of Empire*, a dispirited warning to a rapacious and greedy public betraying the ideals of the Founding Fathers.¹⁶ But Morris, of course, has raised the ante to world destruction rather than the failure of a particular country or political system, and has given us not a warning but a vision of the holocaust.

If any ray of hope exists in these works, it is suggested in psychobiological rather than politicoeconomic terms. In his essay, Morris wrote that “if the impulse for the energetically abstract could be identified with Eros, the decorative would fall on the side of Thanatos.”¹⁶ Perhaps these words provide a clue to reading the new pieces, in that they contain a series of dialogues between life and death instincts. On one level, the firestorms represent Eros and the hydrocal reliefs, with their repetitive body parts, Thanatos. On another, the sentences attached to the firestorms (listed earlier) represent the presence of the death instinct in life. In the reliefs, the reverse is the case, the sexual members suggesting the presence of

life in death. (The idea of sex as a loss of body fluids, as a momentary loss of control and as a preliminary to sleep also suggest the immanence of death.) So, as Eros and Thanatos are totally intertwined with each other in Freudian theory, so their visualizations are intertwined in Morris's new work. As there is death in life and life in death, so there are Morris's handsome pieces that dwell on horrific themes, acts of creation dealing with threats of destruction.

Similar thoughts and images course through works by contemporary poets. As with artists, approaches range from the purely descriptive to the abstract, from "see-it-now" accounts to the evocatively imaginative. The perceptions of at least one poet, James Merrill, parallel Morris's, particularly in the former's complex book-length poem *Mirabell: Books of Number*, in which apocalyptic visions are intimated. One passage seems especially close to Morris's latest works as well as the earlier monocolored Firestorms and hydrolcal reliefs.¹⁷

THIS ATOM GLIMPSED IS A NEARLY FATAL CONSUMMATION
 ONE FLOATS IN CLEAR WARM WATER THE SUN OF IT PULSES GLOWS
 Through eyelids, a veined Rose
 A MUSIC OF THE 4 COLORS TO FLOAT LAPT BY COOL GREEN
 Sun yellow, aquamarine,
 Cradle of pure repose
 & OF INTENSE FISSIONABLE ENERGIES BLACK & WHITE
 WHICH EITHER JOIN & CREATE OR SEPARATE & DESTROY
 Day and night, day and night
 O IT IS SPERM EGG & CELL THE EARTH & PARADISE O
 A burning in our eyes—
 What you must feel, recalling that lost joy!
 (But They feel nothing, The have told us so.)

This is the right moment to end this essay, but I would like to raise one issue. It concerns the way blame is assigned for past and possibly future holocausts. In the *Jornada del Muerto*, Morris clearly blames the United States for instituting atomic warfare and in the new pieces he holds the Royal Air Force responsible for the firebombings of German cities. In a telephone conversation, Morris acknowledged the terrible war record of the Axis countries, but added that the Allies had crossed a moral line, too. From the tenor of our conversation, I assumed that he was not among those—the unilateral disarmers being the extreme—who see only evil in Western military actions, but rather one who did not want to see the West engaged in moral transgressions whatever the provocation.

Footnotes

¹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J.H.Bernard. New York: Mac-Millan, 1951, p. 82.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

³Samuel Monk, *The Sublime*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960, p. 7.

⁴Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful*. First published in 1757.

⁵William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, I (1791), p. 252, cited in Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime*, London: British Museums Publications, 1980, p. 72.

⁶Grace Glueck in *The New York Times*, January 18, 1985, Section C, p. 22

⁷"The Ides of Art: 6 Opinions on What Is Sublime in Art," *Tiger's Eye* 6, 52 (1948).

⁸Robert Morris, "The Art of Existence," *Artforum* 9, 51 (April 1969).

⁹Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 4," *Artforum* 7, 51 (April 1969).

¹⁰The following information is based on these sources: Howard N. Fox, *Metaphor: New Projects by Contemporary Sculptors*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1982; Marti Mayo, *Robert Morris*, Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1982; Thomas Krens, *The Drawings of Robert Morris*, Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 1982; Nancy Marmer, "Death in Black and White," *Art in America* 71, 129-33 (March 1983) and Sally Yard, "The Shadow of the Bomb," *Arts* 58, 73-82 (April 1984).

¹¹Howard N. Fox, *Metaphor*, p. 62.

¹²Yard, "The Shadow of the Bomb," 76.

¹³This and the following texts were supplied by the very helpful staff of the Sonnabend Gallery.

¹⁴Robert Morris, "American Quartet," *Art in America* 69 92-106 (December 1981).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁶Matthew Baigell and Allen Kaufman, "Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow*: A Critique of American Civilization," *Arts* 55, 167-69 (May 1981).

¹⁷James Merrill, *Mirabell: Books of Number*. New York: Antheneum, 1978, p. 25. This poem was brought to my attention by Cleo McNelly and George Kearns of the Rutgers University English Department.

Harold Rosenberg: Transforming the Earth

MARJORIE WELISH

Late in 1947, a magazine devoted to the uncertain protagonist entered the world. The magazine carried the title *Possibilities*, and, as is by now well known, called for an esthetics of spontaneity within and against Heideggerian bleakness. Included in its pages were some diaristic thoughts on the process by which Hamlet becomes fit for revenging the death of his father and thus worthy of his life assignment, or role. This essay, by Harold Rosenberg, and an article on Dada by Richard Huelsenbeck, as well as two key statements on painting by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, found their way into print just as a new purposefulness sunk into canvas. Somber and earnest and not yet institutionalized, Abstract Expressionism had found its historical role, and Rosenberg, in his groping manifesto of the new spirit, had helped author it.

Given the recent political evisceration of Europe, no wonder Rosenberg invoked a figure deeply troubled by the moral implications

of the political situation in which he finds himself. To the literary intellectual of the anti-Stalinist Left, politics had effectively stymied all hope for humanity, first in 1939, when the Moscow-Berlin pact revealed the despotic side of Socialism, and then in 1940, with "The Fall of Paris," where, as Rosenberg observes in *Partisan Review*, "the laboratory of the twentieth century has been shut down." "As a consequence of this double loss, looking to Europe for models of enlightened future behavior seemed to Americans altogether untenable.

As a symbol of the intellectual after World War II, Hamlet, who is civilized, and whose flaw is a cerebral complexity that comes with education, becomes the paradigm of a bereft, contemplative person bound to a situation requiring action. But Rosenberg's concern is with the actor playing Hamlet, and he proposes that being too aware of one's responsibility in destiny is not unlike the actor's being too self-conscious of his artistic choices and paralyzed just when he should be moving forward. Even so, the question remains: how does a participant-observer situate himself to the advantage of culture? The answer would be for the actor to enter the illusion of the drama so entirely that the contradictions between him and his character disappear. Or as Rosenberg would say in 1952 in his famous "The American Action Painters," "the role of the artist is to become so involved with the art that distinctions between life and art are broken."² Throughout his career, Rosenberg insists that, not the expedient realism of "is" that deal in denotation, but the subterranean and sublime imagination that answers to the hidden causes of "seems," is the artist's true domain. To quote the Hamlet essay:

Since what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we, in our peevish opposition,
Take it to heart?

To seek to denote oneself [writes Rosenberg] truly is, from the point of view of the actor, a 'peevish opposition' that interferes with playing one's part. Worse, it shows an intolerable contempt for the stage itself and everything that governs it.³

Weighing Shakespeare's meaning, Rosenberg insists that, like Sartre's proposal that we should act as if we were free, the actor should zealously embrace the imagination as if it were true. Sartre may distrust the imagination, but Rosenberg, disgusted with the realm of spurious realism politics traffics in, defends it as integral to art and art's contribution to the world. Throughout his career, Rosenberg goes to extreme lengths in his art criticism to defend the esthetic of imagination, without which, he contends, there would be no art at all.⁴

Not only the artist, but the critic, Rosenberg believes, must give imagination priority over the realism given to "tracing out the fact." Rosenberg's achievement is to have defended the value of the imagination and the extreme ambitions of experimental art and literature in an era of cautious realist values, and against exclusively formal

concerns. He tenaciously pursued the meaning of modern art in a method that superficially seems like argument but is best described as revelation strongly asserted, overthrown and reworked. Constantly reformulating his thought about art and creation, milieu and culture, he construed art criticism as a defense of the creative imagination applied courageously and subtly to art and literature.

Emerging as a freelance thinker in the 1930s, and as an art critic in the 1940s, Rosenberg was sufficiently cognizant of the world to note that American art lagged behind the brilliant products of the European imagination. His fierce loyalty to the individualism that produced experimental literature, however, made him quick to dislike the regimentation of culture taking place within the individualistic politics of the Left. In the 1930s many of the literary intellectuals infatuated with Communism submitted to the notion that popular culture can express the dreams of an enlightened socialist order or, at least, the enlightened socialist order to come. In 1934, *Partisan Review*, the literary journal of the John Reed Club, appeared, supporting Trotskyite politics but condemning the proletarian literature advocated by Communists as ideologically correct. As James Gilbert reports in his book *Writers and Partisans*,⁵ not only proletarian literature meant to recruit the masses, but also realist literature intending to speak clearly and humanely about contemporary life, was deemed simply artistically inferior to the experimental literature produced abroad. Awed by contemporaries Joyce and Eliot, whose *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published in 1922, the staff of *Partisan Review* was soon ostracized by the Communists for its literary allegiance to Europe. In 1937 when the Moscow trials showed Stalinism to be repressive, and many intellectuals dissociated themselves from Communism; *Partisan Review* still advocated the intellectual's hope for a Trotskyite version of it, although with increasing reticence. Depending on one's outlook, *Partisan Review's* steady emphasis on the literary avant-garde either represented a commitment to liberated intellectual life or an escape from political realities. Eliot saw fit to publish two sections of his *Four Quartets* in *Partisan Review*. At the same time, from Mexico, Trotsky wrote *Partisan Review* that it was politically soft—that one needed to be 'fanatical' in one's beliefs if one was to succeed against totalitarianism.

George L.K. Morris, art critic for the *Partisan Review* from 1937-1942, advocated Mondrian in both his writing and painting, and the mass media trounced him for doing so; elsewhere, the political dilemma over abstraction continued to trouble the most thoughtful critics. In the inaugural issue of *The Marxist Quarterly*, January 1937, Meyer Schapiro takes the occasion of the "great" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, to critique Alfred Barr's esthetic assumptions, all the while scrupulously justifying modern art to his uneasy political audience. He disputes Barr's contention that, having "exhausted" the naturalistic universe the Renaissance explored, abstraction is art's inevitable outcome, subject to

no esthetic reversals, and existing beyond history and time; no art can be beyond history, Schapiro argues.⁶ Several years pass until Schapiro, in an intellectual quandary about abstraction, can freely support its “liberating” values. For his part, Rosenberg is undaunted by the controversy. In his belief that abstraction renders naturalism obsolete with its culturally timeless, and transcendent esthetic, Rosenberg echoes Barr; in his belief that form is not immaculately conceived and sustained, he accords with Schapiro. Esthetic excellence can co-exist with causal explanation, and like Schapiro, Rosenberg locates the style of modernism within the individualistic, international and “ahistorical” historical moment of Paris on the eve of the Great War. Trotsky’s cultural rationale satisfied Rosenberg to the extent that he becomes impatient with his irresolute colleagues. Still, his own halting diaristic thoughts show that Rosenberg is sympathetic to this protracted Hamletism within the intellectual socialist community.

Rosenberg initially appreciates the ascent of literature over politics that *Partisan Review* held as editorial policy. But by 1948, the year he launched *Possibilities*, Rosenberg came to criticize *Partisan Review*, along with *Dissent* and other politically enlightened magazines, of intellectual cowardice in censoring new literary experiment.⁷ Any politics that encourages new content only to encroach on the “politically suspect” form by which newness declares its integrity, any politics which cannot accommodate the most advanced extension of man’s creative and intellectual gifts, performs a masquerade, and in these circumstances, it is the politics that is deficient not the art. On this point at least, Clement Greenberg, who in 1958 became *Partisan Review*’s art critic, and Rosenberg agreed. Greenberg, however, more fanatical in his belief, insisted that form must be construed as a radical principle if it is to be esthetically and thus historically compelling. While Greenberg looked to make form his mission, Rosenberg, devoted to the mysterious plot of the unique imagination, clung to his mission of an open creative process.

Rosenberg came to resent being classified as a left-wing critic, for he felt that this assumption of intellectual camaraderie foreclosed on the complex, untidy cultural nourishment that determined his own creative possibilities. He was influenced as much by “the Old Testament and the Gospels, Plato, eighteenth-century music, the notion of freedom as taught in the New York City school system, the fantastic emotional residues of the Jewish family” as “the thirties,” he wrote.⁸ To read Rosenberg is to encounter an on-going protest against any reductive, streamlined ideological grasp of the individual. Generalizations made about individuality are routinely met with Rosenberg’s insistence that a human being is inconsistent, incomplete, and an expression of this formative impurity in conflict with itself and society. More than anything, Rosenberg valued individual expression, and it is from this complex notion of the self that his rationale for art is most frequently explained; it is precisely be-

cause individuality is so central to his esthetic that we underestimate his career-long defense of the imagination.

Susceptible to literary influence, ranging from Proust to Kafka to Wallace Stevens, he had a particular passion for Dostoevsky and did indeed start to write a biography of him but could never sufficiently distance himself from the topic to finish it.⁹ Certainly the poetic and philosophical debates within the individual soul, the comatose contemplative mind that suddenly turns to fanatical action, the immanent truths that Russian literature addresses—all these literary dimensions Rosenberg evidently found irresistible. However, among the pantheon of influences, the Symbolist poet-critics Baudelaire and Valery evince an unmistakable authority, shaping not only Rosenberg's esthetics but his sense of the art critical task. Baudelaire's disdain for the "minutiae" of "petty description" in art and art criticism gives conviction to Rosenberg's own discredited view of journalism. Then, too, Rosenberg may have achieved fame as a booster of existential spontaneity, but only after the romantic notion of imagination—sad, ardent, and forever in metamorphosis—had installed itself in his mind. Transformation through subtlety or unexpected change or "the vision which arrives through intense meditation"¹⁰ are, thanks to Baudelaire, values Rosenberg looks for in painting.

Observing Degas as work caused Valery to note that unlike artists who codify and finish their work, "for Degas, a painting was a result of a limitless number of sketches."¹¹ The self-aware creative activity that brings art into being but is never finished, is a process of inductive manufacture to which Rosenberg responds even if he disapproves of the chastity that is its result in Valery's own poems. Rosenberg held Valery in high regard, for his privacy, and for his example of the reflective intellect whose standards of excellence are limited only by what he can intellectually attain. It is an esthetic pursuit not to everyone's liking. In 1931, studying the luminaries of Symbolism in his book *Axel's Castle*, Edmund Wilson found a beautiful abstruse world of language relevant only to a former era, an era before the First World War, caught in "the chambers of its own imagination."¹² Yeats, Valery, Eliot, Proust, Joyce, Stein and Rimbaud rely too much on intimation and "on metaphors detached from their subjects."¹³ "Though under the proper conditions these principles [of Symbolism], remain valid."¹⁴

European imaginative literature remained more compelling to Rosenberg than American realism. Journalism, a favored mode of writing in the thirties, was of no interest to him, however intelligently pursued. Friends, like Dwight McDonald, would get the back of his hand for joining the ranks of mass culture, while peers, like Wilson, with a limited, albeit conscientious understanding of abstraction, and who practiced reportage with a human face, were conspicuously boycotted in the pages of Rosenberg's writings. Evidently the documentary stance adopted by writers was too ideologically foreign for

Rosenberg to be gracious to any of its practitioners.

To judge by the pages of *Art News* in the 1950s, abstraction got its revenge through the advocacy of sophisticated poet-critics. Even if, as Robert Goldwater says, his own *Magazine of Art* was the first to feature Abstract Expressionists,¹⁵ *Art News* was the movement's most intensely literary and discerning champion. Editor Tom Hess wrote criticism with haptic sensitivity. Poets John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Peter Schjeldahl and John Perreault wrote intelligible reviews that nevertheless presupposed the meaningfulness of Symbolism and Surrealism, now that there was a tradition of the mind and its conscious meandering, its leaps coming into being, and its linked or floating metaphorphoses of things, feelings and thoughts, rather than things as they are. Such work is not meaningless as often charged, but meaningful, precisely because centered on the imaginative transactions that, as Rosenberg, quoting Rilke, says, "transform the earth."

Rosenberg, too, wrote for *Art News*. In 1950, William Seitz, researching his Ph.D., *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, referred to Harold Rosenberg as "a poet closely associated with New York artists."¹⁶ Rosenberg earned that epithet by having produced a volume of poetry, *Trance Above the Streets*, 1942, as well as by having written many probing articles on literature (including a 1936 review in *Poetry* of Kenneth Burke's formative *Permanence and Change*, in which Rosenberg quotes Burke's Heideggerian conclusion that "the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man's relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor."¹⁷ *Art News* did not eschew journalism of course, but editorial latitude allowed for a sophisticated response to non-representational art, from argument to oratory, from impressionist to the sort of speculative criticism that asks not only: what do I think, but what is there to think. It is within his long-standing campaign for the acceptance of modernism, now conducted within a magazine friendly to this cause, that we should understand Rosenberg's provocative "The American Action Painters" when it appeared in December 1952.

The innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with representation of the state in favor of enacting it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation. This was possible because an action, being made of both the psychic and the material, is by its nature a sign...yet also exists as a 'thing' in that it touches other things and affects them.¹⁸

It was not long before Rosenberg's epithet "Action painting" became a debased conceptual logo for a public ignorant of or indifferent to the cultural history of abstraction. If, however, "acting painting" came to seem an idiosyncratic notion pushed too hard, action was an *idée fixe* of the 20th century long before it became an obsession for Rosenberg. "A work of mind exists only in action. Outside of that act, nothing is left but an object which has no particular relation to the mind," wrote Paul Valery,¹⁹ drawing a clear distinction between the creative process and its pristine result. Defining art as an expression of an intuition, Croce reflected the modern

impulse to escape from the sealed off imagination characteristic of the previous introspective era. Additionally, Dewey's idea of "art as experience" infiltrated contemporary thought until the passage of art into life and back again became a stable esthetic transaction in many people's minds. Finally, the rejection of contemplation elevated action as an esthetic idea with political momentum. Activism, with its capacity for turning metaphysical ruminating into sudden mobilization for revolution, has driven the engines of a great deal of art this century, fueling not only Russian Constructivists but Dadaist gadflies: "the Dadaist should be a man who has fully understood that one is entitled to have ideas only if one can transform them into life—the completely active type."²⁰ Rosenberg admires the Dadaists in particular for the radical passion with which they fused purely esthetic and purely political impulses. In general, he approves of action as a cultural locus, that if not logical, is nevertheless an effective working ontology enabling results. He believes he can lean on the symbolism of action, even risking foolish overemphasis because, from behavioral psychology to existentialism to Zen, it represents the confluence of so many disparate cultural longings.

For Rosenberg, "action" is the dramatic semantic core of a 20th-century myth. Developed passionately but provisionally, it is subject to revision both in substance and style: from the groping consideration of action in *Hamlet*, in 1948; to its 1952 presentation in *Art News* as an oracular spectacle—part Valery's summits of thought, part Karl Marx's 1848 polemics urging Communards to turn their lost street fight into history; to a stately proposition offered in a paper at an academic conference, in 1965: "That creation of art within the twentieth century is an activity within the politico-cultural drama of a world in the process of remaking itself"²¹; to a simple explanation for *Vogue*, in 1967, portraying "action painting" as an episode in the history of movement in art.²² The implications of this recycling suggest more than a professional obligation to suit writing to an audience. In each instance, Rosenberg adjusts his intellectual focus to implement the notion of action. He writes art criticism militantly but conditionally, reworking the ideas which are his medium the way he exhorts artists to work their paint. Rosenberg's criticism, then, has not lost touch with the notebook or laboratory where hypotheses about action, the avant-garde, and other cultural notions spontaneously bubble. To locate our style is to locate the identity of our century, our distinctive cultural individuality, and Rosenberg identifies our best self with the triumph of modernism. Modernism is Rosenberg's ideology—belief, he has said, he would like to see enacted as law²³—but an ideology whose terms are subject to dismantling, erasure, reassembly, augmentation, transgression as the critical occasion dictates. Taken together, the diverse definitions of the terms of modernism occurring in his essays dare to provide an on-going, open interpretation of modernism, a stream of intellectual "impressions," as Dewey said, whereby conceptions, tested by experience, undergo

revision.

It is a practice that actively invites descriptions and creative speculation to collaborate with the intellect. Rosenberg writes criticism that, however prescriptive and strongly voiced, also revises its ideological position as it goes along, destabilizing its own fixed points of reference. Over the years, Rosenberg's continual restatement of "action" establishes a history of seeing art from different points of view and at different levels of generality, a quasi-legal precedent that, if prescriptive, is meant to be contested and lead to further intellectual litigation. In this sense, acknowledging the provisional status of his own analysis, Rosenberg offers us a theoretical work-in-progress, and while this enterprise is not intellectually rigorous, there is more than poetic justification for it. Assuming art is a product of imagination, not fact, Rosenberg opts for a kind of criticism that attempts to cope with partial comprehension of art's ambiguous, multivalent meaning and the phenomenon of changing interpretations of its meaning over time. Some estheticians consider this self-imposed intellectual openness not a weakness but a strength of Rosenberg's criticism. The interpretative model of criticism once advocated by Kant²⁴ also earns current approval. At least, according to esthetician Joseph Margolis, "the sort of rigor associated with determining matters of fact is flatly inappropriate in the circumstances in which interpretations are provided."²⁵ Rosenberg, who adopts a speculative, phenomenological interpretative approach toward symbol, accepts, even delights in the opportunity to rethink his own premises and ultimately fail at controlling the protean imagination.

To watch Rosenberg defend the imagination, threatened on one hand by realism and fact, and on the other by intellectualism and theory, is to see the strength of his commitment to the Romantic notion of the artist. Yet his defense takes paradoxical turns. Keeping art new—imaginative, if not radical—depends on the imagination strenuously making compost of stale realisms. So from this point of view it is surprising to see Rosenberg accept the terms by which Jackson Pollock manages, in Pound's words, to make it new. "The originality of Pollock," Rosenberg says, "lay in the literalness with which he converted theoretical statements into painting practice. What to others was philosophy or metaphor, he dealt with as material fact."²⁶ It is Pollock's conceptual break-through—translating metaphysical fantasies of action into physical movement—that redefines the meaning of paint. Pollock's action painting is a product of the imagination that offers a critique of the contemplative imagination by taking the activist advice given by moderns at their own word: following the trajectory of logic that Huelsenbeck urges in *Possibilities* or that Dostoevsky's characters perform fictively when they hurl themselves into action. In this sense, Pollock's art is an unconditional and efficient modernist expression. So it is not surprising that Rosenberg embraced its originality. He did, however, balk at Allan Kaprow's material extension of Pollock's art into the actual world.

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street.... The young artist...will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness. He will not try to make them extraordinary. Only their real meaning will be stated.²⁷

Although Kaprow understands the theoretical and ideological implications of Pollock very well, Rosenberg judges Kaprow's desire for sheer material existence misguided. Were he predisposed, Rosenberg could also construe the cascade of recorded sound that constitutes Kaprow's "Words" as a Pollock in poetry. There are two ways, the way of fully ramified sensibility, once Pollock becomes enriched by de Kooning, and the way of sensation, once Pollock becomes concrete and actual in Kaprow's production. But the actual *matiere* of speech recorded in concrete poetry is not the sort of art-into-life Rosenberg tolerates; he regards "Words" as mass media. To remain art, painting may approach life but must never reach it.

For Rosenberg, the crucial feature of Pollock's originality lies in his attention to principle—the concept—of which style is the beautiful precipitate. Attending to action as an imaginative concept but manipulating its "realistic" sense, Pollock produced a skein of paint that fulfills the requirements of modernism by coaxing a new all-over structure into being. In this instance, to translate virtual action into actual action leads to an innovative icon; to manipulate the literal meaning of action produces a drastic imaginative result.²⁹ Although Rosenberg reserves a special place for Duchamp's readymades because of their conceptual originality, when Neo-realism comes back as a reprise of Dada, he considers it as Marx considered history the second time around: farce. Or, along with realism, he throws it down the black hole of "anti-art."

If real life is off-limits for the imagination, so is the intellect demonstrated for its own sake. In his art criticism, Rosenberg brings up the issue where relevant, in discussing Hoffman and Klee, for instance, to determine how their "art as thinking" weathers the theory that informs it. Even so, he remains very protective of the imaginative and symbolic nature of art and does not tolerate formal or semiotic instruments to probe symbols of feeling. "Joan Miro: Magnetic Fields," co-curated by Rosalind Krauss and Margit Rowell, offered an unorthodox selection of Miro's sparest poetic paintings from the 1920s and 1960s; for Rosenberg, both the selection of works and the investigation of their meaning is suspect, and an instance of the intellectual abuse of art. In his review of the catalogue essay, he condemns Krauss' formalist descriptions of Miro's poetic signs as a distortion of the artist's intentions and a distortion of art as well. "For if there is one thing that should have been learned from Surrealism, as from Freud," Rosenberg says, "is that the antithesis consciousness/unconsciousness, or form/imagination upon which the Guggen-

heim exhibition is based, is unreal, and that it falsifies the manner in which original art is created.”²⁹ In fact, Krauss’ catalogue essay is not the ruthless document Rosenberg claims. Krauss’ description of visual elements explains how animating space of painting creates the poetic ambiguity that distinguish these ineffable works—among the very few truly Surrealist paintings produced—from concrete poetry and forms which they resemble. She utilizes her analytic tools delicately, and does not violate their presence if she employs linguistic means to explain the signs in *tableaux-poemes* that, as much as they are mysterious, are precisely ambiguous: what could be more relevant than responding semiotically to art whose meaning is simultaneously visual and verbal? Rosenberg strenuously objects to this approach, however. Though he read Langer and absorbed her notion of the presentational symbol,³⁰ Rosenberg remains opposed to formalist or semiotic analysis on principle. He is further disturbed by what he construes to be the moral implications of art created or interpreted methodically. Wanting to protect Miro from association with painters who by solving visual problems suggest Soviet engineers of the soul, Rosenberg is defensive. “In art, however, it is always a mistake to push a concept to its logical conclusion. Art comes into being not through correct reasoning but through uniting contradictions of reason in the ambiguities of a metaphor.” Art is the “action of living imaginations,”³¹ and these precepts Rosenberg believes should remain inviolate in the act of interpretation as well. Her association with Greenbergian formalism, on the one hand, superstitious fear of Stalinist “science” infiltrating art, on the other, drives Rosenberg to condemn Krauss’ analytic response to art as pernicious.

A limitation of Rosenberg’s criticism is his frequent categorical dismissal of cognitive and intellectual tools in the interpretation of art, no matter how responsibly utilized, no matter that this analysis does not preempt the imaginative speculation he defends as most relevant to art. Because he wants the “tools” integrated, Rosenberg adopts an extreme polemical stance. An intellectual wary of intellectual entrapment, he defends the imaginative domain of art against art history and disciplined philosophy, and artists or art critics that trespass with unwanted esthetic rigor or knowledge are condemned as self-consciously formal and “exceeding their roles.” Even though art freed from matching natural appearances inevitably “stresses the awareness of the sign itself,”³² this increased esthetic emphasis, Rosenberg believes, is not what art is about. As preoccupation with the material and formal language of paint is unfit for art criticism, concern with the metalanguage of style, genre or history is illegitimate for art. For this foe of denotation and the declared idea, the imagination is at the least a corrective for unassimilated knowledge, at the most, the means for significantly original work.

Oh
when a thing is getting ready
for everybody there should be a halo
of vigilance over the streets.³⁵

Evaluating Rosenberg as an art critic necessarily entails impure thoughts. He is a cultural ombudsman who refuses to treat art solemnly, with the result that political activists consider him too esthetic and esthetes consider him too political, too sociological or too philosophical. He did not endear himself to political artists by blessing Hans Hofmann with the Dionysian praise: "Not the Muse of social consciousness but the ideologist of the picture plane and the throbbings of space and color have been proven right about the direction of painting."³⁴ Nor did he win friends by advocating the artisanal handiwork of painting among those who consider this pre-industrial technology inherently servile, self-indulgent, atavistic, and a futile escape to the realm of enchanted introspection. That he champions abstraction, with its self-sufficiency and artisanal devotion to the medium, places him in the camp of esthetes, who, like T.S. Eliot, believe the artist's task is to excel at his medium, and improvement in world conditions will come by way of his example. Rosenberg, who has in fact seconded Eliot on this, would only add that the artist is an instrument for the improvement of society to the degree to which he resists depersonalized, regimented artifacts of society.

Nor does Rosenberg's hybrid philosophy entirely satisfy modernists. He outlaws both formal exploration in which the intellect is privileged, as well as the autonomous activity of play that feeds upon the flux of calculated or unpremeditated sensuous differences. Like the formalists he so often opposes, modern art, whether painterly or flat, does not represent for Rosenberg the triumph of sensation ingeniously exploited through sheer material beauty.³⁵ Rosenberg, who gives total support to the ideology of modernism in its imaginative reaches, will not relinquish the panoramic cultural view that supplies the causal explanation for a painter's esthetic criteria. In him, the humanist as much as the Marxist forbids the esthete to take charge, and he pulls back from condoning the self-referring formal experiments of Valery and Mallarme, though their art represents the total sovereignty of imaginative literature over realistic "non-literature." Modernists resent the fact that Rosenberg insists on interpreting modernism from the point of view of Romantic idealism. Form, they contend—not lofty or sinister temperament taken as an absolute—has determined the stylistic originality civilization prizes above all. Were this not so, Manet would be forgotten, tossed aside as an empty Delacroix.

Having invested in the artistic laboratory of modernism, Rosenberg remains nevertheless tied to a legacy of inherited meaning that renders art for art's sake ideologically insupportable in the 20th century. Once an early and militant champion of experimental form and language revolutionary by reason of its heightened self-awareness,³⁶

Rosenberg, now witnessing the formalist implementation of self-awareness come about in painting, reaffirms his own commitment to the metaphoric center of the art work. Unlike Valery, who insists poetry justifies its existence insofar as its language, remaining remote from prose, pursues a “verbal materialism” of sounds and rhythms of words in their symbolic and endlessly orchestrated meaning, Rosenberg condemns this practice. He recoils from “the art of the real” unless attached to Hofmann’s “search for the real,” with the emphasis placed on the search proven by work and unperfected transformation. Still, he reveres that part of Valery that accords with Kant, Heidegger and the hiddenness of art that, however precisely approached, remains finally ineffable.

Moreover, Rosenberg’s defense of the metaphor harmonizes his politics with his esthetics, for both the dialectical Hegelians and the transfiguring Symbolists in whom he so strongly believes find partial truths and moral values immanent within sensation. The statement, “it is imagination that has taught man the moral meaning of color, of contour,”³⁷ evokes Rosenberg writing about Rothko, though it is Baudelaire who first expressed it. With the idea shining through sensation permeating both art and politics, when Rosenberg comes to defend abstract painting, he does it in the belief that moral immanence is not dated, still quaintly attached to its period origins, but has general cultural validity. So if he defends modernism with Baudelairean faith in German romanticism, it is because Rosenberg feels ideologically secure in doing so. If he defends action vociferously, it is to put forth a metaphor that gives contemporary structure to artistic intention without circumscribing the possibilities for its imaginative realization. In any event, metaphor—something construed as something else—is the paradigm Rosenberg advances as quintessentially cultural.

As formalism becomes entrenched, Rosenberg becomes correspondingly more hardened in his belief that creative imagination, not extravagant technique or the dogmatic assertion of the intellect, remains the overriding criterion by which art proves itself. But, in his favor, it should be noted that Rosenberg, whose visual acuity is sharper than his esthetic detractors admit, is dismissed as an art critic by those who do not appreciate the intellectual accuracy of his emotional response to sensory images. Were he rigidly ideological in ranking art by its adherence to indwelling ideas and extra-artistic social forces, Rosenberg would be incapable of reliable esthetic judgments and could not be counted on to winnow the significant from the trivial. But, as his writings show, within a range that generously spans Duchamp to Johns, he is not coercive, but emotionally and intellectually responsive to stylistic criteria the artists themselves impose, and, despite strong ambivalences around the fringes of his cultural values, is a keener judge of beauty and form than are several of his sensuously-oriented colleagues.

Whether an artist is foraging among stylizations or—very rarely—

in training to produce a full-fledged style remains a highly complex visual determination few critics engage. Esthetic considerations alone are insufficient for criticizing a work of art, and for the critic, knowledge of cultural context is imperative in determining a painting's meaning as well as its relative rank in history; and Rosenberg was exceptional among his peers in his insistence on a truly comprehensive contextual view of modernism. Nevertheless, there is a history of art with which to contend, and Rosenberg addressed its stylistic concerns less well. Pollock's radical model of a post-Cubist space remains a landmark within this special history, and that Rosenberg, with his semantic proclivities, would not culturally justify this syntactical break-through, is an intellectual shortcoming that cannot be wished away. This said, however, Rosenberg's explanation of Pollock's originality is deeply insightful. Differentiating Pollock from Miro by calling Miro's *Constellations* "a composition" and Pollock's all-over works "an expression," Rosenberg forces us to attend to a crucial stylistic principle distinguishing paintings of superficially similar appearance. Constantly seeking out the axiomatic sense of things, Rosenberg's analysis is characterized by its altitude—penetration and breadth of meaning that tolerates only basic issues. Indeed, his deep evaluation of 20th century art, seen from a long cultural perspective, explains his ceaseless defense of modernism. Complexly motivated, Rosenberg's reason for addressing individuality, action and the avant-garde as he does, is not to perform a facile gesture of solidarity with Baudelaire's pronouncement that modern art and Romanticism are synonymous, or even always to engage in a deeply felt defense of the imagination he unflaggingly upholds. To be a worthy critic, Rosenberg rightly believes, is to tirelessly investigate the claim that what's current is significantly new, and to question whether the art that is newly arrived presents an important advance over modernism, challenging the revolutionary art of 1904-1914, not the slight rebuffs to it done the day before yesterday. That he interpreted the modernist adventure in a certain way does not diminish or falsify his sure sense of modernism's historical moment and scale.

Yet whether it was Baudelaire or Hegel that drove him, Harold Rosenberg's achievement as a critic was to inspire American artists to do their most esthetically ambitious work and then defend them fiercely and intelligently when they most needed encouragement. Both resented and respected for his initiative, Rosenberg is even considered too ambitious for the Abstract Expressionists, who, in the words of Tom Hess, are America's most important artists since Copley. Reviewing *The Tradition of the New for Dissent*, Paul Goodman wrote: "Harold made up their sense for them. He does not praise or explain the paintings, but he gives them a warrant to exist; and of course we have had the rich comedy of the painters disowning their namer as they hew to his line."³⁸ Skeptical if not of the art then of the artists' ability to think for themselves, Goodman should have noted

that, however strong a spokesman, Rosenberg demanded much less unanimity of style from the independent-minded European and American bohemians and exiles grappling with the possibilities of Surrealism than Greenberg managed to extract from his disciples. Moreover, the exchange was two-way, and as dominant as he was, Rosenberg constantly consulted with De Kooning, Guston and Saul Steinberg on artistic matters. Ultimately, the individuality of Abstract Expressionism proceeded less from an intellectual dependency on any one charismatic man than from an invigorating cultural unruliness that brought about a loose federation of ideas and attitudes.³⁹ Even as the heterogeneous band of French Surrealists exiled in New York promoted slippage between doctrine and the imaginative artistic result, they exerted a stronger influence on their American heirs than Rosenberg acting alone.⁴⁰ This cultural agitation by Europeans, the strong art that resulted, and then the rich, provocative, and at times significant painting and performance, culture and site art to which Abstract Expressionism later gave rise, belies the artistic impotence Goodman ascribes to the movement. Finally, the individual artists' successes and failures are their own, not Rosenberg's. The waves of bland, domesticated and otherwise "safe" Abstract Expressionism soon saturating the market prove that, as much as he may articulate sense, Rosenberg is not a guarantor of excellence. He did, however, in hammering at salient cultural issues and values keep the pressure on artists. He did not need Plekhanov to tell him artists must aim to deal courageously and imaginatively with major contemporary issues if they hope to do major work.

Vigilance is a function of habit. During World War II it became apparent that skywatchers performed less well as soon as they succumbed to the tedium the long hours of scanning entailed. In art this loss of vigilance is not catastrophic, but even so, having encouraged American artists to excel by competing with the best imaginative art of Europe, Rosenberg kept watch for signs of complacency. Once art has lost "freshness" and "uneasiness" with itself, he maintained, it is no longer art, however readily it may be collected and praised. It is worth noting that in his writings Rosenberg does not blame the consumer society or the capitalist system for the commercialization of art where the artists themselves are responsible. Artists delude themselves and the public by confusing superficial mimicking of energy with the genuine energy of metamorphosed work; Rosenberg could distinguish true from false vitality, and his distinction between a successful artist and a successful careerist, and his constant vigilance on this point, is typical of the unflinching moral stance Rosenberg thought imperative for the role of the critic. His way of meting out justice at the moment of Abstract Expressionism's decline combines flexibility with steadfast adherence to principles. In 1958, ten years after Rosenberg worried over the distinction between "is" and "seems," the magazine *It Is* appeared. Angst is dead, Albers announced to Rosenberg. Rosenberg had meanwhile en-

couraged artists to move on, to take initiative in the search for something else, and at some point remarked that Abstract Expressionism ended in 1952-53, the year, it should be noted, that the celebrated "The American Action Painters" appeared in print. More than most observers, Rosenberg knew when Abstract Expressionism had become fashionable. That is why, though not a fan of Rauschenberg's, he sincerely defers to him in calling *Factum I* and *Factum II* "brilliant." Even so, Rosenberg maintained, for Albers to construe crisis content as a manner or look guarded against perennial renewal, is to have missed the point of creativity altogether. The vigilance the artist must practice to ensure his uniqueness may be projected as a bohemian stance; but in Rosenberg's mind, it was not anti-social theatricality but moral rectitude that saves art from degenerating into fashion.

Harold Rosenberg was art criticism's valuable maverick, who cut across ideological lines and was worldly enough to remain unintimidated by the pressure to conform to either esthetic or political doctrine. To the role of a loner, he brought complex intellectual apparatus, and throughout his career, reserved the right to think complexly about rich and significant topics. For Rosenberg, art criticism entailed analytic thinking no less strong for accommodating a poetry of meaning—over-determined and open-ended—that was for him commensurate with the workings of creativity and the intellectual process needed to understand it. To practice imaginative interpretation of art's superabundant meaning allowed him to continually redefine a given topic, and to feel it even as he came to know and debate it. He did continually debate and test the art world, and construed art criticism as intellectually braver than public relations, more imaginative than journalism, more biased than history. He construed the critic to be in a privileged position, creative like the artist, with the wisdom of interpretation at his disposal, but also with judgmental, evaluative responsibilities. A critic partial to Abstract Expressionism, Rosenberg, in true parental fashion, combined abiding love with deep concern and tough standards, and was capable of lecturing and scolding artists and intellectuals of his own community. He did so with more appetite and precise thinking than he did when he dealt with art that followed and responded to his own. "To justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate, and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but from a point of view that opens up the widest horizon."⁴¹ Esthetically committed, endlessly investigatory within that commitment, Harold Rosenberg fit Baudelaire's professional requirements perfectly.

The value of Rosenberg for today's critics is his model of independent, imaginative and intellectual criticism at a time when not only our politics and our art, but our art criticism is conservative and self-serving. Whether politically Right or Left, cultural observers whose visual aptitude is often slight disavow abstraction for "a return to content"; but this is an unexamined "herd" response to art whose

issues elude them. Moreover, even informed, visually acute art critics seem incapable of the elementary esthetic distinction enabling them to realize that the return to representation today is by and large not return to content but a return to subject matter. A painting of studio nudes may be utterly formalist, or it may be pornographic—nudes, the figural equivalent of gothic expression, a kitsch imitation of the gothic, the subversion of the kitsch imitation, or a presumptive and fey misreading of the esthetics of subversion seen by some literary critics as continuing the pornographic tradition. Likewise, abstraction is rich with meanings that reinforce or deny the assertion of heroic personal brushwork or the impersonal material presence: black may signify tragedy or the fashion of tragedy. In any event, postmodern appropriation of realism is potentially worthy but often irresponsibly employed, and critics remain lax in dealing with this presumed sophistication. Partisans once again tend to accept this return to the figure at face value. All too often, critics stand by as the figure is craftily transformed from reactionary figurative clichés to a subversive political expose of reactionary values embedded in the clichés. What is needed is a debate on the uses and abuses of irony that the artists invoke, not a pseudo-intellectual smokescreen of irony's difficult and important rhetoric to justify complicity with reactionary art. Rosenberg should goad today's art critics into examining such unexamined issues. In "The Politics of Art," citing the Nazi's slick use of German Expressionist motifs, he discusses how styles in art are co-opted and become propaganda for political ends antithetical to their original intention.⁴² It is a sobering discussion for critics complacent about their esthetic or political immunity from cultural backlash, but it might as well be the starting point in a discussion about the criteria under which jejune parodies become persuasive cultural transgressions, and the role of the imagination in keeping the content, if not the subject matter, beyond the reach of easy manipulation. For his part, Rosenberg was ideologically opposed to making any concessions to popular culture, irredeemably simplistic in its grasp of things. With his complex cultural perspective, Rosenberg should shame critics cloistered in strongholds of art or politics into realizing that to claim a creative dialectical philosophy is presumptuous unless one practices it deeply and openly.

And one should practice it most strenuously on one's pet notions. The excellence that Rosenberg defended is the content between the individual artist and the conformist tendencies within himself. Critics, too, should be aware of a deadness or coziness within themselves when, in the name of professionalism or ideological purity, they exempt their own presuppositions from critical discourse. Rosenberg's theatrical mode of writing was the style of a criticism meant to refresh opinion, vocabulary, formulaic rehearsals, and similar indexes of false consciousness within his own professional milieu. Rosenberg was an exceptional critic because while he held very

strong views on art, his intellectual scruples and esthetic discernment would not allow him the prejudicial narrowness many critics, whether upholding Marx or Bell, confuse with thinking. If we were truly brave, we would invite historians and estheticians disciplined in these fields into the pages of our magazines to implement a genuine self-critical attitude we pretend to have but is largely absent from the dogmatic rehearsal of power, desire, or form that suffices for art criticism today. After all, rigid assent to advance ideas is not a sign of intellectual toughness but doctrinaire softness, and only by sustained internal debate may we experience the necessary self-criticism that leads to consciousness.

Footnotes

¹Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* (New York, Grove Press, 1961), p. 209.

²*Ibid.*, p. 28.

³Harold Rosenberg, "The Stages: A Geography of Action," *Possibilities*, 1 (Winter 1947/1948): 50.

⁴Although he distanced himself from them, Rosenberg remained indebted to I.A. Richards and the formalist literary theorists of the 1920s for supplying him with clear semantic categories, especially the distinction between instrumental language, which is denotative, and esthetic language, which is connotative, and uniquely distinguished by imagination. See, for instance, the symptomatic discussion of literature and "non-literature" in Rene Wellek, "The Nature of Language," *Theory of Literature* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World), 1956, pp. 20-28.

⁵James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

⁶Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *The Marxist Quarterly*, 1 (January-March, 1937): 77-98.

⁷Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds," *Discovering the Present* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 15-28.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹Dore Ashton, in conversation with the author. For Ashton, Rosenberg's motivation and major theme is individuality. See her "On Harold Rosenberg," *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (Summer 1980): 615-624.

¹⁰Charles Baudelaire, *Curiosities Esthetiques* (Paris, Crepet, Conard edition, 1923), p. 293.

¹¹Paul Valery, "Degas, Dance, Drawing," in *Degas, Manet, Morisot* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 50.

¹²Gilbert, p. 99.

¹³Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York, Scribner's, 1931), p. 21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the New York School," *Quadrum* 8 (1960): 29.

¹⁶William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 60.

¹⁷Rosenberg, *Poetry*, 47, (March 1936): 347.

¹⁸Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, p. 27.

¹⁹Paul Valery, *The Collected Works of Paul Valery* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1956-75), p. 100.

²⁰Richard Huelsenbeck, "En Avant Dada," *Possibilities*, 1 (Winter 1947/1948): 42.

²¹Rosenberg, "Criticism and its Premises," *Art on the Edge* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 1975, p. 136.

²²Rosenberg, "Movement in Art," *Art and Other Serious Matters* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

²³Also, "Aesthetic programs have replaced regional masterpieces as authority and inspiration. 'Every modern activity,' says Paul Valery, 'is dominated and governed by myths in the form of ideologies' (his italics)." Rosenberg, "Criticism and its Premises," p. 138.

²⁴"By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought....In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, annexed to a given concept, with which, in the free employment of the imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no definite concept can be found for it." Kant, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 190. Incapable as language may be of exhausting the meaning of art, a critic is in the "enviable" position, says Todorov explaining Kant's esthetic, of never running out of material to interpret.

²⁵Joseph Margolis, "The Logic of Interpretation," *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 116, 118.

²⁶Rosenberg, "The Mythic Act," *Artworks and Packages* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 1982, p. 63.

²⁷Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News*, 57 (October 1958): 56-57.

²⁸Prejudiced against structure, Rosenberg virtually ignores the organizational originality of Pollock's all-over canvases. Rather, with the intuition-expression of automatic writing in mind, he discusses the notion of expressivity. The origins of gesture as feeling, not physical action, come by way of the artistic legacy of Expressionism: "The scars of such a revolution in expression are, however, those blots and specks which as emissaries of the id resist the conscious will of the artist in both painting and music alike, which mar the surface and can as little be cleansed away by later conscious correction as the bloodstains in fairytales," T.W. Adorno, on Arnold Schoenberg's expressionist *Verklaerte Nacht*, quoted in Frederic Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 27.

²⁹Rosenberg, "Miro," *Art on the Edge*, p. 29.

³⁰Rosenberg, "Virtual Revolution," *The Tradition of the New*, pp. 50-57. Rosenberg's predisposition towards ambiguity does not foreclose on his using fruitful semiotic terms. His utilization of "sign" in defining action painting apparently derives from the language analysts, via Langer's notion of the presentational symbol. Art, as distinct from everyday, discursive language, cannot represent but only express, involved as it is in a "simultaneous, integral presentation" of meaning. Having written for *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Symposium*, and other literary magazines, Rosenberg might well have noted the discussion of linguistic formalism in their pages. For instance, it is likely he noted the publication of Philip Wheelwright's celebrated "The Semantics of Poetry," in *Kenyon*, 2 (Summer, 1940), discussing his specialized notion of the "plurisign": which is "semantically reflexive in the sense that it is part of what it means. That is to say, the plurisign, the poetic symbol, is not merely employed but enjoyed; its value is not entirely instrumental but largely aesthetic, intrinsic." Quoted in Wellek, *Theory of Literature*, p. 300.

³¹Rosenberg, "The Concept of Action Painting," p. 226, p. 228.

³²Wellek, p. 23.

³³Rosenberg, "Snow on the Aerials," *Poetry*, 54, No. 2 (May 1939): 77.

³⁴Rosenberg, "Hans Hofmann: The 'Life' Class," *The Anxious Object* (New York, New American Library, 1969), p. 120.

³⁵Goldwater, by contrast, believes the meaning of Abstract Expressionism originates in pure sensation and beauty. Goldwater, p. 30.

³⁶"The Great Work for me is knowing work as such—knowing the most general transformation, of which the works are only local applications, particular problems." Valery, *Moi*, p. 302.

³⁷Baudelaire, *Curiosities Esthetiques*, pp. 274, quoted in *Art in Paris 1845-1862* (Oxford, Phaidon Press, 1981), p. 156.

³⁸Paul Goodman, "Essays by Rosenberg," *Dissent*, 6 (Summer 1959): 306.

³⁹Goldwater, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁰Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 92.

⁴¹Baudelaire, quoted in *Art in Paris*, p. 44.

⁴²Rosenberg, "The Politics of Art," *The Anxious Object*, pp. 173-180.

The Fifth Mountain Lake Symposium: A Series of Four Papers

The following four papers were presented at the Fifth Mountain Lake Symposium "Revisionism/Criticism: Directions in Post-Modern and Architecture." Mountain Lake, Virginia, October 25-27, 1

Postmodern Critical Positions

Art History after Revisionism: Poverty and Hopes

Deadministering Art

**The Architecture of Allusion: Notes on the
Postmodern Sublime**

Postmodern Critical Positions

ALAN COLQUHOUN

The main purpose of cross-disciplinary discussions is not, it seems to me, to blur the distinctions between the different arts, but to be able to define, and if necessary, redefine, these distinctions with greater precision. It will be interesting to see what are the areas of agreement and disagreement between critics of architecture and critics of painting over a definition of postmodernism.

I suppose the most important and at the same time most obvious fact about the present condition of criticism—at least architectural criticism—is that we are no longer in the phase of “modernism,” the “classical avant-garde,” or whatever other phrase one might use to describe advanced critical opinion in the period roughly from 1910 to 1965.

In saying this I do not wish to imply that there was a monolithic critical position during this period—even in a single decade of this

period. All I want to say is that the opinions during the period, despite their mutual differences, had more in common with each other than any of them have with advanced critical opinion today. It is true that there exists a powerful and intelligent opinion that the expression "postmodern" is meaningless, and that our period is continuous with modernism. But the existence of a strong and coherent movement *against* this idea is enough to distinguish our period from that of, say, the 1950s.

But to say that we live in a postmodern critical atmosphere is perhaps not to say a great deal, because so-called postmodernism contains, if possible, even more variations than did modernism itself.

* * * *

I said that modernist criticism was far from monolithic. But, in fact, if one looks at the critical statements of the architectural avant-garde during the 1920s and 1930s, one will see that there was considerable agreement. Some leading ideas were reiterated with a certain monotony. The heterogeneity belongs more to the artistic practice of different architects than to differences of opinion about what they were trying to do.

One of the leading ideas in this modern architectural movement was the doctrine of functionalism. Functionalism, it is true, was employed differently by different schools—the Dutch, German, Russian and French—and by different architects. But not so differently as all that. Let us take the "organic" analogy as an example.

It is usual to stress the difference between those critics and architects who used the analogy of organic form and growth and those who used the analogy of the machine. Wright versus Le Corbusier; Expressionism versus the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and so on. Yet, as M.H. Abrams pointed out in his book on the literary Romantic movement, *The Mirror and the Lamp*¹, both the organic and the mechanical analogies, which had been part of critical currency from the end of the eighteenth century, depended on the fact that there was a certain slippery ambiguity in the terms. They tended to become each other.

There is no doubt that for Le Corbusier, for instance, the machine itself was a metaphor for nature. There is equally no doubt, on the opposite side, that what distinguished Wright or Hugo Haring from late nineteenth century *art nouveau* was precisely the possibility of abstract form deriving from industrialization.

So, if one were trying to sum up the classical avant-garde, one might say that it was concerned with the functional application of abstract form. But what exactly was meant by "function"? After all, function and utility had been an important critical concept since the late eighteenth century. How was modernism any different? I think one way of defining the difference is to say that modernism removed from the idea of function all traces of propriety or decorum—anything in fact to do with social custom—which had been an impor-

tant part of it before. It wished to create an aesthetic of architecture that was entirely motivated and natural, without any contamination from the arbitrary forms that survived from history.

This program was more or less the same in all the arts: Even the role of the machine was not restricted to architecture. Was it not an allegory to some extent operative in the other arts—some kind of analog for the organic?

The modernist project, then, gave a privileged position to reason, abstraction, science and technique; and it made two assumptions about modern society. The first was that the modern period must have its own unique cultural forms with as little contamination as possible from tradition (in other words no need for propriety or decorum) and the second was that society was like Locke's description of the mind: a *tabula rasa*. Human institutions and forms could be rationally created on the basis of known needs, and from scratch.

* * * *

It is this positivistic and scientific view of society and of culture, which was an integral part of modernism, at least in architecture, that postmodern criticism has made one of its main objects of attack. But it has done this in the name of at least two widely different models. I would like to call these—following Françoise Choay's useful terminology—the *Progressivist* and the *Culturalist* models.

For the Progressivists, postmodernism is a transfiguration of modernism. It carries over many ideas associated with modernism—primarily the notion of a radical break with history—but transforms them. For the Culturalists, on the contrary, postmodernism implies a complete disassociation from modernism, and a reaction against it in favor of tradition.

I will choose Jean-François Lyotard and his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* as representative of the first (the Progressivist) position.² In doing this I am aware that Lyotard is not writing about architecture, or even art in general, but about knowledge and science. But his interpretation of knowledge is so broad that his essay is essentially a critique of postmodern *culture*, and it is perfectly legitimate to extrapolate from his ideas to architecture so long as one remembers that such extrapolation can only be conjectural.

Lyotard's critique of modernism is made from a position that is as libertarian and antiestablishment as that of modernism itself. He is still concerned with the Enlightenment project of freedom. I think the title of his essay, with its encyclopedic connotations, shows this, but he no longer believes that this can be achieved by the means that Modernism and the Enlightenment shared: a concerted, rational "program" that would replace one set of controlling ideas with another (and therefore one set of controllers by another).

For him, the great meta narratives that legitimized eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visions of society are no longer open to us.

These meta narratives were two in number: the first was the cognitive idea of spiritual and intellectual freedom, which was German in origin; the second was the practical idea of political freedom, which was French in origin. These two master narratives are no longer available, Lyotard claims, because technology, particularly information and communication technology, has irreversibly taken over all the positions of power. It cannot be frontally attacked because it is, essentially, a success story, and it is judged purely on the basis of what it is good at: performance and efficiency and the maximizing of output for a given energy expenditure.

Although he does not say as much, Lyotard implies that modernism unknowingly aided this process through its conflation between science and technique and its belief in technique as a force for liberation.

Lyotard appears to agree largely with Luhmann and the German school of "Systemtheorie," to the extent of this diagnosis of postindustrial society, that in postindustrial society the *performativity of procedures* replaces the *normativity of laws*. But he disagrees with Luhmann's cynical and despairing interpretation. He believes that we can prevent the system "taking over." He doesn't think this can be done in the manner of modernism, by frontal assault, because this would have to be based on technical control and would thus merely reinforce the very system it intended to undermine.

But he believes that it can be done by action from within, because of certain built-in human factors that cannot be absorbed by the system. He makes use of a number of concepts to describe this power of resistance, this anti-body within postmodern, postindustrial society. I will mention three of these.

First: the idea of "narrative knowledge." Narrative knowledge distinguishes itself from scientific knowledge. It is prescriptive and not just descriptive. It is "knowing how" rather than "knowing." Knowing how to live, how to listen, how to make. It includes value judgments about justice, happiness and beauty. This kind of knowledge (which should perhaps be called "opinion") was the predominant kind of knowledge in the prescientific age. It is based on tradition and custom. It is still, according to Lyotard, essential, and indeed quite normal in everyday life.

Second: the idea of "language games." According to Lyotard there is a sort of incommensurability between different kinds of discourse, such that they cannot be reduced one to the other, or to a common underlying type. Here he lumps together Austin and Wittgenstein: the difference between denotative, performative and prescriptive utterances (Austin) and between questions, promises and narrations (Wittgenstein).

Third: paralogy in science. This simply means that science itself aims not at performative efficiency (as does technology) but at complexity, diversity, instability and contradiction. The overall results of science are paralogical: they cannot be subsumed under a single logic or squared with each other. Science is always producing new

statements. The only difference between this and narratives is that in science these statements are hypotheses that have to be tested according to certain agreed procedures.

Now, it is evident, I think, that Lyotard's propositions all tend toward the relative, the indeterminate and so on. Knowledge is not just scientific knowledge. There are many language games, not just language. Science leads to multiplicity, not to unity. In a sense this view continues the breakdown of traditional certainties even further than did modernism. No global "meaning" is necessary—just multiple meanings ("petits recits"), which are immanent in the very interstices of existence.

* * * *

What about the second type of postmodern criticism, the "culturist"? This is primarily concerned with validating specific traditional disciplines—such as architecture—rather than trying to provide an overall philosophy of art in postindustrial society.

As we know, architecture is marked by the claim that there are traditional values that are good independent of their place in history. But these traditional values are no longer the platonic abstractions with which modernism provided itself with a genealogy (rejecting the father and going back to a shadowy and remote great grandfather). They are nothing other than the devices and forms that the history of architecture has itself created. In other words we must build on the experience of the past in order to create beautiful architecture.

What varies in this kind of postmodern critical discourse is the extent to which the past is seen as providing absolute models, or a set of general principles that have to be transformed if they are to be applicable to the modern world. There is nothing in postmodern criticism that can decide this point, and we find widely different interpretations of the idea of returning to the past.

At one extreme we find someone like Robert Venturi, whose attitude toward tradition seems in some ways to be like that of Lyotard. Lyotard's emphasis on the indeterminate, the mixed, the pluralistic and the fragmentary seems to echo the thesis of Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* and much of his architecture.

At the other extreme we find someone like Leon Krier who treats the tradition of classicism as an absolute model and discipline, even if he takes as much from neoclassicism as from Roman architecture.

In between one finds a whole range of solution types in which classical forms are used fairly literally but are connected together in peculiar ways. Many architects are now using these traditional forms with a sense of parody (though why they should be parodied is not quite clear) or with a cartoon-like irreverence and an apparently unintentional vulgarity (but what is vulgarity?).

But different as they may be, they have one thing in common—they all reject the modernist prohibition against the imitation of

tradition. They all, to some extent, loosen the connection that historicist thought makes between artistic forms and the *Zeitgeist*. They all treat architecture as a discipline with its own internal tradition that is at least partially independent of the changes in technical, economic and social conditions. In other words, they “*de-historicize*” architecture.

Perhaps, in fact, the greatest difference between this type of postmodernism and the first type, is that the first type is fundamentally historicist. Instead of underemphasizing the relevance of historical change, as culturalist postmodernism does, Progressivist postmodernism emphasizes it—emphasizes the difference between our age and all those that preceded it. The historiographic model here seems to be that of Michel Foucault with his notion of different periods and their different “*epistomes*,” or of Thomas Kuhn with his motion of changing “*paradigms*.”

But I would like to draw your attention to a curious reversal that seems to take place in the respective positions of Progressivist and Culturalist postmoderns *vis-a-vis* history.

Lyotard would like to say that we are committed to a peculiar stage of cultural evolution that is different from anything that has gone before and that is intimately connected with the economic and technical developments of the postindustrial society. He stresses this in his rejection of what he calls legitimation by meta narrative, which has been a characteristic of all traditional societies.

But he also, as I have said, stresses the continued importance of narrative knowledge and the role of the *petit recit*. Is he not involving an archaic image here? He says that, paradoxically, narrative knowledge, with its dependence on customary and traditional kinds of wisdom and know-how, has the effect of obliterating the past. It does so because, in the process of being reenacted, the past *becomes* the present.

Translating this into architecture, one might imagine it to apply to the Middle Ages, where a craft tradition internalized and transformed what had (remotely) been received from antiquity. One might, perhaps, be able to apply it to the Renaissance, when a defunct tradition was revived and codified but soon became second nature.

It would, I think, be difficult to apply it to the end of the eighteenth century, when the past suddenly begins to seem very remote and is looked back to nostalgically. It would be more difficult to apply it to nineteenth century eclecticism and revivalism. It would be even more difficult still to apply it to the present, when almost any more or less literal reference to the architectural tradition looks like a quotation.

As far as the Culturalist postmodernists go, we see a reciprocal reversal. Here the claim is that architecture is to an important extent free of historical determination. In returning to the past we are returning to eternal aesthetic values. Yet it is precisely the use of past forms that draws our attention to our remoteness from the time in

which these forms were originally developed. We are reminded of the past as *the past*. The only way in which a building could make us feel that the values of architecture were eternal and not subject to historical change would be if its forms seemed modern to us, that is to say, “natural” to our way of life. But in this case we would have to be able to forget that these forms were specifically historical, as was no doubt possible in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. Or rather, historical time, once more, would have to become mythical time.

Finally, it might be interesting to compare the attitudes toward the “new” in Lyotard on the one hand, and Culturalist postmodernism on the other.

The “new” has been an ingredient of the avant-garde since the introduction of this term into critical discourse in the mid-nineteenth century. In truth, the argument goes back to the *querel* between the ancients and the moderns in the French academy in the seventeenth century. Then, of course, it arose in the field of science, but was applied by the Perrault brothers to architecture: “We can do better than the ancients.” But in the nineteenth-century avant-garde, the “new” took on prophetic connotations: art was thought of as anticipating cultural freedom, chiefly through its ability to perceive and project reality.

In Lyotard, the “new” is connected with science. In calling on the “players” in the “game” of scientific discourse to be ready to accept different “rules,” he says: “The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.” This belief in the new is even more extreme than it was in modernism, where statements were expected to be “true” and correspond to “reality” as well as be new. (What else is Functionalism but a kind of Realism?)

It is true that this view does not seem consistent with his conception of narrative knowledge, which is the knowledge of custom, and therefore, cannot count newness as its most important property. Nonetheless, there is a spirit in Lyotard that favors open-endedness and risk, which has much in common with the classical avant-garde and which is opposed to the conservative spirit of Culturalist postmodernism.

Few Culturalist postmodernists would deny that modern works are bound to be different from past works, if only because the artist or architect cannot be conscious of all the factors that are impinging on him. But they would nonetheless be likely to place the emphasis on what was *not* new in a design—on the element of tradition that was being transformed.

It would seem, then, that in their attitudes both to the way historical memory operates in the present and to the concept of invention, Progressivist and Culturalist postmodernism have diametrically opposite views, however much they may agree about other matters.

It has been my purpose in this paper to try to elucidate a few of these differences, and, in so doing, to show that Postmodernist criti-

cism is very far from being monolithic. In my opinion not enough attention has been given to the fact that the same term is often used to refer to opposite ideas.

Footnotes

¹M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford, 1953.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minnesota Press, 1984. The present essay is not a critical evaluation of Lyotard's position. It takes Lyotard as typical of a certain trend.

Art History after Revisionism: Poverty and Hopes

SERGE GIULBAUT

In general intellectuals are funny birds. They emigrate just like the feathered species, but they follow varied patterns according to their countries of origin. Lets take, if you don't mind, two countries I know pretty well—France and the United States.

In France, traditionally, the grand majority of the intelligentsia has always been against the government in power. Since the Second World War, when France was governed by the right, intellectuals were for the most part, on the left, in a radical and vocal way. Popularized by the press and television, we have seen a critique of bourgeois power, of capitalism and of liberalism come from people like Sartre, Barthes, Foucault and of course, from Communist intellectual groups, which until recently were a powerful force in the French intellectual spectrum.

After the Socialist/Communist coalition came to power under Francois Mitterand in 1981, the leftist intellectuals lost voice and

memory. Fatally disillusioned, they preferred to keep silent rather than criticize a party that one had wished to see in power but without really believing that its victory could actually happen, and probably also in the end without really wanting it to happen. The leftist intellectual disappeared despite the "call to order" and the cries of help from certain ministers who did not understand this renunciation when faced with signs of erosion in the socialist group.

On the contrary it was from the right, from the new right, that a critical vitality came, a new intellectual force identified with those who made up the "groupe de l'Horloge" and the "Nouveaux Philosophes."

Marxism, which for three generations of intellectuals had been the nodal point of French thinking was not in fashion anymore; it was even disdained. During the past few years, with the collapse of Communist support among the French electorate, to utilize Marxist concepts has been considered "gauche," passe, old hat and certainly not "moderne." In a sense, to be a Marxist, has become like going to a Parisian discotheque dressed in a hippie costume while everybody else dresses like Rudolph Valentino, with hair plastered down and dancing Tango to Tango. The Tango and anti-Marxism are the latest fads in Paris this fall.

The current fashion is to be disillusioned with everything, but especially with Marxism. Gone are the cultural analyses connecting art and politics. Once again, art is considered a product of the immaculate conception and far removed from the stain of politics and ideology.

In the United States, on the other hand, for a long time (contrary to France) the intelligentsia appears to have gone along with the dominant current in politics.

Under Roosevelt and Truman, a strong left revived literary and art criticism—James T. Farrell, Meyer Schapiro, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonal. Under Eisenhower and during the cold war, these same intellectuals moved away from Trotskyism to a more or less reactionary avant-gardism violently anti-communist and pro-Americanist, which facilitated, as it has been analyzed by Christopher Lash and Alan Theoharis, the implantation of the McCarthy hysteria.

Under Kennedy and Johnson, but of course also under the influence of the Vietnam War, we witnessed a large opposition, in particular coming from the new left, with the so-called "revisionist" historians, like William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko and Richard Freeland.

And now, here we are in the age of Reagan and are witnessing a revival of the right and the resurgence of the specter of a new cold war warmed up for immediate consumption. The art scene of course, with its positive pluralism, has not avoided this atmosphere. As Edward Said, one literary critic who actually sees some direct relationship between politics and the state of culture, has noted:

Literary theory, whether of the left or of the right, has turned its back on the social world. This can be considered I think, the triumph of the ethic of professionalism. But it is no accident that the emergence of so narrowly defined a philosophy of pure textuality and critical noninterference has coincided with the ascendancy of Reaganism, or for that matter with a new cold war.... In having given up the world entirely for the aporias and unthinkable paradoxes of a text, contemporary criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society.... A precious jargon has grown up, and its formidable complexities obscure the social realities that, strange though it may seem, encourage a scholarship of modes of excellence very far from daily life in the age of declining American Power.

Now we can see how, in the United States and France, despite very different governments, the cultural atmosphere has become strangely and desperately similar. And we could say the same thing about England or West Germany.

This transatlantic positive and subjugated culture, a culture made of surfaces, of simulation and simulacrum, does not leave much room, in its postmodern quality, for an oppositional critique, because today even the force of illusion which was operating in the late 1940s, for example, is not working. The illusion of cultural opposition that sustained much of modern cultural production has apparently entirely collapsed.

Something has to be said though about this postmodern moment of ours, which is accepted without too many questions by the majority of us. This hospitable, transparent, pluralistic postmodern period is in part the result of a truncated, inachieved and reductionist reading of the modernist project.¹ This project should of course be criticized in its excesses, but instead it has been wrongly reduced to Greenbergian formalism and hence so easily defeated. (This reduction of modernism into formalism has a fascinating history, in its political ramification, but too long to be discussed here.)

By insisting on the self-referential and authoritarian side of modernism, the enthusiastic postmodern has forgotten what was combative, resistant and negative in modernism, and, most of all, the reasons why such a project was so important for so long. As Thomas Crow has explained:

The success of modernism has been...the narration of its contingency, insufficiency, and lack of transcendence; but this narration only makes sense in and through the effort to reach closure and sufficiency, even if that effort is endlessly defeated. Without that, the late modernist or postmodernist work, whatever one chooses to call it, lapses into a complacent nihilism, passively celebrating the insufficiency and absence of autonomy which are the pervasive conditions of the everyday social nightmare.²

It is about the celebration of this quotidian nightmare that the fashionable French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has written several books during the last five years.³ The fact that Baudrillard has be-

come an editor of the art magazine *Artforum* shows the end of utopia and the celebration of desperation. Jean Baudrillard describes in detail the invasion and destruction of public and private spaces by the obscenity of our society of communication which now disintegrates the walls of separation which consumerist society has succeeded in building around each of us, and between us and culture. He says about this new type of society:

Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all become transparent and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication.... We live in the ecstasy of communication.⁴

This is a somber image because we are no longer even confronted with a wall against which we can bump, against which we have the possibility to fight, to push, to fume. It is this wall that Clement Greenberg described in his "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" article of 1939.⁵ He did so with a certain amount of optimism despite the grim situation then; because in the end, a crack could be found, a space into which one could penetrate, as described by Rosenberg and Motherwell in 1948 in the famous introduction to their new magazine *Possibilities*. In this text, they are reflecting on the gloomy prospects available to them during 1948, while the threat of a third world war was mounting and while the cultural industry was growing at an accelerating pace. Despite all this, some hope existed, some utopia. Some artists thought that even if a transformation of society was not possible, at least an oppositional stand was still needed and possible. This is what they said:

Naturally the deadly political situation exerts an enormous pressure.... Once the political choice has been made, art and literature ought of course to be given up. Whoever genuinely believes he knows how to save humanity from catastrophe has a job before him which is certainly not a part-time one. Political commitment in our times means logically—no art, no literature. A great many people, however, find it possible to hang around in the space between art and political action.⁶

The wall that was surrounding from all sides avant-garde modern artists, pushing them into silence, could at least, so they believed, be attacked and pierced.

But in 1984 we no longer have this chance, we are surrounded, soaked in a soothing warm mass of fluid waves, which lulls us, puts us to sleep, calms us and in the end fills us up through a radical symbiosis just like the famous "Blob" used to do in 1950s horror movies.

Despite all the grinding, Baudrillard himself seems to have been accommodated to this state of affairs. He has become a "Blob" too. He is recycled. He is also, after having been vampirized, part of the living dead and tells us that it is not that bad after all.

The old schizophrenic symbol of consumerist society, the alienated man, the one who was unstable in his exasperated restlessness, is now pacified in the pseudo-communion of the society of com-

munication. As Baudrillard says again: "He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence."⁷

How to bypass, if there is still time, this fascination that drags us along the spiral to the core of narcissism? Has the historian a role to play in the resistance; and what is the place of the art historian in this confused postmodernist saga where the flourishing explosion of the art market seems to create an implosion annihilating all sense, all real content?

What can be done when confronted with this massive loss of content resulting from the radical leveling of signification following the saturation of the networks of production?

What can be done when confronted with such a frightening, precise, cold and intelligent analysis like Baudrillard's?

Is there still some room somewhere for a cultural guerrilla, or should we join, with grins on our faces, the numerous spectators who answer in chorus to the questions put to them by the popular French singer Guy Beart: "Ou sommes nous?: Dans la merde. Ou allons nous?: Dans la merde."

Why does it seem to me that a revisionist art historian has a vital role to play in this apocalypse? Very simply because the art world, the artist, masterpieces have always been protected and sacred, thanks to their monopoly on image production. They have become taboo, surrounded by an aura tough to pierce. Art is situated—so it is believed—in a special place, divorced from any direct connection with the outside world. Despite the fact that it has objectively lost its power, art still functions symbolically in the same way. In fact, it may be the only sphere of the cultural realm that has avoided the loss of aura and has kept in the public sphere a religious and mystical potential. Nothing must tarnish or question the sacrosanct and pure production of art.

We see this even in the left itself. Just read the humanistic and whining criticism published in the *Guardian* in England or the *Nouvel Observateur* in France to see that, if the critique of ideology in literature or history is accepted and even encouraged, when it comes to art history, the left does not seem to be able to integrate it into those parameters. To do that would be like undermining our entire cultural tradition.

It is because of this wide acceptance of art's neutrality that a deconstruction of its role in modern society represents an urgent need.

The best tool for an art historian is in fact a large dose of suspicion and of irreverence, because art is not only there to represent but also to persuade. What has to be done is to forget about our illusions of culture. We must confront it coldly and ask it to tally up the bill, even if the process is a painful one due to our long and emotional relationship.

This could help us understand why we are today in the "thing" which Guy Beart keeps singing about.

The work of the art historian then, not only consists in the descrip-

tion of images, but in discussing them in their historical and social context, analyzing their function. And this is all the more important because we have given birth to a culture which upholds surfaces, appearances, gazes, showing off and mirroring. This is a culture in which the image is king, where it is so powerful that our princes themselves don't hesitate to base their political career on it, and to stay silent on the issues at stake. Brian Mulroney in Canada for example has been elected by a landslide, by selling his smiling and glossy but perfectly soundless image. Ronald Reagan is sold in the same way through a slick image campaign where the strategy of silence is the guarantee of success.

In this situation, if the art historian has anything to do with images produced by our culture, he has to discuss, to criticize the signification, the strategies implanted in the epoch. This becomes even an ethical necessity if not a moral one—in the way it was necessary to defend modern art when it was attacked by fascism during the 1940s.

It has of course become banal today to say that power is everywhere, that it penetrates even our corporeal attitudes, and even our language. Power is everywhere—but if we listen to the majority of art historians and their public, it is not in art itself. And this is so because art historians have always had a privileged place in the cultural chain. He/She has been on a leash for too long, led by the art market, the collector, corporations or political power, unable or unwilling to understand his/her role. So close is the relationship that the art historian still has an embarrassing mark around his neck, more visible perhaps than the famous umbilical cord of gold, connecting the artist to power and the bourgeoisie, which Clement Greenberg described so well.

At a time when literary criticism went through an exciting auto-analysis, producing a serious theoretical discussion about its goals and its tools of analysis (from New Criticism and Barthes in the 1950s to the new texts by Edward Said, Terry Eagleton and Frank Lentricchia) liberating, shaking a field of study always on the verge of academicism, Art History was superbly purring along in the moistness of salons and museums.

Art History did not produce a similar array of critical texts, of serious debates about the purpose of the profession, or of its tools of analysis. The fact that to this day the idealist art history of H.W. Janson, inhabited by good-hearted geniuses, is still extremely successful (by 1978 he had sold 2 million survey books)⁸ seems to indicate that the profession undisturbed by discussions in other fields has established unquestionable functioning parameters. The formalist line and the universal or transcendental explanation of works of art were the recognized state of art.

Trouble started in the late 1960s and 1970s when a new crop of graduate students, whose backgrounds had not given them the same reverence for high culture as their teachers possessed, started to criticize the elitism of "grand" taste. This, coupled with a growing dissatisfaction with the modernist paradigm, opened up the field to

questions which the old tools could not really handle. The dismantling of the modernist paradigm by the ascendancy of marginal groups like performance artists, video and chicano art, women's group, as well as the irruption of marginal discourses like popular art, T.V., comics as full fledged and accepted art form, split open the modernist theory. Modernism then could no longer recycle or use popular form in its critical language, as this new independence and success propelled those forms onto the dominant art scene.

This liberating moment, during which no form of art production wanted to be oppressed, gave way to a new form of oppression; an eclecticism which could not prevent premodern conservative and reactionary forces from being reestablished as valid phenomena.

Under the pressure of this postmodernism which was finally able to break loose from modernist chains, new fields of study were created, artists were rediscovered, and the other face of the history of art, the one which had been hidden by the exclusivity of modernist formalism, could then be investigated. But those who were clearing these new fields did not revise their tools of analysis. In the final analysis, the same things came to be said about Byron Browne or Francois Bonhomme as had been said about Eugene Delacroix or Mark Rothko. Suddenly, no differences existed between a Courbet, a Jules Breton or an Antigna. What those revisions did was to enlarge the ranks of the elect who were being sent to the Pantheon of art history. The rediscovered artists, new movements, denigrated during modernism, were now allowed to share power with the old traditional heroes. Unfortunately what was again evacuated was the quality and origin of this power. What was deflected were the reasons for the production of such an art in the first place, the reasons for its success or failure.

All this was, in other words, somewhat like a Palace revolution which, despite its apparent vitality, could not hide its theoretical poverty. This was painfully visible in two major revisionist exhibitions, *The Realist Tradition* organized by the Cleveland museum in 1980, and *Realism and Realities*, held at Rutgers University in 1982. Both exhibitions gave us something else to see, pictures produced alongside the major movement of modern art history; but they did not enlighten us because they did not wish to discuss the major ideological differences which were at stake between say a Courbet and a Ribot, or between a Philip Evergood and a Jackson Pollock. The losers of the history books were simply reinstated onto the same page with the winners.

This general reevaluation was discussed in a special issue of the *Art Journal*, the organ of the College Art Association (CAA) under the title "Modernism, Post-modernism and Revisionism" in the fall of 1980. Here Kirk Varnedoe described the problem concisely but he could not give any precise direction that the field should take. Instead he could only pinpoint the malaise generated by the introduction of the new material. "We have the ambition to deal with a lot more painting and a more complex view of history, but we have not

yet worked out a way in which to deal integrally with old values and new freedom." Nowhere in the issue can we find a criticism of revisionism. No discussion of the finality of art history itself.

The failure of revisionism to have transformed the field in any major way results from the fact, as I have already mentioned, that its questioning of the field of study was not based on a solid theoretical ground. This non-critical revisionism was nevertheless part of a growing dissatisfaction within the field of art history. It was understood by younger scholars that the formalist and traditional ways of writing art history left, in their dogmatism, large areas unexplored. What was left unanswered was the reason for the ascendancy of one type of art over another at a particular historical moment. A change which formalism could only account for through the ideology of progress in forms.

That is why the famous phrase by Walter Benjamin—"There is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism"—has become so important for some of the critical revisionists who are trying to use it as a key to open truly new areas of research. Several things are indicated. First, that when confronted with a dominant cultural production, there is a strong chance that there exists another hidden side to the story, a side which resists superficial investigation, and that there are specific reasons for the ascendancy of one over the other. In other words, that ascendancy, that victory, came with a price-tag, the oppression, sometimes even the destruction of another complex cultural life. All this becomes the material of the critical revisionist historian. What we need in fact is a real Cubist work which puts all this in a new light in order to spread, to unfold the object of study under our eyes, without at the same time detaching it from the other components of the cultural tissue under scrutiny. A complex flattening which gives volume.

Of course it is important to rediscover the forgotten artifacts of modern history, but it might be even more important to study the function and signification of major monuments protected by years of positive stories. Masterpieces like Chartres, Rembrandt, Abstract Expressionism, or Modern Architecture are all auratic monuments which despite their teflon coating cannot take the Walter Benjamin acid text without opening up new important levels of signification.⁹

This re-reading of privileged moments of our culture has already started in the last 10 years. Two important articles, one by Kurt Forster on "Critical history of art or transformation of values?" in the 1972 issue of *New Literary History* and T.J. Clark's "The Conditions of Artistic Creation" in *TLS* (May 24, 1974), gave a vital impetus to those who were looking for another way to write art history. What this type of revisionism incorporates is the recognition that if no reading is innocent as has been demonstrated by literary criticism, no production is either. This recognition forces us to approach the material with a certain dose of suspicion, of doubt, in order to discover the sense which is at work consciously or unconsciously inside works of art, artists and critical texts.

This revisionism moves from description to explanation. Why such a work of art has been produced becomes a central question with all its complexities and difficulties. The interrogation investigates the reasons for the production of a work of art (not discarding the individual input, of course), and for its initial success or failure. All this should be based on a thorough knowledge of the history of the appropriate moment and of its material bases; but, as has been noted by the medieval historian Georges Duby, all these mental representations, these ideologies, have their proper existence and do not always modify themselves in an exact synchronism with the evolution of the economic and social structures. We then have to observe closely the dissonances, discordances, confrontations and tensions which occur due to the different speed with which the different cultural layers and the larger economic and social body move.

The integration of the Marxist theory constitutes one important ingredient of the critical revisionism—especially in its interest in a materialist history of art and its utilization of the concept of ideology, but a Marxism cleaned of those automatisms and idealisms which has in the past often blocked its art historical discourse.

The Marxist concept of ideology, itself, of course, a hotly debated issue—this construction of a world view based on parts of reality and built by a group to rationalize its interest—is important. But what is more important is the differentiation between the different sorts of ideologies at work in a given moment. Ideologies find themselves in permanent conflict, some become dominant, corresponding to the group which is economically superior at a specific moment, others share the ideological space occupied by class factions and fractions which aspire to economic and symbolic power. The dominant ideology is not monolithic, but enters into relations and transactions with the old defeated ideologies, and with those that start to emerge and attempt to impose their views. These notions are important if we want to understand the reasons why apparently sudden shifts occur in art production, likewise, ruptures in the disposition of symbolical systems. The study of these fragmentations and this bargaining can inform the manner in which art utilizes and reworks ideology.

Critical revisionists agree today that art has a certain autonomy vis-a-vis history and the economy, but this does not mean that there is in any work of art something which escapes understanding, something ineffable or transcending history. Autonomy means that art has its own history, that it enters into a dialogue through the producer with the formal possibilities that artists have at their disposal and with particularities proper to each individual in his/her specific historical situation.

In the last few years this type of revisionism has produced a series of works which invite a total re-thinking of the art history of entire periods. Since the appearance of T.J. Clark's two major books on Courbet and the third French Republic, Thomas Crow has written a history of the beginning of art criticism in XVIII century France. He restores the complexities, as well as the incoherencies and contradic-

tions which several new art books on the period forgot to include. David Solkin has given new meaning to the pictures of the British landscape painter Richard Wilson, while in her work on photography Molly Nesbitt has given a new seriousness to the study of early mechanical reproduction. Hollis Clayson, working from a careful understanding of XIX century French prostitution, has transformed the way we view avant-garde and pompiere pictures alike.

Like them, my interest in Abstract Expressionism and in the creation of an avant-garde in New York, started, with an initial enthusiasm for the art, together with a great weariness after having read the literature on the subject. These writings supplied variations on formalist issues which revealed nothing about the difficult gestation of a style, nor anything of the reasons for certain aesthetic choices made by artists in a very dangerous and depressing moment of our history.

Unlike the formalists overcrowding the field, I paid serious attention to what the artists had said and tried to relate their writings to the historical events happening outside their studios. Some clear correlations arose.

The artists were not dripping machines, but individuals trying to express through art forms, a critique or an understanding of everyday life, of their political position, their hopes and despair, their deceptions, dreams and resistance to a world which seemed to push them into the atomic and consumerist apocalypse; two sites where expression, real communication were impossible. To take an artist seriously, for a critical revisionist, is not to look at him/her like a relic or an icon, but to reconstitute the material he/she had at his/her disposal as well as to present the range of available possibilities and to explain the significance of these choices at a particular time.

It is of course understood that it is impossible to recreate a historical moment in all its details. The historian of contemporary art is, one could say, almost as empty-handed (despite the wide range of material) as the medieval historian when dealing with the reconstruction of the past. But at least questions posed by some revisionists avoid many of the traps into which others fall when they write the history of events, without attending to the history of mentalities and materialities of ideologies, without posing the problem of art reception, of its ideological work, and the social battleground that any work always embodies.

This revision of history is perhaps no more truthful than the other type, but at least it is less false.

The attack formulated against this type of revisionism is always the same: that it is an ideological reading, as if those who make this critique don't make it in the name of their own ideology. Barthes answered them when he said:

The major sin in critique is not ideology, but the silence which covers it. This guilty silence has a name: It is Good conscience, or if one prefers "mauvaise foi"—Bad Faith, double dealing.

The situation of revisionism is of course difficult, even precarious, because it is eccentric and isolated, but by the same token, it takes strength out of this situation. Revisionism is self critical. There is a certain insecurity which crosses it, not in relation to its object of study or technique of investigation (in this case revisionists tend to be arrogant), but in regard to the effectiveness of its analysis, of its impact, knowing the danger of reification that is always present.

The critical revisionist always functions on the edge of the abyss, the one which makes one want to renounce any action at all, the one which dries up the throat and blocks the voice.

If, as the revisionist believes, pure truth in history is elusive, he/she must react like Adorno once did. He said: "In face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces becomes a corrective."¹⁰

This does not seem much, but it is, at this time, when the large majority of art historians still act like the famous Balzac heroes Bouvard and Pecuchet, seated on the top of an immense mountain of archives and papers, busy copying, classifying mechanically. To interpret, to explain in this new age of conformity is to be closer to real life. To make things tangible, to make the image talk and be visible, to de-neutralize it, is to fight what culture, according to Edward Said, does best:

It is my conviction that culture works very effectively to make invisible and even "impossible" the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other. The cult of expertise and professionalism, for example, has so restricted our scope of vision that a positive—as opposed to an implicit or passive—doctrine of non-interference among fields has set in.¹¹

In the midst of our pessimistic era, Jean Baudrillard finds, despite himself, a glimmer of hope in the middle of our everyday obscenity caught in its systematized, informatized transparent and radical liberation. It becomes in this sea of symbol a metaphor for the hope discovered in critical art history. At the end of his article on the obscenity and inauthenticity of our culture, he tells the following: In the midst of a sexual orgy, a man whispers into a woman's ear: "What are you doing after the orgy?"

Notes

¹Lately, two books have focused on this issue: Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, 1983. In particular Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An incomplete project"; and Serge Guilbaut, David Solkin, Benjamin Buchloh (eds.), *Modernism and Modernity*, Halifax, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983.

²Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture" in *Modernism and Modernity*, p. 257.

³Jean Baudrillard. See for example, *Simulacres et Simulation*, Galilee, Paris, 1981; *De la Seduction*, Denoel/Gonthier, Paris, 1977; *A l'ombre des Majorites silencieuses: La fin du Social*, Denoel/Gonthier, Paris 1982.

- ⁴Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 130.
- ⁵Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939, p. 34-49.
- ⁶Harold Rosenberg, Robert Motherwell in *Possibilities*, No. 1, Winter 1947/48, p. 1.
- ⁷Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," p. 133.
- ⁸Cited in Tom Cummins, Deborah Weiner and Joan Weinstein: "Le role de l'Historien Marxiste dans une Societe Capitaliste," *Historie et Critique des Arts*, No. 9-10, 1979, p. 93.
- ⁹In fact, the critical study of major cultural monuments brings more—because they are highly mythicized—than the study of new types of cultural artifacts. It could be more interesting and telling, for example, to study the structure and functioning of the CIA than the CIA.
- ¹⁰Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, p. 44, cited in Martin Jay: *Adorno*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 115.
- ¹¹Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 136.

Deadministering Art

DONALD KUSPIT

Like Christ in the temple with the moneylenders of art, or like Hercules cleaning the Augean stables of art criticism itself, I have always tried to write in the spirit of T.W. Adorno's strictures "Against administered art."¹ My images may suffer from hyperbole, but to be a critic is to suffer the scorn of both artist and society. Like Tristan and Iseult, they are so eager to fall into one another's arms, they cannot suffer the critical sword between them. Adorno writes: "As the organization of culture expands, the desire to assign art its place in society, theoretically as well as practically, becomes more intense." For Adorno, the wish "to control art...to enforce the primacy of the administered world over art," is countered by art's wish "to be left alone," correlate with its ability to act "against total socialization." By reason of "the dialectic between aesthetic quality and social function" innate to authentic art, it is able to withstand the culture industry's insistence upon its consumability (which is what standard art

historical education unconsciously emphasizes) and the ideological use to which it is put as an instrument of society's self-validation.

The culture industry has the important task of mediating society's meaning to itself—justifying it to itself, making it narcissistically content. Society's sense of its own profound value—its sense of the "justice" or absolute rightness of its existence—hinges upon the success with which the culture industry superficializes such dialectically integrated reflections as art by dismembering them into reified essences. This makes them universally available as tokens of society's "advance." (Art flashily crystallizes, in mock redemption—the way a crystal ball, by reason of its concentrated space, appears to bring under control the future it predicts or the way an elegant watch gives the illusion of total command of time—the complex contradictions the society may keep from itself through its delusions of grandeur.) With a kind of dubious Solomon's wisdom, the culture industry bifurcates art into consumable and creative parts, that is, into pure matter and pure spirit (equally rapidly digestible, equally likable goods). In other words, the culture industry treats art with absolute vulgarity and absolute puritanism—astonishingly explicit managerial appropriation and spontaneously cynical delicacy—simultaneously. The culture industry takes the already dialectically elevated host of art and elevates it still higher, into the seventh heaven of significance that comes with the unconditional popularity of complete consumability, in which not a trace is left for thought. Or what is left for thought has the status of a trophy, affording a necrophiliac delight. Consumed openeyed in a standard operation of recognition, art becomes socially successful; the culture industry apotheosizes art by cannibalizing it. Society is enriched by the experience, and thinks itself blessed with taste. The bones of art become relics that thinkers ponder, wondering whether they can, like the bones Ezekial saw, live again through divine intervention.

I am not as hopeful as Adorno about art's power of recuperation from the culture industry—of which criticism, in one of its lesser incarnations, is a not insignificant part. I do not believe art even speculates about resisting it; art's will to resist, its general power of opposition, which is associated with its avant-garde character and authenticity (in whatever historical period), has been drained from it by society, which has appropriated that power and with it art's authenticity and adventurousness. It is society that now, however ironically, has the possibility of genuine authenticity and vanguard risk, which is why art is far from finding its rape by the culture industry a violation of its integrity, for that integrity no longer really exists, or exists only coyly. (It does not even exist as an ironical metaphysical substratum, hidden from view except to the initiates—to connoisseurs and other cognoscenti). Avant-garde art's power of opposition exists only as a token power—exists paradoxically and perversely as its own opposite: as a token of society's power to oppose art by administering it, of which the act of appropriation may be the least aspect, and even look like a naive gesture of possessive love.

The difference between Adorno and myself may be the difference between a German philosopher who grew up within reach of the heyday of the European development of avant-garde art and an American art critic who, however philosophical, matured during the decadence of American avant-garde art and witnessed at first hand its submission to the pressure of the market, to the extent that it began to take its identity from the market, “grew” only in response to the market. The market became avant-garde, as art was no longer able to. In my case, philosophy afforded no consolation and little insulation from this experience. Even less than art itself, philosophy was unable to shield me from reality, at least for longer than it took to dispel the momentary illusion that it did. Like art and the ostrich hole, philosophy for me was only a safe place for pride. I could not accept the contrary claim of philosophical aesthetes as different as Oscar Wilde and T.S. Eliot that art was able to mediate as direct an experience of eternity—detachment—as was possible here on earth, creating a space for philosophical meditation. In Adorno’s case, there was greater belief in philosophy and art (if not belief in their eternally detached character), undoubtedly because he had to believe there was some defense—and his use of them as points of view from which to aggressively analyze society is a kind of defense—against a fascist society. He had experienced one at first hand; Nazi Germany was his implicit model for the totally administered society, with its bogus unity based on forced interdependence.

Whatever the social and historical differences between us, it seems to me generally the case today that art wants to copulate passionately with the culture industry, wants the success of being appropriated (as if that at last gave it the consensus to believe in itself—was the right mirror, correctly compensating for its flaws, to confirm its narcissism, to make it feel sufficient unto itself). Adorno himself once thought as much, recognizing the effect of the social investment in art as a commodity on the character of art itself—on its autonomy, its sense of adequacy:

With the cheapness of mass-produced luxury goods and its complement, the universal swindle, a change in the character of the art commodity itself is coming about. What is new is not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one; that art renounces its autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty.²

For me, then, the problem of criticism is now to make it function to de-administer art. How can it reappropriate the power of opposition and resistance from society, and thus itself become avant-garde and authentic (as art can no longer be and as society can only playfully—deceitfully—be)? What critical techniques can it use to combat administrative techniques that reduce art to a cultural asset and adornment of polite society (but also make it indiscriminately available to the masses as a proof of their authenticity) as well as to an investment property? What techniques can criticism use to combat art itself, for art welcomes this reduction as its salvation from the

taboo of social isolation (not to speak of inherent aloneness—the taboo of being autonomous), even from the threat of extinction by censorship through radical neglect or outright suppression?

The real problem of art criticism today is to reconstitute the critical spirit as such. Then that spirit can be used to reconstruct authenticity in art—to reconceive art in terms of its deepest intentions, forgotten even by art itself. The depth of art's transformative intention toward the world has become obscured—to the extent that art seems to have lost all subliminal force—by its commodity identity and its broad culture industry use as a ratification of the status quo of social appearances as well as principles, that is, its use as another administrative technique of control. (Once controlled, art controls in turn, whether as a harmless escapist outlet for disturbingly real sensations—temporary exception to the rule of no exit that proves it—or as a more charming way to insist upon it, to rule.)

Criticism's job is to save art from itself by going against the grain of conventional categorizations of it, perversely setting it in a defiantly deviant context. (An example of what I mean is available in my article on "Comic Modern," where, following the lead of certain modern artists, I argue that modern art as a whole is essentially comic in effect.) But this is done in the name of revealing the dialectical intention that makes it truly radical in its relationship to social reality and experience in general. Stripping art down to its subtly irreverent intention by grossly irreverent treatment of its conventional administrative conceptualizations—indifferently dismissing them or replacing them, seemingly arbitrarily, with their opposites, yet showing how these opposites grow directly from the art itself—uncovers the meaning of its peculiar kind of dialectical integration of contradictory materials. (An example of what I mean is available in my article on "The Status of Style," where I attempted to show how modern art's aim at the impossible ideal of stylelessness is not only essential to its self-respect but responsible for its restless development and abandonment of styles, and its constant invention and reinvention of the meaning of style.)

We can begin to approach this inner dialectical meaning through three quotations from the preface to Charles Baudelaire's "Salon of 1846," addressed "To the bourgeois." The bourgeois has power, but he needs "poetry." Baudelaire attempts to tell the bourgeois what poetry and beauty are, and what they can do for his life. Baudelaire writes:

Art is an infinitely precious good, a draught both refreshing and cheering which restores the stomach and the mind to the natural equilibrium of the ideal.

And yet it is just that if two thirds of your time are devoted to knowledge, then the remaining third should be occupied by *feeling*—and it is by feeling alone that art is to be understood; and it is in this way that the equilibrium of your soul's forces will be established.

If you recover the amount of enjoyment which is needed to establish the equilibrium of all parts of your being, then you are happy, satisfied and well-disposed, as society will be satisfied, happy and well-disposed when it has found its own general and absolute equilibrium³

Art is conveniently understood as an escape from reality. Adorno notes that “any deviation from the reality principle is immediately branded as an escape,” and responds: “The experience of reality is such that it provides all kinds of legitimate grounds for wanting to escape.”⁴ For him, art at its best attempts “to keep a hold on the negativity of the real and to enter into a definite relation to it.”⁵ In other words, only when reality is “insane,” is it truly sane to make art—to dialectically engage the negativity or insanity of real experience. Such engagement is also rebellion, a struggle against reality which uncovers and plunges into the full depth of its insane negativity—in order to expose it, to assimilate it, but also to come up with something positive, namely, the autonomy that can resist it. The fiction of autonomy motivates art—is the mainspring of its struggle with and rebellion against reality. Autonomy is the shape rebellion takes—but autonomy remains a myth, an ideal statement of a seemingly impossible goal, receding the closer one comes to it, and all the more consequential for that. The autonomy of art is always limited and tenuous, more of a siren song than a hymn of triumph and gratitude—more of an unreality, an illusion, than a positive reality: for reality is insane, negative.

Yet it is just this illusion—this illusion of equilibrium, as Baudelaire calls it, involving the return of repressed feeling, of neglected “intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite” (all that is “romantic”)⁶—that is art’s gift. Adorno insists that art is simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous, that “art’s essence is twofold: on the one hand, it dissociates itself from empirical reality and from the functional complex that is society and on the other, it belongs to that reality and to that social complex.”⁷ But he never sufficiently explicates esthetic autonomy—he seems perpetually unhappy with the terms customarily used to conceive it—never even acknowledges its nature decisively, although he broadly hints at it, as when he asserts “It is as if art works were reenacting the process through which the subject comes painfully into being.”⁸ It may be that his dialectical method, which involves thinking in terms of the mutual qualification of opposites and thus refuses to allow any member of the pair dominance or exclusivity, precludes allowing esthetic autonomy any self- or unequivocal identity. Any straightforward definition would be simplistic, a betrayal and falsification of the complexity of art. Yet Adorno is also afraid of the ideality of autonomy, which seems to make it self-negating.

But understood through Baudelaire’s conception of esthetic autonomy as the abstract form of equilibrium, art’s inner intention, its ulterior motive, as it were, becomes clear. The “natural equilibrium

of the ideal" is not so much another forced integration of reified life fragments as a spontaneous re-emergence within the revived (and revived) totality of the self of the infinite horizon of feeling for life that survived its reductive/repressive integration into the pursuit of power and knowledge, that is, that survived the attempt to dominate it—a part of life making the feeling for the whole of it submissive. Art is reparative, its intention is to restore psychic health, and its proposal—anticipation—of autonomy is not an idealistic, self-defeating illusion, but a means of articulating just what health means: the ability, through a determined however incomplete and flawed integration of *all* the powers in the self, to withstand negative reality, insane experience. The very fact of the resurrection through art of the power of feeling that was negated—declared insane—by reality and truly *real* experience, that of power and knowledge, already shows the power—healing effect—of the myth of esthetic autonomy. Adorno writes that "To experience the truth or untruth of art is more than a subjective 'lived experience': it signals the breaking-through of objectivity into subjective consciousness."⁹ The objectivity that breaks through under the auspices of esthetic autonomy that is of the real possibility of the autonomous self—the truth of the self that can resist and oppose the negativity of experience with its own "insane" reality. Such a self seems "insane" because from the point of view of normally insane experience it seems impossible, abnormal, hopelessly ideal and illusory.

But today only critical autonomy is really possible, not artistic autonomy, which has been co-opted as a sign of the presupposed material and spiritual ideality of society. In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche writes: "The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia's fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him. Then, in this supreme jeopardy of the will, art that sorceress expert in healing, approaches him; only she can turn his fit of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live." But art can no longer do this; most of it is nauseating, because it bespeaks the administered society—eagerly presents itself as commodity and the token of a code—with its nihilistic human consequences, summarized for Baudelaire in the notion of its attempted extermination of feeling, with the resulting loss of equilibrium, of integrated selfhood. Adorno at one point speaks of art as "a fragile balance, attained now and then, quite similar to the psychological equilibrium between id and ego."¹⁰ It is when such a balance, such a "dynamic equilibrium" (Mondrian) is attained, that art seems autonomous, and transmits to the self the ideal of autonomy in the form of a feeling for integration. This ideal gives it the determination to survive, to preserve itself in the face of the disintegrative negativity of reality, to persist in its complex project of integrity: to withstand the insane world, by whatever means are necessary. "Without a heterogenous moment," Adorno writes, "art cannot achieve autonomy."¹¹ This heterogenous moment is not simply the

acknowledgement of the negativity of reality, but the assimilation of it, in a kind of mithridatism: effective autonomy implies dynamically integrated selfhood, a self sustained by that sense of wholeness that comes from having all its resources at its command, from being simultaneously “instinctive” and “egoistic.”

Today criticism is art’s heterogenous moment, lending it the autonomy that comes of critical dissociation from reality—critical intervention in the social functioning of art. Criticism creates storms which interfere with art’s desire for smooth sailing in well-administered waters, in the shallow lakes of cultural understanding and communal property. Above all, what criticism does is romanticize art, romanticization being the way, as Novalis says, to “original meaning. Romanticizing means nothing but raising to a higher level of quality.... In giving a noble meaning to the vulgar, a mysterious appearance to the commonplace, the dignity of the unknown to the known, the semblance of infinity to the finite, I romanticize it.”¹² And in so romanticizing it the critic makes it a fictional “second self,” re-invents it as “a form that integrates” selfhood so that it functions with new stamina and power of confrontation in the face of the negativity of real experience. The autonomy art creates may have all along been escapist—which is why it welcomes its cultural/capitalist administration (its totalization as cultural capital)—rather than critical. But the autonomy criticism gives art through criticism’s own struggle for autonomy gives art a sublime integration that is the analogue for the healthy ego, all too rarely encountered in the real world, because of the negativity of experience.

It is criticism, then, that does the real “work” of art, and that is responsible for the creation of successful artworks, that is, objects that seem to possess the integrity of authentic selfhood, that radiate egostrength once feared lost forever—that seem the very model of secured selfhood. (But not the formalist criticism that misinterprets esthetic integration as a matter of syntactic subtlety with “formal facts,” a neutralization, reduction, and total materialization of the process of esthetic integration that is equivalent to the culture industry’s administration of art as cultural capital, with a sharply reduced sense of the power and meaning of both culture and capital. Indeed, formalism is the preferred mode of esthetic administration in the totally administered society.) If the work of art is not critically recreated as the second self, then it becomes the “happy prison” the formalists think it is, that is, “a place of safety, a retreat from the unpredictable and traumatic causality of civilization, and a withdrawal from apparently hopeless relationships into onanistic solitude, aloof self-sufficiency, and omnipotent self-possession”—into an infantilistic condition.¹⁴ The artwork as happy prison—what false, positivistic (and falsely positive) criticism turns it into—also signifies “potential revolt and escape,” as indeed it did for the late 19th-early 20th century esthete who endorsed it for its power of transcendence. What the true critic does—the critic who recognizes the psychosocial implications of esthetic integration—is return “the abstract idea

of aesthetic autonomy," as it is developed by formalists and art administrators of all kinds—formalist art administrators—to its "likely origin" in "tragedy,"¹⁵ that is, in the tragic sense of self Heinz Kohut speaks of.¹⁶

This self, the self that has not been empathized with, finds succor in the happy prison of the artwork, but is made to realize, by criticism which explores the psychosocial effects of art, that the consoling artwork is in fact a distorted mirror image of the integrated self it would like to be—the untragic self that is not the victim of an indifferent reality, a social reality that couldn't care less whether the self lives or dies, or has any particular reason for doing one or the other. (The feeling of the life-world's nihilistic indifference is a general effect of experience in the totally administered society.) That is, the fabulously integrated artwork, by virtue of the mythical absoluteness of its integrity understandable as an abstract analogue of the ideally integrated self—the self equal to the negativity of reality—is a perversely narcissistic reflection of the tragic self, in a sense, the image with which it empathizes with or comforts itself. The perversely ideal self—the autonomous self—represented by the subtly, complexly integrated artwork, has a tragically narcissistic function; it is rooted in a tragic experience of social reality as nihilistically indifferent. Narcissism to overcome nihilism—that is the formula of the best art. This is why Baudelaire insists that the critic be "partial, passionate and political"—have "temperament" and feeling, express "love or hate"—rather than, using "the pretext of explaining everything" about the artwork, practice "a cold, mathematical [formalist] criticism."¹⁷ For critical recognition of the profound meaning of the special integration of the artwork comes out of the critic's narcissistic feeling for the artwork, the critic's need to cure his own tragic sense of life, to heal his own sense of the world's nihilation of him through its indifference. At times this is converted into indifference to the artwork, on the grounds of its naivete and absurdity ("unreality") in daring to attempt to create and project absolute integrity (rather than accept the flawed, relative integration of selves and artworks in this imperfect world.) This equally essential indifference must also be overcome; otherwise the critic leaves the artwork in the tragic limbo of its own dumb material and innocently social identity, that is, its well-administered role as superior object and sign of superior subjectivity. This also shows it to have an uncompromised integrity, but one without autonomy.

My attempt to debunk abstract art—to depose it from its throne of self-importance—in my article on "Authoritarian Abstraction" goes hand in hand with my attempt, in an article on Van Gogh, to understand his art in terms of his problematic selfhood, all the more tragic by reason of his implicit recognition that he could not have a more than momentary, unsteady integrity until society did. He would then reflect its cohesion, and it would seem to mirror him warmly, positively. This brings us back to Baudelaire's comparison of the bourgeois' search for "the equilibrium of all parts of [his] being" with

society's attempt to find "its own general and absolute equilibrium." Both efforts are implicitly hopeless; for all the encouragement Baudelaire gives the bourgeois, Baudelaire is not so certain that he will find his happiness in art, trust the feeling it awakens in him. Nor is he convinced that society will ever find "the equilibrium of the ideal." The bourgeois is in Van Gogh's situation, and Van Gogh speaks for the bourgeois—gives voice to the rage he must secretly feel at the indifference—the thinly disguised negative response—of society to his existence, shown by it refusing him happiness, always making it hard.

Most of my criticism reflects in one way or another my sense of the tragic situation of art and criticism in the modern period. My article on collage examines the difficulty of integration in the authentically modern work of art. My article on "The Unhappy Consciousness of Modernism" examines one inadequate, forced kind of integration in dubiously authentic modern art. Much of my criticism examines the difficulties modern art has achieving any kind of equilibrium. All in all, what I have tried to do is remind the reader of the truth of what Oscar Wilde said at the beginning of this century, namely, that the critic is an artist—that the very root of art is criticality—and is thus subject to the same disintegrative forces of the negativity of modern reality as the artist. These forces include the media which shape the voices of both art and criticism; the audience which listens to them, uncertain of its own seriousness, and so implicitly indifferent, interested only in the developing novelty of both; and the ideologies which pre-empt them, making a mockery of the criticality in which their autonomy is rooted.

Indeed, the critic is the only authentic artist left, for the typical artist comes to rest in an integrated style, which he takes as the emblem of his narcissistically completed selfhood, while the critic remains restless, disbelieving in the absolute integrity of any style (or artwork), free of the need for steady narcissistic succor. This is why the critic remains more authentic than the artist in the administered society, for it insists that everyone be satisfied.

The critic is neither art's John the Baptist, Grand Inquisitor, or crucifier, but himself crucified, the victim of a Passion of his own. This is not only because he is the victim of the contempt of artists—such as Gauguin, who said the critic was always comparing art to something that had nothing to do with it¹⁸, or Olga Rozanova, a Suprematist artist who thought that criticism was a "cautious," "pseudo-artistic path" taken by "the person without talent,"¹⁹ or the contemporary English activist artist Conrad Atkinson, who thinks critics "dip their pens in pig's urine."²⁰ It is also because he refuses to give the artist the satisfaction of telling him that his art has overcome the negativity of the real, triumphed over an insane world by mediating a sense of absolutely integrated selfhood—an eternal equilibrium of selfhood achieved through art. How can the critic tell the artist this when the critic knows the autonomy art proposes is only a fiction, and must remain one if it is to have any value. It is because

the critic is so distrustful of art's claims to autonomy that he gets no satisfaction from criticism, which argues for art's privileged integrity—which is exactly why the critic continues to be critical. Criticism is the only enterprise with no narcissistic satisfaction, which is why there is so little of it, compared to art.

Notes

- ¹T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 355.
- ²Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, Seabury Press, 1972; Continuum Books), p. 157.
- ³Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846," *The Mirror of Art* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday & Co., 1956; Doubleday Anchor Books), pp. 38-40.
- ⁴Adorno, p. 13.
- ⁵Adorno, p. 17.
- ⁶Baudelaire, p. 44.
- ⁷Adorno, p. 358.
- ⁸Adorno, p. 165.
- ⁹Adorno, p. 347.
- ¹⁰Adorno, p. 9.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*
- ¹²Quoted in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *From Karl Mannheim* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1971), p. xlv.
- ¹³Roy Schafer, *The Analytic Attitude* (New York, Basic Books, 1983), p. 291.
- ¹⁴Shafer, pp. 264-65.
- ¹⁵Adorno, p. 9.
- ¹⁶Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York, International Universities Press, 1977), p. 206.
- ¹⁷Adorno, p. 41.
- ¹⁸Paul Gauguin, Letter to Andre Fontainas, March 1899, in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968), p. 76.
- ¹⁹Olga Rozanova, "Suprematism and the Critics" (1918).
- ²⁰Conrad Atkinson, *Picturing the System* (London, Pluto Press, 1981; Institute of Contemporary Art exhibition catalogue), p. 78.

The Architecture of Allusion: Notes on the Postmodern Sublime

ANTHONY VIDLER

"In the end the sublime turns into its opposite anyway. It might be better to stop talking about the sublime completely."

—T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*¹

In a recent essay on the nature of postmodernity, the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard noted what he saw as the common character of allusionism, informing both modern and postmodern aesthetics, and referred this to the category of the sublime as defined by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.² On one level, this ascription seems helpful in describing, if not explaining, the peculiar qualities of much postmodern imagery: its evident desire to restore a lost dimension of feeling and meaning to art, whether through historical allusion or by a more diffuse appeal to power and authenticity through scale and nostalgic reference. The notion of the Kantian sublime, a "negative pleasure," with its associations of inadequacy in the face of superior force, of what Kant described as "the feeling of momentary inhibition of the vital powers," would find its modern and postmodern analogs in the evident self-consciousness of the inadequacy of language, the tendency toward dematerialization,

parody, caricature and reductive simplification.³ On another level, however, the use of the term sublime in this context would seem to be surrounded by difficulties, not the least of which would be the changing and often contradictory meanings attached to the word after Kant, in European and American aesthetic criticism, from Romanticism to Modernism. As even Harold Bloom has realized, although not entirely internalized, the "sublime" indicates a different specificity from period to period, artist to artist, indicating more a shifting set of attitudes to power, nature, tradition and the self, than any fixed aesthetic category.⁴ In this sense, the "postmodern" or "modern" sublime, if it existed, would have to take its distance from its predecessors, Burkean, Kantian, Hegelian, Emersonian or Freudian, and establish its own realm of applicability and function. A number of ideas, traditionally associated with sublimity, would in this case have to be set aside immediately, including those most central to its first modern definition—notably those feelings of terror, fear, awe and superstition, which appear to be singularly absent from the gamut of emotions explored in or produced by contemporary works of art. This might, logically, open the question as to what would be left of the sublime.

Lyotard was, of course, entirely aware of this danger from a relativizing historicism; this is why he took pains to characterize the "sublime" as a "turn" or tendency, dedicated from Kanon, to the presentation of the unrepresentable. Modernism, in this sense, would, according to Lyotard, be that art which dedicates itself to presenting "the fact that the unrepresentable exists," and by the abstraction of its forms negatively alluding to its "missing contents."⁵ Lyotard sees these forms nevertheless as nostalgic attempts to preserve a lost unity, in their consistency demonstrating a desire to please, to provide solace; postmodernism, on the other hand, rejects even this consistency, simply putting forward the "unrepresentable in presentation itself"; rules, characteristic of modern's counter-realism, are dispensed with completely; each artist projecting an experiment which is more "an event" than a work of art traditionally conceived. Certainly we can recognize here some of the leitmotifs of modern abstraction and postmodern representation; but Lyotard's argument, attached as it is to a historicist notion of the sublime—its descent from Kantian fullness to postmodern dryness is clearly traced—as well as an ahistorical definition, is caught at the point where it becomes equally possible to identify the "postmodern" in the past. Thus, for Lyotard, the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Atheneum*) is modern."⁶ This statement, clever and paradoxical as it seems, loses as much as it gains; for postmodern must be subsequent to modern; it is at root a historical category.

Such confusion has led other critics, notably Adorno, to proscribe the use of the word "sublime" as a "term corrupted beyond recognition," in his view by the post-romantic ideology of art-as-religion. A term originally coined in order to *puncture* grand stylistic categories of the beautiful, has become merely pedestrian and faintly comic.

But Adorno, for all his scepticism, also exhibits a nostalgia; here for the age of the true sublime, when it signified “the greatness of man as a spiritual being,” “Nature’s tamer,” an age long past, now replaced by an age where man, “null and transient as an empirical being,” is unaffected by death, thence by the sublime.⁷ Adorno’s suspicion of the sublime, motivated by a distrust of “spiritualization in art,” more often than not ringing falsely when not embodied in an aesthetic structure, found its counter part in the refusal of the Viennese writer, Karl Kraus, to “participate in the cult of grandiose natural scenery leaving it to the detestable tourists to get what they could out of the high mountains.”⁸ With reference to that most “religious” of secular bourgeois arts, the Wagnerian opera, Adorno noted dryly, “it may well be that the uninitiated listener whose reaction to one of Wagner’s mature works is one of boredom, does not simply reveal a pedestrian consciousness incapable of responding to Wagner’s claims to the sublime.”⁹ Repetition, overstatement, over-extended hyperbole of any kind has always been, as Longinus first observed, an enemy of the true sublime.¹⁰ Around 1906, the feeling of exhaustion generated by appeals to the sublime was well summarized by the aesthetician Max Dessoir:

“In our age, when relatively many persons become familiar with the sea and the Alps, and are early accustomed to the broadest dimensions, the qualities of the sublime must meet a particularly large standard. Earlier generations...could get the same inner excitement from smaller impressions, but we need vast vistas.”¹¹

Such an empiricism of the sublime, while apparently far from Kantian abstraction, is in fact, close to Burke; Adorno also found the concept to be a disguise for the idea of a mood which “hands over art to empiricism.”¹² A worn-out, used-up category, the sublime explains nothing but the empty minds of its users. Against such strictures, the erudite reference of Lyotard might seem gratuitous, at least inappropriate.

But a glance at the history of the sublime as a concept would warn us that the “counter-sublime” was hardly more reliable a category. It was after all, Longinus who warned that “the important thing to know is how far to push a given hyperbole; it sometimes destroys it to go too far; too much tension results in relaxation, and may indeed end in the contrary of the intended effect.”¹³ He argued for the hiding of figures, the masking of their presence. Later, Burke, brought up in the age of Hogarthian caricature, warned repeatedly against bathos; Jean-Paul Richter found it easy to define the sublime by focussing on its (only) apparent opposite, the ridiculous; Hegel flatly ruled out the possibility of a modern sublime as anything but a decadent and depreciated version of an irrevocably lost Biblical original.¹⁴ The tone was long set for the sublime, a “puncturing” notion, to be itself punctured by its bad effects. The common-place quality of the arguments, all repeating, with variations the Longinian formula, reminds us of that anti-ornamental stricture coined by Vitru-

vius which, as Gombrich has shown, finds its reuse in classical idealism, Enlightenment materialism and modernism.¹⁵

Clearly, arguments for and against the sublime in any period should be analyzed, not so much in terms of an eternal and reoccurring cultural phenomenon, but as specific and differentiated instances. Criticism might then find its material in the way in which sublimity is appealed to not only as an esthetic description but as a part of the condition it purports to describe. Thus Lyotard, in raising the question of sublimity in modernism not only implicitly rewrites Kantian categories to accord with twentieth century ideas of abstraction, but more importantly reconceives modernism itself in postmodern terms. For if there is any echo of sublime intentions in contemporary art, it is surely more conspicuous in postmodern attitudes toward allusion than in any nostalgia for absence in modernism; abstract art, after all, promised no simple rejection of realism, but a positive affirmation of a new language bravely asserted as full enough in its own right. Postmodernism, on the one hand, does revel in nostalgia, in overt reference, in quotation and figurative allusion.

If the postmodern sublime is in fact that which postmodernism makes of a long tradition of continuous re-interpretation, a selective and inevitably eclectic formation with an instrumentality of its own, one should not necessarily expect any degree of continuity or uniformity in this selectivity when considered in relation to the different arts. Critics have long recognized the difficulty in applying a constant concept of the sublime to arts which employ different media, representational techniques and canons, which are forced to take distinctly unique approaches to their subject matter. The varied properties of the poetic sublime, the prosaic sublime, the painterly sublime, the sculptural sublime and the more abstract musical and architectural sublime—not to mention sublimity of taste and smell—were examined in detail by Burke and many subsequent authors. Indeed, the examination of these practices provided a clear demonstration of Lessing's thesis that the arts should be considered according to their semiotic capacity to represent subject matter, temporal or spatial; the sublime, in its tendency to heighten and exaggerate, was an acid test of the limits of potentialities of each art. Thus, for example, Burke, anticipating presciently many of the academic and sentimental paintings of sublime subjects in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, gently warned against trying to depict certain concepts like "Hell" with too much naturalism; the resulting "odd wild grotesques" were more ridiculous than they were grand. Poetry, however, with the use of more obscure and magnificent figures, was evocative of emotions "more awful, more striking, more terrible...than the clearest painting could possibly represent it."¹⁶ Kant would rule out the application of the term sublime to art altogether, as a category proper only to describe a state of mind of the observer in front of an object of nature and not residing in the object itself.¹⁷ Hegel disagreed, but was equally strict in limiting the

symbolism of the sublime to sacred art, and more specifically to that of the Jews: "for visual art cannot appear here, where it is impossible to sketch any adequate picture of God; only the poetry of ideas expressed in words can."¹⁸

In these boundary disputes only architecture held its own with poetry; for Burke and Kant indeed, architecture was a most powerful illustration of types of artistic sublimity. Physically standing in nature, apprehended like a natural object, its effects were similar to those of landscape; made by man it further inspired cultural and historical awe beyond the natural. Thus the darkness of the first temples, the idea of force and labor associated with the building of Stonehenge, the brilliant or subdued illumination of a building, the infinitude implied by apparently endless rows of columns were all, for Burke, primary instigators of sublime emotions.¹⁹ Kant, treating architecture as nature, found the pyramids of Egypt and the great dome of St. Peter's exemplars of the lofty and the splendid (mathematical) sublime respectively.²⁰ The extraordinary attempts by late eighteenth century architects like Boullee and Ledoux, and later Joseph Gandy, to fabricate an architecture of sublime sensations were directly inspired by these writers.²¹ But here, with the question as to what might constitute an architecture of the sublime we are presented with the problem of boundaries yet again. As Burke himself pointed out, the sublime tended to undermine the canons of the classical tradition; no longer would the qualities of a work reside in its proportional embodiment of human or natural harmonies, but rather in the reactions of an individual, sensing, feeling and projecting. The criteria thereby shifted from the structural to the visual, the mathematical to the pictorial. It is significant that sublimity in neo-classical architecture is always represented in dramatic paintings of a building in nature, registering the effects of light, the play of shadows, the night, the dawn, the changing seasons, tempests, clouds tossed by the winds. That is, the painterly depiction of sublime architecture was a necessary device to suggest the effects these monuments would have on the spectator. Architectural design thus became susceptible to that kind of exaggeration already noted with respect to painting. Similarly the huge scale demanded of buildings that would rival the immensity of nature, the mechanical repetition and uniformity called for by the imitation of concepts like infinity, led very quickly in practice to banality and poverty of expression; the architecture of Albert Speer, consciously modelled on that of Boullee and his contemporaries, is only the most evident example of this danger.

In its postmodern version, the sublime in architecture has also found its vehicle in painting: not accidentally often immediately derived from some late eighteenth century precedent. A comparison of Michael Graves' project for the Fargo-Moorhead Cultural Center Bridge (1977-8) with its evident inspiration in Ledoux's designs for the River Surveyors' House (c. 1790) and for a decorative motif at the Saline de Chauox (1774-8); of the entrance to James Stirling's extension to the Tate Gallery with one of Boullee's Egyptian cemeteries; of

Robert Stern's Temple to Architecture with Boullée's own attempt to create a "negative" architecture of shadows, will reveal the extent of such borrowings. Such comparisons though, allow for a more precise definition of the postmodern in at least three of its most essential aspects: its treatment of the quotation and the fragment; its notion of suitability, or what was traditionally called appropriate character; and its attitude toward the sensations. Each bound in some way to that quality of allusion singled out by Lyotard, each is nevertheless profoundly distanced from that to which it alludes.

The central place of quotation in all theories of the sublime has been noticed by recent critics. Neil Hertz, in the best contemporary reading of Longinus, considers the role of his chains of linked quotations, joined not so much by their capacity to illustrate the rhetorical topic under discussion, but by more subtle associations and allusions, that themselves partake of the "sublime turn" treated by Longinus.²² Hertz compares this method to that of Walter Benjamin, another adept of the quotation, and finds common ground between the ancient and the modern critic in their method of writing,

which consists in the more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies into "quotations," in the interest of building up a discourse of one's own, a discourse which, in its turn directs attention to passages that come to serve as emblems of the critic's most acute, least nostalgic sense of what he is about.²³

This defense against nostalgia derives, in the first instance, from what seems to be the most profound nostalgia on the part of these two writers, "directed ambiguously toward certain great literary works and toward the traditional culture out of which they sprung."²⁴ Longinus recalling the golden age of Athens from the perspective of Imperial Rome, Benjamin recalling the Europe before industrialization, both coining words—*hypsos* (sublime), *aura*—for what had been lost. Yet both were also, Hertz concludes, "strangely...drawn to texts that bear the marks of the disintegration of order."²⁵ Neither their nostalgia, nor their historical evaluation, their evocation of catastrophe, can be trusted, for their cunning use of the technique of the sublime itself turns the "moment of disintegration" into a "figurative reconstitution"; one that is far from nostalgic or traditional in its intended, critical, effects. Measured in these terms postmodern quotation, certainly as illustrated by Graves' project, reveals neither profound nostalgia nor any dimension of critical reconfiguration; there is, in the figure of the bridge that spills its own water into the stream it crosses, or that of the key-stone that becomes a capital, no great sense of catastrophe either. Rather, the re-assembly of borrowed terms—the key-stone, the upset urn, the cylindrical house—into a building on a bridge seems playful and entirely irreverent, building only on the allusions to water and bridges held in Ledoux's designs, and not at all on what, for Ledoux, constituted their original sublimity: the power of man over nature, symbolized by the crystallization of saline water, or by the trapping of the river by the house of

its surveyors. The sublimity of the Fargo Bridge is purely technical, one of devices rather than of contents.²⁶

The second question, that of “character,” was equally preeminent in theories of the late eighteenth century; Boullée defined it, decisively breaking with classical conventions, as “the effect which results from (an) object and makes on us an impression of any kind.”²⁷ The appropriateness of such impressions was to be measured by their analogy with the idea of the building, its role and associations. Thus the special resonance of the mysterious and original Egyptian style, with its overtones of eternity, for the cemetery; Boullée heightened the effect of his pyramidal gateways and cenotaphs, painting them as lashed by storms, appearing like ghostly shadows from behind the clouds. Similar effects were, in even more atmospheric a form, attempted by Turner, the entrance to whose gallery Stirling endows with a negative pyramid directly emulating that of Boullée. But this pyramidal shape, cut into the facade composed of layers of stone facing and curtain wall, each peeled back to reveal their essentially surface quality, is obviously not intended to inspire feelings of terror in the face of eternal burial; the insertion of the conventional revolving door in the center of the arch would in any case give the lie to such an effect. The architect’s allusion is simply to the academic appropriateness—a kind of art-historical comparison—of entering a gallery for the display of the Romantic sublime through a form that refers to its counterpart in architecture. Here the allusion is, rather than sublime itself, to the sublime as a historically closed sensation.

Finally, a consideration of sublime negativity in architecture, a concept which led Boullée to propose an entirely de-materialized architecture constructed not of stone, but by shadows, would find in this counter-architectural notion, especially as explored in the late eighteenth century, the logical and extreme conclusion of the coupling “sublime” and “architecture.” Boullée’s “Temple of Death” (*Monument Funeraire*) presents a plain surface into which is inscribed by means of openings, the columns and pediment of a shadow building. The facade is built out of a material that absorbs the light, its decoration “consisting of shadows outlined by still deeper shadows”; nothing, Boullée observed, could be gloomier.²⁸ By contrast, Stern’s “negative” facade, where the spaces between the columns have been given positive, cut out shapes, attempts by inversion to parade a form of architectural wit that knowingly refers to a tradition that it neither subverts nor sustains.

These examples, considered without regard for their individual qualities as works of architecture, indicate that postmodern allusion is not directed toward any missing contents, of the kind imagined by Burke or Kant; nor does it seem, despite assertions to the contrary, to be motivated by deep-seated feelings of nostalgia for lost aura. On the contrary, it appears that postmodernism makes a virtue of the literal: a fragment is simply a fragment, a quotation a quotation, a reference to sublime architecture is simply that, and a joke is a joke. This literal dimension, which Lyotard has characterized as the putting

forward of “the unrepresentable in presentation itself,” works to deny even the “heightened feeling” that was a part of the rhetorical definition of Longinus; certainly it appeals to none of the great Romantic tropes of self and nature. But if little is left of the contents of the sublime, the manner in which the sublime is referred to points to another, perhaps all-determining characteristic of the postmodern—its fundamentally academic nature. It was ever a fault of epigones and interpreters of Longinus, who never himself used his quotations uncritically, to take his quotations at face value, and, in the hope of elevating the mind to repeat them, as so many allusions to a sublime feeling, but one incapable of being reinvented. This practice of the “sublime quote” has a long tradition in the subsequent history of literature, rhetoric and of art, never more pronounced than in the nineteenth-century academies. That postmodernism takes this fault and elevates it into the status of a fine art, is not, in itself, a fault; save perhaps when its authors, filled with zeal for the recovery of something lost, lose the capacity themselves to invent something new.

Footnotes

¹T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and Boston, 1984), p. 283.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Reponse a la question: qu’est-ce que le posmoderne?”, *Critique*, number 419, April 1982, translated in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. 71 et seq.

³See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (Oxford, 1952), II, No. 23.

⁴Notably in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, (New York, 1982).

⁵Lyotard, p. 81.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Adorno, p. 283.

⁸As reported by Adorno, p. 103.

⁹Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London, 1981), p. 37.

¹⁰*Longinus’ On Sublimity* (Oxford, 1965), 38. 1-38.3.

¹¹Max Dessoir, *Aesthetics and Theory of Art [1906-1923]* (Detroit, 1970), p. 161.

¹²Adorno, p. 161.

¹³*Longinus’ On Sublimity*, 38. 1-38.3.

¹⁴Jean Paul Richter’s ‘School for Aesthetics’ (Detroit, 1973) VI, “On the Ridiculous, No. 27, Theory of the Sublime,” pp. 73 et seq.

¹⁵See E.W. Gombrich, *Norm and Form, Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1966), pp. 83 et seq.

¹⁶Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London, 1958), p. 63.

¹⁷Kant, II, No. 31.

¹⁸G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford, 1975), Vol. I, p. 373.

¹⁹Burke, pp. 59, 72-82.

²⁰Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful Sublime* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), p. 49.

²¹On Etienne-Louis Boullée, see J.M. Perouse de Monclos, *Etienne-Louis Boullée*, Paris, 1969; on Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, see M. Gallet, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, 1736-1806*, Paris, 1980; on Joseph-Michael Gandy, see J. Summerson, "The Vision of J.M. Gandy," in *Heavenly Mansions and other Essays on Architecture*, New York, 1963, pp. 111-134.

²²Neil Hurst, "A Reading of Longinus," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 3, March 1983, pp. 579-596, originally published in *Poétique* 15, 1973.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 591.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 590.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 591.

²⁶See, for an analysis of the rhetorical techniques of Graves, A. Colquhoun, "From Bricolage to Myth, or How to put Humpty-Dumpty together again," *Oppositions* 12, Spring, 1978, pp. 1-19.

²⁷E.L. Boullée, *Architecture. Essai sur l'Art*, ed., Perouse de Monclos (Paris, 1968), p. 73.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 137

Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

JACK SPECTOR

Peter Burger's important book, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (hereafter *Theory*), which first appeared in 1974, has now (1984) been reissued in English translation. It received considerable attention in Germany during the late 1970s, even provoking a book of essays criticizing it. M. Ludke ed., "*Theorie der Avantgarde.*" *Antworten auf Peter Burgers Bestimmung von Kunst und burgerlicher Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, 1976. Hereafter *Antworten*).

Burger intends to defend the value and cogency of the avant-garde as he understands that concept. He explains it as follows (*Theory*, 53-54): "In summary, we note that the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former. The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life." He insist-

ently distinguishes modernism from the avant-garde that *destroys* modernism, and from the “neo-avant-garde that ineffectively repeats the motions of the “historical avant-garde” of the 1920s and 1930s. Here he rejects the equation of avant-garde and modernism of Renato Poggioli (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968) and of T.W. Adorno (and Habermas, who follows him in this), who date modernism to the early or mid-19th century. His approach essentially unites historical analysis to a study of “aesthetic categories” (chiefly that of “artistic means” or “procedures”; *Theory*, 17). First he traces the evolution of the aestheticist attitude, which asserted that art is an institution, to the late 18th century (Kant, Schiller). He explains the “institution of art” as the framing condition of art: “The model provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works. When one refers to the function of an individual work, one generally speaks figuratively; for the consequences that one may observe or infer are not primarily a function of its special qualities but rather of the manner which regulates the commerce with works of this kind in a given society or in certain strata or classes of a society. I have chosen the term ‘institution of art’ to characterize such framing conditions” (*Theory*, p. 12). He links the “institution of art” to Marcuse’s “affirmative character” of art in order to explain the conservative function of art for bourgeois society. This role is served by “modern” art with its cult of newness adapted to the needs of the liberal bourgeois mentality. This ivory tower art first becomes completely self-critical or aware of itself when it becomes wholly autonomous in aestheticism at the end of the 19th century. At that time art separates from life and its “praxis.” This detachment of art from life is precisely what the avant-garde attacks, in order to reunite them. Thus, the convergence of autonomy and the institution of art served, in Burger’s eyes, as a necessary prelude to the critical stance taken by the avant-garde. Although the avant-garde failed in its intention to destroy the institution of art, Burger insists that it had an irreversible effect on the history of art: “the attack did make art recognizable as an institution and also revealed its (relative) inefficacy in bourgeois society as its principle. All art that is more recent than the historical avant-garde movements must come to terms with this fact in bourgeois society.”

By the “avant-garde,” Burger means Dadaism, the Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution and especially Surrealism, though he concedes that “within certain limitations” Italian Futurism and German Expressionism also attacked art as an institution. (*Theory*, p. 109, note 4. In fact, Burger makes no further substantial reference to either of the latter.) He strongly defends Surrealism as progressively radical against Poggioli, though not in this book. (Cf. Burger, *Der französische Surrealismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), p. 183 note 149: “Eine massive Ablehnung avantgardistischer Kunst mit dem Argument, diese sei stets von einem politischen Radikalismus

diktiert, findet sich bei R. Poggioli.... Indem der Verfung die Tatsache unterschlagt, dass die avantgardistische Kunst Antwort auf eine bestimmte historisch-gesellschaftliche Situation ist, kann er mit der wissenschaftlich unhaltbaren Gleichsetzung von Faschismus und Kommunismus die futuristische wie die surrealistische Bewegung vom Standpunkt eines konservativen *juste-milieu* aus kritisieren.”)

In Burger's reading, the historical role of the avant-garde depended on its creating a break both with the traditions of the presentational system of perspective (*Theory*, p. 62) and with the organic work of art, starting with the Cubist invention of collage (*Theory*, p. 73). Burger uses the unique historical character of this break to refute both Lukacs' demand for organic totality in the work of art and Adorno's concept of art as both organic and new (*Theory*, p. 84). He regards both as either ahistorical or vaguely historical for referring to too large a period (ca. 1850-1950). And he also criticizes Adorno for ignoring that “the break with tradition that the historical avant-garde movements brought about has not made irrelevant all talk about the historical level of artistic techniques practiced today” (*Theory*, p. 63). In other words, Adorno's persistence in believing in artistic modernism and the advance in technique demonstrates that his “theoretical position is part and parcel of the epoch of the historical avant-garde movements” (*Theory*, p. 63); i.e., irrelevant to the post-avant-garde period. (The point that contemporary art had become static emerged already in the 1960s with L.B. Meyer (*Music, the Arts and Ideas*, Chicago, 1967), who observes: “The concept of an avant-garde implies goal-directed motion.... If the Renaissance is over, the avant-garde is ended” (p. 169).

Burger's book has the merit of focusing on important issues concerning the relation of theory and history; but it has a number of problems and limitations. First, in the interest of broad generalization, Burger has simplified both the history of modernism and of the avant-garde; second, he has failed to do justice to the subtlety of Adorno's ideas. (A point made cogently by Ludke, “Die Aporien der materialistischen Asthetik—kein Ausweg? Zur kategorialen Begundung von P. Burgers ‘Theorie der Avantgarde’” in *Antworten* p. 72f.) Third, he does not do justice to Benjamin's idea of allegory. Finally, he fails to appreciate the viable elements of the avant-garde in the current pluralistic period he synoptically calls the “post-avant-garde.”

Burger accuses other theorists of the avant-garde of failure to understand the historical specificity of the avant-garde. But the effort to undermine the institution of art by the avant-garde that Burger locates in the 1920s in fact emerged earlier in the absurdist and politically unfocused ideas of Jarry and others at the *fin-de-siecle*. Duchamp, to whose example Burger ascribes much importance, worked—without attachment to a movement in his pre-Dada “Dadaism”—with the intention of undermining Art, and he continued to do so after the “official” demise both of Dada and Surrealism. Thus, Burger's claim to a socio-historical precision in his

references to the 1920s movements seems exaggerated. Moreover the very character of the institution of art that the avant-garde overthrows is subject to ambiguity, as observed perceptively by Lindner: “Dennoch entsteht jetzt eine neue Schwierigkeit: Es bleibt offen, ob ‘Institution Kunst’ die materielle und ideologische Verankerung der autonomen Kunst in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft bezeichnet oder ob sie eine allgemeine, soziologische Kategorie darstellt, der keine noch so veränderte künstlerische Praxis entraten kann. Diese Unklarheit hat zur Folge, dass die Bedingungen dessen, was zum Scheitern der Avant-garde geführt hat bzw. als Scheitern interpretiert wird, nicht exakt bestimmt werden. Scheiterten die Avantgardisten, weil sie die institutionellen Rahmbedingungen, denen jede gesellschaftlich organisierte Tätigkeit unterliegt, übersahen? Übersahen sie diese Bedingungen, weil sie implizit—wie oben dargelegt—an der Autonomie-Ideologie festhielten? Oder scheiterten sie, weil die politisch-gesellschaftlichen Instanzen, welche das Funktionieren der Institution Kunst regulieren, den Angriff der Avantgardisten unter ihre Kontrolle brachten (Vermarktung der Avantgardistischen Kunst; sozialistische Kulturpolitik)? Oder scheiterten sie, weil die gesellschaftlichen Produktionsbedingungen noch nicht ‘reif’ waren?” (B. Lindner, “Aufhebung der Kunst in Lebenspraxis? Über die Aktualität der Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen Avantgardebewegungen” in *Antworten*, p. 90.) Another criticism of Lindner’s—that the attempt to liquidate art as an institution “does not appear as a break with the ideology of the period of autonomy but as a reversal phenomenon (*Umschlagphänomen*) on the identical ideological level” (*Theory*, 106, no. 10 and *Antworten*, p. 83)—is not answered in Burger’s text.

Burger places so much emphasis on collage/montage in his interesting though overgeneralized treatment, that he ignores the varied uses of collage among the Surrealists or near-Surrealists. Of the former, Dali (of whom Burger never speaks) oscillated between megalomaniac imagery tending to a vaguely political radicalism, including Fascism, and a quasi-psychotic symbolism, neither mode conforming to Burger’s idea that Surrealist collage signified an assault on the institution of art. Of the latter Miro (likewise overlooked by Burger) masterfully converted collage into awesomely aesthetic art objects, most of them well within the bounds of the institution art. Burger’s example, the politically cogent collage posters of the Dada/Surrealist Heartfield characterize—like Russian revolutionary posters—only a segment of the uses of collage. Not only did the Futurists adopt collage (and continue to use it into their fascist period), but Soviet propagandists during the Zhdanovite period of Social Realism occasionally employed it, as did even the Nazis on rare occasions. (Poster for 1936 exhibition of *Entartete Kunst*; montages in Riefenstahl’s movie, *Triumph des Willens*, 1936. For Burger’s argument against Poggioli, who was writing during the Cold War that one must not equate proto-Fascist Futurists and Communists, see above). Moreover, collage was by no means the sole principle advocated by

the Surrealists: Breton assigned a major role for shocking the public and bringing about change in art to automatism. Burger ignores automatism and the whole psychoanalytic dimension that Breton placed in the center of Surrealist art production, a fact doubly surprising since Burger shows his awareness of both in his book on Surrealism (p. 19), where he asserted Breton's "dominierende Stellung in der Bewegung" and insisted on basing himself "vor allem auf Texten von Breton." (One example: he cites Breton on p. 65 on *la folie*, while ignoring Artaud's crucial writings and personal example, doubtless because, as he observes on p. 76, Artaud, along with Soupault, was expelled from the movement by Breton for pursuing "la stupide aventure litteraire.") Finally, he nowhere considers *Eros and Civilization* (New York, 1955), in which Marcuse expands the notion of the "affirmative character" of art adopted by Burger, declaring (after Adorno) that "art survives only where it cancels itself...where it becomes Surrealistic and atonal" (p. 145), and—psychologizing what Burger politicizes—states that regression "would dissolve the institutions of society in which the reality ego exists" (p. 198). And in another work ignored by Burger, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society" (*Arts Magazine*, May, 1967), Marcuse describes the compromised position of Surrealist radicalism (perhaps determined by the inevitably "affirmative character" of art in bourgeois society): "In contrast the Surrealists proclaim the submission of the social revolution to the truth of the poetic imagination. However, this Surrealistic thesis is undialectical inasmuch as it minimizes the extent to which the poetic language itself is infested and infected with the general falsity and deception; it does not remain pure. And Surrealism has long since become a saleable commodity."

Burger made Benjamin's concept of allegory his starting-point for "the development of a concept of the non-organic work of art" (*Theory*, p. 68-69). (He presumably believes that allegory can represent in turn or at once the alienation of Hegel and Marx, the defamiliarization of the Russian formalists, and the non-organic technique of collage/montage.) He extracts two components from Benjamin's concept: "1. The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function; 2. The allegorist joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning."

In transferring allegory from Benjamin's context of the Baroque to the avant-garde with its non-organic production, Burger makes a serious modification—he minimizes Benjamin's characterization of "the attitude of the allegorist as melancholy" (*Theory*, p. 71). Burger regards Baroque melancholy as "a fixation on the singular" untransferable to the avant-garde as a general description of procedure: "It seems plausible to see in Benjamin's concept of melancholy the description of an attitude of the avant-gardiste who, unlike the aestheticist before him, can no longer transfigure his social functionlessness." Burger, in his effort to adapt Benjamin's concept, has failed to do justice to Benjamin's rich thought and ignores its rele-

vant history. Benjamin linked allegory not to collage Cubism or to Surrealism but to Expressionism (he compared the Baroque to Expressionism), a movement which, as we have seen, was almost entirely excluded from Burger's notion of the avant-garde. Moreover Benjamin, who planned to write a chapter on "Baudelaire as Allegorist," considered Baudelaire the inheritor of the German *Trauerspiel*, with his "genius...fed on melancholy...an allegorical genius." The complex interplay between symbol and allegory in Romanticism as understood by Benjamin (and by Gadamer in his *Truth and Method*) unfortunately finds no place in the stripped-down concept of allegory applied by Burger, who leapfrogs from the Baroque to the end of the 19th century. Obviously Burger would have nothing to do with a period like Romanticism that emphasized organism in art and society. It may well be that Benjamin took cues from German Romantic philosophers like Friedrich von Schlegel, who made allegory the basis of all art; and Hegel, who attributed the melancholy of the Greek sculptors to the contradiction between the infinite spirit and the finite body; i.e., their inability to realize fully their idea of beauty. Or Benjamin may have absorbed ideas from such French Romantics as Chateaubriand or Hugo, both of whom made melancholy central features of their thought. (On the pessimism of classical antiquity see S.H. Butcher, "The Melancholy of the Greeks," *Some Aspects of the Greek Genius*, 4th ed., London, 1916, pp. 133-70. On the relation between "Allegorie, Melancholie, Avantgarde" see F. Masini, *Text and Kritik*, vol. 31-32, (1979, pp. 94-102).) A hostile view of the relation of allegory to modern art appears in the reactionary Baroque specialist Haus Sedlmayr, *Moderne Kunst* (1955), who calls non-objective art "eine moderne Abart der Allegorie" (p. 35).

A more serious drawback to Burger's book, as others have noted, results from a strain of dogmatism in his theory: he fails to appreciate the healthy pluralism of post avant-garde art: the significant productions of feminist and minority artists, for example, in Anglo-Saxon countries, and the extraordinary explosion of expressionist art in Germany concerned with death, by artists born in the 1930s and 1940s, in the historic shadow of the Nazi terror and in the face of nuclear megalomania. There is a curious parallel between Burger, who turns away from the melancholic or terrified art of his fellow Germans to Breton and French surrealism, as though to escape from the bourgeois modernism of it's country, and Nietzsche who looked in his *Human, All too Human*, to the Frenchman Voltaire as an antidote to Bismarckean progressivism and the mediocrity of German modernism. However Burger, sadly enough, lacks Nietzsche's humor, and so—interpreting avant-garde manifestations uniformly as wrecking operations—he overlooks the important features of Duchampian wit, Dada absurdity and Surrealist laughter.

Burger's dogmatic rejection of Romantic organicism, noted above, induced its own form of ideological totalitarianism. One thinks here of the significant concourse in late 18th century France of the emergence of the institution of art and of the notion of *ideologie* (As-

thetik emerged in Baumgarten). Like ideology-bound Paris after the 1780s, which found no other way to make room for libertarian impulses than to promote periodic revolutions against inflexible barricades, Burger (like some post-structuralists) incorporates into his theory notions of *aporias* and *decalages*. As he put it in a rejoinder to Habermas's defense of modernism against the anti-modernism of young conservatives (meaning Bataille, Foucault and Derrida), old conservatives (Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas), and neoconservatives (post-modernists like Gottfried Benn), he demanded a *dialectical comprehension* of ruptures in order to prevent this important historical category from becoming a pawn in the hands of the Young Conservatives. (See Burger, "A Reply to J. Habermas," *New German Critique*, No. 22 (Winter 1981, p. 22).)

Burger has borrowed heavily from and criticized the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), whose latest positions tended away from empirical study of society toward mysticism and preoccupation with aesthetic questions (its most recent exponent Habermas, on the other hand, has returned to an earlier position, and idolizes the rationalism of the Enlightenment). Burger's academic theorizing about art caps this final state of the school's development, appropriately commemorating what he sees as the demise of the avant-garde. It is as though in the old tradition of Hegel's death of art theme, Burger were erecting in his theory a monument to the death of the avant-garde. As Croce put it in his *Aesthetics*: "The Aesthetic of Hegel is thus a funeral oration: he passes in review the successive forms of art, shows the progressive steps of internal consumption and lays the whole in its grave, leaving Philosophy to write its epitaph" (Croce, *Aesthetic*, London, 1922, pp. 302-3). Of course the living artists can, like Mark Twain, contest their obituary and protest against being institutionalized in a mausoleum of theory.

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