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OCTOBER

16

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Art World Follies:
A Special Issue

In the Name of Picasso

*The Holy Alliance: Populism and
Feminism*

Art and Authoritarianism:

*Walter De Maria's Lightning Field
Figures of Authority, Ciphers of
Regression*

The End of Painting

*American Art at Mid-Century:
The Sandwiches of the Artist*

*Photophilia: A Conversation about
the Photography Scene*

The Prospect Before Us

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Art World Follies, 1981: A Special Issue

Over the months that *Art World Follies, 1981*, was in its various stages of planning and production, it was referred to by a somewhat less elliptical and facetious title. The editors and collaborators of *October* simply called it the *Narrischkeit* issue—a number dedicated to knaves and fools, with an emphasis on the latter.

On just what day would foolishness have appeared to us as a special issue? Could it have been when we were told about the phone call placed to a fellow scholar and critic by a former student wanting to know about “a good book on recent painting,” a call that produced the information that the student needed such a book because she had become an art consultant and had a large commission to buy contemporary painting, even though her almost total ignorance of this subject was revealed by the fact that in placing her call she clearly had no idea that the leading book on the subject had been written by her own teacher and published a few years before?

Or could it have been at the 1980 exhibition *Houses for Sale* at the Leo Castelli Gallery, where a highly visible collector functioned as “curator” for a show of architectural drawings, thus enacting as conspicuously as possible the simultaneous short-circuiting of art discourse and art function. For, in view of the newly minted coin of the architectural drawing as the latest collectible hedge against inflation, it is only natural that a dealer would choose to drop the whole cumbersome phase of real-world architectural practice (in which buildings are programmed, designed, and constructed for a specific purpose) from the acquisitional chain and commission the drawings directly—so that as both patron and dealer there will be no bothersome middleman. The collapse of function parallels the collapse of discourse through assigning the duties of curator straight off to the prospective collector, thereby ridding everyone concerned of the intellectual middleman in order to proceed directly to commodity value.

Or did foolishness strike us as a special issue on the day that a prominent critic of contemporary art (*prominent* is used here in its literal rather than its honorific sense), when questioned in the columns of *Arts Magazine* about his accusation that *October* was launching “yet another new formalist campaign—post-Structuralism,” chose to respond in those same columns with invective and gossip? Thus, the man whose chosen critical form is the gossip column provided yet another extravagant example of the way that reasoned argument has become progressively devalued in the practice of criticism—devalued in direct proportion as the giddy pace of collecting anything inside a Kulick frame has escalated.

There are many other days one could cite, for foolishness has become the medium through which almost every transaction in the art world is conducted. If

the institutions that formerly generated the discourse through which modern art was publicly interrogated, examined, and, if possible, understood—the museum, the university, the critical journal—if these institutions are now bypassed to make way for the process of consumption of quite another kind, that is because art discourse itself has welcomed, courted, flaunted foolishness. And it has likewise shunned the operations of thought.

One of our leading historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting, who, like the critical wag in the above example, is also an avowed enemy of “formalism,” was recently lecturing in New York about “new art and old art.” His thesis was that anything you could think of in the art of the past two decades could be shown to have a direct precedent in earlier modern art. One of his many examples was Jasper Johns’s *Map* series, which he saw prefigured by Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* series. At the end of his lecture, the scholar was asked if this was not an enactment of the very formalism he had always opposed. If, that is, formalism is the denaturing of the work’s subject (or content) in order to leave it a lifeless, meaningless shell, what could be more formalist than to forget that Monet’s use of series serves the uniqueness of each independent moment of perception, while Johns’s conception of series exploits notions of mechanical reproduction? Was not the comparison, merely on the basis of the necessarily empty concept of *series*, the very picture of a debased formalism?

The speaker was dumbfounded by the question and by its request for logic, for a respectable level of method. For he, like many of his confreres, critics and historians alike, is actively involved in the practice of no-method. Or rather, his most recent, favorite method is one borrowed from the game of charades: from the gambit called “sounds-like.” Finding himself stumped by a word he doesn’t know how to enact, the player tugs at his ear to signal “sounds-like,” and then makes twisting gestures with his hand to pantomime *screw*, hoping that his teammates will somehow transform this to *blue* or *crew* or *grew*. Johns is to Monet as screw is to blue. With this ratio we may have found the formula for the foolishness of current art historical and critical thinking.

During its first five years, *October* has chosen for the most part to ignore foolishness, confident in the conviction that, left alone, it would go away. We have directed our attention instead to what we felt was most positive and serious in the practice of contemporary art, its theory and criticism. But now, at the end of those five years, we realize with increasing force that foolishness has not gone away. On the contrary it has become ever more present, pressing, importunate in its claims to centrality, so that it now threatens to replace the very thing it most abhors, namely rational discourse. It is at this point that folly loses its comic shine to become darker, more sinister. Foolishness has entered the new decade as a mode of concerted opposition to thought, argument, coherence. It is time to name it, to describe it, and actively to become its adversary.

THE EDITORS

In the Name of Picasso

ROSALIND KRAUSS

Exhibit A: Picasso's Seated Bather, 1930. Against an azure wall of water, fragments of bone and bleached carapace assemble the monumental image of isolated, predatory woman. Woman-as-insect, with great mandibles in place of mouth evoking more effectively than any Masson or Miró the threat of the *vagina dentata*, this painting has functioned for years as a major emblem of Picasso's affinities with surrealism, as it has also established his preoccupation with an especially surrealizing notion of metamorphosis. The Museum of Modern Art showed the picture in 1939, and then again in 1946, at both major Picasso exhibitions. Thereafter it entered the collection to be placed on permanent view and to be installed—permanently it had seemed—within a particular “view” of the 1930s Picasso. This was a notion of a metamorphic “style” concerned with the body as a loose assembly or construction of parts often suggestive of found objects. This style was fundamental to the early sculpture of David Smith, as it was to the early painting of Gorky and de Kooning. They understood it as a mode or manner having a rather general application: that of biomorphic construction to create an image of transmutation. Not only artists, but generations of students imbibed this conception of the Picasso of the '30s and this particular style.

Exhibit B: Picasso's Bather with Beach Ball, 1932. Against a pale cobalt sea and sky, the monumental form of female adolescence is assembled from a collection of pneumatic parts: bulbous bones so pumped with air that the figure appears to float. As a pendant to the *Seated Bather*, this work displays a contrary mood, a lugubrious sense of play instead of the earlier image's desiccated wrath. But in all those conditions that we would call style the paintings are nearly twins. Both exploit a simple backdrop to force a sculptural experience of their theatrically isolated forms. Both conceive the figure as constructed out of parts whose provisional coherence effects a transformation from one thing (bone, balloon) to another (pelvis, breast).

Exhibit C: At a lecture this fall at the Baltimore Museum of Art, William Rubin, one of the leading Picasso scholars, showed both paintings.¹ With these

1. The lecture was presented on October 12, 1980, at a symposium on the cubist legacy in twentieth-century sculpture.



Pablo Picasso. Seated Bather. 1930. (Left.) Bather with Beach Ball. 1932. (Right.)

two works, he said, we find ourselves looking at two different universes—and by this he meant different formal as well as symbolic worlds. This is hard to understand; as difficult as if someone pointed first to a Hals portrait of a Dutch militia officer and then to his rendering of the *Malle Babbe* and maintained that they were products of different styles. But Rubin was insisting on this difference, a difference become incontrovertible by the very fact that behind each picture there lay a real-world model, each model with a different name: Olga Picasso; Marie-Thérèse Walter.

We are by now familiar with the sordid conditions of Picasso's marriage in the late '20s, as we are with his passion for the somnolent blond he met when she was seventeen and who was to reign, a sleepy Venus, over a half-dozen years of his art. But in Rubin's suggestion that Olga and Marie-Thérèse provide not merely antithetical moods and subjects for the pictorial contemplation of the same artist, but that they actually function as determinants in a change in style, we run full tilt into the Autobiographical Picasso. And in this instance Rubin himself was the first to invoke it. The changes in Picasso's art, he went on to say, are a direct

function of the turns and twists of the master's private life. With the exception of his cubism, Picasso's style is inextricable from his biography.

With the Museum of Modern Art's huge Picasso retrospective has come a flood of critical and scholarly essays on Picasso, almost all of them dedicated to "Art as Autobiography." That latter phrase is the title of a just-published book on Picasso by an author who sees everything in his work as a pictorial response to some specific stimulus in his personal life, including the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which she claims was made in an effort to exorcise "his private female demons."² This same author, who proudly pounces on a mish-mash of latter-day accounts to "prove" that Picasso's turn-of-the-century decision to go to Paris to pursue his art was due to his need to "exile himself from Spain in order to escape his tyrannical mother," provides us with a delicious, if unintended parody of the Autobiographical Picasso.³

But prone to parody or not, this argument is upheld by many respected scholars and is attracting many others. John Richardson, of course, took the opportunity of reviewing the Museum of Modern Art exhibition to forward the case for the Autobiographical Picasso. Agreeing with Dora Maar that Picasso's art is at any one time a function of the changes in five private forces—his mistress, his house, his poet, his set of admirers, his dog (yes, dog!)—Richardson exhorts art-historical workers to fan out among the survivors of Picasso's acquaintance, to record the last scraps of personal information still outstanding before death prevents the remaining witnesses from appearing in court.⁴ Richardson's trumpet has been sounding this theme for over twenty years, so on this occasion his call was not surprising. But the Autobiographical Picasso is new to William Rubin and that this view of matters should now hold him convert is all the more impressive in that it had to overcome the resistance of decades of Rubin's training. Rubin's earlier practice of art history was rich in a host of ways of understanding art in transpersonal terms: ways that involve questions of period style, of shared formal and iconographic symbols that seem to be the function of larger units of history than the restricted profile of a merely private life. So the Rubin case is particularly instructive, all the more because in his account the personal, the private, the biographical, is given in a series of proper names: Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Françoise, Jacqueline. And an art history turned militantly away from all that is transpersonal in history—style, social and economic context, archive, structure—is interestingly and significantly symbolized by an art-history as a history of the proper name.

2. Mary Mathews Gedo, "Art as Exorcism: Picasso's 'Demoiselles d'Avignon.'" *Arts*, LV (October 1980), 70-81.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 72; see also *Art as Autobiography*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

4. John Richardson, "Your Show of Shows," *The New York Review*, July 17, 1980. Eugene Thaw uses Richardson's essay as an occasion for his own attack on art as autobiography. See, "Lust for Life," *The New York Review*, October 23, 1980.

I can call nothing by name if that is not its name. I call a cat a cat, and Rolet a rogue.

—Boileau

A proper name, we could say, is a token without a type. Not transferable and not reusable, it applies only to me. And I am its complete significance. The proper name completes, exhausts itself in an act of reference. Aside from labeling the object that is its bearer, it has no further meaning, and thus no "sense" such as other words have. Those words, like the common nouns *horse* or *house* have definitions: a set of predicates by which we grasp the concept that can be said to be their sense, or meaning. But a proper name has no such definition—only an individual who bears the name and to whom it refers. That is not only common sense, but it is the view that philosophy held until the end of the last century.⁵ But then this traditional no-sense view was attacked first by Frege and then by Russell.⁶ Proper names, Frege argued, must not only have a sense, but in cases where one is naming a nonexistent character (like Santa Claus), they may even have a sense but no referent. Russell went on to enlarge this view by claiming that ordinary proper names are, in fact, disguised definite descriptions and thus we learn how correctly to apply a proper name by recourse to sets of characteristics. (Thus the "sense" of the name Aristotle is supplied by some or all of a set of descriptions, such as: a Greek philosopher; the tutor of Alexander the Great; the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. . . .) We could call this the intensional or sense view of the proper name; and it has been variously argued by the later Wittgenstein and by Searle,⁷ to be itself more recently challenged by a causal theory of nominal reference.⁸

In an extraordinary essay Joel Fineman has recently indicated the importance of the philosophical debate on proper names to literary theory and criticism:

The progressive and increasingly dogmatic subordination by philosophy of nominal reference, first to extension, then to expression, then to

5. John Searle writes: "Perhaps the most famous formulation of this no-sense theory of proper names is Mill's statement that proper names have denotation but not connotation. For Mill a common noun like 'horse' has both a connotation and a denotation; it connotes those properties which would be specified in a definition of the word 'horse,' and it denotes all horses. But a proper name only denotes its bearer. See, Searle, "Proper Names and Descriptions," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., New York, Macmillan, 1967, vol. 6, p. 487.

6. Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Peter Geach, Max Black, eds., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1960. This essay was first published in 1892. Bertrand Russell, "Descriptions," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, Jay Rosenberg, Charles Travis, eds., Englewood, Prentice-Hall, 1971. Reprinted from Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, London, 1919.

7. Thus Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Para. 40: "When Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies." See also Para. 79. John Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind*, LXVII (April 1958), 166-173.

8. This literature is anthologized in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, Stephen P. Schwartz, ed., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977.

intention, and finally to a historicity that postpones its own temporality, in many ways parallels the development and eventual demise of an aesthetics of representation. That is to say, the perennial awkwardness philosophy discloses in the collation of word and thing is closely related to the uneasy relation our literary tradition regularly discovers when it connects literal to figurative literary meaning.⁹

Whatever its status within current considerations of literary representation, it is clear that the proper name has a definite role to play within current art-historical and critical notions of the relation between image and meaning.

Classical theories of mimesis would, like the classical theory of proper names, limit meaning to reference. A visual representation of something "means" that thing in the world of which it is a picture. "Hence," Aristotle writes, "the pleasure [all men] receive from a picture: in viewing it they learn, they infer, they discover what every object is, that this, for instance, is such a particular man, etc."¹⁰ A picture is thus a label—only a visual rather than a verbal one—which picks out something in the world and refers to it. And its meaning is used up in this act of reference. It is in this sense that the mimetic image (or representation) is like the traditionally understood proper name. Both are types of labels, modes of reference; in both cases the meaning is conducted through, limited to, just this referential channel. In this view both names and pictures would constitute representations that, in the philosophical sense, have extension but no intension. The meaning of the label extends over the object to which it refers, but comes to an end at its boundaries. It denotes the object. But it is without connotation or intension, without, that is, a conceptual status that would allow it to be applied over a plurality of instances, without, finally, general conditions of signification. In the classical sense of the proper name, it has a referent but no sense.

It is too obvious to need restating that art history was launched through a sense of, among other things, the inadequacy of classical mimetic theories to explain the multiplicity of visual representation over the course of world art. In a search for reasons for a particular culture's maintenance of nearness or distance between its art's images and their referents, art historians turned to a notion (or rather a whole host of notions) of signification. Thus we have Riegl insisting that late Roman sculpture is unnaturalistic because it intends a meaning that cannot be netted by, or completed within, the confines of that material object the sculpture could be said to represent. From its very beginning art history called upon a theory of representation that would not stop with mere extension (or denotation) but would allow for intension (or connotation). Iconology, as Panofsky presents it, would be unthinkable without such a theory. However, those

9. Joel Fineman, "The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980), fn. 7, p. 89.

10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part I, Section V.

early generations of art historians almost never, themselves, theorized their own assumptions about representation. They simply took it as a given that it was in the connotative richness and density—that is, the intension—of the aesthetic sign, that it lay claim to being art at all. Its intension we could say, was taken as a record or index of the multiplicity of human meaning or intention; and they equated this capacity for multivalent content with the very capacity to conceive aesthetic signs.

No technical field is monolithic, and of course art historical practice has been divided about method, purview, and almost everything else one could name. But it is probably the case that, with very few exceptions, the unspoken assumptions about the intensive powers of visual representation were shared by most practitioners in the first part of this century.

Thus the revision in the theory of representation that is currently underway, in its overturning of those older beliefs, is all the more striking. The revision involves a return to a notion of pictorial representation as constituted by signs with referents but no sense: to the limiting of the aesthetic sign to extension, to the dependent condition of the classically conceived proper name. Although the epidemic of extension is widespread in art-historical practice, nowhere is it more virulent and obvious than in Picasso studies. And as I shall go on to demonstrate, nowhere should its spread evoke more irony.

*I have said everything when I have
named the man.*

—Pliny the Younger

What I have been calling an aesthetics of extension or an art history of the proper name can be likened to the detective story or the *roman à clef*, where the meaning of the tale reduces to just this question of identity. In the name of the one “who did it” we find not only the solution, but the ultimate sense of the murder mystery; and in discovering the actual people who lie behind a set of fictional characters, we fulfill the goal of the narrative: those characters’ *real* names *are* its sense. Unlike allegory, in which a linked and burgeoning series of names establishes an open-ended set of analogies—Jonah/Lazarus/Christ—there is in this aesthetics of the proper name a contraction of sense to the simple task of pointing, or labeling, to the act of unequivocal reference. It is as though the shifting, changing sands of visual polysemy, of multiple meanings and regroupings, have made us intolerably nervous, so that we wish to find the bedrock of sense. We wish to achieve a type of signification beyond which there can be no further reading or interpretation. Interpretation, we insist, must be made to stop somewhere. And where more absolutely and appropriately than in an act of what the police call “positive identification”? For the individual who can be shown to be the “key” to the image, and thus the “meaning” of the image, has the kind of singularity one is looking for. Like his name, his meaning stops within the boundaries of identity.

The instance of "positive identification" that led off the last dozen years' march of Picasso studies into the terrain of biography was the discovery that the major painting of the Blue Period—*La Vie*, 1904—contained a portrait of the Spanish painter and friend of Picasso, Casagemas, who had committed suicide in 1902.¹¹ Until 1967, when this connection with Casagemas was made, *La Vie* had been interpreted within the general context of fin-de-siècle allegory, with works like Gauguin's *D'Où Venons Nous?* and Munch's *Dance of Life* providing the relevant comparisons.¹² But once a real person could be placed as the model for the standing male figure—moreover a person whose life involved the lurid details of impotence and failed homicide but achieved suicide—the earlier interpretations of *La Vie* as an allegory of maturation and development could be put aside for a more local and specific reading. Henceforth the picture could be seen as a *tableau vivant* containing the dead man torn between two women, one old and one young, the meaning of which "is" sexual dread. And because early studies for the painting show that the male figure had originally been conceived as Picasso's self-portrait, one could now hypothesize the artist's identification with his friend and read the work as "expressing . . . that sense of himself as having been thrust by women into an untenable and ultimately tragic position. . . ." ¹³

The problem with this reading is not that the identification is wrong, but that its ultimate aesthetic relevance is yet to be proved or even, given current art-historical fashion, argued. And the problem of its aesthetic relevance is that this reading dissociates the work from all those other aspects, equally present, which have nothing to do with Casagemas and a sexually provoked suicide. What is most particularly left out of this account is the fact that the work is located in a highly fluctuating and ambiguous space of multiple planes of representation due to the fact that its setting is an artist's studio and its figures are related, at least on one level, to an allegory of painting.¹⁴ Whatever its view of "life," the work echoes such distinguished nineteenth-century forebears as Courbet and Manet in insisting that, for a painter, life and art allegorize each other, both caught up equally in the problem of representation. The name Casagemas does not extend far enough to signify either this relationship or this problem. Yet current art-historical

11. Pierre Daix, "La Période Bleue de Picasso et le suicide de Carlos Casagemas," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXIX (April 1967), 245.

12. Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool, *Picasso, The Formative Years*, New York Graphic Society, 1962, pp. 18-21.

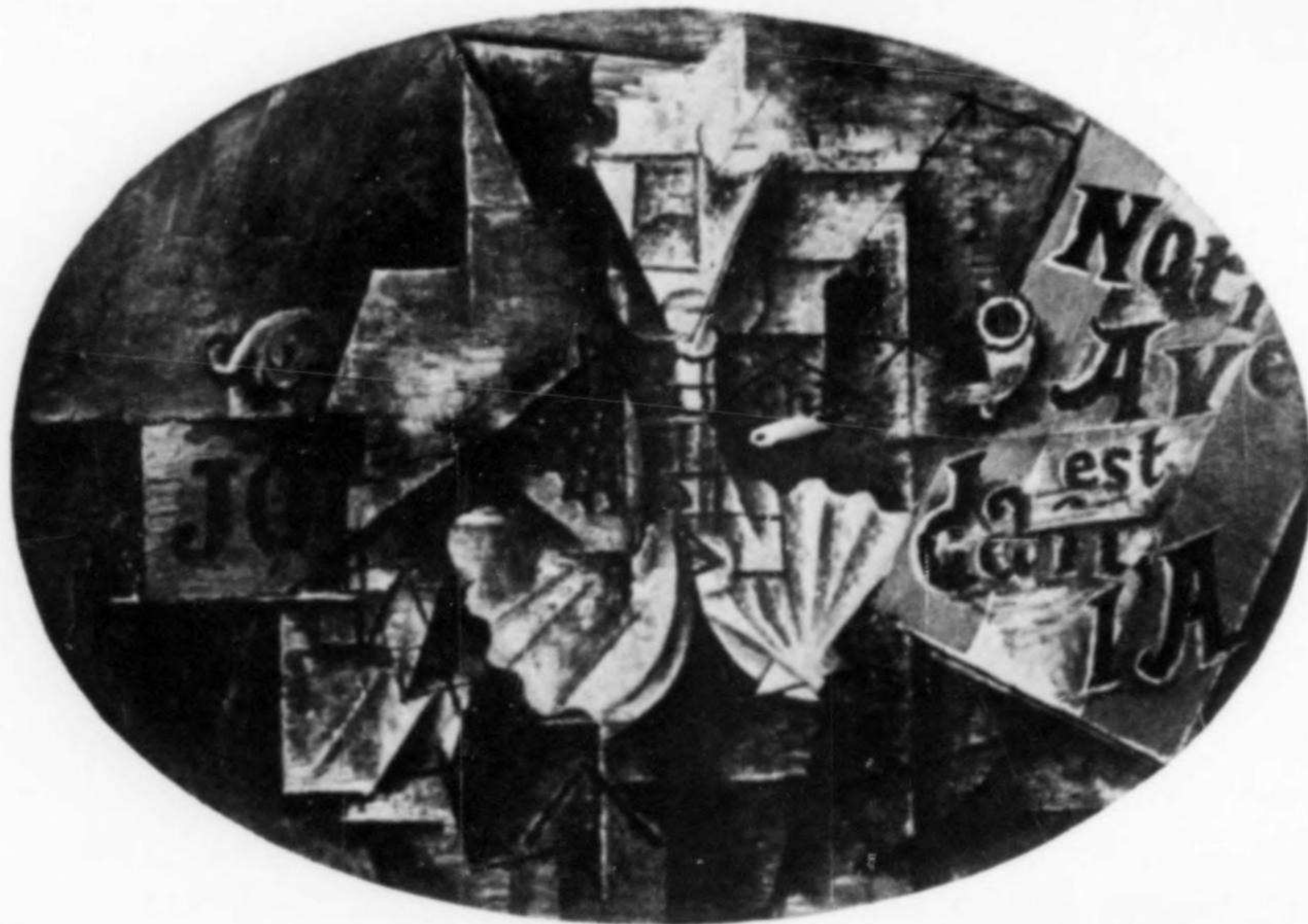
13. Theodore Reff, "Themes of Love and Death in Picasso's Early Work," in *Picasso in Retrospect*, Roland Penrose, John Golding, eds., New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 28.

14. At the beginning of his discussion of *La Vie*, Reff has no trouble locating the work: "the setting, an artist's studio with two of his canvases in the background" (p. 24). But after "reading" it through the proper name of Casagemas, his account of the location changes and, curiously, "the setting is no longer necessarily an artist's studio" (p. 28). This is a niggling detail, but I bring it to the attention of the reader who feels that there is nothing inherently objectionable to a history of proper names, since that merely adds another dimension to the interpretation of a given work. In practical fact, what we find in most cases is not addition, but restriction.

wisdom uses "Casagemas" to explain the picture—to provide the work's ultimate meaning or sense. When we have named Casagemas, we have (or so we think) cracked the code of the painting and it has no more secrets to withhold.

La Vie is after all a narrative painting and this close examination of its dramatis personae is an understandable (though insufficient) response to the work. The methodology of the proper name becomes more astonishing, however, when practiced on the body of work inaugurated by cubism.

Two examples will serve. A recent study by Linda Nochlin takes up the question of Picasso's color, an issue almost completely ignored by earlier scholar-



Pablo Picasso. The Scallop Shell (Notre avenir est dans l'air). 1912.

ship.¹⁵ Within modernist art, color would seem to be a subject set at the furthest possible remove from a reading by proper names. This turns out not to be true, as Nochlin analyzes a 1912 cubist painting that is mostly *grisaille*, broken by the intrusion of a flat plane broadly striped in red, white, and blue, and carrying the written words, "Notre avenir est dans l'air." Conceived at about the same time as the famous first collage, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, the work in question echoes many other canvases from early 1912, in which the introduction of some kind of

15. Linda Nochlin, "Picasso's Color: Schemes and Gambits," *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 10 (December 1980), 105-123; 177-183.

large plane which, like the chair-caning or the pamphlet "*Notre avenir . . .*," is a wholly different color and texture from the monochrome faceting of analytic cubism, and inaugurates both the invention of collage and the opening of cubism to color.

This, however, is not Nochlin's point. The actual red-white-and-blue *tricolore* pamphlet that Picasso depicted in this cubist still life had been issued originally to promote the development of aviation for military use. Thus the pamphlet "means" French nationalism; its colors bear the name of Picasso's adopted country. Behind the *tricolore* we read not only "France" but the name of the artist's assumed identity: "Picasso/Frenchman." Color's meaning contracts to the coding of a proper name. (Later in the same essay Nochlin reveals that behind Picasso's use of violet in his work of the early '30s there lies yet another name, which is its meaning: once again, Marie-Thérèse.)

Thus the significance of color reduces to a name, but then, in the following example, so does the significance of names. In his essay "Picasso and the Typography of Cubism," Robert Rosenblum proposes to read the names printed on the labels introduced into cubist collage, and thus to identify the objects so labeled.¹⁶ In Picasso's collages many newspapers are named: *L'Indépendant*, *Excelsior*, *Le Moniteur*, *L'Intransigeant*, *Le Quotidien du Midi*, *Le Figaro*; but none with such frequency as *Le Journal*. Rosenblum describes at length the way this name is fractured—most characteristically into JOU, JOUR, and URNAL—and the puns that are thereby released. But that the word-fragments perform these jokes while serving to label the object—the newspaper—with its name, is very much Rosenblum's point. For he concludes his argument by declaring the realism of Picasso's cubist collages, a realism that secures, through printed labels, the presence of the actual objects that constitute "the new imagery of the modern world."¹⁷

This assumption that the fragmented word has the ultimate function of a proper name leads Rosenblum to the following kind of discussion:

Such Cubist conundrums are quite as common in the labelling of the bottles of Picasso's compatriot, Juan Gris. On his café table tops, even humble bottles of Beaujolais can suddenly be transformed into verbal jokes. Often, the word BEAUJOLAIS is fragmented to a simple BEAU . . . in another example . . . he permits only the letters EAU to show on the label (originally *Beaujolais*, *Beaune*, or *Bordeaux*), and thereby performs his own Cubist version of The Miracle at Cana.¹⁸

We are to expand the word-fragment to grasp the name (we have our choice

16. Robert Rosenblum, "Picasso and the Typography of Cubism," in *Picasso in Retrospect*, pp. 49-75.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

of three reds) and thereby to secure the original object. In this certainty about word-world connection there is realism indeed.

But are the labels EAU and JOU a set of transparent signifiers, the nicknames of a group of objects (the newspaper, the winebottle) whose real names (*Journal*, *Beaujolais*) form the basis for this labor of the cubist pun? Is the structure of cubist collage itself supportive of the semantic positivism that will allow it to be thus assimilated to the art history of the proper name? Or are the word-fragments that gather on the surfaces of Picasso's collages instead a function of a rather more exacting notion of reference, representation, and signification?

This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.
—Robert Rauschenberg

The most recent major addition to the scholarly inquiry on cubism is Pierre Daix's catalogue raisonné, *Picasso: 1907-1916*. Daix's suggestive text expands the somewhat limited art-historical vocabulary for describing what transpires with the advent of collage, for Daix insists on characterizing collage-elements as signs—not simply in the loose way that had occurred earlier on in the Picasso literature—but in a way that announces its connection to structural linguistics.¹⁹

Daix is careful to subdivide the sign into signifier and signified—the first being the affixed collage-bit or element of schematic drawing itself; the second being the referent of this signifier: newspaper, bottle, violin.²⁰ Though this is rare in his discussion, Daix does occasionally indicate that the signified may not be an object at all but rather a free-floating property, like a texture—for example, wood, signified by a bit of wood-grained wallpaper—or a formal element such as verticality or roundness—although this element is usually shown to function as the property of an object: of the round, vertical winebottle, for example.²¹ Again and again Daix hammers away at the lesson that cubist collage exchanges the natural visual world of things for the artificial, codified language of signs.

But there is, nowhere in Daix's exposition, a rigorous presentation of the concept of the sign. Because of this, and the manner in which much of Daix's own discussion proceeds, it is extremely easy to convert the issue of the collage-sign into a question of semantics, that is, the sign's transparent connection to a given

19. Daix's relation to structuralism and an analysis of the sign is documented as being through Lévi-Strauss, to whom he refers at points throughout his text.

20. Because Daix seems, indeed, to equate the *signified* with the *referent*, he deviates in the most crucial way from Saussure's characterization of the signified as the *concept* or *idea* or *meaning* of the sign. Saussure is careful to distinguish between the concept evoked by the sign and any real-world, physical object to which the signifier could be attached as a label. It is to the former that the designation *signified* belongs. Daix, who never mentions Saussure's name, seems likewise unaware of the major import of Saussure's analysis.

21. See Pierre Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years 1907-1916*, New York, New York Graphic Society/Little, Brown, 1980, p. 123.

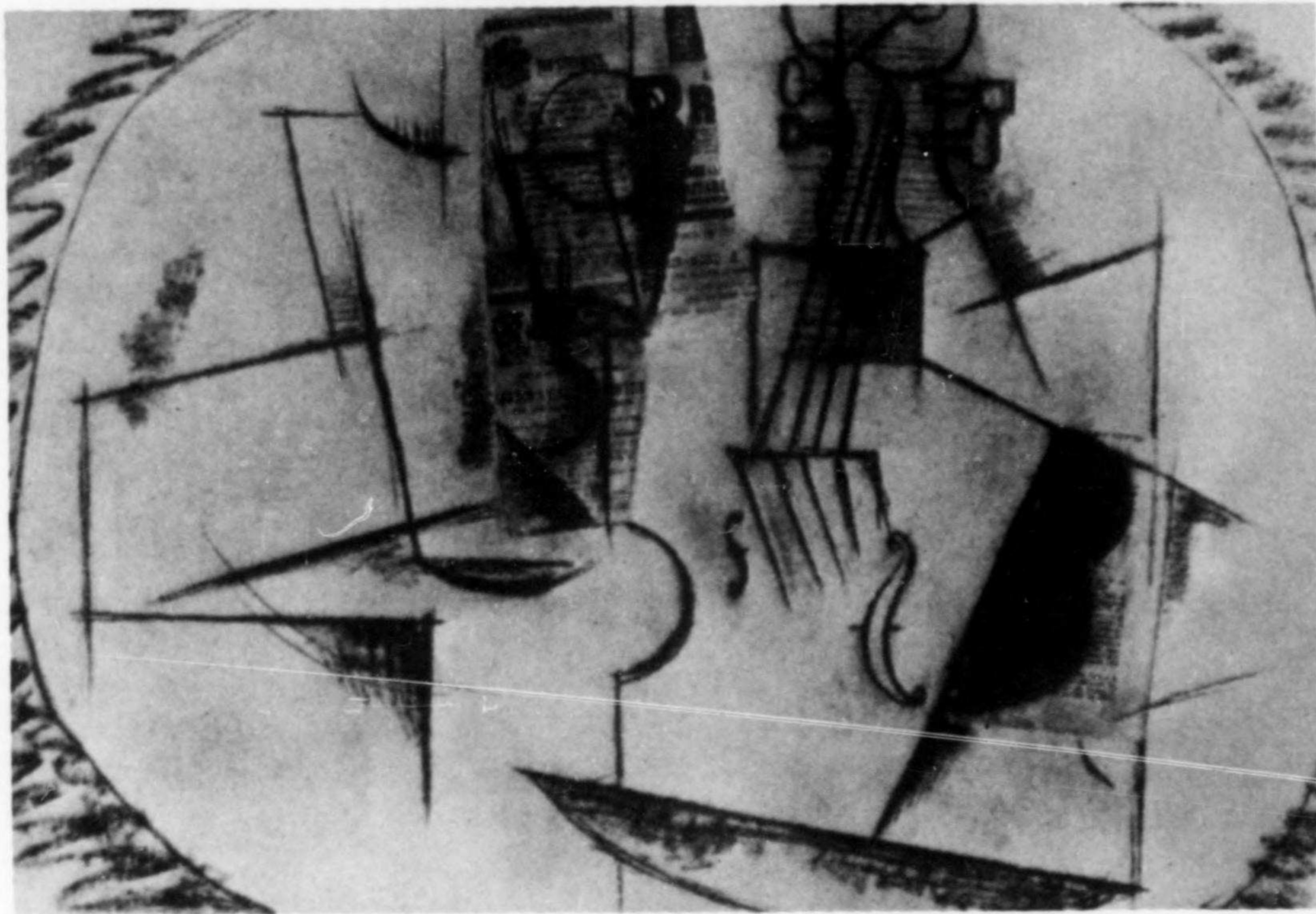
referent, thereby assimilating collage itself to a theater of the proper name: "EAU is really Beaujolais, and JOU is in fact Journal."

If we are really going to turn to structural linguistics for instruction about the operation of the sign we must bear in mind the two absolute conditions posited by Saussure for the functioning of the linguistic sign. The first is the analysis of signs into a relationship between signifier and signified ($\frac{s}{\bar{s}}$) in which the signifier is a *material* constituent (written trace, phonic element) and the signified, an immaterial idea or concept. This opposition between the registers of the two halves of the sign stresses that status of the sign as substitute, proxy, stand-in, for an absent referent. It insists, that is, on the literal meaning of the prefix /re/ in the word *representation*, drawing attention to the way the sign works away from, or in the aftermath of, the thing to which it refers.

This grounding of the terms of representation on absence—the making of absence the very condition of the representability of the sign—alerts us to the way the notion of the sign-as-label is a perversion of the operations of the sign. For the label merely doubles an already material presence by giving it its name. But the sign, as a function of absence rather than presence, is a coupling of signifier and immaterial concept in relation to which (as in the Frege/Russell/Wittgenstein notion of the proper name) there may be no referent at all (and thus no *thing* on which to affix the label).

This structural condition of absence is essential to the operations of the sign within Picasso's collage. As just one from among the myriad possible examples, we can think of the appearance of the two *f*-shaped violin soundholes that are inscribed on the surface of work after work from 1912-14. The semantic interpretation of these *fs* is that they simply signify the presence of the musical instrument; that is, they label a given plane of the collage-assembly with the term "violin." But there is almost no case from among these collages in which the two *fs* mirror each other across the plane surface. Time and again their inscription involves a vast disparity between the two letters, one being bigger and often thicker than the other. With this simple, but very emphatic, size difference, Picasso composes the sign, not of violin, but of foreshortening: of the differential size within a single surface due to its rotation into depth. And because the inscription of the *fs* takes place within the collage assembly and thus on the most rigidly flattened and frontalized of planes, "depth" is thus written on the very place from which it is—within the presence of the collage—most absent. It is *this* experience of inscription that guarantees these forms the status of signs.

What Picasso does with these *fs* to compose a sign of space as the condition of physical rotation, he does with the application of newsprint to construct the sign of space as penetrable or transparent. It is the perceptual disintegration of the fine-type of the printed page into a sign for the broken color with which painting (from Rembrandt to Seurat) represents atmosphere, that Picasso continually exploits. In so doing, he inscribes transparency on the very element of the collage's fabric that is most reified and opaque: its planes of newspaper.

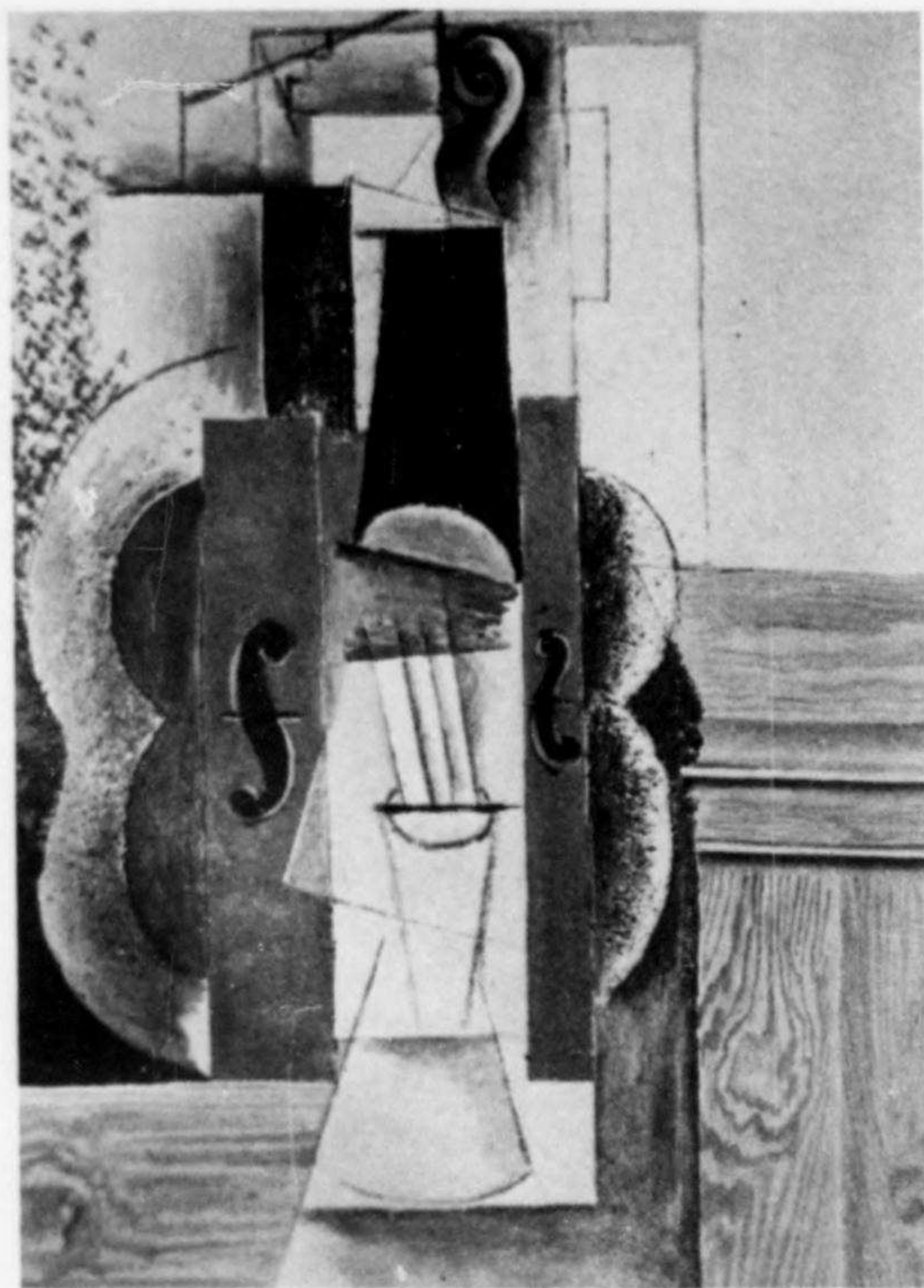
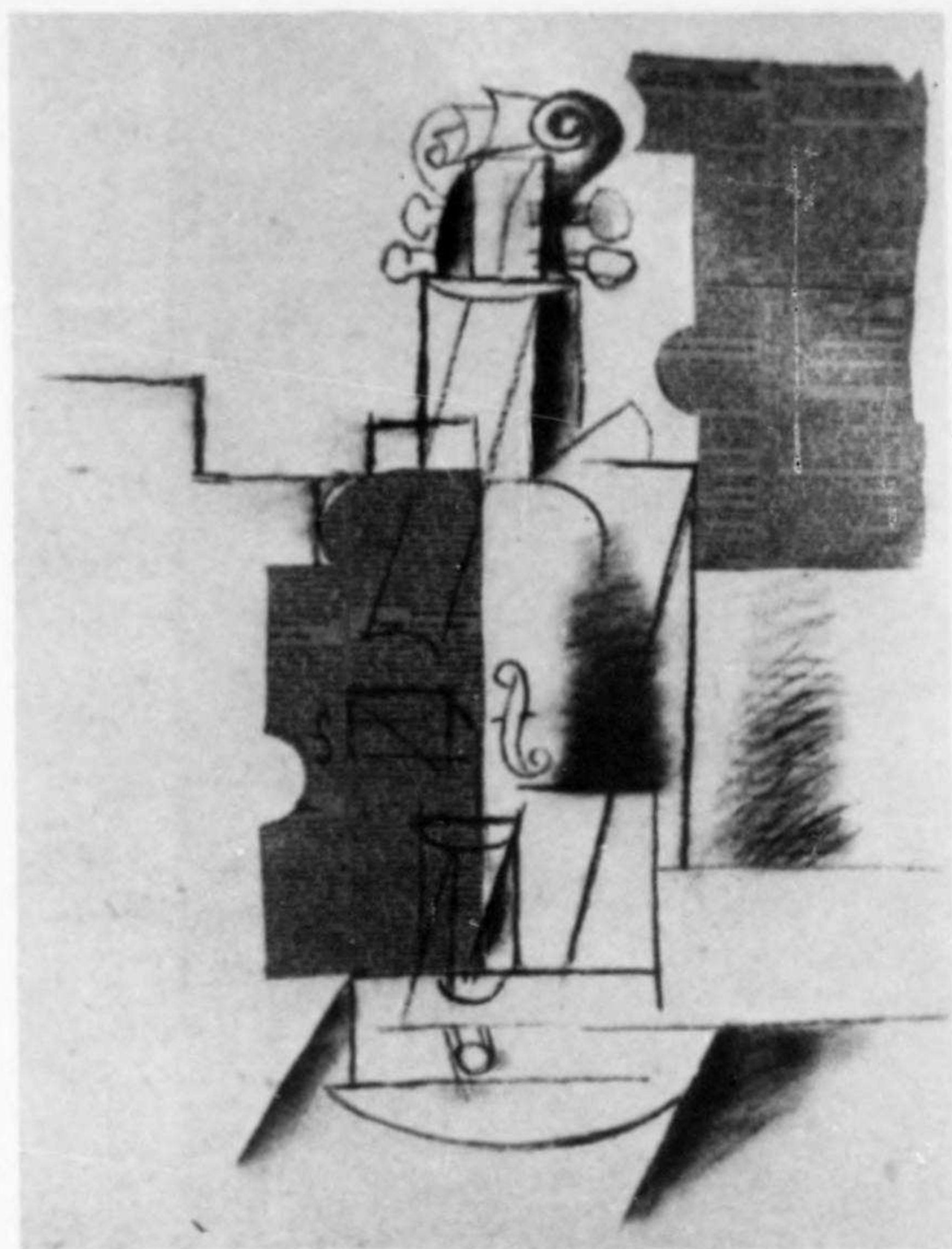


Pablo Picasso. Glass and Violin. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 529.)

If one of the formal strategies that develops from collage, first into synthetic and then into late cubism, is the insistence of figure/ground reversal and the continual transposition between negative and positive form, this formal resource derives from collage's command of the structure of signification: no positive sign without the eclipse or negation of its material referent. The extraordinary contribution of collage is that it is the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign.

From this notion of absence as one of the preconditions of the sign, one can begin to see the objections to the kind of game that literalizes the labels of cubist collages, giving us the "real" name of the wine marked by EAU or the newspaper by JOUR. Because the use of word-fragments is not the sprinkling of nicknames on the surfaces of these works, but rather the marking of the name itself with that condition of incompleteness or absence which secures for the sign its status as representation.

The second of Saussure's conditions for the operation of the sign turns not so much on absence as on difference. "*In language there are only differences,*"

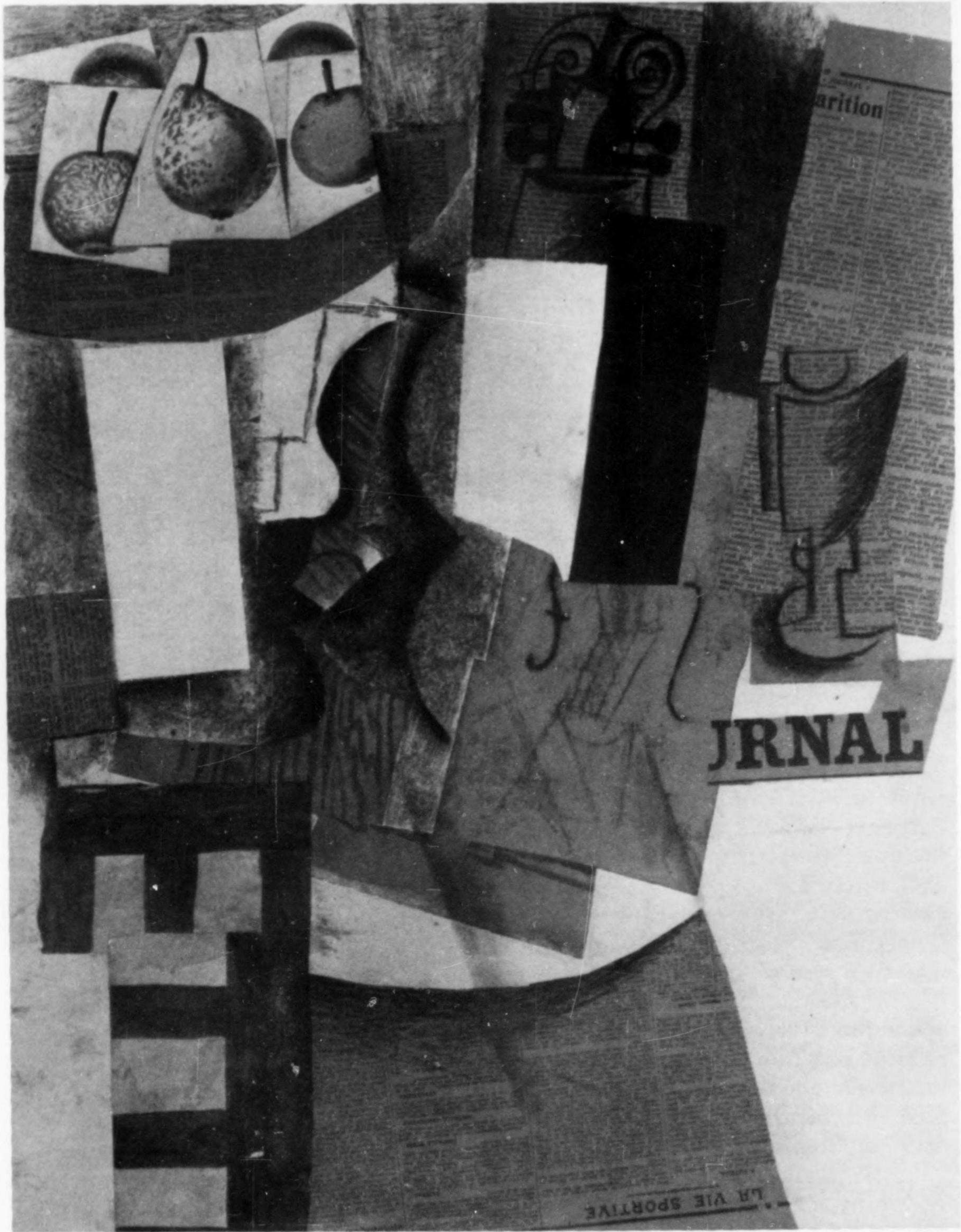


Pablo Picasso. *Violin*. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 524.) (Left.)
Violin Hung on a Wall. 1913? (Daix cat. no. 573.)
 (Right.)

Saussure lectured. "Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*."²² This declaration of the diacritical nature of the sign establishes it as a term whose meaning is never an absolute, but rather a choice from a set of possibilities, with meaning determined by the very terms *not* chosen. As a very simple illustration of meaning as this function of difference (rather than "positive identification") we might think of the traffic-light system where red means "stop" only in relation to an alternative of green as "go."

In analyzing the collage elements as a system of signs, we find not only the operations of absence but also the systematic play of difference. A single collage element can function simultaneously to compose the sign of atmosphere or luminosity and of closure or edge. In the 1913 *Violin and Fruit*, for example, a piece of newsprint, its fine type yielding the experience of tone, reads as "transparency" or "luminosity." In the same work the single patch of wood-grained paper

22. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, New York, McGraw-Hill, p. 120.



Pablo Picasso. Compote Dish with Fruit, Violin, and Glass. 1912. (Daix cat. no. 530.)

ambiguously allocated to table and/or musical instrument composes the sign for open, as opposed to closed form. Yet the piece of wood graining terminates in a complex contour that produces the closed silhouette of a neighboring form. And the transparent colorism of the newsprint hardens into opaque line at the definitiveness of its edges. In the great, complex cubist collages, each element is fully diacritical, instantiating both line and color, closure and openness, plane and recession. Each signifier thus yields a matched pair of formal signifieds. Thus if the elements of cubist collage do establish sets of predicates, these are not limited to the properties of objects. They extend to the differential calculus at the very heart of the formal code of painting. What is systematized in collage is not so much the forms of a set of studio paraphernalia, but the very system of form.²³

That form cannot be separated from Picasso's meditation on the inner workings of the sign—at least as it operates within the pictorial field—is a function of the combined formal/significatory status of the most basic element of collage. For it is the affixing of the collage piece, one plane set down on another, that is the center of collage as a signifying system. That plane, glued to its support, enters the work as the literalization of depth, actually resting "in front of" or "on top of" the field or element it now partially obscures. But this very act of literalization opens up the field of collage to the play of representation. For the supporting ground that is obscured by the affixed plane resurfaces in a miniaturized facsimile in the collage element itself. The collage element obscures the master plane only to represent that plane in the form of a depiction. If the element is the literalization of figure against field, it is so as a figure of the field it must literally occlude.

The collage element as a discrete plane is a bounded figure; but as such it is a figure of a bounded field—a figure of the very bounded field which it enters the ensemble only to obscure. The field is thus constituted inside itself as a figure of its own absence, an index of a material presence now rendered literally invisible. The collage element performs the occultation of one field in order to introject the figure of a new field, but to introject it *as* figure—a surface that is the image of eradicated surface. It is this eradication of the original surface and the reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence that is the master term of the entire condition of collage as a system of signifiers.

The various resources for the visual illusion of spatial presence becomes the ostentatious subject of the collage-signs. But in "writing" this presence, they guarantee its absence. Collage thus effects the representation of representation. This goes well beyond the analytic cubist dismemberment of illusion into its constituent elements. Because collage no longer retains these elements; it signifies or represents them.

What collage achieves, then, is a metalanguage of the visual. It can talk

23. This and the next six paragraphs are adopted from my "Re-Presenting Picasso," *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 10 (December 1980), 91-96.

about space without employing it; it can figure the figure through the constant superimposition of grounds; it can speak in turn of light and shade through the subterfuge of a written text. This capacity of "speaking about" depends on the ability of each collage element to function as the material signifier for a signified that is its opposite: a presence whose referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence. As a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it. Collage's very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground—a ground both supplemented and supplanted.

It is often said that the genius of collage, its modernist genius, is that it heightens—not diminishes—the viewer's experience of the ground, the picture surface, the material support of the image; as never before, the ground—we are told—forces itself on our perception. But in collage, in fact, the ground is literally masked and riven. It enters our experience not as an object of perception, but as an object of discourse, of *representation*. Within the collage system all of the other perceptual *données* are transmuted into the absent objects of a group of signs.

It is here that we can see the opening of the rift between collage as system and modernism proper. For collage operates in direct opposition to modernism's search for perceptual plenitude and unimpeachable self-presence. Modernism's goal is to objectify the formal constituents of a given medium, making these, beginning with the very ground that is the origin of their existence, the objects of vision. Collage problematizes that goal, by setting up discourse in place of presence, a discourse founded on a buried origin, a discourse fueled by that absence. The nature of this discourse is that it leads ceaselessly through the maze of the polar alternatives of painting displayed as system. And this system is inaugurated through the loss of an origin that can never be objectified, but only represented.

The power of tradition can preserve no art in life that no longer is the expression of its time. One may also speak of a formal decay in art, that is, a death of the feeling for form. The significance of individual parts is no longer understood—likewise, the feeling for relationships.

—Heinrich Wölfflin

We are standing now on the threshold of a postmodernist art, an art of a fully problematized view of representation, in which to name (represent) an object may not necessarily be to call it forth, for there may be no (original) object. For this postmodernist notion of the originless play of the signifier we could use the term

simulacrum.²⁴ But the whole structure of postmodernism has its proto-history in those investigations of the representational system of absence that we can only now recognize as the contemporaneous alternative to modernism. Picasso's collage was an extraordinary example of this proto-history, along with Klee's pedagogical art of the 1920s in which representation is deliberately characterized as absence.

At the very same moment when Picasso's collage becomes especially pertinent to the general terms and conditions of postmodernism, we are witnessing the outbreak of an aesthetics of autobiography, what I have earlier called an art history of the proper name. That this maneuver of finding an exact (historical) referent for every pictorial sign, thereby fixing and limiting the play of meaning, should be questionable with regard to art in general is obvious. But that it should be applied to Picasso in particular is highly objectionable, and to collage—the very system inaugurated on the indeterminacy of the referent, and on absence—is grotesque. For it is collage that raises the investigation of the impersonal workings of pictorial form, begun in analytical cubism, onto another level: the *impersonal* operations of language that are the subject of collage.

In his discussion of classic collage, Daix repeatedly stresses the de-personalization of Picasso's drawing in these works, his use of preexistent, industrialized elements (which Daix goes so far as to call *readymade*), and his mechanization of the pictorial surfaces—in order to insist on the objective status of this art of language, this play of signs.²⁵ Language (in the Saussurian sense of *langue*) is what is at stake in Daix's reference to the readymade and the impersonal: that is, language as a synchronic repertory of terms into which each individual must assimilate himself, so that from the point of view of structure, a speaker does not so much speak, as he is spoken by, language. The linguistic structure of signs "speaks" Picasso's collages, and in the signs' burgeoning and transmuting play *sense* may transpire even in the absence of *reference*.

The aesthetics of the proper name involves more than a failure to come to terms with the structure of representation, although that failure at this particular juncture of history is an extremely serious one. The aesthetics of the proper name is erected specifically on the grave of form.²⁶

One of the pleasures of form—held at least for a moment at some distance from reference—is its openness to multiple imbrication in the work, and thus its hospitableness to polysemy. It was the new critics—that group of determined "formalists"—who gloried in the ambiguity and multiplicity of reference made available by the play of poetic form.

24. *Simulacrum* is a term used by both Jean Baudrillard and Guy de Bord.

25. Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years*, pp. 132-137.

26. The passage from Heinrich Wölfflin, cited at the beginning of this section, which faces the possibility of the "death of the feeling for form," is taken from Wölfflin's unpublished journals. For that passage, as for its translation, I am indebted to Joan Hart and her PhD dissertation *Heinrich Wölfflin*, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

For the art historians of the proper name, form has become so devalued as a term (and suspect as an experience), that it simply cannot be a resource for meaning. Each of the studies on Picasso-via-the-proper-name begins by announcing the insufficiencies of an art history of style, of form. Because Rosenblum's essay on cubist typography was written a decade ago, it therefore opens by paying lip-service to the importance of a formal reading of cubism, modestly describing its own area of investigation as "a secondary aspect," a matter of "additional interpretations that would enrich, rather than deny, the formal ones."²⁷ But Rosenblum's simple semantics of the proper name does not enrich the forms of cubist collage; it depletes and impoverishes them. By giving everything a name, it strips each sign of its special modality of meaning: its capacity to represent the conditions of representation. The deprecation of the formal, the systematic, is now much more open in what Rosenblum has to say about method. "Certainly the formalist approach to the 19th century seems to me to have been exhausted a long time ago," he recently told two graduate-student interviewers. "It's just too boring . . . it's so stale that I can't mouth those words anymore."²⁸

This petulant "boredom" with form is emblematic of a dismissal that is widespread among historians as well as critics of art. With it has come a massive misreading of the processes of signification and a reduction of the visual sign to an insistent mouthing of proper names.

27. Rosenblum, p. 49.

28. In *The Rutgers Art Review*, I (January 1980), p. 73.

The Holy Alliance: Populism and Feminism

CLARA WEYERGRAF

In his stirring speech before the 1980 Democratic National Convention, Edward Kennedy addressed himself to the "common man," whose problems he articulated with eloquence and empathy. He identified them individually—the unemployed glass-blower from Charleston, the Iowa farmer concerned for the future of his children, "the grandmother in East Los Angeles . . . who no longer has a phone to call her grandchildren, because she gave it up to pay her rent on her small apartment."¹ On their behalf, the senator asked his audience "to renew the commitment of the Democratic Party to economic justice," reminding his listeners of the revolutionary belief in the equality of all men. So believable were the concern and engagement of the speaker that the delegates were moved to tears. At least for the duration of his address, even Kennedy himself seemed to believe in the possibility of translating political rhetoric into social reality. But it can hardly be assumed that the audience, so moved by this speech, was unaware of the contradiction in which the politician portraying himself as a spokesman for the people, imagining a better future for the common man, makes his political career in a society that fundamentally precludes the realization of such a future. This awareness was, however, momentarily eclipsed by the charisma of the speaker, who for once treated the problems of the ordinary man not within the limits of economic calculation but humanely.

Just as there is a "humanist politics"—moving, ephemeral, and impossible—there is a "humanist aesthetics." It appeals to "man" as the center of the aesthetic experience, as the pretext of the art's making, the subtext of its meaning, the context of its reception. We are moved by this description of ourselves as the audience of the work of art as we are consoled by its implicit sense of the universal status of our *humanity*. But this de-historicized audience is in fact a fiction—one of the fictions of the "humane" degenerated into ideology—and a staple of the rhetoric of populism. Art that rejects such rhetoric in the name of truth is, of course, seldom praised. On the contrary, it is more likely to be criti-

1. "Transcript of Kennedy's Speech on Economic Issues at Democratic Convention," *New York Times*, August 13, 1980, B2.

cized for its lack of both humanity and truth, or, on the other hand, deprived of its integrity by a trivializing set of humanist interpretations that understand the point of such art even less than the criticism which abhors it.

Critics had already begun to decry the "loss of man" by the middle of the nineteenth century. For example, in his criticism of the salon of 1868, Redon writes of Manet that his "weakness is that he sacrifices man and his ideas to good brushstrokes and the success of the detail."² The German art historian Hans Sedlmayr finds his first instance of a loss of human center in Cézanne's painting, asserting that because this art is limited to the merely visible it thereby excludes from the process of perception all other aspects of the human, such as empathy and the intellect. Sedlmayr equates pure painting with a pathological failure of empathy.³ Redon and Sedlmayr are characteristic of that art criticism which can only trace the course of modern art—from its origin in the nineteenth century through its development into the twentieth—through the category of loss.

But, of course, what is understood as a loss by Redon and Sedlmayr is seen by many artists as art's freedom. Ad Reinhardt states the modernist artist's position succinctly:

The one declaration of all the main movements in art of the nineteenth century is of the "independence" of art. The one question, the one principle, the one crisis in art of the twentieth century centers in the uncompromising "purity" of art, and in the consciousness that art comes from art only, not from anything else.⁴

The origin of *l'art pour l'art*, the insistence upon the freedom and autonomy of art, the declaration of the purity of art—all this involves a refusal to propagate the prevailing ideology, whose efficacy rests even today upon a thoroughly discredited humanism. Politically engaged artists, such as the German composer Hans Eisler, recognized that the radical quality of modernist art resided in its refusal "to simulate relationships between people which no longer exist in bourgeois society."⁵ On the other hand Meyer Schapiro, who began his theoretical work as a Marxist, continues to fight the battle for the humanity of abstract art. Instead of analyzing the renunciation of ideological "human" messages as the political statement of abstract art, Schapiro discusses that art's putative "inner life," its "resources of imagination," its potential for a "great span of expression."⁶ In this he fails to perceive that the "life," the "imagination," and the

2. Quoted in John Rewald, *History of Impressionism*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1973, p. 122.

3. See Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte*, Frankfurt/M and Berlin, Ullstein, 1961, pp. 98-99.

4. *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose, New York, Viking, 1975, p. 53.

5. Hanns Eisler, *Schriften I: Musik und Politik 1924-1948*, Munich, Bernhard, 1973, p. 255.

6. Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," in *Modern Art 19th & 20th Centuries: Selected Papers*, New York, Braziller, 1978, p. 277.

"expression" of abstract art are for the most part uncommunicative precisely because of their subjectivity. What exists of humanity in abstract art remains locked up in a highly formalized prison. In his essays "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting" and "Mondrian," Schapiro alludes to the "human content" of his subject, but in general he respectfully restricts himself to problems of form.⁷

That which remains somewhat theoretical or allusive in Meyer Schapiro's essays, however, becomes for such contemporary critics as Donald Kuspit and Lucy Lippard the very center of attention. Indeed, they diligently search out the most trivial signs of humanistic value in modern art, and where these values are not to be found at all, they simply ascribe to, or insistently demand from, art the very thing that it intentionally and systematically excludes. Kuspit and Lippard are representative of that art criticism which, with almost total disregard for the art itself, manipulates and distorts it so that it will conform to a cliché of what art is thought to be. Certainly these two critics represent the extremes of this interpretive technique. But by now this mode of criticism has become so pervasive that an analysis of the extremes may shed light on a common and persistent violation of modern art.

Searching obsessively for meaning in order that he may relay what he conceives of as the artist's message to the viewer, Donald Kuspit launches a parody of interpretation. It is not surprising that his efforts lead to comic results. Even Kuspit seems aware of this lack of seriousness when he concludes his manifesto "The Necessary Dialectical Critic" by saying, "Dialectic criticism becomes a kind of clowning about art."⁸ A few examples will suffice to prove his point. Kuspit views Sol LeWitt's grid structures as the "deification of the human mind by reason of its mathematical prowess."⁹ He interprets Pollock's painting "in terms of its social dynamics, however disguised these may be," and comes to the conclusion that, "There is the same abstract messianic urgency . . . in Pollock as in early Communist ideology." The message of Pollock's art is "the need for revolution."¹⁰ Kuspit locates Roy Lichtenstein's "surrealist" paintings in the great tradition of allegorical representations of the relations between the sexes, comparing them, from this perspective, to Titian's *Venus with the Lute Player*. And he goes on to say that "the banalization of supposedly profound styles masks a profound personal involvement with the redefinition of subject matter."¹¹

It is Kuspit's contention that art needs criticism for its salvation.¹² And

7. Schapiro, "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting," *ibid.*, pp. 233-261.

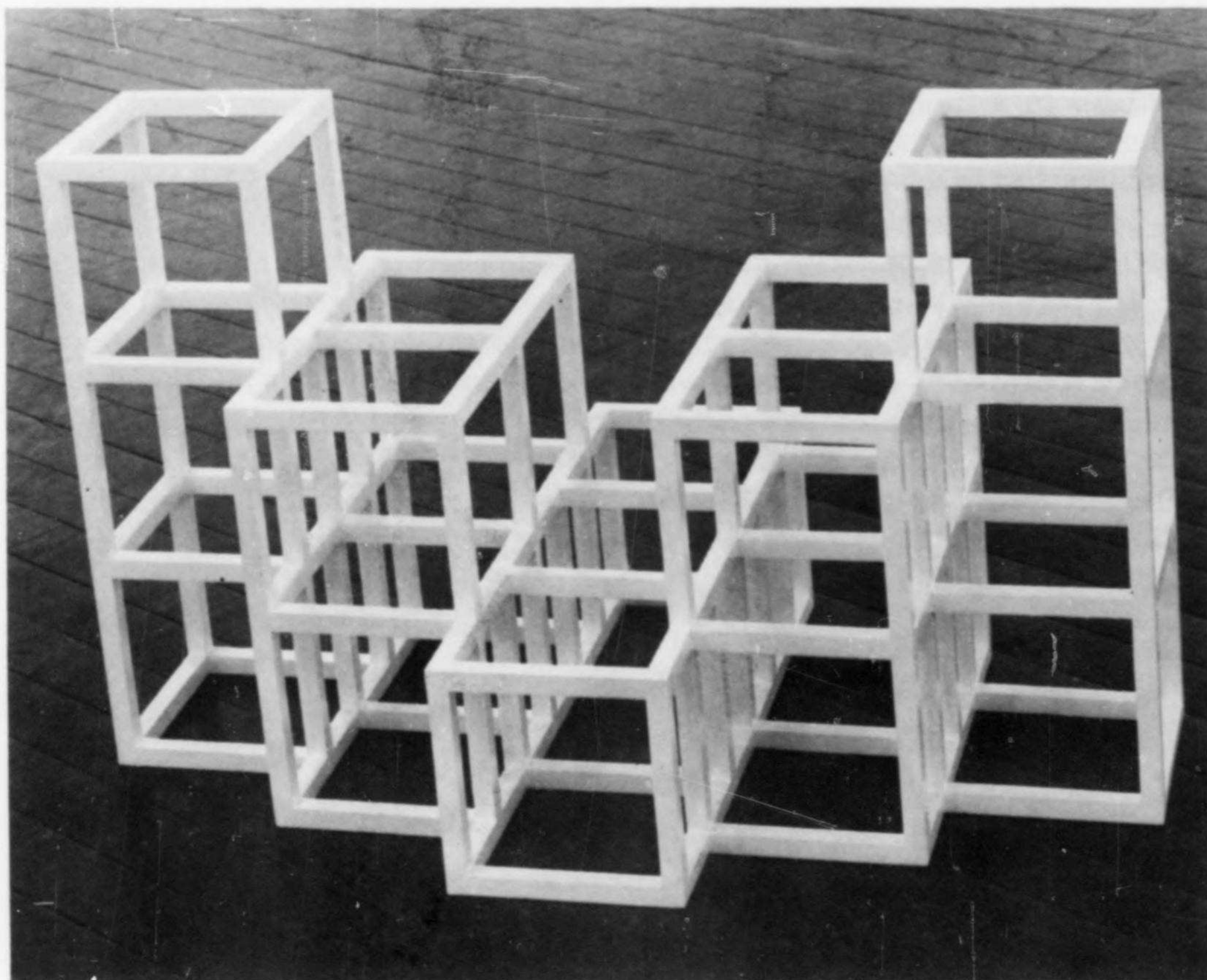
8. Donald Kuspit, "The Necessary Dialectical Critic," *Art Criticism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1979), 31.

9. Donald Kuspit, "Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought," *Art in America*, vol. 63, no. 5 (September-October 1975), 48.

10. Donald Kuspit, "Abstract Expressionism: The Social Contract," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 7 (March 1980), 118.

11. Donald Kuspit, "Lichtenstein and the Collective Unconscious," *Art in America*, vol. 67, no. 3 (May-June 1979), 100-105.

12. "To be worthy of the name today—even to be necessary to the art scene as its salvation—there must be a consciously new way to be a critic" (Kuspit, "Dialectical Critic," p. 13).



Sol LeWitt. 3 4 3 4 3. 1974.

certainly whoever reads his criticism knows just what he means. For how else would we have ever discerned what Lichtenstein "masks" or Pollock "disguises" if not for Kuspit's help?

Art which is firmly resistant to Kuspit's fantasies of humanist salvation is dismissed as formalist:

Formalism in general, it seems to me, is badly in need of acknowledging its subjectivity—as a tension within its objectivity. For its identity is always in danger of degenerating into a sterile, however subtle, equilibrium. It is just because its identity is so completely abstract and involves such a precise and limited vocabulary that it is always in danger of becoming a meaningless game, a hermetic play with artistic units that become entirely predictable in effect. However much the ritual of that play might establish an artistically meaningful identity, that identity

cannot itself achieve full significance until it blossoms into a promise of existential consequence, a promise of impact on identities other than its own.¹³

In this critique of formalism as "a meaningless game" with "no impact on identities other than its own," Kuspit differs fundamentally from Theodor Adorno, whom he nevertheless designates as the source of his "dialectical criticism."¹⁴ Autonomous works of art are, according to Adorno, guided by their immanent laws. The intention of effect is secondary. "The promise of existential consequence" that Kuspit would exact from a work of art contradicts Adorno's view that the social content of art since the mid-nineteenth century is to be found in its resistance to social acceptance and utility.¹⁵ Kuspit relies heavily upon the Frankfurt School philosopher—fifteen out of twenty-one quotes in "The Necessary Dialectical Critic" are derived from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—but at the same time he fundamentally contradicts Adorno's theory. Kuspit's rather singular understanding of dialectical method is that of becoming entangled in contradictions without having to account for them—contradictions of the art he interprets, contradictions of the sources he relies upon, and contradictions of himself.

In his desire for "meaning," "subjectivity," and the "impact of art on identities other than its own," Kuspit finds his ideal in Joseph Beuys, propagandist for a socially responsible art, who claims that "art is the only power to free humankind from all repression."

I still experience Joseph Beuys's objects as resistant to codification as art—and yet as saying something about what art can be, and what it was when it was more integral to society, in some unspecified but long-past time. His works, albeit newly fabricated, hark back to an era when "art" objects were fetishes, functioning in a communal, magical way. After this sense of art, strongly evoked if not fully restored by Beuys's objects, I felt the triviality of most of the esthetically self-conscious objects of today. Being exclusively esthetic, they are stuck with themselves, limited in a way that Beuys's objects with their "anthropological power," are not. . . . Thus Beuys's art seems to exist in a utopian way, as though offering us a substance and involving us in a process

13. Donald Kuspit, "Existential Formalism: The Case of Sharon Gold," *Artforum*, vol. 17, no. 7 (March 1979), 39.

14. "I still regard what I'm doing as a kind of philosophical work. It generated, essentially, from my connection with the Frankfurt School. I studied in Germany and took my doctorate in philosophy there with Theodor Adorno. You probably know Adorno's school of thought is called the Critical School and the idea of the general significance of criticism in life became very important to me" ("Donald Kuspit: The One and Only Practitioner of the Dialectical Attitude," interview by Rupert Ravens, *Artworkers News*, April 1980, p. 22).

15. Theodor W. Adorno, "Thesen zur Kunstsoziologie," *Ohne Leitbild, Parva Aesthetica*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1968, p. 97.

that might heal our wounds and renew our strength. As such, the works seem fragments of a titanic effort as social therapy—the afterbirth of a magical attempt at self- and world-renewal.¹⁶

Although Kuspit here devalues “the self-conscious objects of today,” which are limited by their aestheticism, in contrast to Beuys’s objects, with their “anthropological power,” only half a year earlier he had found “transcendental truth” in precisely such purely aesthetic objects. In an essay entitled “Cosmetic Transcendentalism,” Kuspit ascribed to the phenomenon he called “the new luxury art” the accomplishment of having once and for all made clear that “the distinction between high art and entertainment is obliterated today.” “In today’s world, art and entertainment are one.”¹⁷ In fact, Kuspit himself dissolves the distinction by using art as entertainment—elevated entertainment of course. He is the very type of bourgeois art lover whose cultural needs cannot be satisfied by TV soap operas and Hollywood movies because of an acquired taste for the high-brow. For him, contemporary art is a demanding form of entertainment which makes consumption interesting rather than merely easy. Moreover, it transfers the allure of the artist as Other into bourgeois life. It is characteristic of bourgeois thought that it cannot accept the Other in its difference, but must forcibly transform it into an experience of identity in order to make it acceptable. Were such a transformation to become impossible, the only alternative would be categorical rejection. Unfortunately, however, contemporary art is not rejected by the educated, “enlightened” bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is wholeheartedly accepted—and transformed. It serves as a target for intellectual or emotional projections of the kind in which Kuspit specializes. These projections have little or nothing to do with the specific properties of the art objects; rather they reveal the expectations and desires of the minds that produce them. “Deification of the human mind”—this is neither LeWitt’s intention nor can it be seen in his work. Nor do Pollock’s paintings call for revolution. Such projections only tell us of the need to reduce art to a pretext for self-gratification.

When Kuspit occasionally laments the entire state of contemporary art, it is to complain that art is unnecessarily impeding the workings of his imagination: “Today when too much art has become seamless, art must be split open by a surplus of reality if it is to be viable as art, i.e., if it is to change our consciousness, which is the root mission and meaning of ‘art.’”¹⁸ The reality that Kuspit demands remains, of course, undefined. He seems less interested in the particular “surplus of reality” than in the fact that art is venturing too far into the aesthetic distance to be susceptible to his trivializing projections of “reality.”

16. Donald Kuspit, “Beuys: Fat, Felt and Alchemy,” *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 5 (May 1980), 81.

17. Donald Kuspit, “Cosmetic Transcendentalism,” *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 2 (October 1979), 38-40.

18. Donald Kuspit, “Spero’s Apocalypse,” *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 8 (April 1980), 35.

Reality, the real world—these are notions that are also dear to Lucy Lippard. More radically than Kuspit, who wants to make contemporary art accessible, Lippard rejects the mainstream of contemporary art as irretrievably lost in the esoteric and insular. She wants, instead, a new, feminist art that will directly affect those whom contemporary art has failed to reach: "The goal of feminist art, bolstered by the confidence and understanding received in a female community, is to enter the real world and affect everyone—all those people whom contemporary art has failed to reach or to move."¹⁹ Lippard wants to be understood politically, as a populist and a radical feminist whose goal is to change the world with art: "Women's conditioning and capacity to please can lead to pleasing a broad audience as well as to pleasing the art hierarchy—a broad audience which would be of course half female. Finding that audience, making contact, is a political as much as an artistic act."²⁰

Nothing in the course of history suggests that pleasing authority leads to revolutionary change; beyond that, it seems confusing that anyone calling herself a radical feminist should reaffirm the role of subservient female. Not that revolutionary potential could not be found in traditional female roles: Julia Kristeva points, for example, to the role of the hysteric:

A woman can represent a kind of negativism, an agitation, which forces power to the point where it must question itself. This is the classic role of the hysteric, who is in a position to erupt as a revolutionary symptom in the positive sense.²¹

Lippard cannot, however, be interested in revolutionary, anarchic behavior, in escaping the present system. Rather, she is interested in a successful adjustment to the system, and she correctly recognizes that within the system women are most likely to succeed by smiling—"please the art hierarchy, please the broad audience." At first it might seem that her admonition to women artists to flatter should be interpreted as a parody of militant feminism; but Lippard is no cynic. Her understanding of emancipation is limited to the demand for equality; thus she does not question power; she simply wants a share of that power for herself, for women artists, whom she patronizes, and for women in general. Her position is analogous to that of a credulous member of the Democratic Party who perceives changes within the system as real changes in the world. It is therefore not surprising that Lippard's characteristic political (populist-feminist) artist compares herself not to a revolutionary but to a congressional representative: "Maybe artists have to be like congress-people—representatives of the needs, feelings, and

19. Lucy Lippard, "Changing Since Changing," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, Dutton, 1971, p. 8.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

21. Julia Kristeva, "Une(s) femme(s)," interview by Eliane Boucquey, in *Essen vom Baum der Erkenntnis, Weibliche Praxis gegen Kultur*, Berlin, Merve, 1977, p. 39.

aspirations of a group of people. At least that's what I [Judy Chicago] want to be—to speak to the longings and yearnings and aspirations of women.”²² Judy Chicago is presented by Lippard as the role model for feminist artists. She views Chicago's *Dinner Party* as “unique in having as one of its immediate goals the education and training of women to take command.” The *Dinner Party* is for her “one of the most ambitious works of art made in the postwar period,” because it combines, as few other works do, “a strong esthetic” with “political content,” and its primary goal is “social change.”²³

Chicago's prophecy of social change is woven into six tapestries which are suspended at the entrance to the *Dinner Party*:

And She Gathered All before Her
 And She made for them A Sign to See
 And lo They saw a Vision
 From this day forth Like to like in All things
 And then all that divided them merged
 And then Everywhere was Eden Once again²⁴

Having been provided with this optimistic perspective, the visitor enters a chapel-like, darkened room in whose center is a spot-lit, triangular, gold and white and multicolored table. Thirty-nine plates with ceramic protrusions rest on embroidered table runners. At each place setting the runner reveals the name of a mythological or historical woman: goddesses, nuns, scientists. . . . The plate decorations metamorphose (or so we are told) between butterflies and female genitalia, the choice depending upon the degree of the spectator's repression. An additional 999 names are burned into the ceramic floor on which the dinner table rests. Thanks to information available from the nearby cashier, who dispenses audio tours (with the artist's voice), brochures, and catalogues (with texts by the artist), nothing remains unexplained about the *Dinner Party*'s form, technique, and symbolism, the stories of the selected women, or even the reasons for their selection. The latter criteria, according to which women are found worthy of plate, embroidery, or floor inscription, are stated in an available brochure:

- (1) Did the woman make a significant contribution to society?
- (2) Did she attempt to improve conditions for women?
- (3) Did her life illuminate an aspect of women's experience or provide a model for the future?²⁵

Answering these questions, Chicago creates her version of history predicated

22. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, “Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*,” *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 4 (April 1980), 119-120.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

24. *The Dinner Party* (brochure), Boston Center for the Arts, 1979, p. 2.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

upon heroes—only in this case heroines are substituted for heroes; it is a history of the female exceptions. It is true, of course, that the history of women has yet to be written; but when it is, it must explain why only a limited number achieved historical relevance. Mother Courage is in this sense far more interesting than Boadicea.²⁶

What is it, then, that Chicago's gallery of ancestors is meant to offer the "broad audience"? "Affirmative symbols," says Lippard.²⁷ Indeed, the brash vulgarity of the *Dinner Party* may well appeal to the taste of the middle-class housewife, her taste having been effectively shaped by the household industry. And, in addition, the housewife can now go home with new ideas for old hobbies, hobbies that are meant to compensate for her daily frustrations. And she may also leave the show with the renewed certainty that women can achieve greatness if only they desire it and persevere.

Lippard's enthusiastic propagandizing for Chicago's work can easily be explained by the simple congeniality of the two women's ideas of populist feminism. It is a homemade version of feminism that hurts no one, but, as has been amply demonstrated over the past few years, sells extremely well. Lippard and Chicago share a conception of political art that rejects militancy as it rejects artistic radicalism. Their brand of feminist art is intended to please, and please it does. They also agree that feminist art should develop a separatist aesthetic consciousness. Such an aesthetic would reject the advances made by contemporary art, because this is understood to be the art of men. Thus, Chicago reverts to the atavistic mediums of embroidery and ceramics, which are seen as traditional feminine skills, for which Lippard, too, has high regard. And the feminist artist and her apologist further agree that the critical criteria through which other contemporary art is examined are not applicable to feminist art. The path is thereby cleared for trivial symbolism and knick-knacks.

If Chicago is Lippard's populist-feminist exemplar, how does she contend with other art? It goes without saying that she writes about art by women. If she cannot force such art into clichés of the "feminine," she at least attempts to personalize it. The feminine quality of women's art is channeled through Lippard's overall humanizing endeavor. In an interview with Yvonne Rainer, for example, Lippard states, "I think that women deal more openly with feelings than men do, that the movement has developed a humanist rather than a formalist approach." And here is Rainer's reply: "But I accept this dichotomy [humanism-formalism] as a necessity of modern art. I'm not trying to work my way *back* to a more direct relationship to subject matter." Lippard's attempts to harness

26. Boadicea is listed as "British heroine, warrior queen, 1st C. A.D.," in Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*, New York, Anchor, 1979, p. 67.

27. Lippard, "Judy Chicago's Dinner Party," p. 115.

Rainer's work to her simplistic notions of a feminine aesthetic often results in these comic exchanges:

Lippard: A friend of mine and I have the theory that there is a special kind of fragmentation that often surfaces in women's work in all media. Your films . . . have that quality of pulling a lot of things together, bouncing from one idea to another. . . .

Rainer: But if I think of influences, things I saw at impressionable periods, there's Rauschenberg, and Johns, and certainly John Cage. Doesn't that destroy the feminist interpretation of fragmentation?²⁸

In her book on Eva Hesse, Lippard publishes, in addition to a discussion of the work, the artist's diaries, the story of her terminal illness, and comments about the artist by her friends. Personal data and information about the work are woven into a seamless fabric:

By August, Hesse was having headaches again. She was tired and slept in the afternoons, "slept as though she weren't going to wake." However, she went back into the city, not because she was sick, but because she wanted to get to work. But within a few days, the symptoms recurred so violently that she went right back to the hospital. Her second operation was on August 18th. When she came out, she had radiation treatments for about two weeks, and later chemotherapy with Dr. William Schapiro. She was still optimistic, and as soon as she could, she began to work again on the airy web of fiberglass skeins that had hung in her studio since the previous winter, when Schieve remembers that she was already concerned that the piece was "too pretty." She called it (and a drawing unrelated to it . . .) *Right After*.²⁹

Right After, like all of Hesse's mature work, entirely transcends the personal. It engages, in its idiosyncratic and complex way, with the conventions of abstract painting and sculpture that formed Hesse's aesthetic experience. Why then is Hesse's work, in which her personal life is utterly unidentifiable, burdened with this biographical material? Is it to make an otherwise dry discursive essay more tantalizing? Or is Lippard's need to reinvest the work with "humanity" governed again by the impulse to make difficult art accessible to a "broad audience," even if this means adding to it information with the base appeal of gossip, the assured effect of rank sentimentality?

Certainly it is the appeal of the artist's exotic life that is most often used by

28. Lippard, "Yvonne Rainer on Feminism and Her Film," *From the Center*, pp. 269, 276.

29. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, New York University Press, 1976, p. 160.

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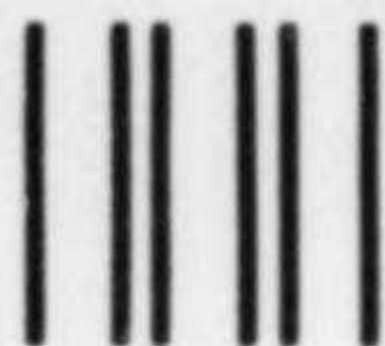
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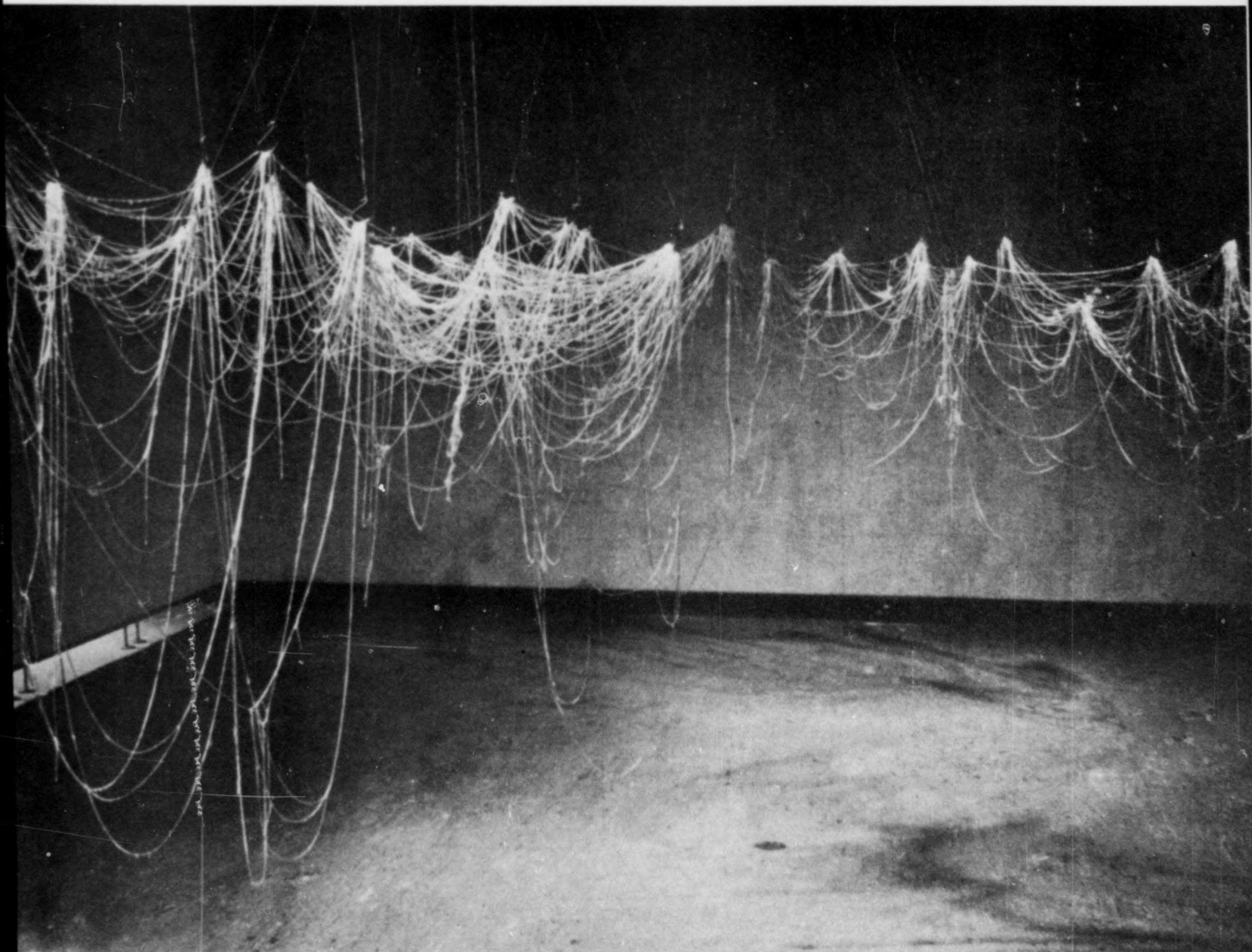
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Eva Hesse. Right After. 1969.

bourgeois culture to explain and neutralize the problematic nature of art. It is not therefore surprising that autobiography plays such an important role in the public relations efforts of both Kuspit's and Lippard's exemplary artists.³⁰ This past year, both Joseph Beuys's retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, shown at the Brooklyn Museum, were blockbuster events. Although apparently so different, Beuys and Chicago share many things in addition to their P.R. strategies: populist rhetoric that substitutes for truly political work; and a return to myth, ritual, and magic with symbolic content whose precise interpretation is dictated by the artists themselves. Nothing in their art or their rhetoric challenges the most shopworn ideas of either art or politics. No wonder it sells. Populist humanism and its feminist variant *are* the prevailing ideology, as Senator Kennedy's convention speech so amply demonstrated. Kuspit and Lippard are merely its latest apologists among the art critics.

30. Judy Chicago's autobiography, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York, Anchor, 1977), is of course available together with all the other publications by the artist wherever the *Dinner Party* is shown. Not only were the facts, and perhaps myths, of Beuys's biography the main substance of the considerable press coverage of Beuys's Guggenheim show, but the catalogue of the exhibition itself simply reiterated the artist's autobiographical explanations for his works; see Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979.

Art and Authoritarianism:
Walter De Maria's *Lightning
Field**

JOHN BEARDSLEY

It is perhaps an outmoded conviction of mine that art criticism should take as its point of departure the specific characteristics of a work of art or a group of works. In the case of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, however, this is virtually impossible. The measure of control exercised by the artist and his sponsor, the Dia Foundation, over the viewer's approach to the work, his physical experience of it, his access to information and documentation about it, forecloses an independent appraisal of the work. It thereby renders problematic any discussion of the work as such, for it inhibits an effective dissociation between what one sees and what one is expected to see, between what one believes and what one is led to believe.

Although it is an open question to what extent the *Lightning Field* would ever involve an experience of lightning for the average viewer, it is nevertheless a seriously conceived work, and it is therefore regrettable that it cannot be discussed on its own merits. But the directive posture assumed toward the viewer by De Maria and Dia suggests that both artist and patron lack confidence in either the quality of the work or the discernment of the viewer. They are therefore being defensive or condescending, neither posture positively predisposing the viewer to the work. Unwilling to have the *Lightning Field* or even photographs of it seen in circumstances other than those absolutely dictated and controlled by them, they are responsible for obscuring the work with extra-art issues, and ultimately for eliciting a criticism that is bound to be distasteful to them.

*

Although it is a long way from almost anywhere to Quemado, New Mexico, the town is neither economically disenfranchised nor culturally remote. Representative of a region now politically and economically on the ascendant, Quemado is the scene of continuing, if not quite flourishing, cattle ranching, and it is

* I wish to acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, which provided funds necessary to research this essay through the Art Critics' Fellowships program.

not far from the massive open-pit copper mines of Santa Rita and Clifton-Morenci. In addition, uranium deposits are thought to underlie the region. Quemado is served by the federal highway system, making it about four hours away from Albuquerque, six from Phoenix. And now, Quemado even has contemporary art.

The coincidence of a relatively high number of lightning days per year with the availability of purchasable, flat, semi-arid, sparsely populated range land brought De Maria and the Dia Foundation to Quemado in the mid-seventies. De Maria had already tested his ideas for the *Lightning Field* in a pilot project constructed near Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1974. Now he wanted a final project which would be considerably larger, whose permanence would be guaranteed by ownership of the land. The Dia Foundation, which is principally supported by Philippa Pellizzi, heiress to the De Menil oil fortune, came to De Maria's assistance. On his behalf, the foundation acquired five or more sections (a section is a square mile, or 640 acres) northeast of Quemado. Here De Maria erected his grid of 400 stainless steel poles with pointed tips. The grid measures a mile east to west and slightly over a kilometer north to south; the east-west rows contain twenty-five poles, the north-south, sixteen. They are spaced 220 feet apart, 331 feet on the diagonal. Despite fluctuations of ground level, they are installed in such a way that their tips form a continuous plane at an average height of twenty feet, seven and one-half inches above ground.

In the town of Quemado, Dia meanwhile bought and renovated a building for the local administrative office of the *Lightning Field*. It also houses what they call a mini-museum of De Maria's work, where a selection of the *Silver Meters* and the circle and square *Equivalents* are on view. This, then, is a counterpart to the permanently installed, Dia-supported *Earth Room* and *Brass Kilometer* at locations in New York City.

It is to this office in Quemado that a prospective viewer must write for an appointment to see the *Lightning Field*. The appointment procedure insures that no more than a few people are on the *Field* at any given time, since it is believed that the work is best experienced in these uncrowded conditions. If the appointment is granted, the viewer reports for his visit to the Quemado office, surrenders his unauthorized photographic equipment, and signs a release freeing De Maria and Dia of liability should injury or death occur while visiting the work. Next, a "contribution" of thirty dollars is made to Dia to help them defray expenses for the visitor's food and lodging. Then, like a neophyte in a new order, the visitor is driven off for a minimum twenty-four-hour initiation into the mysteries of the *Lightning Field*. The lodging on the location is a renovated homesteader's cabin. Food is pointed out and canteens are issued. The visitor is then left alone until the same time the following day, when he is returned to Quemado, his camera, and his car.

Given the complexities of this procedure, one might rightfully expect some revelation during residence at the *Lightning Field*. Instead, there is an unprepos-

sessing array of poles in what is admittedly a very beautiful landscape. In the bright light of mid-day, the poles of the *Field* are barely visible. They are seen to good advantage only at dawn and dusk, when fully illuminated by raking light. And, of course, since lightning storms pass over the *Field* approximately three days a month during the lightning season, from late May through early September, the likelihood of seeing dramatic lightning strikes is remote.

There is, then, an enormous disparity between the actual sculpture, which is a minimalist understatement, and the promotion it receives, which is anything but. The necessity of making an appointment, signing a release against a danger which seems more imagined than real, and of being delivered to the *Field* rather than allowed to drive, all conspire to induce a feeling of awe, to insure that one will fully expect to see God at the *Lightning Field*. Needless to say, He doesn't appear. No artwork could live up to this hype, least of all one that involves the dematerializing effects of sunlight and the subtle interrelationship of sculpture and landscape.

There is no question but that those who administer the *Lightning Field* have carefully considered the manner in which they control access to and, indirectly, perception of the work. A conversation with a representative of Dia elicited several reasons for such extreme control, including the insurance that the viewer is alone, or nearly so, with the work, and protection of the fragile semi-arid environment in which it is situated. These concerns may be legitimate, but certainly many other works—Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, Smithsonian's *Spiral Jetty*, Heizer's *Double Negative*, not to mention such urban works as Robert Morris's *Grand Rapids Project*—all stand unprotected in the landscape and are in no worse condition than the *Lightning Field*. In my various visits to other artworks in relatively remote areas, I have never encountered other visitors, so it seems doubtful that the number of potential visitors to the *Lightning Field*, were access unimpeded, would ever be great enough to endanger the work or the surrounding environment. Restrictions, in this case, seem more an expression of the willful cultivation of mystery.

De Maria's and Dia's efforts to control the viewer's response to the work extend even beyond the circumstances of the visit to include manipulation of information about the work, especially photographs. I have been obliged for several years to play an elaborate game of cat and mouse with De Maria to obtain photographs: photographs for publication were repeatedly going to be available "sometime soon." When asked about the possibility of obtaining photographs for this particular essay, the Dia representative inquired about its point of view. When told, she explained that it was "doubtful that De Maria would want to put his stamp of approval" on it by supplying photographs. While it is true that an artist has full discretion over a work that is not in the public domain, such a demonstration of insecurity about an independent point of view suggests a complete misunderstanding of the nature of criticism, which is never simply intended to parrot the opinions of the artist. Are De Maria and his sponsors so

uncertain of the quality of the *Lightning Field* that they cannot let it stand on its own merits? Is it so vulnerable that it cannot withstand the independent opinions of writers?

When De Maria did release photographs for publication in *Artforum*, he exerted considerable control over the way they were used. Working closely with the magazine's staff and photographer John Cliett, De Maria produced what *Artforum* publisher Amy Baker describes as "an artist's work"—i.e., pages designed specially by the artist. Acknowledging that it was "a generous, expensive lay-out," Baker explained that the staff felt that the work was of sufficient interest to warrant an unusual amount of space and expense, and that the publication of the work on the artist's terms seemed essential to the dissemination of the work.

The number of photographs, the exclusive use of color, the number of editorial pages—De Maria was given the cover plus five pages at the centerfold—is unusual, to say the least, for *Artforum*'s artists' pages. But particularly offensive was the use of blank gray pages separating De Maria's photographs from the thereby implied dross of the remainder of the issue. Evidently caught between their desire to see the work published and the artist's excessive demands, *Artforum*'s staff was complicit in the mystification of the *Lightning Field* and the exaggerated claims made for it.

Matters of control and access to the *Lightning Field* would be of little concern if they remained limited to this one instance. However, they are of consequence to all artworks in the landscape, for which this work could conceivably become a model. The Dia Foundation, which is, of course, tax exempt and therefore indirectly supported by every taxpayer, has recently received financial support for two projects from the National Endowment for the Arts. A condition of these grants, awarded through the Art in Public Places program, is that the public have "free and unimpeded access" to the artwork. One of these projects is Jim Turrell's *Sun and Moon Space*, to be installed in Arizona. Given the stipulations of Endowment support, one hopes that access to the work will not be established on the model of the *Lightning Field*.

From a critical perspective, as well, the management of the *Lightning Field* is no trivial matter. Not only do the machinations of the artist and his sponsors in this case reveal contempt for the enterprise of criticism, but, more importantly, they call into question the very possibility of a criticism that seeks independence from the controlling factors of any artwork's context.

Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression

Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.

—Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and the Black Square, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import? And how did this shift come to be understood as an autonomous achievement of the masters, who were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability, for the reinstatement of figuration? If the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation—the visual and spatial ordering systems that had defined pictorial production since the Renaissance and had in turn been systematically broken down since the middle of the nineteenth century—were reestablished, if the credibility of iconic referentiality was reaffirmed, and if the hierarchy of figure-ground relationships on the picture plane was again presented as an “ontological” condition, what other ordering systems outside of aesthetic discourse had to have already been put in place in order to imbue the new visual configurations with historical authenticity? In what order do these chains of restorative phenomena really occur and how are they linked? Is there a simple causal connection, a mechanical reaction, by which growing

* I wish to thank Jo-Anna Isaak for reading the manuscript of this essay. I have limited my investigations here to European phenomena, even though I am aware that a comparable movement is presently emerging in North America. The reasons for such a limitation are best described by Georg Lukács: “We will restrict our observations to Germany, even though we know that expressionism was an international phenomenon. As much as we understand that its roots are to be found everywhere in imperialism, we know as well that the uneven development in the various countries had to generate various manifestations. Only after a concrete study of the development of expressionism has been made can we come to an overview without remaining in the abstract” (“Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus” [1934], in *Probleme des Realismus*, vol. I, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IV, Berlin, 1971, p. 111).

political oppression necessarily and irreversibly generates traditional representation? Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socio-economic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that we witness, for example, in European painting of the mid-1920s and early 1930s?

It would certainly appear that the attitudes of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and *Pittura Metafisica* cleared the way for a final takeover by such outright authoritarian styles of representation as Fascist painting in Germany and Italy and socialist realism in Stalinist Russia. When Georg Lukács discussed the rise and fall of expressionism in his "Problems of Realism," he seemed to be aware of the relationship of these phenomena, without, however, clarifying the actual system of interaction between protofascism and reactionary art practices: "The realism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* is so obviously apologetic and leads so clearly away from any poetic reproduction of reality that it can easily merge with the Fascist legacy."¹ Paradoxically, however, both traditional Marxism and standard liberalism exempt artists from their responsibilities as sociopolitical individuals: Marxism through its reflection model, with its historical determinism; liberalism through its notion of the artist's unlimited and uninhibited freedom to produce and express. Thus both political views extend to artists the privilege of assuming their determinate necessity to produce unconscious representations of the ideological world.

But would it not be more appropriate to conceive of these radical shifts of the period between the wars, with such decisive selections of production procedures, iconographic references, and perceptual conventions, as calculated? Should we not assume that every artist making these decisions would be aware of their ramifications and consequences, of the sides they would be taking in the process of aesthetic identification and ideological representation?

The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation in present-day European painting reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism; or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice; or, worse yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come.

In order to analyze the contemporary phenomenon, it may be useful to realize that the collapse of the modernist idiom is not without precedent. The bankruptcy of capitalist economics and politics in the twentieth century has been consistently anticipated and accompanied by a certain rhythm of aesthetic manifestations. First there is the construction of artistic movements with great potential for the critical dismantling of the dominant ideology. This is then negated by those movements' own artists, who act to internalize oppression, at

1. Lukács, p. 147.

first in haunting visions of incapacitating and infantilizing melancholy and then, at a later stage, in the outright adulation of manifestations of reactionary power. In the present excitement over "postmodernism" and the "end of the avant-garde," it should not be forgotten that the collapse of the modernist paradigm is as much a cyclical phenomenon in the history of twentieth-century art as is the crisis of capitalist economics in twentieth-century political history: overproduction, managed unemployment, the need for expanding markets and profits and the resultant war-mongering as the secret promise of a final solution for late capitalism's problems. It seems necessary to insist upon seeing present developments in the larger context of these historical repetitions, in their nature as response and reaction to particular conditions that exist outside the confines of aesthetic discourse.

If the current debate does not place these phenomena in historical context, if it does not see through the eagerness with which we are assured from all sides that the avant-garde has completed its mission and has been accorded a position of comfort within a pluralism of meanings and aesthetic masquerades, then it will become complicit in the creation of a climate of desperation and passivity. The ideology of postmodernism seems to forget the subtle and manifest political oppression which is necessary to save the existing power structure. Only in such a climate are the symbolic modes of concrete anticipation transformed into allegorical modes of internalized retrospection. If one realizes that melancholy is at the origin of the allegorical mode, one should also realize that this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression. What is taken as one of the key works for postmodernist aesthetics and the central reference for any contemporary theory of the return to allegory in aesthetic production and reception, Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was written during the dawn of rising fascism in Germany. Its author was well aware of the work's allusion to contemporary artistic and political events, as is confirmed by Benjamin's friend Asja Lacis:

He said that he did not consider this thesis simply as an academic investigation but that it had very direct interrelationships with acute problems of contemporary literature. He insisted explicitly on the fact that in his thesis he defined the dramaturgy of the baroque as an analogy to expressionism in its quest for a formal language. Therefore I have, so he said, dealt so extensively with the artistic problems of allegory, emblems, and rituals.²

Or, as George Steiner describes it in his introduction to the English edition of Benjamin's study:

2. Asja Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf*, ed. Hildegard Brenner, Munich, 1971, p. 44.

As during the crises of the Thirty Years' War and its aftermath, so in Weimar Germany the extremities of political tension and economic misery are reflected in art and critical discussion. Having drawn the analogy, Benjamin closes with hints towards a recursive theory of culture: eras of decline resemble each other not only in their vices but also in their strange climate of rhetorical and aesthetic vehemence. . . . Thus a study of the baroque is no mere antiquarian archival hobby: it mirrors, it anticipates and helps grasp the dark present.³

Repression and Representation

It is generally agreed that the first major breakdown of the modernist idiom in twentieth-century painting occurs at the beginning of the First World War, signaled by the end of cubism and futurism and the abandonment of critical ideals by the very artists who had initiated those movements. Facing the deadlock of their own academicization and the actual exhaustion of the historical significance of their work, Picasso, Derain, Carrà, and Severini—to name but a few of the most prominent figures—were among the first to call for a return to the traditional values of high art. Creating the myth of a new classicism to disguise their condition, they insisted upon the continuation of easel painting, a mode of production that they had shortly before pushed to its very limits, but which now proved to be a valuable commodity which was therefore to be revalidated. From this situation there originated their incapacity or stubborn refusal to face the epistemological consequences of their own work. Already by 1913 their ideas had been developed further by younger artists working in cultural contexts which offered broader historical, social, and political options to dismantle the cultural tenets of the European bourgeoisie. This is particularly the case with Duchamp in America and Malevich and the constructivists in Russia. But, even in Paris, such artists as Francis Picabia recognized the imminent demise of cubism. Upon his return from his first journey to New York in 1913, he wrote, "But, as you know, I have surpassed this stage of development and I do not define myself at all as a cubist anymore. I have come to realize that one cannot always make cubes express the thoughts of the brain and the feelings of the psyche."⁴ And in his "Manifeste de l'Ecole Amorphiste," published in a special issue of *Camera Work* in 1913 he was even more explicit: "One has said of Picasso that he studies objects in the way a surgeon dissects a cadaver. We do not want these bothersome cadavers anymore which are called objects."⁵

3. George Steiner, "Introduction," in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, 1977, p. 24.

4. Francis Picabia, "Comment je vois New York," in *Francis Picabia*, Paris, *Musée National d'Art Moderne*, 1976, p. 66.

5. Francis Picabia, "Manifeste de l'Ecole Amorphiste," *ibid.*, p. 68.

Even in 1923 these polemics continued among various factions of the Parisian avant-garde. On the occasion of the first performance of Tristan Tzara's "Cœur à Gaz" at the Soirée du Cœur à Barbe, a fistfight broke out in the audience when one of the artists present jumped onto the stage and shouted, "Picasso is dead on the field of battle."⁶ But even artists who had been allied with the cubist movement realized by the end of the second decade that it was exhausted, without, however, necessarily advocating a return to the past. Blaise Cendrars, for example, in his text "Pourquoi le cube s'effrite?" published in 1919, announced the end of the relevance of the cubist language of form. On the other hand, in the very same year a number of ideological justifications appeared for the regression that had begun around 1914-15. Among the many documents of the new attitude of authoritarian classicism are a pamphlet by the cubist dealer Léonce Rosenberg, *Cubisme et Tradition*, published in 1920, and Maurice Raynal's "Quelques intentions du cubisme," written in 1919 and published in 1924, which stated, "I continue to believe that knowledge of the Masters, right understanding of their works, and respect for tradition might provide strong support."⁷ If properly read, this statement, in its attempt to legitimize the academicization of an aging and ailing cubist culture, already reveals the inherent authoritarian tendency of the myth of a new classicism. Then as now, the key terms of this ideological backlash are the idealization of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters, the attempt to establish a new aesthetic orthodoxy, and the demand for respect for the cultural tradition. It is endemic to the syndrome of authoritarianism that it appeal to and affirm the "eternal" or ancient systems of order (the law of the tribe, the authority of history, the paternal principle of the master, etc.). This unfathomable past history then serves as a screen upon which the configurations of a failed historical presence can be projected. In 1915, when Picasso signals his return to a representational language by portraying the cubist poet Max Jacob, recently converted to Catholicism, in the guise of a Breton peasant, drawn in the manner of Ingres, we get a first impression of the degree of eclecticism that is necessary to create the stylistic and historical pose of classical simplicity and equilibrium, with its claim to provide access to the origins and essentials of universal human experience. Subsequently this historicist eclecticism becomes an artistic principle, and then, as in Jean Cocteau's "Rappel à l'Ordre" of 1926, it is declared the new avant-garde program.

In Picasso's work the number and heterogeneity of stylistic modes quoted and appropriated from the fund of art history increases in 1917: not only Ingres's classical portraits but, as a result of Picasso's journey to Italy in the company of

6. See William Rubin, *Picasso*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p. 224. The awareness of Picasso's decline eventually developed even among art historians who had been previously committed to his work: "Picasso belongs to the past. . . . His downfall is one of the most upsetting problems of our era" (Germain Bazin, quoted in Rubin, p. 277).

7. Maurice Raynal, "Quelques intentions du cubisme," *Bulletin de l'effort moderne*, no. 4 (1924), 4.

Pablo Picasso. Portrait of Max Jacob. 1915.



Cocteau, the iconography of the Italian commedia dell'arte and the frescoes of Herculaneum (not to mention the sculpture of the Parthenon frieze and the white figure vases at the Louvre, the peasant drawings of Millet, the late nudes of Renoir, the pointillism of Seurat, as Blunt, Green, and other Picasso scholars have pointed out). And, of course, there is the self-quotation of synthetic cubist elements, which lend themselves so easily to the high sensuousness of Picasso's decorative style of the early twenties.

Again it is Maurice Raynal who naively provides the clue to an analysis of these works when he describes Picasso's 1921 *Three Musicians* as "rather like magnificent shop windows of cubist inventions and discoveries."⁸ The free-floating availability of these cubist elements and their interchangeability indicate how the new language of painting—now wrenched from its original symbolic function—has become reified as "style" and thus no longer fulfills any purpose but to refer to itself as an aesthetic commodity within a dysfunctional discourse. It therefore enters those categories of artistic production that by their very nature either work against the impulse to dissolve reification or are oblivious to that impulse: the categories of decoration, fashion, and objets d'art.

This transformation of art from the practice of the material and dialectical transgression of ideology to the static affirmation of the conditions of reification and their psychosexual origins in repression have been described as the source of a shift towards the allegorical mode by Leo Bersani:

8. *Ibid.*

It is the extension of the concrete into memory and fantasy. But with the negation of desire, we have an immobile and immobilizing type of abstraction. Instead of imitating a process of endless substitutions (desire's ceaseless "travelling" among different images), abstraction is now a transcendence of the desiring process itself. And we move toward an art of allegory.⁹

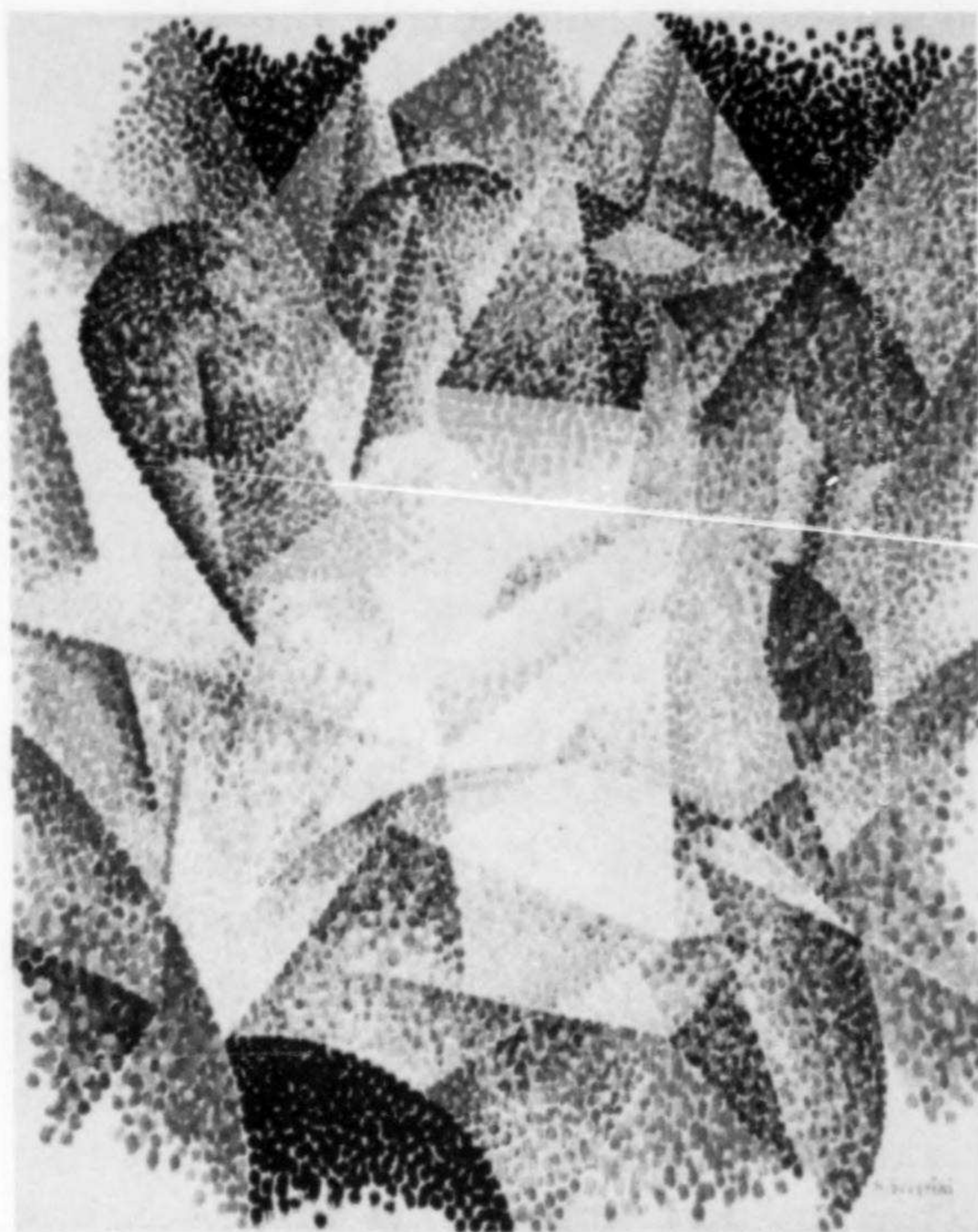
This becomes even more evident in the iconography of *Pittura Metafisica*, which de Chirico and the former futurist Carrà initiated around 1913. The conversion of the futurists, parallel to that of the cubists, involved not only a renewed veneration of the cultural tradition of the past—as opposed to their original fervent antipathy to the past—but also a new iconography of haunting, pointlessly assembled quotidian objects painted with meticulous devotion to representational conventions. De Chirico describes his paintings as stages decorated for imminent but unknown and threatening acts, and insists on the demons that are inherent in the objects of representation: "The metaphysical work of art seems to be joyous. Yet one has the impression that something is going to happen in this joyous world."¹⁰ De Chirico speaks of the tragedy of joy, which is nothing other than the calm before the storm, and the canvas now becomes the stage upon which the future disaster can be enacted. As the Italian historian Umberto Silva pointed out, "De Chirico is the personification of Croce's Italian disease: not quite fascism yet, but the fear of its dawn."¹¹

As was the case in Picasso's conversion, the futurists now fully repudiated their earlier nonrepresentational modes and procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization. They further rejected the collage techniques by which they had forced the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous materials and procedures within the painted surface, and through which they had underlined the interaction of aesthetic phenomena with their social and political context. It is surely no accident that one of Severini's first paintings to manifest his return to history is a work called *Maternity*, which represents a mother suckling an infant in the traditional pose of the Madonna. Even more conspicuous perhaps is the case of Carrà, who had been one of the most important futurists due to his development of nonmimetic pictorial signs, his systematic transgression of verbal and visual codes through the insertion of verbal fragments within painting, and his mechanization of pictorial production processes and their juxtaposition with pictorialized remnants of mechanical production processes. Carrà turned at that time to representational depictions of biblical scenes in the manner of Tuscan painting.

9. Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud*, Berkeley, 1977, p. 98.

10. Giorgio de Chirico, "Über die metaphysische Kunst," in *Wir Metaphysiker*, Berlin, n.d., p. 45.

11. Umberto Silva, *Kunst und Ideologie des Faschismus*, Frankfurt, 1975, p. 18.



Gino Severini. Spherical Expansion of Light (Centrifugal), 1914. (Left.) Maternity. 1916. (Right.)

Art, Past and Master

To the very same extent that the rediscovery of history serves the authoritarian purpose of justifying the failure of modernism, the atavistic notion of the master artist is reintroduced to continue a culture oriented to an esoteric elite, thus guaranteeing that elite's right to continued cultural and political leadership. The language of the artists themselves (or rather these particular artists, for there is an opposite definition of artistic production and culture simultaneously developing in the Soviet Union) blatantly reveals the intricate connection between aesthetic mastery and authoritarian domination. Three examples from three different decades may serve to illustrate this aesthetic stance:

Hysteria and dilettantism are damned to the burial urns. I believe that everybody is fed up now with dilettantism: whether it be in politics, literature, or painting.—Giorgio de Chirico, 1919.¹²

12. Giorgio de Chirico, *Valori Plastici*, Nos. 3-4, Rome, 1919. This phenomenon finds its earliest explicit manifestation in de Chirico's declaration "Pictor sum classicus," with which he concludes emphatically his call for a return to the law of history and classic order, a manifesto called "The Return to the Craft" published in *Valori Plastici* in 1919. Like Carlo Carrà in his "Pittura Metafisica," also published in 1919, de Chirico not only requests the return to the "classic" tradition and the "masters" of that tradition (Uccello, Giotto, Piero della Francesca), but to the specific *nationality* of that tradition. This is the most obvious of the three historical fictions in that authoritarian construct of



Carlo Carrà. Patriotic Celebration. 1914. (Left.) The Daughters of Loth. 1919. (Right.)

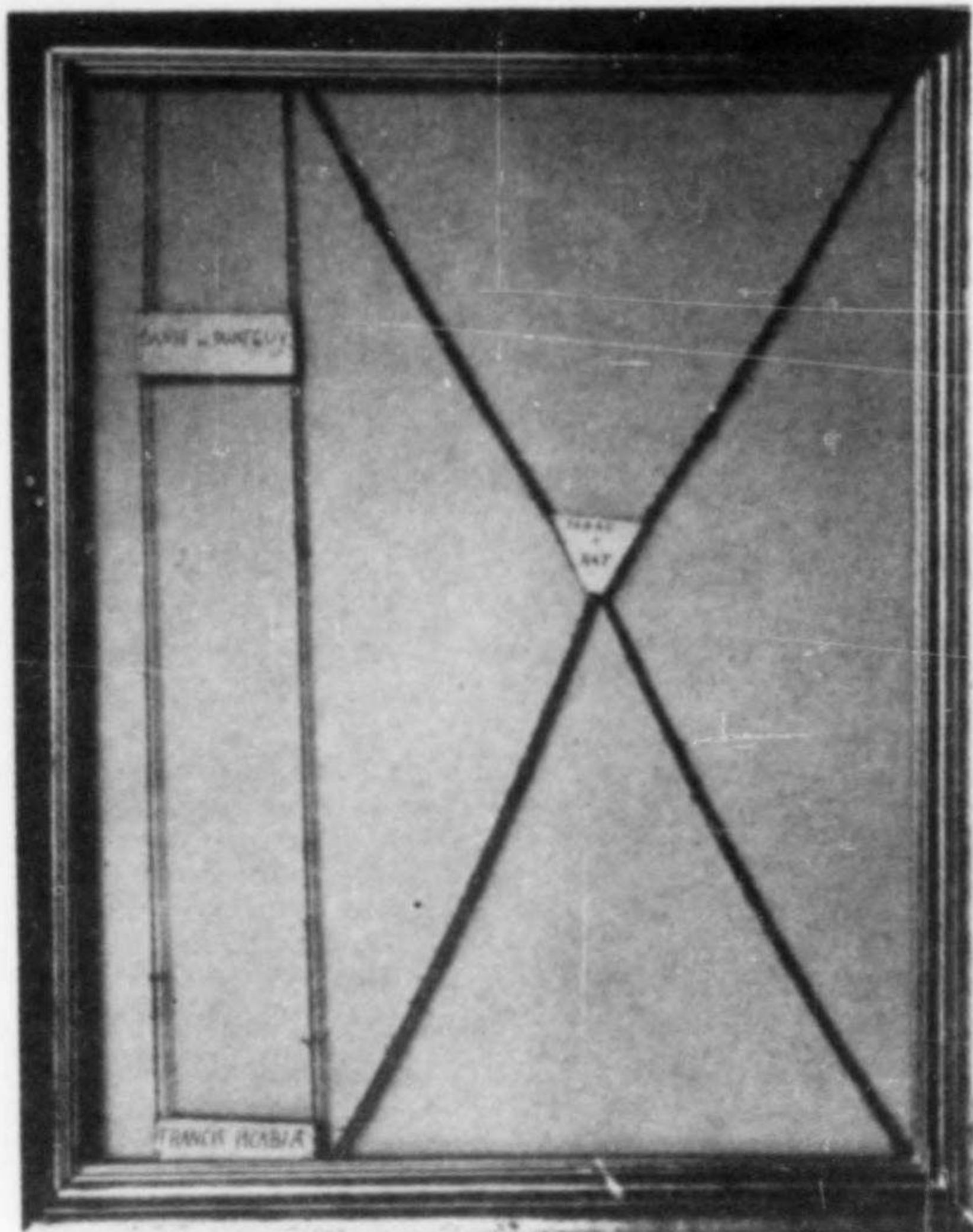
Socialism has only been invented for the mediocre and the weak. Can you imagine socialism or communism in Love or in Art? One would

a return to the past, since the nation-state as a socio-economic and political ordering system did not exist at the time of these masters' production.

It is only logical to find Carrà's name subsequently among the artists who signed the "Manifesto of Fascist Painting" in 1933 which reads as follows: "Fascist Art rejects research and experiments. . . . The style of Fascist art has to orient itself towards antiquity."

It seems that with increasing authoritarianism in the present the projection into the past has to be removed further and further away—from Renaissance to antiquity in this case. More explicitly we find this substitution of present history by mnemosynic fictions of past history in an essay by Alberto Savinio, published in *Valori Plastici* in 1921: "Memory generates our thoughts and our hopes . . . we are forever the devoted and faithful sons of Memory. Memory is our past; it is also the past of all other men, of all men who have preceded us. And since memory is the ordered recollection of our thoughts and those of the others, memory is our religion: *religio*."

When the French art historian Jean Clair tries to understand these phenomena outside of their historical and political context, his terminology, which is supposed to explain these contradictions and save them for a new reactionary anti-modernist art history writing, has to employ the same clichés of authoritarianism, the fatherland, and the paternal heritage: "[These painters] come to collect their paternal heritage, they do not even dream of rejecting it. . . . Neoclassicism is lived as a meditation on the exile, far from the lost fatherland which is also that of painting, the lost fatherland of paintings" (Jean Clair, "Metafisica et Unheimlichkeit," in *Les Realismes 1919-1939*, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1981, p. 32).



Francis Picabia. *Tabac-Rat or Dance of Saint Guy*. 1919-21. (Left.) *Printemps*. 1942. (Right.)

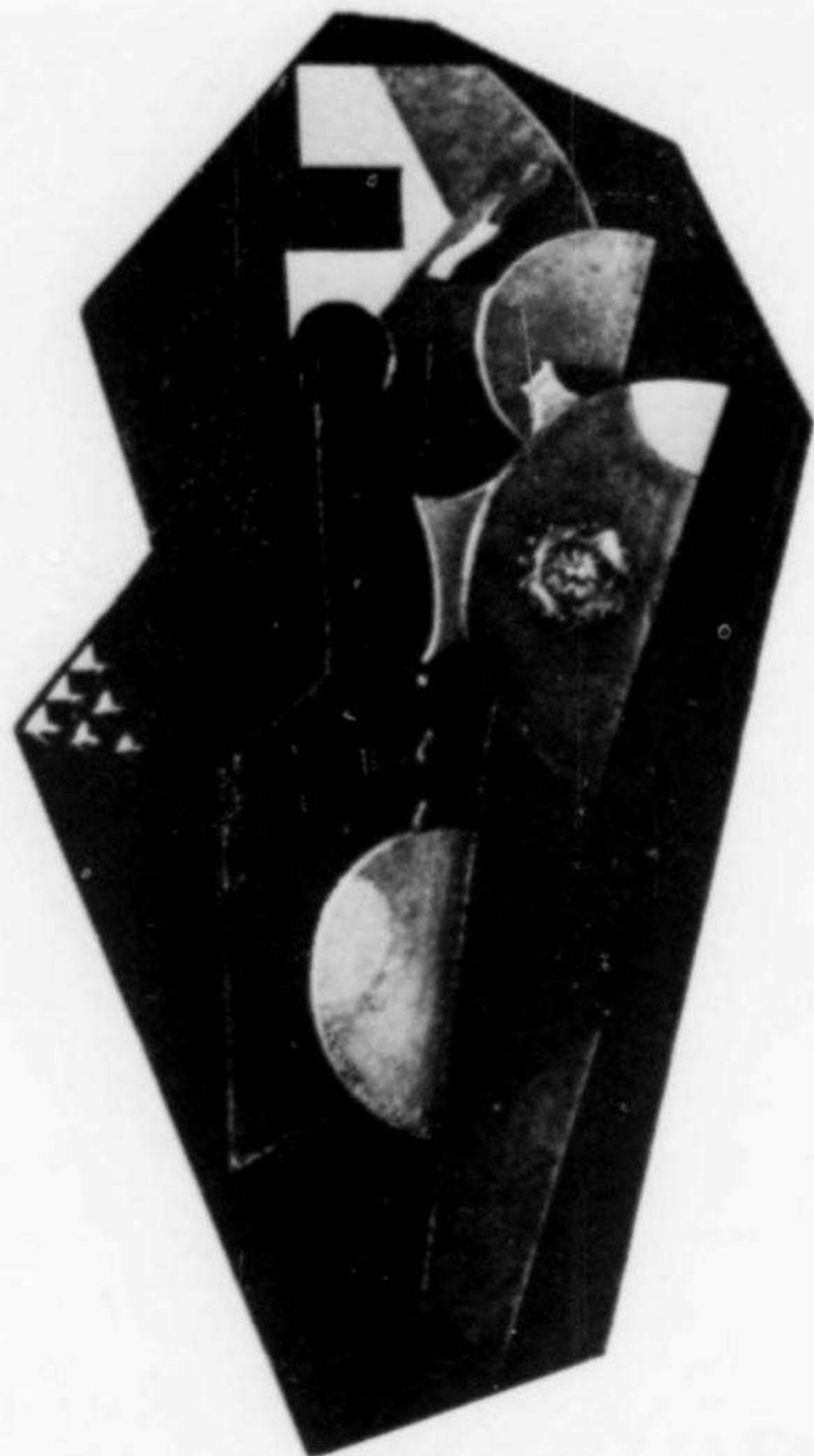
burst into laughter—if one were not threatened by the consequences.—
Francis Picabia, 1927.¹³

and finally, Picasso's notorious statement from 1935:

There ought to be an absolute dictatorship . . . a dictatorship of painters . . . a dictatorship of one painter . . . to suppress all those who have betrayed us, to suppress the cheaters, to suppress the tricks, to suppress mannerisms, to suppress charms, to suppress history, to suppress a heap of other things.¹⁴

13. "Francis Picabia contre Dada ou le Retour à la Raison," in *Comoedia*, March 14, 1927. p. 1. "The Return to Reason" and "The Return to Order" not only espoused almost identical programs of authoritarian neoclassicism, but also shared the same supposed enemies and targets of attack. Dada was, of course, one of them, so it seems useful in this context to recall the attitudes of the literary neoclassicist T. S. Eliot towards dada: "Mr. Aldington treated Mr. Joyce as a prophet of chaos and wailed at the flood of Dadaism which his prescient eye saw bursting forth at the tap of the magician's rod. . . . A very great book may have a very bad influence indeed. . . . A man of genius is responsible to his peers, not to a studio full of uneducated and undisciplined coxcombs" (T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial*, vol. LXXV [1923], pp. 480-483).

14. Pablo Picasso, in conversation with Christian Zervos, in *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. X, no. 1 (1935), 173.



Christian Schad. *Portrait of a Woman*. 1920. (Left.)
Self-Portrait. 1927. (Right.)

Like senile old rulers who refuse to step down, the stubbornness and spite of the old painters increase in direct proportion to the innate sense of the invalidity of their claims to save a cultural practice that had lost its viability. When, in the early twenties, the former German dadaist Christian Schad attempts a definition of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* by portraying members of the Weimar hautemonde and demimonde in the manner of Renaissance portraits; when, in 1933, Kasimir Malevich portrays himself and his wife in Renaissance costumes; then obviously the same mechanism of authoritarian alienation is at work. In a text from 1926 Schad delivers a complete account of the syndrome's most conspicuous features:

Oh, it is so easy to turn one's back on Raphael. Because it is so difficult to be a good painter. And only a good painter is able to paint well. Nobody will ever be a good painter if he is only capable of painting well. One has to be born a good painter. . . . Italy opened my eyes about my artistic volition and capacity. . . . In Italy the art is ancient and ancient art is often newer than the new art.¹⁵

15. Christian Schad, statement in exhibition catalogue, Galerie Würthle, Vienna, 1927. See also a nearly identical statement by the former expressionist Otto Dix: "The new element of painting for me

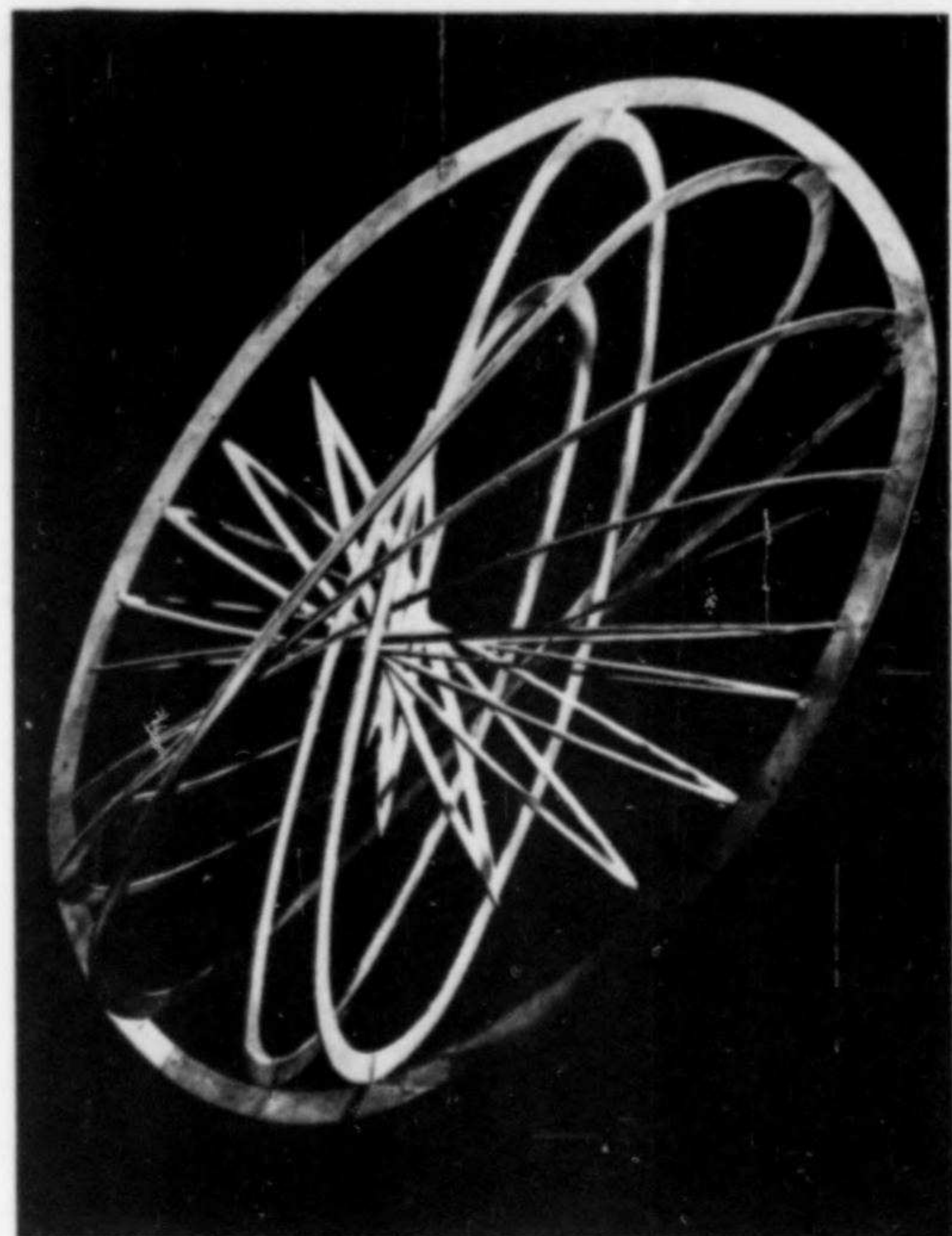


Kasimir Malevich. Black Cross. 1915. (Left.) Self-Portrait. 1933. (Right.)

The idealization of the painter's craft, the hypostasis of a past culture that serves as a fictitious realm of successful solutions and achievements that have become unattainable in the present, the glorification of the Other culture—in this case Italy—all of these features—currently discussed and put into practice once again—recur through the first three decades of twentieth-century modernism. They seek to halt that modernism and to deny its historical necessity as well as to deny the dynamic flux of social life and history through an extreme form of authoritarian alienation from these processes. It is important to see how these symptoms are rationalized by the artists at the time of their appearance, how they are later legitimized by art historians, and how they are finally integrated into an ideology of culture.

The concepts of "aesthetic paradox" and "novelty," essential features of avant-garde practice, serve as explanations for these contradictions. Here, for

resides in the intensification of forms of expression which *in nuce* exist already as givens in the work of *old masters*" (in *Das Objekt ist das Primäre*, Berlin, 1927). Compare this with the statement by George Grosz, a peer of Schad and Dix: "The return to French classicist painting, to Poussin, Ingres, and Corot, is an insidious fashion of *Biedermeier*. It seems that the political reaction is therefore followed by an intellectual reaction" (in *Das Kunstblatt*, 1922, as a reply to Paul Westheim's inquiry "Towards a New Naturalism?").



Alexander Rodchenko. Oval Hanging Construction. 1920. (Left.) Romance (Circus Scene). 1935. (Right.)

example, is Christopher Green's justification for Cocteau's and Picasso's neo-classicism:

For Cocteau a return to narrative clarity and to form in the novel did not mean a denial of paradox, and in the same way neither did a return to representation in painting. Indeed it seems possible that it was at least partially out of a sense of paradox that Picasso turned against the antirepresentational dogma associated with Cubism to revive Ingres in 1915. . . . Cocteau suggests that where audacity had become convention—as in the Parisian avant-garde—the resurrection of the old modes could create a special kind of novelty: that looking backwards the artist could even more dramatically look forward. There is no direct evidence that Picasso consciously aimed to create such a paradox, but the fact remains . . . that by turning back he did achieve novelty and that his perverse development of Synthetic Cubism and representational styles alongside one another between 1917 and 1921 was calculated to throw the paradox implicit in his progressive move backwards into the highest possible relief.¹⁶

16. Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avantgarde*, London, 1976, p. 218.

The Carnival of Style

The degree of congruity between Cocteau's antimodernist stance (or should we say cliché of ahistorical thought?) and the arguments against avant-garde practice in the art press's current discussion of postmodernism is striking. The stereotype of the avant-garde's audacity having become convention is, of course, used primarily by those who want to disguise their new conservatism as its own kind of audacity (Cocteau at the time of "Rappel à l'Ordre" had just turned to Catholicism). They deny the fact that conventionalization itself is a maneuver to silence any form of critical negation, and they wish to share in the benefits that bourgeois culture bestows on those who support false consciousness as it is embodied in cultural conventions. With regard to historical eclecticism, the congruity between the neoclassicists of the 1920s and the contemporary figuration is even more astounding. Intellectual acrobatics are needed to make the ideological stance look like an organic historical necessity, as opposed to a construct determined by extreme social and political factors. Whatever we are to understand by a "progressive move backwards" or a "paradox as novelty," and however Green's observation of Picasso's "perverse development" indicates his limited awareness of the contradictions resulting from the art historian's need to accommodate a cultural notion of the master who necessarily moves from achievement to achievement, it becomes even more evident that the art historian's maneuvers cannot explain the contradictions when we read:

His [Picasso's] work between 1917 and 1921, ranging as it did from a gay Synthetic Cubism to a sober Classicism repeatedly confirmed the irrelevance for him of having a style and the relevance for him of Cocteau's idea of "style." The bright color planes of Cubism are right for the carnival brilliance of the 1918 *Arlequin*, the sheer figurative weight of Roman fresco painting and of Ingres' *Madame Moitessier* were right for the monumental stability of *La Femme assise lisant*; the implication was that any style, old or new, could be adapted to Picasso's needs, could be made subject to his will.¹⁷

Style, the very gem of reified art-historical thinking, the fiction that there could be a pictorial mode or a discursive practice that might function autonomously—traditionally rejected by artists—is now applied by the artists to imbue these exhausted modes with historical meaning. "All the wasms have become isms," is a vulgar contemporary variation on the theme of historicism put forward by the self-styled spokesman of postmodernist architecture, Charles Jencks.

Style then becomes the ideological equivalent of the commodity: its universal exchangeability, its freefloating availability indicating a historical moment

17. *Ibid.*

of closure and stasis. When the only option left to aesthetic discourse is the maintenance of its own distribution system and the circulation of its commodity forms, it is not surprising that all "audacities have become convention" and that paintings start looking like shop windows decorated with fragments and quotations of history.

None of the manifold features of this eclecticism should be seen as random; they confirm one another in an intricate network of historical meaning, which may, however, be read differently from the intentions of the authors or the interests of their audience and the art historians who constitute their cultural reception. This transformation of the subversive function of aesthetic production to plain affirmation necessarily manifests itself in every detail of production. The discovery of "history" as a treasure trove into which one might dip for the appropriation of abandoned elements of style is but one obvious step. The secret attraction of the iconography of Italian theater for Picasso and others at that time becomes more comprehensible in such a perspective. The Harlequins, Pierrots, Bajazzos, and Pulcinelles invading the work of Picasso, Beckmann, Severini, Derain, and others in the early twenties (and, in the mid-thirties, even the work of the former constructivist/productivist Rodchenko in Russia) can be identified as ciphers of an enforced regression. They serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the avant-garde artist who has come to realize his historical failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on utopian thought.¹⁸

18. When Max Beckmann in the twenties referred to himself as the "alienated clown and the mysterious king" he expressed precisely the unconscious dilemma of the artist's fluctuation between authoritarian rule and melancholy, as George Steiner puts it in his introduction to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "Prince and Puppet are impelled by the same frozen violence" (p. 18). Renato Poggioli described this dilemma without coming to an adequate understanding: "Aware that bourgeois society looks at him only as a charlatan the artist deliberately and ostentatiously assumes the role of the comic actor. From this stems the myth of the artist as *pagliaccio* and mountebank. Between the alternating extremes of self-criticism and self-pity, the artist comes to see himself as a comic victim and sometimes as a tragic victim, although the latter seems to be predominant" (Renato Poggioli, "The Artist in the Modern World," in *The Spirit of the Letter*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 327).

This new icon of the clown is only matched in frequency in the paintings of that period by the representation of the *manichino*, the wooden puppet, the reified body, originating from both shop-window decoration and from the props of the classical artist's studio. If the first icon appears in the context of the carnival and the circus as the masquerades of alienation from present history, the second appears on the stage set of reification. With due historical transformation we can observe parallel phenomena in the iconography of the "New Painting." As described in the following example: "The comic and the self-effacing aspects . . . loom very large (and very small in the work of many recent artists). Miniaturization, stick figures, dimpled dollies, micro freaks and the humanoid progeny of Krazy Kat are all part of an ever increasing Lilliputian population; the doll house syndrome is very much with us" (Klaus Kertess, "Figuring It Out," *Artforum*, November 1980, p. 30). Or, a more adequate critical understanding of these phenomena: "In another of a long string of ironic (?) refusals of virtuosity and 'sensitivity,' painters have recently adopted a reduced brutish figuration (seemingly chosen from a lexicon of the drastically damaged mentally) whose nihilism strikes not at any society in particular but at 'civilization'—a familiar desperate move" (Martha Rosler, unpublished notes on quotation).

This carnival of eclecticism, this theatrical spectacle, this window dressing of self-quotation becomes transparent as a masquerade of alienation from history, a return of the repressed in cultural costume. It is essential to the functioning of historicism and its static view of history that it assemble the various fragments of historical recollection and incantation according to the degree of projection and identification that these images of the past will provide for the needs of the present. Quite unlike the modernist collage, in which various fragments and materials of experience are laid bare, revealed as fissures, voids, unresolvable contradictions, irreconcilable particularizations, pure heterogeneity, the historicist image pursues the opposite aim: that of synthesis, of the illusory creation of a unity and totality which *conceals* its historical determination and conditioned particularity.¹⁹ This appearance of a unified pictorial representation, homogeneous in mode, material, and style, is treacherous, supplying as it does aesthetic pleasure as false consciousness, or vice versa. If the modernist work provides the viewer with perceptual clues to all its material, procedural, formal, and ideological qualities as part of its modernist program, which therefore gives the viewer an experience of increased *presence* and autonomy of the self, then the historicist work pretends to a successful resolution of the modernist dilemma of aesthetic self-negation, particularization, and restriction to detail, through *absence*, leading to the seductive domination of the viewer by the Other, as Julia Kristeva has described the experience of alienation and perversion that ideology imposes on the subject.

19. These "concealed collages" in painting represent a false unification. Fredric Jameson describes this analogous attempt at unification in literature: "... the mirage of the continuity of personal identity, the organizing unity of the psyche or the personality, the concept of society itself, and not least, the notion of the organic unity of the work of art" (*Fables of Aggression*, Berkeley, 1986, p. 8). The term "painted collages" was used by Max Ernst in his "Au-delà de la Peinture" in 1936 to describe the painting of Magritte and Dali. Of course Ernst was not able to provide a historical differentiation between the original collage techniques and their implications and the attempt of renewed painterly unification of fragmentation, fissures, and discontinuity of the plastic language. Since then several authors have described the phenomenon of the "painted collage" in the neoclassicist paintings and their peculiar unreal spatiality, a surface and pictorial space that seem to be made of glass or ice. See, for example, Wieland Schmied, "Pittura Metafisica et Nouvelle Objectivité," in *Les Realismes 1919-1939*, p. 22. This is of course the spatial configuration of the static melancholic experience which is fixated on the authoritarian images of the alien and the ancient and that recognizes itself in the shimmering surface of classicist painting that seems to contain life in a shrine. The most haunting image of this idealized classical beauty is given in Baudelaire's poem "La Beauté":

Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
 Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
 Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
 Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
 J'unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
 Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
 Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

The Returns of the New

The meaning structure of art seems to have been undergoing reorganization while the market merely faltered briefly and then regained its stride. The '70s may turn out to have been a revanchist period in which controlling influences within audience and market elites regrouped to reestablish the stratification of the audience and its objects, thereby reasserting, for example, the preeminence of painting as artifactual meaning bearer and as tangible investment.

—Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, Makers: Thoughts on Audience"

Perceptual and cognitive models and their modes of artistic production function in a manner similar to the libidinal apparatus that generates, employs, and receives them. Historically, they lead a life independent of their original contexts and develop specific dynamics: they can be easily reinvested with different meanings and adapted to ideological purposes. Once exhausted and made obsolete by subsequent models, these production modes can generate the same nostalgia as does iconic representation for an obsolete code. Emptied of their historical function and meaning, they do not disappear but rather drift in history as empty vessels waiting to be filled with reactionary interests in need of cultural legitimation. Like other objects of cultural history, aesthetic production modes can be wrenched from their contexts and functions, to be used to display the wealth and power of the social group that has appropriated them.

To invest these obsolete modes with meaning and historical impact requires, however, that they be presented as *radical* and *new*. The secret awareness of their obsolescence is belied by the obsession with which these regressive phenomena are announced as innovation. "The New Spirit of Painting," "The New Fauves," "Naive Nouveau," "Il Nuove Nuove," "The Italian New Wave" are some of the labels attached to recent exhibitions of retrograde contemporary art (as though the prefix *neo* did not indicate the restoration of preexisting forms). It is significant in this regard that the German neoexpressionists who have recently received such wide recognition in Europe (presumably to be followed by a similar acclaim in North America) have been operating on the fringes of the German art world for almost twenty years. Their "newness" consists precisely in their current historical availability, not in any actual innovation of artistic practice.

The historical specificity of iconographic codes is generally more apparent than that of production procedures and materials. It had seemed until recently, for

example, that the representation of saints and clowns, of female nudes and landscapes, was entirely proscribed as an authentic expression of individual or collective experience. This proscription did not extend, though, to less conspicuous aspects of pictorial and sculptural production. Excited brushwork and heavy impasto paint application, high contrast colors and dark contours are still perceived as "painterly" and "expressive" twenty years after Stella's, Ryman's, and Richter's works demonstrated that the painted sign is not transparent, but is a coded structure which cannot be an unmediated "expression." Through its repetition the physiognomy of this painterly gesture so "full of spontaneity" becomes, in any case, an empty mechanics. There is only pure desperation in the recently reiterated claim of "energism," which betrays a secret foreboding of the instant reification that awaits such a naive notion of the liberating potential of apolitical and undialectical aesthetic practices.

But the intentions of the artists and their apologists remain to be understood, because contrary to their claim to psychic universality they in fact "express" only the needs of a very circumscribed social group. If "expressivity" and "sensuousness" have again become criteria of aesthetic evaluation, if we are once again confronted with depictions of the sublime and the grotesque—complementary experiential states of modernism's high culture products—then that notion of sublimation which defines the individual's work as determined by alienation, deprivation, and loss is reaffirmed. This process is simply described by Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel:

Suffering is portrayed as a personal struggle, experienced by the individual in isolation. Alienation becomes a heroic disease for which there is no social remedy. Irony masks resignation to a situation one cannot alter or control. The human situation is seen as static, with certain external forms varying but the eternal anguish remaining. Every political system is perceived to set some small group into power, so that changing the group will not affect our "real" (that is private) lives. . . . Thus simply expressed, the elements of bourgeois ideology have a clear role in maintaining the status quo. Arising out of a system that functions through corporate competition for profits, the ideas of the bourgeoisie imply the ultimate powerlessness of the individual, the futility of public action and the necessity of despair.²⁰

Modernist high culture canonized aesthetic constructs with the appellation "sublime" when the artists in question had proven their capacity to maintain utopian thought in spite of the conditions of reification, and when, instead of actively attempting to change those conditions, they simply shifted subversive

20. Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel, "Modernism and History," *New Literary History*, vol. III, no. 1, p. 196.

intentions into the aesthetic domain. The attitude of individual powerlessness and despair is already reaffirmed in the resignation implicit in a return to the traditional tools of the craft of painting and in the cynical acceptance of its historical limitations and its materially, perceptually, and cognitively primitivist forms of signification.

Such paintings, experienced by a certain audience as sensuous, expressive, and energetic, perform and glorify the ritual of instant excitation and perpetually postponed gratification that is the bourgeois mode of experience. This bourgeois model of sublimation—which has, of course, been countered by an avant-garde tradition of negation, a radical denial of that model's perpetrations of the extreme division of labor and specialization of sexual role behavior—finds its appropriate manifestation in the repeated revitalization of obsolete representational and expressive pictorial practices. It is not accidental that Balthus—champion of the bourgeois taste for high titillation with his scopophilic pictures of sleeping or otherwise unaware adolescent female nudes—has recently received renewed acclaim and is regarded as one of the patriarchal figures of the “new” figuration. Nor is it accidental that not *one* of the German neoexpressionists or the Italian Arte Ciphra painters is female. At a time when cultural production in every field is becoming increasingly aware of, if not actively countering, the oppression of traditional role distinctions based on the construction of sexual difference, contemporary art (or at least that segment of it that is currently receiving prominent museum and market exposure) returns to concepts of psychosexual organization that date from the origins of bourgeois character formation. The bourgeois concept of the avant-garde as the domain of heroic male sublimation functions as the ideological complement and cultural legitimation of social repression. Laura Mulvey has analyzed this phenomenon in the context of the “visual pleasure” of cinematic experience:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.²¹

and Max Kozloff puts it explicitly in the context of the visual arts:

Further scouting might produce more evidence that virility is often equated with the probing of space or the masterful brushing of a surface. The metaphor of sculptural extension or battling with the canvas is easily sexualized because it conflates two desirable goals associated with the energy of creation. With Expressionist theory, German and American, we are never far removed from its special

21. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, vol. XVI, no. 3 (1975), 7.

aura. . . . The imagery of modern art, of course, is rich with overtones of masculine aggression and depersonalization of woman.²²

The abandonment of painting as sexual metaphor that occurred around 1915 implied not only formal and aesthetic changes but also a critique of traditional models of sublimation. This is most evident in Duchamp's interest in androgyny and in the constructivists' wish to abolish the production mode of the individual master in favor of one oriented to collective and utilitarian practice. In contradistinction, those painting practices which operate under the naive assumption that gestural delineation, high contrast color, and heavy impasto are immediate (unmediated, noncoded) representations of the artist's desire propagate the traditional role model; and they do so far more effectively than the painting practices which systematically investigate their own procedures. The former's attraction and success, its role and impact with regard to notions of high culture and the hierarchy of the visual arts, are governed by its complicity with these models of psychosexual organization. Carol Duncan has described how psychosexual and ideological concepts interrelate, how they are concealed and mediated in early twentieth-century expressionist painting:

According to their paintings, the liberation of the artist means the domination of others; his freedom requires their unfreedom. Far from contesting the established social order, the male-female relationship that these paintings imply—the drastic reduction of women to objects of specialized male interests—embodies on a sexual level the basic class relationship of capitalist society. In fact such images are splendid metaphors for what the wealthy collectors who eventually acquired them did to those beneath them in the social as well as the sexual hierarchy. However, if the artist is willing to regard women as merely a means to his own ends, if he exploits them to achieve his boast of virility, he, in his turn, must merchandise and sell himself—an illusion of himself and his intimate life—on the open, competitive avant-garde market. He must promote (or get dealers and critic friends to promote) the value of his special credo, the authenticity of his special vision, and—most importantly—the genuineness of his antibourgeois antagonism. Ultimately, he must be dependent on and serve the pleasure of this very bourgeois world or enlightened segments of it that his art and life seem to contest.²³

Inasmuch as this sexual and artistic role is itself reified, *peinture*—the

22. Max Kozloff, "The Authoritarian Personality in Modern Art," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 8 (May 1974), 40.

23. Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Painting," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 9 (June 1974), 38.

fetishized mode of artistic production—can assume the function of an aesthetic equivalent and provide a corresponding cultural identification for the viewer. Not surprisingly, then, both German neoexpressionists and Italian Arte Ciphra painters draw heavily upon the stock of painterly styles that predate the two major shifts in twentieth-century art history: fauvism, expressionism, and Pittura Metafisica before Duchamp and constructivism; surrealist automatism and abstract expressionism before Rauschenberg and Manzoni—the two essential instances in modern art when the production process of painting was radically questioned for its claim to organic unity, aura, and presence, and replaced by heterogeneity, mechanical procedures, and seriality.

The contemporary regressions of “postmodernist” painting and architecture are similar in their iconic eclecticism to the neoclassicism of Picasso, Carrà, and others. A variety of production procedures and aesthetic categories, as well as the perceptual conventions that generated them, are now wrested from their original historical contexts and reassembled into a spectacle of availability. They postulate an experience of history as private property; their function is that of *decorum*. The gaudy frivolity with which these works underscore their awareness of the ephemeral function they perform cannot conceal the material and ideological interests they serve; nor can their aggressivity and bravura disguise the exhaustion of the cultural practices they try to maintain.

The works of the contemporary Italians explicitly revive, through quotation, historical production processes, iconographic references, and aesthetic categories. Their techniques range from fresco painting (Clemente) to casting sculpture in bronze (Chia), from highly stylized primitivist drawing to gestural abstraction. Iconographic references range from representations of saints (Salvo) to modish quotations from Russian constructivism (Chia). With equal versatility they orchestrate a program of dysfunctional plastic categories, often integrated into a scenario of aesthetic surplus: freestanding figurative sculpture combined with an installation of aquatint etchings, architectural murals with small-scale easel paintings, relief constructions with iconic objects.

The German neoexpressionists are equally protean in their unearthing of atavistic production modes, including even primitivist hewn wood polychrome sculpture, paraphrasing the expressionist paraphrase of “primitive” art (Immendorff). The rediscovery of ancient teutonic graphic techniques such as woodcuts and linocuts flourishes (Baselitz, Kiefer), as does their iconography: the nude, the still life, the landscape, and what these artists conceive of as allegory.

Concomitant with the fetishization of painting in the cult of *peinture* is a fetishization of the perceptual experience of the work as *auratic*. The contrivance of aura is crucial for these works in order that they fulfill their function as the luxury products of a fictitious high culture. In the tangibility of the auratic, figured through crafted surface textures, aura and commodity coalesce. Only such synthetic uniqueness can satisfy the contempt that bourgeois character holds for the “vulgarity” of social existence; and only this “aura” can generate “aesthetic

pleasure" in the narcissistic character disorder that results from this contempt. Meyer Schapiro saw this symbiotic relationship between certain artists and their patrons in 1935: "The artist's frequently asserted antagonism to organized society does not bring him into conflict with his patrons, since they share his contempt for the public and are indifferent to practical social life."²⁴

The aesthetic attraction of these eclectic painting practices originates in a nostalgia for that moment in the past when the painting modes to which they refer had historical authenticity. But the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production. This is not so much because they actually derive from particular precedents, but because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness. That is the price of instant acclaim achieved by affirming the status quo under the guise of innovation. The primary function of such cultural re-presentations is the confirmation of the hieratics of ideological domination.

24. Meyer Schapiro, quoted in Kozloff.



Gino Severini. The Two Clowns. 1922.

National Identity and Product Protection

... but the European has been unhoused for a long time, he is a déraciné, and as he could in no way face up to it and did not have the courage to admit it, he became a parvenu. To be a parvenu means to maintain the pretense of being at home in the world . . .

—Otto Freundlich, *Bulletin D*, 1919

If the *raison d'être* of historicist work is that of private property, and fashion the discourse in which it manifests and maintains itself, then it is only natural that the work itself has the characteristics of the cliché: compulsively repeated gestures emptied of meaning and congealed into grotesques. Beyond the obsolete and stereotyped conception of the artist's role and character; beyond the fetishized conventions, procedures, and materials which we have analyzed; these clichés are most easily recognized in the artists' call for a return to national culture with its "roots and laws."

Carrà's demand for *italianità* in the 1920s now recurs in both Italian and German painting as the claim of national cultural identity. But such a claim cannot hide its economic function as product protection in the increasingly competitive international art market. Its ideological function has been defined by Fredric Jameson in another context:

National allegory should be understood as a formal attempt to bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday life within a given nation state and the structural tendency of monopoly capital to develop on a worldwide, essentially transnational scale. . . .²⁵

Just as history has been rediscovered as an inexhaustible source for fictions of identity and subjectivity in commercial culture (fashion, advertising, etc.), so the regressive practices of "high" cultural production provide luxury goods directed at the identity and subjectivity of the managerial class.²⁶ When Lenin said that "Nationality and Fatherland are essential forms of the bourgeois system," he could hardly have anticipated that "history" would subsequently assume the same function. The nostalgia of artistic production for its own past conventions corresponds to this class's nostalgia for its past processes of individuation at the time of its historical ascendancy.

The very same call for a return to the fictions of national and cultural identity as we observed in the regressive art of the twenties is now taking place in

25. Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, p. 94.

Arte Ciphra and neoexpressionism. Frequent references to the late de Chirico and the painterly manner of Sironi's work of the twenties occur in contemporary Italian painting, while the current German painters refer to the pictorial characteristics and production techniques of German expressionism.

The reference to expressionism in contemporary West-German art is the natural move to make at a time when the myth of cultural identity is to be established specifically against the dominance of American art during the entire period of reconstruction. Since the Second World War, expressionism, the "German intuition" of early twentieth-century modern painting, has received increasing esteem. It had of course lacked just this esteem in the post-World War I period, prior to its eventual suppression under fascism. But during the early sixties skyrocketing prices indicated that expressionism had achieved the status of a national treasure, the best of the pre-Fascist heritage of German culture. As opposed to the political radicalism of Berlin dada, expressionism presented an avant-garde position acceptable to the newly reconstituted upper middle class, and it thus became the key object for historical study, collection, and speculation. The apolitical humanitarian stance of the expressionist artists, their devotion to spiritual regeneration, their critique of technology, and their romanticization of exotic and primal experience perfectly accorded with the desire for an art that would provide spiritual salvation from the daily experience of alienation resulting from the dynamic reconstruction of postwar capitalism.

The generation of contemporary neoexpressionists—now in their forties—received their education during this period from artists who had themselves only recently learned the lessons of post-surrealist automatism as represented by *art informel* and abstract expressionism. The first "scandals" of individual achievement of the present generation occurred in the early sixties, when they "dared" to reintroduce figurative subject matter and highly expressive gestural and chromatic qualities into their art. Their "courage" consisted, then, precisely in committing themselves to the emerging myth of Germany's cultural heritage and national identity through the adoption of the artist's traditional role and the willful ignorance or rejection of all the aesthetic, epistemological, and philosophical developments of the first two decades of the century.

Originally—that is, in the early to mid-sixties—some of these artists had produced work of considerable interest. (The early activities of Immendorff at the Düsseldorf Academy and his subsequent LIDL happening, and the early work of the East German "primitivist" painter Penck are cases in point.) But subsequent to their discovery by the market and museums, these painters underwent a stylistic streamlining that resulted in the "movement" of neoexpressionism. The first step was the return to large-scale easel painting. For that purpose individual eccentricities of aesthetic activity had to be sacrificed, as did all references to twentieth-century developments contesting the practice of painting. The second step was the conversion of the various idiosyncratic activities of the artists into a homogeneous neoexpressionist style.

The neoexpressionists and their apologists understandably reject an exclusive alignment with the German expressionist patrimony, since their painterly erudition and ambition extends to an assimilation of the pictorial standards of the New York School and the economic value set by it. Any art that wants to supplant the dominance of American art through the programmatic return to a national idiom can only be successful on the market if it acknowledges the dominant "foreign" style. After all it had been the major problem of postwar European painting that it never achieved the "qualitative" level of the New York School (just as, according to Greenberg, the major problem facing American painting before the war was attaining the level of "quality" of the School of Paris). This is particularly evident in the work of the neoexpressionist Georg Baselitz, whose canvases' size and scale, drawing, and painterly gesture owe as much to abstract expressionism as to German expressionism.

The successful institutionalization of neoexpressionism has required a complex and subtle set of maneuvers by the market and museums. For example, historical continuity had to be established in order to legitimize the neoexpressionists as heirs to the German cultural heritage. A recent example of how this authentication may be achieved is a spectacular case of *Geschichtsklitterung* (eclectic historicist construct), the *First Study for a Sculpture* by Baselitz. The large scale seated figure, hewn out of a wood block, raising its right arm in such a way that hostile critics have called it a Fascist gesture, was recently shown at the



Max Beckmann. Perseus Triptych. 1941.

Whitechapel Gallery in London. For this exhibition, it was surrounded by the late tryptichs of Max Beckmann, thus establishing the historical pedigree, the continuity of specifically German art. Thus accredited with authenticity, local products can succeed on the international market.

A second strategy, complementing this contrived national continuity, is that of carefully placing the work in the context of the contemporary international avant-garde. For example, a reproduction of a painting by the neoprimitivist Penck appears on the frontispiece of a catalogue for a recent exhibition of the Italian artists Fabro, Kounellis, Merz, and Paolini at the Kunsthalle, Bern—one of the strongholds of German neoexpressionism. And more overtly, the catalogue introduction states the museum director's proposal to combine work by this group of truly significant Italian artists with that of the neoexpressionists who are described as their "nordic" counterparts. Thus the intellectual subtlety and analytic clarity of these Italian artists is conferred upon the reactionary German artists, when the proper German peers of these Italians are, of course, Darboven, Palermo, and Richter.

Critical Clichés, Manufactured Visions

Social reasons for this impotence [of historicism]: the fantasy of the bourgeois class ceases to focus on the future of the forces of productivity which it released. The specific Gemütlichkeit of the middle of the century results from this conditioned fading away of social fantasy. The desire to have children is only a weaker stimulation of potency in comparison to the images of the future that this social fantasy once engendered.

—Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark"

When art emphasizing national identity attempts to enter the international distribution system, the most worn-out historical and geo-political clichés have to be employed. And thus we now see the resurrection of such notions as the nordic versus the Mediterranean, the teutonic versus the Latin. A typical formulation of the clichéd idea of German character appears in an art historian's comment on a neoexpressionist painter's work: "The tendency of German art to literature, to profound allegories, and ideological symbolism, [and] to the mysticism and ecstasy of an exuberant imagination has found expression here."²⁶

Just as the art itself resorts to cliché as the reliable strategy for operating

26. Siegfried Gohr, "Remarks on the Paintings of Markus Lüpertz," in *Markus Lüpertz-Stil Paintings*, London, Whitechapel Gallery, 1979, n.p.

within an obsolete context, so the critics and curators who have become the spokesmen of the "new art" resurrect a critical language of false naiveté and bloated trivialities which forms the terminology of the new subjectivity. The lack of historical specificity and reflection upon methodology, the willful ignorance of radical changes in other fields of research bearing upon aesthetic practice (semiology, psychoanalysis, criticism of ideology) are particularly revealing. Take for example the British art historian and curator Nicholas Serota discussing the manner in which one of the neoexpressionist painters

has adopted the seemingly more traditional ground of the painter of still life. He has created for himself a kind of theatre in which the absurd object, emblems, allegory and metaphor are used to reinterpret universals such as the creation and awakening of life, the interaction of natural forces, human emotions and ideologies and the experience of death. For a comparison one has to look back to the tryptichs of Beckmann, though Beckmann's use of narrative structure is quite different.²⁷

Or, more hyperbolically, Rudi Fuchs, Dutch art historian and director of one of Europe's most active museums in exhibiting contemporary art, claims that

Painting is salvation. It presents freedom of thought of which it is the triumphant expression. . . . The painter is a guardian angel carrying the palette in blessing over the world. Maybe the painter is the darling of the Gods.²⁸

And the German art historian Siegfried Gohr, in a text published by London's Whitechapel Gallery, writes

The relationship between beauty and terror, eros and death, those time honored themes of art, are presented again by the painting. Negativity, death is introduced as a theme.²⁹

The lack of formal and historical complexity in the painters' works and the attendant avoidance of genuine critical analysis of their contrived "visions" results inevitably in a stereotypical critical language. Here for example, are two virtually identical statements by two critics writing about different painters:

The motifs which Georg Baselitz time and again employs in his paintings are insignificant as content. They are only meaningful within his pictorial method: as formal points of departure.³⁰

27. Nicholas Serota, *Markus Lüpertz-Stil Paintings*.

28. R. H. Fuchs, *Anselm Kiefer*, exhibition catalogue, Venice Biennale, 1980, p. 62.

29. Gohr, "Remarks."

30. R. H. Fuchs, *Georg Baselitz—Bilder 1977-1978*, Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 1979, n.p.

The value of the motif in these paintings of Lüpertz's lay only in the way in which he used it as a starting point for the development of a meaningful activity.³¹

As was the case in the call to order by regressive artists of the twenties, a growing aggressivity is now becoming apparent in the manner that these clichés of vision and language are propagated. With the demise of liberalism, its underside—authoritarianism—no longer feels inhibited. And it thus comes to the fore in the guise of irrationality and the ideology of individual expression. In reaction against social consciousness and political awareness, proto-Fascist libertarianism prepares the way for the seizure of state power. Without questioning the reasons for the failure of enlightenment, the end of modernism and the enforced silencing of its critical potential are taken as excuses for indulging in defeat.

The following programmatic statements, couched in a pastiche of Deleuze and Guattari, Stirner, and Spengler, fervently advocate the received ideas of petit bourgeois anarchism in relation to Arte Ciphra:

Arte Ciphra exposes itself as an art of the most extreme subjectivism. . . . The disillusionment is the strongest with those who even at the beginning of the seventies still believed in an immediately imminent collapse of capitalism—generated by criticism and revelation. . . . Now it is much more important to develop new forms which relate to pure intensity, to the indivisibility of desire and to the unconscious fixations of desire. Desire therefore assumes a revolutionary position. But as desire itself is always a part of infinitely complicated and ambivalent interdependences, its particular fixations must come to bear in their totality, even if they are partially "regressive," "bourgeois," or "nonrevolutionary". . . . The failure of bourgeois enlightenment—well understood long ago in political and ideological thought—was not acknowledged by this art of the seventies. . . . Arte Ciphra attempts a formation of the "here and now". . . . Its aim is the opposite of utopia—it's *atopia*, the discovery of the other in the immediacy of the present.³²

And here, in the explicitly proto-Fascist language of an Italian critic:

The new force of art is born from this very tension, turning a relationship of quantity into a relationship of intensity. The work is taken from a socially underprivileged position back to an individual centrality, reestablishing the creative need by means of an image in opposition to the shapeless foggy of social needs.³³

31. Gohr, "Remarks."

32. Wolfgang Max Faust, *Arte Ciphra*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1979, p. 14.

33. Achille Bonito Oliva, "The Bewildered Image," *Flash Art*, nos. 96-97 (April 1980), 35.

Rather than face up to its own bankruptcy and the necessity of political change, this frankly elitist notion of subjectivity ultimately opts for the destruction of the very historical and cultural reality that it claims to possess. The secret longing for destruction as a solution to contradictions that can only be met in political, not cultural, terms, manifests itself in fantasies of catastrophe. This climate of finality—when the end of a class is mistaken for the end of the world—generates apocalyptic and necrophilic visions, first in high art, then spread throughout the culture. Eventually self-destruction can be seen as an act of heroism. These tendencies are again to be found in the painting of neoexpressionism and its accompanying criticism:

It represents one of the great tyrannical gestures in aesthetics: an emperor burning down a city to make way for a new and grander one. As a theme it belongs of course to a larger topological framework which dates back to the beginning of time: renewal and purification through fire. . . . Fire destroys but it also cleanses.³⁴

and:

Last year . . . I accompanied Lüpertz to the Ruhleben crematorium on the outskirts of the city. As we walked slowly down a wide path to the modern crematorium . . . a pale of black smoke began to rise slowly from the chimneys. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sharp report of rifles firing on the British artillery range hidden behind the crematorium. The conjunction was typical of Berlin. Inside the building was the pair of paintings by Lüpertz. . . . They have a quality of universal truth.³⁵

The historical "authenticity" of these works is contained, then, in the very retardation and regression which they enact: the continuing domination of the obsolete. In the pathetic farce of their repetition-compulsion, we can still recognize the tragic failure of the original forms of the protest of expressionism. In the mockery and mimicry of contemporary neoexpressionism we see the afterimage of that anarchic and subversive, but ultimately apolitical radicalism that was doomed to failure, to be appropriated by the very forces that it had set out to oppose. It is Lukács, once again, who has described this mechanism:

Mythologizing the problems allows one to avoid looking at the phenomena which are criticized as being part of capitalism, or to render capitalism in such a spurious, distorted, and mystified form that the critique does not generate a confrontation of the problems but a parasitic complacency with the system; by inversion, even an affirma-

34. Fuchs, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 57.

35. Serota, *Markus Lüpertz*.

tion coming from the "soul" can be derived from this critique. . . . Without doubt, expressionism is only one of the many bourgeois ideological currents eventually leading to fascism, and its role as ideological preparation is not any more or less important than currents of the imperialist epoch, inasmuch as they express decadent parasitic features, including all the fake revolutionary and oppositional forces. . . . This schism is deeply inherent in the character of anti-bourgeois expressionism and this abstracting impoverishment of content not only indicates the tendency of expressionism; it is from the very beginning its central, insurmountable stylistic problem, because its extraordinary poverty of content marks a blatant contradiction of the pretense of its performance, of the hybrid subjective pathos of its representation.³⁶

The mock avant-garde of contemporary European painters now benefits from the ignorance and arrogance of a racket of cultural parvenus who perceive it as their mission to reaffirm the politics of a rigid conservatism through cultural legitimation.

36. Lukács, "Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus," p. 116.

The End of Painting*

DOUGLAS CRIMP

Painting has not always existed; we can determine when it began. And if its development and its moments of greatness can be drummed into our heads, can we not then also imagine its periods of decline and even its end, like any other idea?

—Louis Aragon, "La peinture au défi"

The work of art is so frightened of the world at large, it so needs isolation in order to exist, that any conceivable means of protection will suffice. It frames itself, withdraws under glass, barricades itself behind a bullet-proof surface, surrounds itself with a protective cordon, with instruments showing the room humidity, for even the slightest cold would be fatal. Ideally the work of art finds itself not just screened from the world, but shut up in a safe, permanently and totally sheltered from the eye. And yet isn't such an extremism, bordering on the absurd, already with us, everyday, everywhere, when the artwork exhibits itself in those safes called "Galleries," "Museums"? Isn't it the very point of departure, the end, and the essential function of the work of art that it should be so exhibited?

—Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*

On one of those rare occasions during the past decade when Barbara Rose abandoned the pages of *Vogue* magazine in order to say something really serious about the art of our time, she did so to vent her rage at an exhibition called *Eight*

* This text was first presented as a lecture on February 25, 1981, at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles under the auspices of the Foundation for Art Resources.



*Daniel Buren. From and Off the Windows. 1974.
(Photo-souvenirs: Daniel Buren.)*

Contemporary Artists, held at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1974.¹ Although she found the work in the show "bland and tepid" and therefore something "normally one would overlook," she felt compelled to speak out because this show was organized by our most prestigious institution of modern art and, for that reason alone, it became significant. But the work in the show was bland and tepid to Rose only from an aesthetic standpoint; it was more potent as politics:

For some time I have felt that the radicalism of Minimal and Conceptual art is fundamentally political, that its implicit aim is to discredit thoroughly the forms and institutions of dominant bourgeois culture. . . . Whatever the outcome of such a strategy, one thing is certain: when an institution as prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art invites sabotage, it becomes party, not to the promulgation of experimental art, but to the passive acceptance of disenchanting, demoralized artists' aggression against art greater than their own.²

1. *Eight Contemporary Artists*, an exhibition of the work of Vito Acconci, Alighiero Boetti, Daniel Buren, Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, Robert Hunter, Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, organized by Jennifer Licht, at the Museum of Modern Art, October 9, 1974-January 5, 1975.

2. Barbara Rose, "Twilight of the Superstars," *Partisan Review*, vol. XLI, no. 4 (Winter 1974), 572.



The particular saboteur who seems to have captured Rose's attention in this case is Daniel Buren, whose work for MOMA consisted of his familiar striped panels, cut to conform to the windows facing the garden, and affixed to the corridor wall facing those windows, and again to the garden wall, with leftover fragments displaced to a billboard and a gallery entrance in lower Manhattan. Impressed though she is by the cogency of Buren's arguments about the ideology imposed by the museum, Rose is nevertheless perplexed that his work should appear in one, which seems to her like having his cake and eating it too. For illumination on this matter, she turns to an interview with William Rubin, the director of MOMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture. In this interview, published in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*, Rubin explains that museums are essentially compromise institutions invented by bourgeois democracies to reconcile the large public with art conceived within the compass of elite private patronage. This age, Rubin suggests, might be coming to an end, leaving the museum essentially irrelevant to the practices of contemporary art.

Perhaps, looking back 10, 15, 30 years from now, it will appear that the modernist tradition really did come to an end within the last few years, as some critics suggest. If so, historians a century from now—whatever name they will give the period we now call modernism—will see it

beginning shortly after the middle of the 19th century and ending in the 1960s. . . . Perhaps the dividing line will be seen as between those works which essentially continue an easel painting concept that grew up associated with bourgeois democratic life and was involved with the development of private collections as well as the museum concept—between this and, let us say, Earthworks, Conceptual works and related endeavors, which want another environment (or should want it) and, perhaps, another public.³

Rose assumes that Buren is one of those artists whose work wants (or should want) another environment. After all, his text, "Function of the Museum," which she quotes, is a polemic against the confinement of artworks in museums.⁴ But if Buren's work had not appeared in the museum, had not taken the museum as its point of departure and as its referent, the very issues Rose is pondering would never have arisen. It is fundamental to Buren's work that it act in complicity with those very institutions that it seeks to make visible as the necessary conditions of the artwork's intelligibility. That is the reason not only that his work appears in museums and galleries, but that it poses as painting. It is only thereby possible for his work to ask: What makes it possible to see a painting? What makes it possible to see a painting *as a painting*? And, to what end is painting under such conditions of its presentation?

But Buren's work runs a great risk when it poses as painting, the risk of invisibility. Since everything to which Buren's work points as being cultural, historical, is so easily taken to be natural, many people look at Buren's paintings the way they look at all paintings, vainly asking them to render up their meaning *about themselves*. Since they categorically refuse to do so, since they have, by design, no internal meaning, they simply disappear. Thus, Barbara Rose, for example, sees Buren's work at the Museum of Modern Art only as "vaguely resembling Stella's stripe paintings."⁵ But if Rose is myopic on matters of painting, blind to those questions about painting which Buren's work poses, that is because she, like most people, still *believes* in painting.

3. William Rubin, "Talking with William Rubin: 'The Museum Concept Is Not Infinitely Expandable,'" interview by Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans, *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 2 (October 1974), 52.

4. Daniel Buren, "Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 1 (September 1973), 68.

5. Rose, "Twilight," p. 569.

One must really be engaged in order to be a painter. Once obsessed by it, one eventually gets to the point where one thinks that humanity could be changed by painting. But when that passion deserts you, there is nothing else left to do. Then it is better to stop altogether. Because basically painting is pure idiocy.

—Gerhard Richter, in conversation
with Irmeline Lebeer

As testimony to her faith in painting, Rose mounted her own exhibition of contemporary art five years after the MOMA show. Given the forward-looking, not to say oracular, title, *American Painting: The Eighties* (the exhibition was mounted in the fall of 1979), Rose's exhibition expressly intended to show the public that throughout that grim period of the sixties and seventies, when art seemed so bent on self-destruction, intent as it was on those extra-art concerns gathered together under the rubric *politics*—that throughout that period there had been "a generation of hold-outs," survivors of "disintegrating morality, social demoralization, and lack of conviction in all authority and tradition."⁶ These noble survivors, painters all, were "maintaining a conviction in quality and values, a belief in art as a mode of transcendence, a worldly incarnation of the ideal."

Now, as it happens, Rose's evidence of this keeping of the faith was extremely unconvincing, and her exhibition was an easy target for hostile criticism. Biased as her selection was toward the most hackneyed recapitulations of late modernist abstraction, the show had the unmistakable look of Tenth Street, twenty years after the fact. Given the thousands of artists currently practicing the art of painting, Rose's selection was indeed parochial; certainly there is a lot of painting around that *looks* more original. Furthermore, favoring such a narrow range of painting at a time when stylistic catholicity, pluralism, is the critical byword, Rose was virtually inviting an unfavorable response. And so, as was to be expected, she was taken to task by the various art journalists for whomever of their favorites she failed to include. Thus, Hilton Kramer's review asked: Where are the figurative painters? And John Perreault's asked: Where are the pattern painters? And Roberta Smith's asked: Where is Jennifer Bartlett? But the point is that no one asked: Why painting? To what end painting in the 1980s? And to that extent, Barbara Rose's show was a resounding success. It proved that faith in painting had indeed been fully restored. For, however much painting may have been in question in 1974, when Rubin was interviewed by *Artforum* and his museum

6. Barbara Rose, *American Painting: The Eighties*, Buffalo, Thorney-Sidney Press, 1979, n.p. All following quotations from Barbara Rose are taken from this text.

staged *Eight Contemporary Artists*, by 1979, the question clearly had been withdrawn.

The rhetoric which accompanies this resurrection of painting is almost exclusively reactionary: it reacts specifically against all those art practices of the sixties and seventies which abandoned painting and coherently placed in question the ideological supports of painting, and the ideology which painting, in turn, supports. And thus, while almost no one agreed with the choices Barbara Rose made to demonstrate painting's renaissance, almost everyone agrees with the substance, if not the details, of her rhetoric. Rose's catalogue text for *American Painting: The Eighties* is a dazzling collection of received ideas about the art of painting, and I would submit that it is only such ideas that painting today knows. Here, then, is a litany of excerpts from Rose's essay, which I think we may take as provisional answers to the question: To what end painting in the 1980s?

. . . painting [is] a transcendental, high art, a major art, and an art of universal as opposed to topical significance.

. . . only painting [is] genuinely liberal, in the sense of free.

[painting is] an expressive human activity . . . our only present hope for preserving high art.

[painting] is the product exclusively of the individual imagination rather than a mirror of the ephemeral external world of objective reality.

. . . illusion . . . is the essence of painting.

Today, the essence of painting is being redefined not as a narrow, arid and reductive anti-illusionism, but as a rich, varied capacity to birth new images into an old world.

[painting's] capacity [is] to materialize an image . . . behind the proverbial looking-glass of consciousness, where the depth of the imagination knows no bounds.

Not innovation, but originality, individuality and synthesis are the marks of quality in art today, as they always have been.

. . . art is labor, physical human labor, the labor of birth, reflected in the many images that appear as in a process of emergence, as if taking form before us.

The liberating potential of art is . . . a catharsis of the imagination.

. . . these paintings are clearly the works of rational adult humans, not a monkey, not a child, or a lunatic.

[the tradition of painting is] an inner world of stored images ranging from Altamira to Pollock.

For Rose, then, painting is a high art, a universal art, a liberal art, an art through which we can achieve transcendence and catharsis. Painting has an essence and that essence is illusion, the capacity to materialize images rendered up by the boundless human imagination. Painting is a great unbroken tradition that encompasses the entire known history of man. Painting is, above all, human.

All of this is, of course, in direct opposition to that art of the sixties and seventies, of which I take Buren's work to be exemplary, which sought to contest the myths of high art, to declare art, like all other forms of endeavor, to be contingent upon the real, historical world. Moreover this art sought to discredit the myth of man and the ideology of humanism which it supports. For indeed these are all notions that sustain the dominant bourgeois culture. They are the very hallmarks of bourgeois ideology. But if the art of the sixties and seventies sought to contest the myth of man as an eternal essence, with its open assault upon the artist as unique creator, there was another phenomenon which had initiated that assault in the arts at the very founding moments of modernism, a phenomenon from which painting has been in retreat since the mid-nineteenth century. That phenomenon is, of course, photography.

You know exactly what I think of photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable.

—Marcel Duchamp, in a letter to
Alfred Stieglitz

"From today painting is dead": it is now nearly a century and a half since Paul Delaroche is said to have pronounced that sentence in the face of the overwhelming evidence of Daguerre's invention. But even though that death warrant has been periodically reissued throughout the era of modernism, no one seems to have been entirely willing to execute it; life on death row lingered to longevity. But during the 1960s, painting's terminal condition finally seemed impossible to ignore. The symptoms were everywhere: in the work of the painters themselves, each of whom seemed to be reiterating Reinhardt's claim that he was "just making the last paintings which anyone can make," or to allow their paintings to be contaminated with such alien forces as photographic images; in minimal sculpture, which provided a definitive rupture with painting's unavoidable ties to a centuries-old idealism; in all those other mediums to which artists turned as they, one after the other, abandoned painting. The dimension that had always resisted even painting's most dazzling feats of illusionism—time—now became the arena in which artists staged their activities as they embraced film, video, and performance. And, after waiting out the entire era of modernism,

photography reappeared, finally to claim its inheritance. The appetite for photography in the past decade has been insatiable. Artists, critics, dealers, curators, and scholars have defected from their former pursuits in droves to take up this enemy of painting. Photography may have been *invented* in 1839, but it was only *discovered* in the 1970s.

But "What's All This about Photography?"⁷ Now that question is asked again, and in the very terms of Lamartine, also nearly a century and a half ago: "But wherein does its human conception lie?"⁸ Lamartine's argument is rehearsed this time by Richard Hennessy, one of Rose's American painters of the eighties, and published in *Artforum*, the very journal that had so faithfully and lucidly chronicled those radical developments of the sixties and seventies which had signaled painting's final demise, and which more lately has given testimony that painting is born again. Hennessy against photography is characteristic of this new revivalist spirit:

The role of intention and its poetry of human freedom is infrequently discussed in relation to art, yet the more a given art is capable of making intention felt, the greater are its chances of being a fine, and not a minor or applied, art. Consider the paintbrush. How many bristles or hairs does it have? Sometimes 20 or less, sometimes 500, a thousand—more. When a brush loaded with pigment touches the surface, it can leave not just a single mark, but the marks of the bristles of which it is composed. The "Yes, I desire this" of the stroke is supported by the choir of the bristles—"Yes, *we* desire this." The whole question of touch is rife with spiritual associations.⁹

Imagine the magnitude of that choir, bristling so with desire as to produce a deafening roar of hallelujahs, in the particular case of Robert Ryman's *Delta* series, paintings which employed

... a very wide brush, 12 inches. I got it specially—I went to a brush manufacturer and they had this very big brush. I wanted to pull the paint across this quite large surface, 9 feet square, with this big brush. I had a few failures at the beginning. Finally, I got the consistency right and I knew what I was doing and how hard to push the brush and pull it and what was going to happen when I did. That's kind of the way to begin. I didn't have anything else in mind, except to make a painting.¹⁰

Juxtaposed against Hennessy's prose, Ryman's words sound flat indeed.

7. This question is the title of an essay by Richard Hennessy in *Artforum*, vol. XVII, no. 9 (May 1979), 22-25.

8. Quoted in "Photography: A Special Issue," editorial in *October*, no. 5 (Summer 1978), 3.

9. Hennessy, p. 22.

10. Robert Ryman, in Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Robert Ryman," *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 9 (May 1971), 49.

There is in his language, as in his paintings, a strict adherence to the matter at hand. His conception of painting is reduced to the stark physical components of painting-as-object. The systematic, single-minded, persistent attempt to once and for all empty painting of its idealist trappings gives to Ryman's work its special place during the 1960s as, again, "just the last paintings which anyone can make." And that is, as well, their very condition of possibility. Ryman's paintings, like Buren's, make visible the most material of painting's conventions: its frame, its stretcher, its supporting surface, the walls on which it hangs. But more significantly, his paintings, unlike Buren's, make visible the very mechanical activity of laying on the brushstrokes, as they are manifestly lined up, one after the other, left to right, row after row, until the surface is, simply, painted.

The revivalism of current painting, which Hennessy's text so perfectly articulates, depends, of course, on reinvesting those strokes with human presence; it is a metaphysics of the human touch. "Painting's quasi-miraculous mode of existence is produced . . . by its mode of facture. . . . *Through the hand*: this is the crucial point."¹¹ This faith in the healing powers of the hand, the facture that results from the laying on of hands, echoes throughout Rose's catalogue text, which pays special homage to Hennessy's attack on photography. The unifying principle in the aesthetic of her painters is that their work "defines itself in conscious opposition to photography and all forms of mechanical reproduction which seek to deprive the art work of its unique 'aura.'" For Rose, elimination of the human touch can only express "the self-hatred of artists. . . . Such a powerful wish to annihilate personal expression implies that the artist does not love his creation." What distinguishes painting from photography is this "visible record of the activity of the human hand, as it builds surfaces experienced as tactile."

To silence all the euphoria over photography's reemergence, Hennessy finally offers *Las Meninas*, which he sees as a "description of the photographic process, in which we become the camera." We are to understand, although it is stated ever so subtly, that we pay homage to this particular painting for its celebrated facture. Hennessy tells us of Velazquez that "he looks at us, almost as if we might be his subjects" as "his hand, hovering between palette and canvas, holds"—what else?—"a brush." Hennessy describes this painting with the most dazzling of metaphors, tropes of which he and Rose are particularly fond, for they consider painting essentially a metaphorical mode. He says, for example, that it is "a gift we will never finish unwrapping," "a city without ramparts, a lover who needs no alibi" in which "the play of gazes, in front, behind, past and toward us, weaves a web about us, bathing us in murmuring consciousness. We are the guests of the mighty, the august, in rank and spirit. We stand at the center of their implied world, and are ourselves the center of attention. Velazquez has admitted us into his confidence."¹²

11. Hennessy, p. 23.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Diego Velazquez. Las Meninas. 1656.



Stripped of its fatuous metaphors and its sanctimonious tone, Hennessy's description of *Las Meninas* might remind us of the rather more persuasive discussion of this painting which comprises the opening chapter of *The Order of Things*. As Michel Foucault describes it, this is indeed a painting in which the artist, on the one hand, and the spectator, on the other, have usurped the position of the subject, who is displaced to the vague reflection in the mirror on the rear wall of Velazquez's palace studio. For within the seventeenth century's theory of representation, these parallel usurpations and displacements were the very ground of representation's possibility.

It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing—despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits. . . .

Perhaps there exists, in this picture by Velazquez the representation, as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject—which is the same—has been elided. And representation, freed from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.¹³

What Foucault sees when he looks at this painting, then, is the way representation functioned in the classical period, a period which came to an end, in Foucault's archaeological analysis of history, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when our own age, the age of modernism, began. And, of course, if this era of history came to an end, so too did its modes of understanding the world, of which *Las Meninas* is a very great example.

For Hennessy, however, *Las Meninas* does not signal a *particular* historical period with its *particular* mode of knowledge. For Hennessy, *Las Meninas* is, more essentially than anything else, a painting, governed not by history but by creative genius, which is ahistorical, eternal, like man himself. This position is the very one that Foucault's enterprise is determined to overturn, the position of an entrenched historicism. From such a position, painting is understood as an eternal essence, of which *Las Meninas* is one instance, the marks on the walls of

13. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970, p. 16.

Altamira another, the poured skeins of Jackson Pollock another. "From Altamira to Pollock": that phrase encapsulates the argument that man has always had the impulse to create paintings; how, then, can it even be thinkable that he could stop in 1965?

But what is it that makes it possible to look at a paleolithic cave painting, a seventeenth-century court portrait, and an abstract-expressionist canvas and say that they are all *the same thing*, that they all belong to the same category of knowledge? How did this historicism of art get put in place?

There was a time when, with few exceptions, works of art remained generally in the same location for which they were made. However, now a great change has occurred that, in general as well as specifically, will have important consequences for art. Perhaps there is more cause than ever before to realize that Italy as it existed until recently was a great art entity. Were it possible to give a general survey, it could then be demonstrated what the world has now lost when so many parts have been torn from this immense and ancient totality. What has been destroyed by the removal of these parts will remain forever a secret. Only after some years will it be possible to have a conception of that new art entity which is being formed in Paris.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Propyläen

The new art entity that was to be formed in Paris, which Goethe foresaw as early as 1798, was the art entity we now call modernism, if by modernism we mean not only a canon of art works but an entire epistemology of art. Goethe foresaw that art would be seen in a way that was radically different from his own way of understanding it, which would in turn become, for us, a secret. The great art entity that was symbolized for Goethe by Italy, which we might call art-in-situ, simply no longer exists for us. And this is not only because, from Napoleon to Rockefeller, art was stolen from the places for which it had been made and confined in the art museums, but because for us, the art entity is held in another kind of

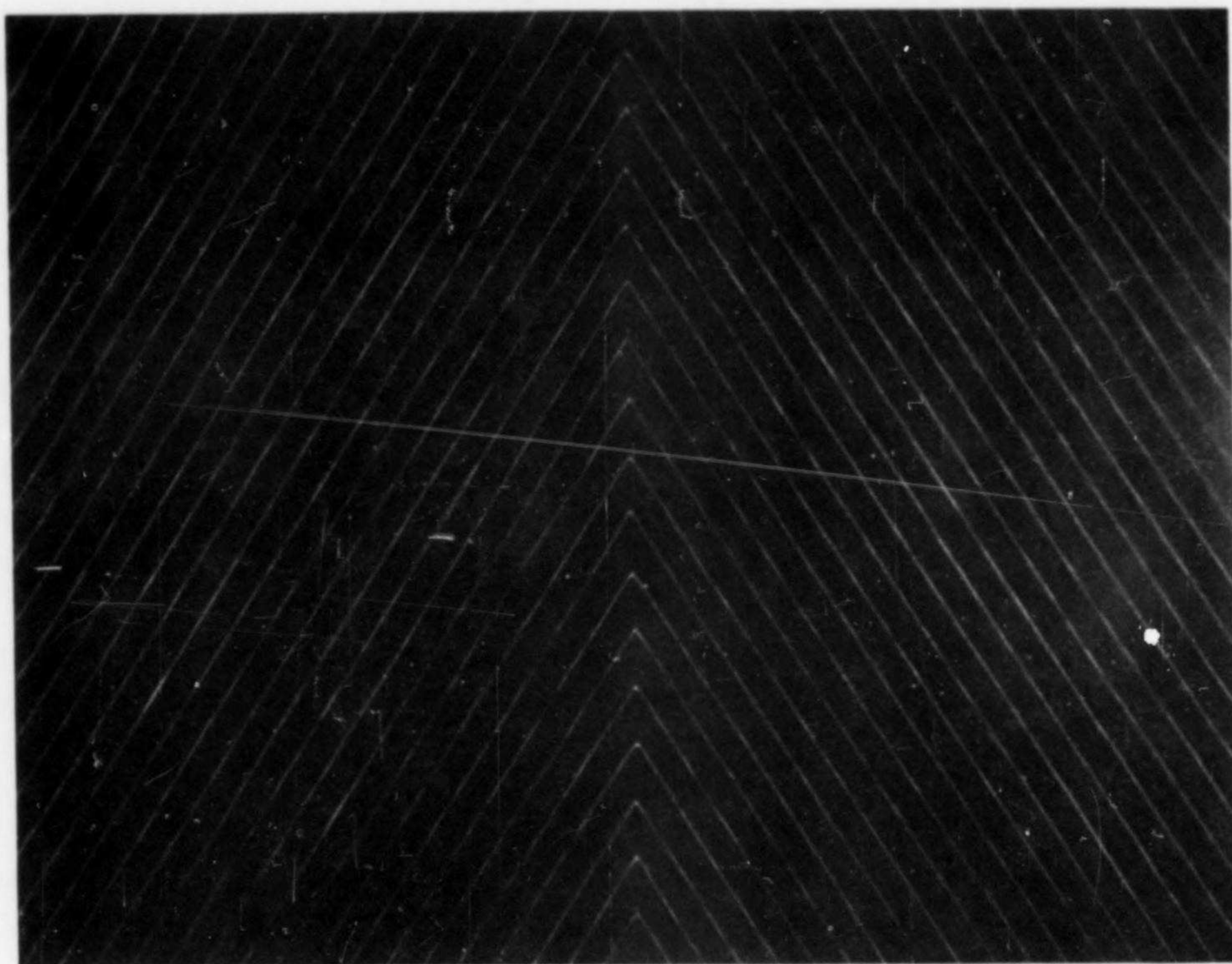
museum, the kind that André Malraux called *Imaginary*.¹⁴ That museum consists of all those works of art that can be submitted to mechanical reproduction and, thus, to the discursive practice that mechanical reproduction has made possible: art history. After art history, the art entity that Goethe called Italy is forever lost. That is to say—and this must be emphasized because from within an epistemological construct, even as it begins to be eroded, it is always difficult to see its workings—that art as we think about it *only came into being* in the nineteenth century, with the birth of the museum and the discipline of art history, for these share the same time span as modernism (and, not insignificantly, photography). For us, then, art's natural end is in the museum, or, at the very least, in the imaginary museum, that idealist space that is art with a capital *A*. The idea of art as autonomous, as separate from everything else, as destined to take its place in *art* history, is a development of modernism. And it is an idea of art that contemporary painting upholds, destined as it too is to end up in the museum.

Within this conception of art, painting is understood ontologically: it has an essence and an origin. Its historical development can be plotted in one long, uninterrupted sweep from Altamira to Pollock and beyond, into the eighties. Within this great development, painting's essence never changes; only its outward manifestation—known to art historians as style—changes. The discourse of art history ultimately reduces painting to a succession of styles—period styles, national styles, personal styles. And, of course, these styles are unpredictable in their vicissitudes, governed as they are only by the individual choices of painters expressing their "boundless imaginations."

There is a recent instance of such a stylistic shift, and its reception, that exemplifies this art historical view of painting and how it functions in support of the continued practice of painting. The shift occurs during the late 1970s in the work of Frank Stella. Although it could be said that this shift was presaged in every earlier stylistic change in Stella's work after the black paintings of 1959, Stella's move to the flamboyantly idiosyncratic constructed works of the past several years is by comparison a kind of quantum leap, and as such it has been taken as sanction for much of that recent painting which declares its individualism through the most ostentatious eccentricities of shape, color, material, and image. Indeed, at the Whitney Museum Biennial exhibition of 1979, one of Stella's new extravaganzas, which was set up as the spectator's first encounter as the elevator doors opened on the museum's fourth floor, became an emblem for everything else that was displayed on that floor—a collection of paintings which were surely intended as deeply personal expressions, but which looked like so many lessons dutifully learned from the master.

But apart from Stella's imitators, how can the phenomenon of his recent work be accounted for? If we remember that it was Stella's earliest paintings which

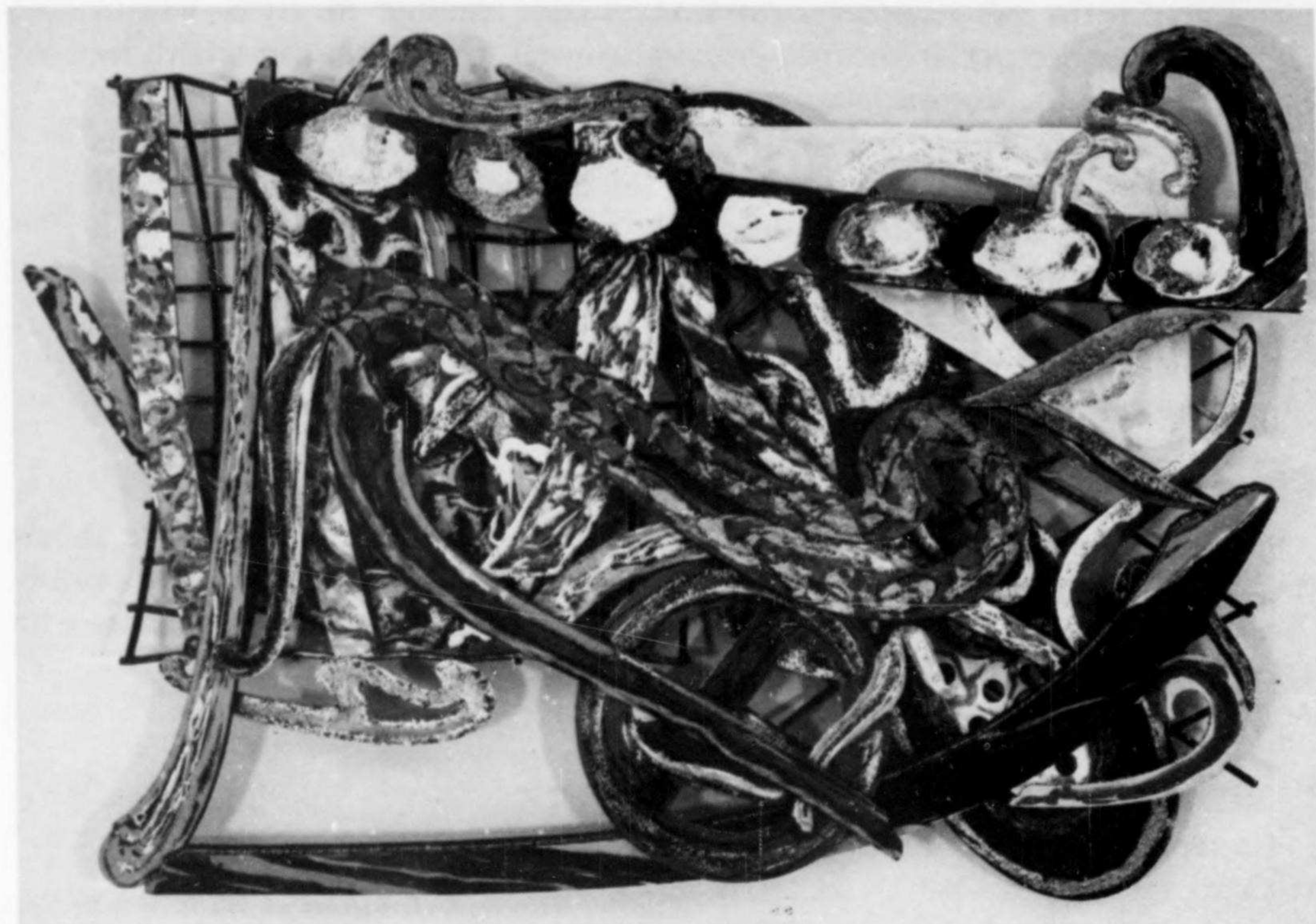
14. For an elaboration of this discussion, see my essay "On the Museum's Ruins," *October*, no. 13 (Summer 1980), 41-57.



Frank Stella. Point of Pines. 1959. (Left.) Haréwa. 1978. (Right.)

signaled to his colleagues that the end of painting had finally come (I am thinking of such deserters of the ranks of painting as Flavin, Judd, LeWitt, and Morris), it seems fairly clear that Stella's own career is a prolonged agony over the incontestable implications of those works, as he has retreated further and further away from them, repudiating them more vociferously with each new series. The late seventies paintings are truly hysterical in their defiance of the black paintings; each one reads as a tantrum, shrieking and sputtering that the end of painting *has not come*. Moreover it is no longer even *as paintings* that Stella's new works argue so tenaciously for the continued life of the medium. The irony of Stella's recent enterprise is that he is only able to point at painting from the distance of a peculiar hybrid object, an object which may well *represent* a painting but certainly can not legitimately *be* a painting. This is not a wholly uninteresting enterprise, this defiance of the end of painting, but surely its only interest is in such a reading, for conceived of as renewal, Stella's recent works are, as Gerhard Richter said of painting, pure idiocy.

Nevertheless, it is as renewal that they are understood. Here, for example, is Stella's friend Philip Leider expressing the majority opinion:



In these most recent works, Stella, throwing open the doors to much that had hitherto seemed to him forbidden—figure-ground dichotomies, composition, gestural paint-handling, etc.—has achieved for abstraction a renewed animation, life, vitality, that has already about it something of the sheerly miraculous. One would be blind not to see it, catatonic not to feel it, perverse not to acknowledge it, spiritless not to admire it.¹⁵

Leider's insistence upon our believing in miracles, echoing that of Hennessy and Rose, is perhaps symptomatic of the real condition of contemporary painting: that only a miracle can prevent it from coming to an end. Stella's paintings are not miracles, but perhaps their sheer desperation is an expression of painting's need for a miracle to save it.

Leider anticipates my skepticism in his apology for Stella's recent work, assuming that, as usual, a major change of style will be met with resistance:

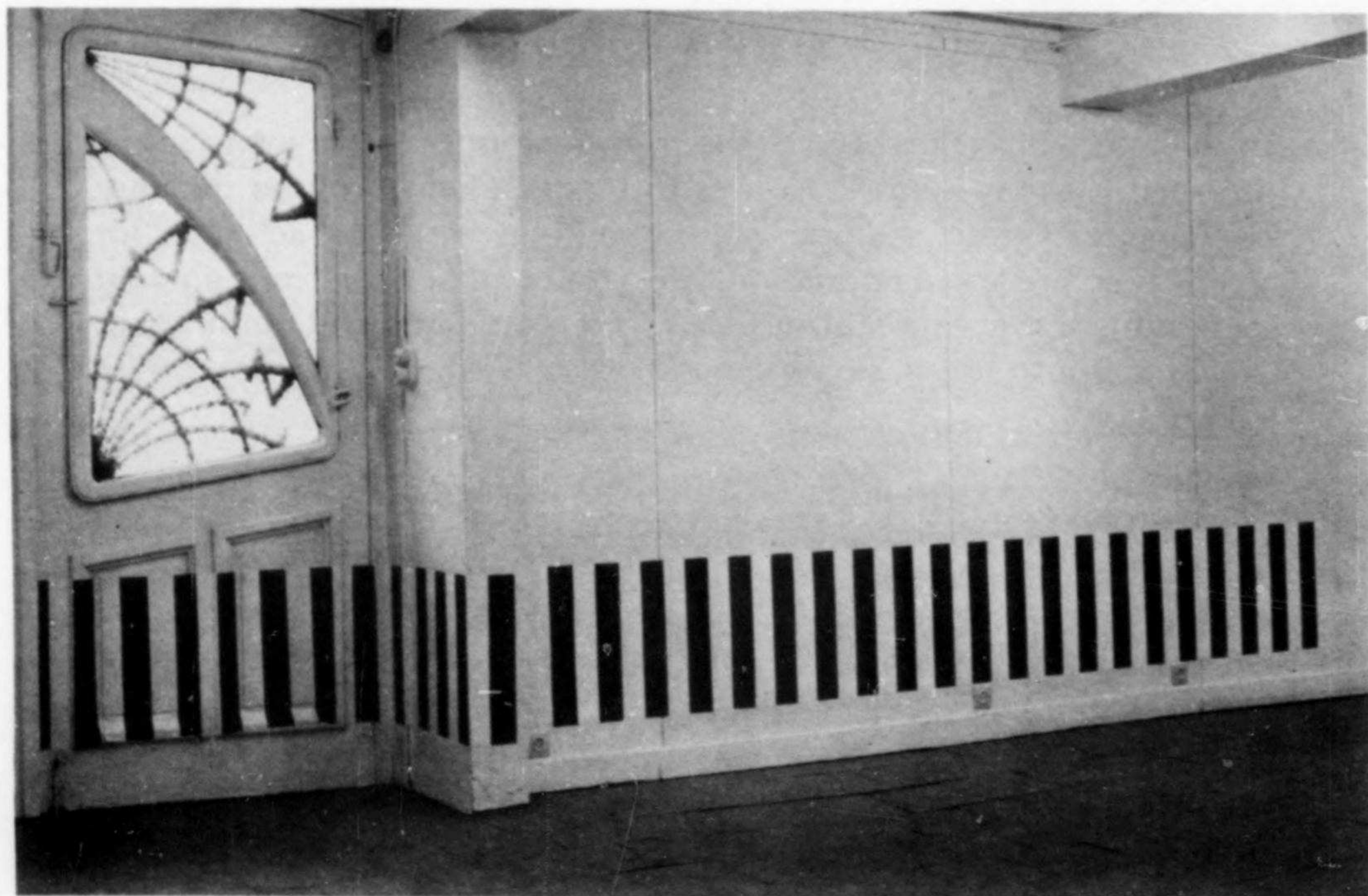
15. Philip Leider, *Stella Since 1970*, Fort Worth Art Museum, 1978, p. 98.

Every artist who hopes to attain a major change in style, within abstraction especially, must prepare himself for a period in which he will have to "compromise with his own achievements." During this period he can expect to lose friends and stop influencing youth. . . . It is a matter of having taken things as far as possible only to find oneself trapped in an outpost of art, with work threatening to come to a standstill, thin and uncreative. At such a point he must compromise with the logic of his own work in order to go on working at all—it is either that or remain prisoner of his own achievement forever, face those sterile repetitions that stare at us from the late works of Rothko, Still, Braque.¹⁶

Opinions regarding the late works of Rothko, Still, and Braque aside, sterile repetitions may, under the present circumstances of art, have their own value. This is, of course, the premise of Daniel Buren's work, which has never, since he began his activities in 1965, evidenced a single stylistic change.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

Daniel Buren. Exhibition at Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp. 1969. (Photo: R. van den Bempt.)



It is no longer a matter of criticizing works of art and their meaning, aesthetic, philosophical, or otherwise. It is no longer a matter even of knowing how to make a work of art, an object, a painting; how to become inserted in the history of art, nor even of asking oneself the question whether it is interesting or not, essential or ridiculous, to create a work of art, how, if you are or desire to be an artist (or if you challenge that word), to fit in with the game so as to play it with your own tools, and to the best of your ability. It is no longer a matter even of challenging the artistic system. Neither is it a matter of taking delight in one's interminable analysis. The ambition of this work is quite different. It aims at nothing less than abolishing the code that has until now made art what it is, in its production and in its institutions.

—Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*

Buren's work has been exhibited more extensively than that of any other painter in the past decade. And although it has been seen in galleries and museums, as well as in the streets, all over the world, probably by more people than have seen the work of any other contemporary artist, it has thus far remained invisible to all but a few. This paradoxical situation is testimony to the success of Buren's gambit, as well as to the seemingly unshakable faith in painting—which is to say, the code. When Buren decided in 1965 to make only works in situ, always using 8.7 centimeter-wide vertical stripes, alternating colored with white or transparent, he obviously made a wise choice. For just as he predicted, this format has not been assimilable to the codes of art, regardless of how elastic those codes have been in the past fifteen years. As we have seen, even such bizarre hybrids as Stella's recent constructions can easily be taken for paintings, though certainly they are not, and as such they can be understood to continue painting-as-usual.

In a climate in which Stella's hysterical constructions can so readily be seen as paintings, it is understandable that Buren's works cannot. It is therefore not surprising that Buren is widely regarded as a conceptual artist who is unconcerned with the visible (or what Duchamp called the retinal) aspects of painting. But Buren has always insisted specifically on the visibility of his work, the necessity for it to be *seen*. For he knows only too well that when his stripes are seen as painting,

painting will be understood as the "pure idiocy" that it is. At the moment when Buren's work becomes visible, the code of painting will have been abolished and Buren's repetitions can stop: the end of painting will have finally been acknowledged.



Daniel Buren. *Exhibition, Rue Jacob, Paris, 1968.*
(Photo: Bernard Boyer.)

The Sandwiches of the Artist

E. A. CARMEAN, JR.

Hors D'Oeuvres

Unlike the artists of Paris in the 1940s, those working in America were known for the variety of their diets. Where we expect to find the same bowl of apples and oranges served by Cézanne, Matisse, or Picasso, no such continuity exists on the abstract expressionists' tables. Here, Pollock's taste for tomato sauce contrasts sharply with Newman's choice of mustard.

Yet one factor does tie these artists together: their expressed interest in sandwiches. This is most clearly seen in the cafeteria opened by Motherwell, Newman, and Rothko in 1948, called "The Sandwiches of the Artist." "The name was Barney's," recalls Motherwell, "to point out we all used bread."

To be sure, the abstract expressionists drew upon European ingredients. But as Gottlieb observed, "We quickly discovered that by a shift in presentation we were getting into diet problems we hadn't anticipated. We were exploring." The sense of the adventure of the sandwich was best summarized by Harold Rosenberg, who wrote, "At a certain moment bread began to appear to one American artist after another as an arena in which to act—rather than a space in which to deposit butter. What was to go on the bread was not a snack but a meal."

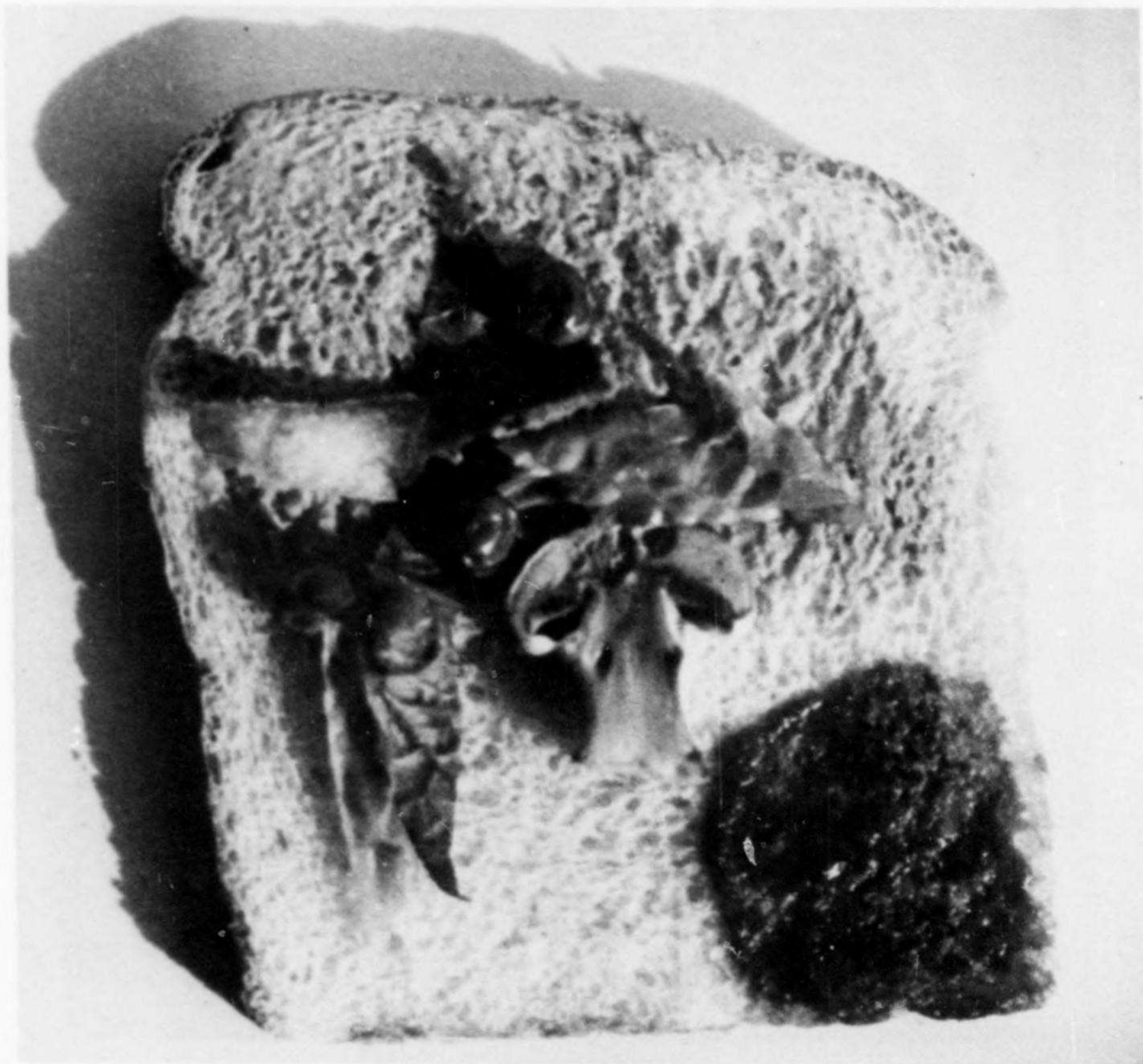
As the abstract expressionists continued to make sandwiches, they grew larger and more complex. They changed the concept of lunch around the world, leading critics to call them "truly, the Hero Generation."



Gorky on a picnic in 1944, holding a bag of sandwiches. Next to Gorky is André Breton, carrying a truffle fork.

Arshile Gorky: *The Chicken and the Pea*

In the 1930s Arshile Gorky based his diet on lunches by Cézanne and Picasso. This changed in 1941, after he experienced the Museum of Modern Art's "Miró's Buffet" of that year, and his introduction to the professional pastry tube, by Willem de Kooning. The major shift in his menu came in the summer of 1942 when Gorky spent time on a Virginia farm, where he discovered fried chicken and peas. As he observed to Dorothy Miller, "I like the wheatfields the chicken the peas the color of peas the ketchup. And bread beneath all." Gorky soon began making very light sandwiches, using very thin washes of mustard. Curiously, Gorky continued to create his lunches in the nineteenth-century European fashion, by first making small cracker versions, before transferring the composition to full-scale bread.



*Arshile Gorky. The Chicken and the Pea, III. 1945.
Chicken, lettuce, peas, mustard, and ketchup on bread.*

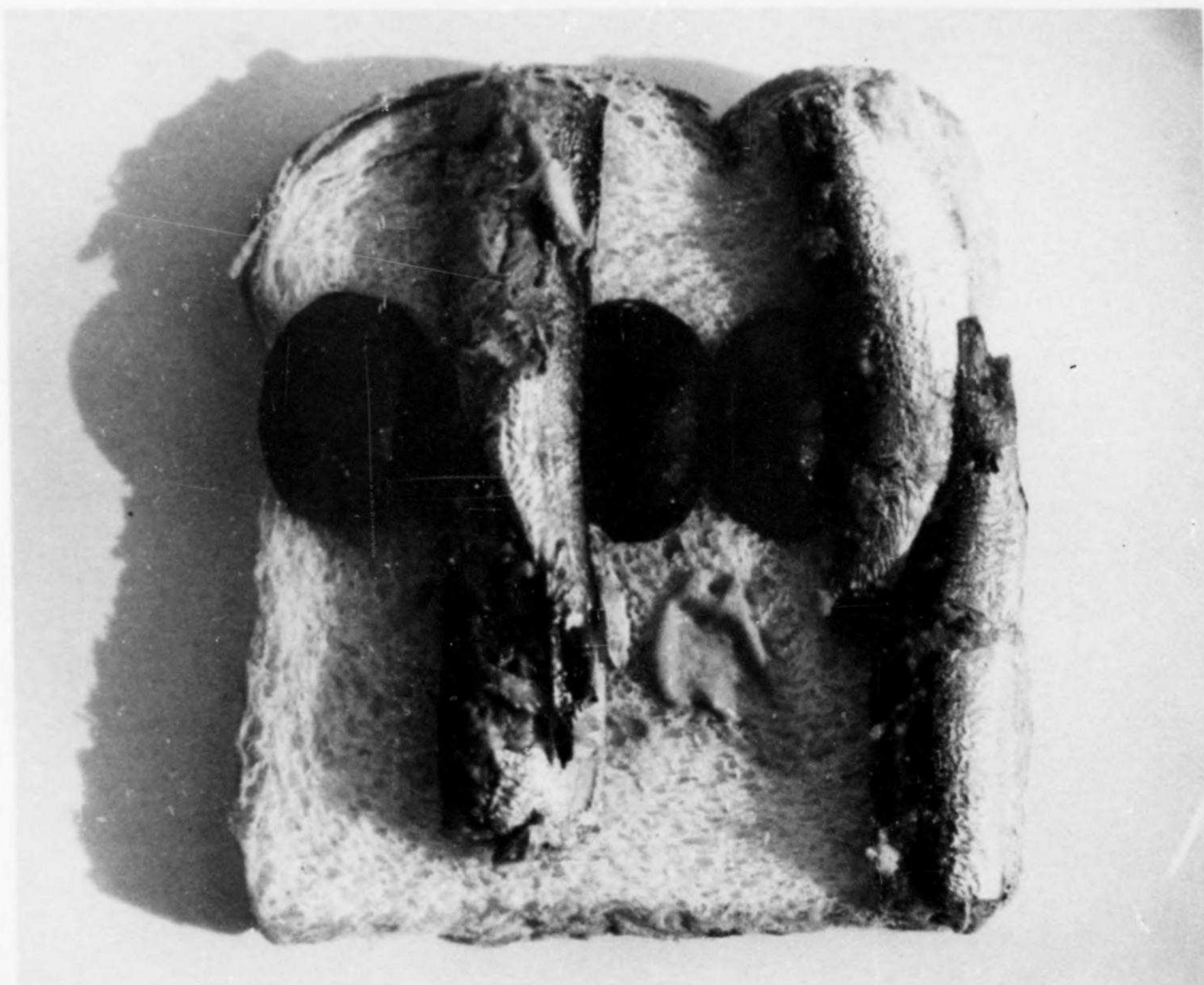


Robert Motherwell after lunch, 1958.

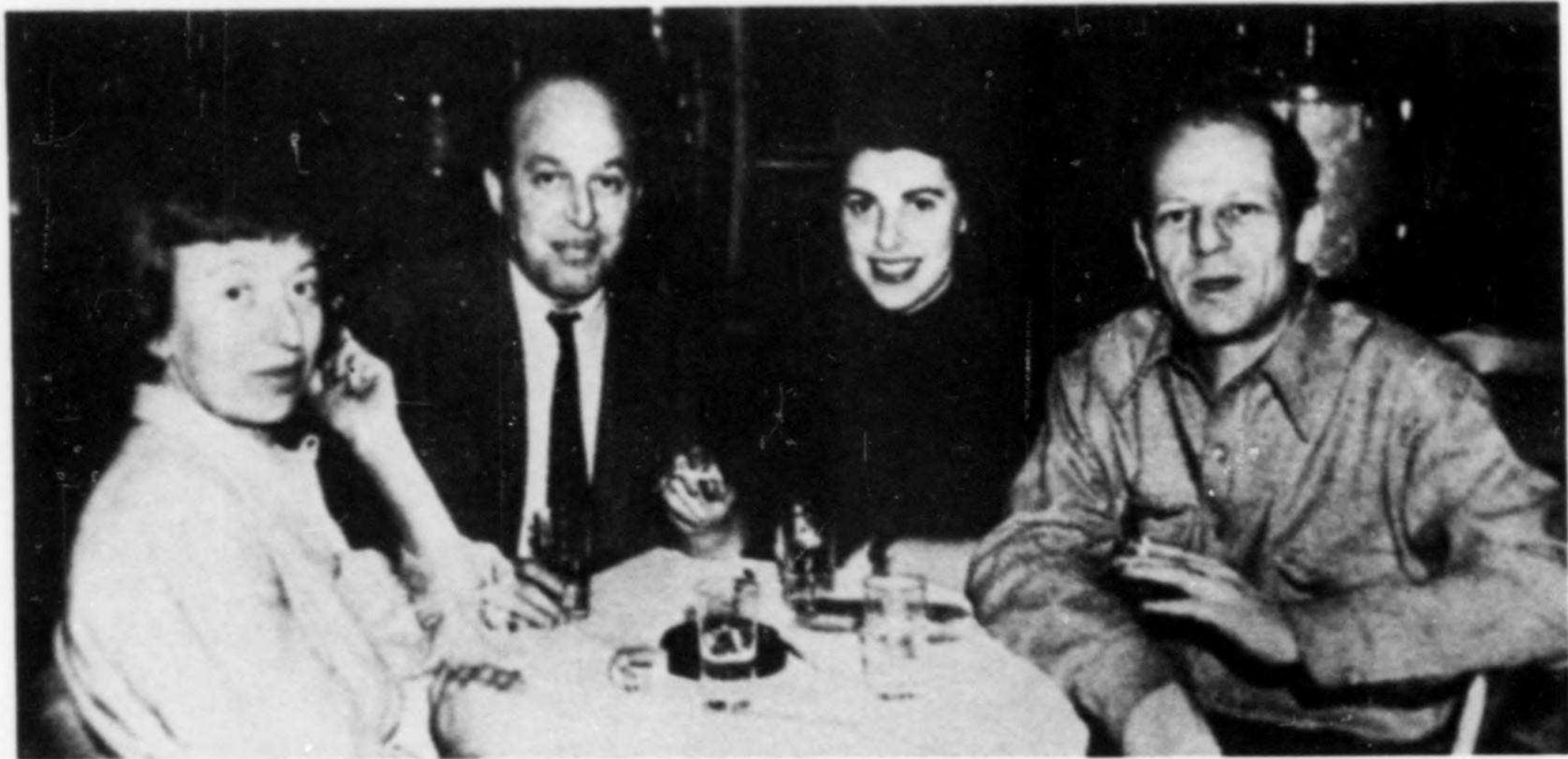
Robert Motherwell: *The Anchovies for the Spanish Olives*

In 1948, when fixing lunch for Harold Rosenberg, Robert Motherwell made a sandwich of anchovies and olives on mayonnaise. When Rosenberg canceled lunch, the sandwich was put away in a drawer, where Motherwell forgot about it for a year. When he found it, he realized its importance and made a larger version. This sandwich soon became a major part of his diet, and he has made 140 since 1948.

The combination of ingredients was important to Motherwell, reminding him of the cold lunch world of his youth in California, thus revealing associations of previous meals. This kind of discovery is a major aspect of his menus; as he once observed, "What a wonderful thing the icebox is! Meat bound in wrappers with jars of condiments on the door—or bread of a certain size—it is hard to see how anyone could not make a snack. The problem of inspiration is simply to be fully hungry at a given moment when cooking."



Robert Motherwell. The Anchovies for the Spanish Olives, No. 78 (Moutarde). 1957. Anchovies and olives on mayonnaise, with mustard, on bread.

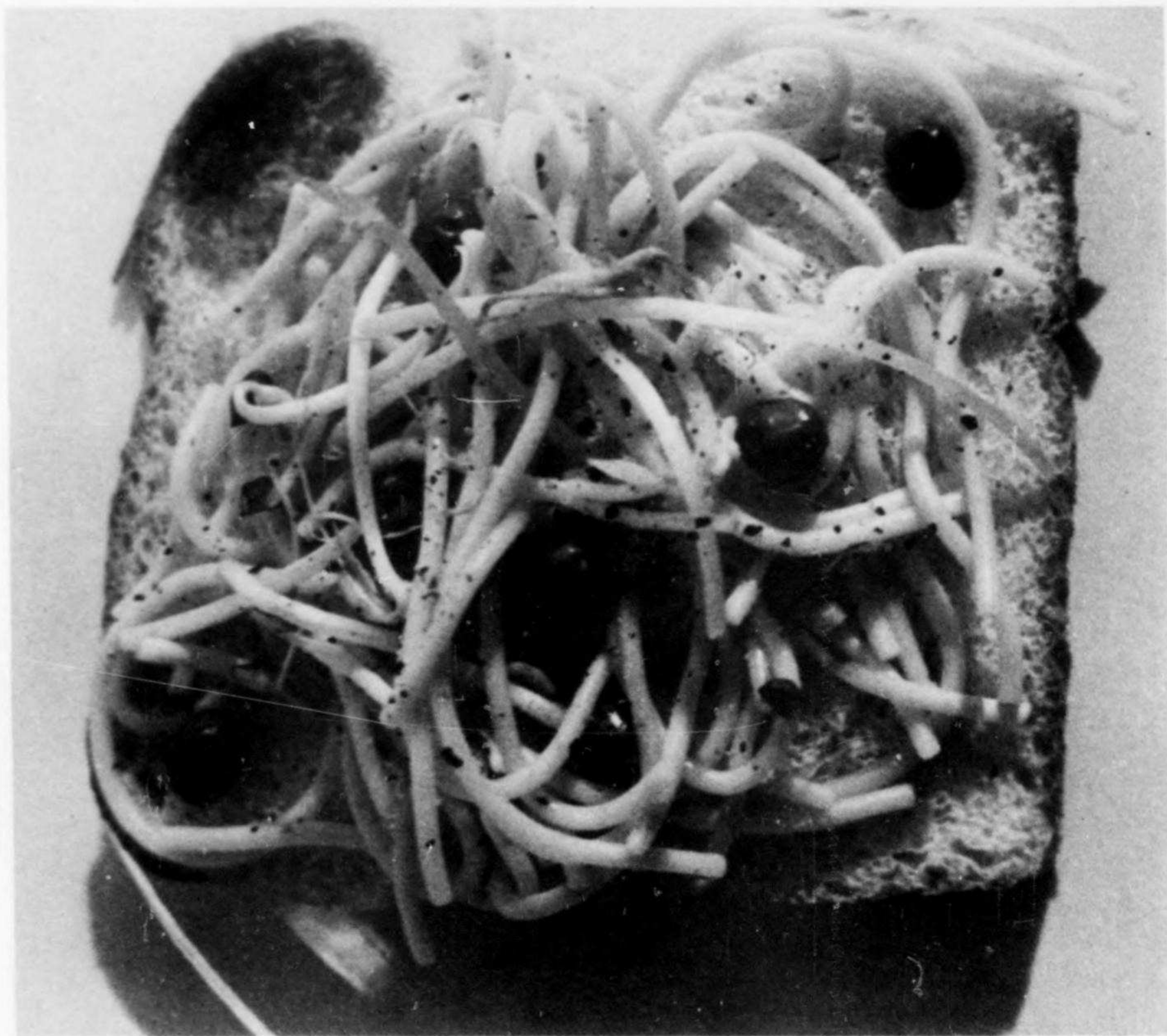


Lee Krasner, Clement Greenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jackson Pollock at lunch in 1951. (It was at this meal that Pollock showed Frankenthaler how to pour tomato sauce onto unbuttered white bread.)

Jackson Pollock: *The Classic Sandwich*

Jackson Pollock's early sandwiches are characterized by the use of raw meat in jagged shapes, derived from his work in a bar-b-que drive-in owned by Thomas Hart Benton. Between 1940-1945 Pollock began to stack this meat, inspired by Picasso's *Jambon* quiches of the surrealist period. But in 1947 Pollock changed an entire way of making sandwiches when he began pouring spaghetti onto toast. "Jackson broke the bread," said his friend de Kooning.

In these classic sandwiches of 1950, Pollock combined pasta with vegetables, creating a dense interweave from the ingredients. Breaking with previous traditions, he created the meatless meal on bread; "I am a garden," he once said to Hans Hofmann. The pasta sandwiches lasted for only a brief moment in his career; in 1951 he returned to the use of meat, in sandwiches composed only of thin slices of pastrami. These differed from his earlier works, however, where, as Pollock said, "I chose to sauce the ingredients."



*Jackson Pollock. Sandwich No. 20 (Almond Ribbons).
1950. Pasta and vegetables on bread.*



De Kooning enjoying a beer after finishing Sandwich IV. At the right are his ingredients and spreading knives.

Willem de Kooning: *The Sandwiches, I-VI*

De Kooning's menus in the 1940s were characterized by his borrowing ingredients from other artists. He also gained the reputation of never eating all of his lunch. In 1950 de Kooning began *Sandwich I*, but it was still unfinished in June of 1952. However, that summer, while in Easthampton, de Kooning was introduced to little tea sandwiches: he could combine various assortments of fillings into one larger sandwich, to create new possibilities for mid-day meals or snacks. Inspired, he finished *Sandwich I* that summer, and completed five more by March of 1953.



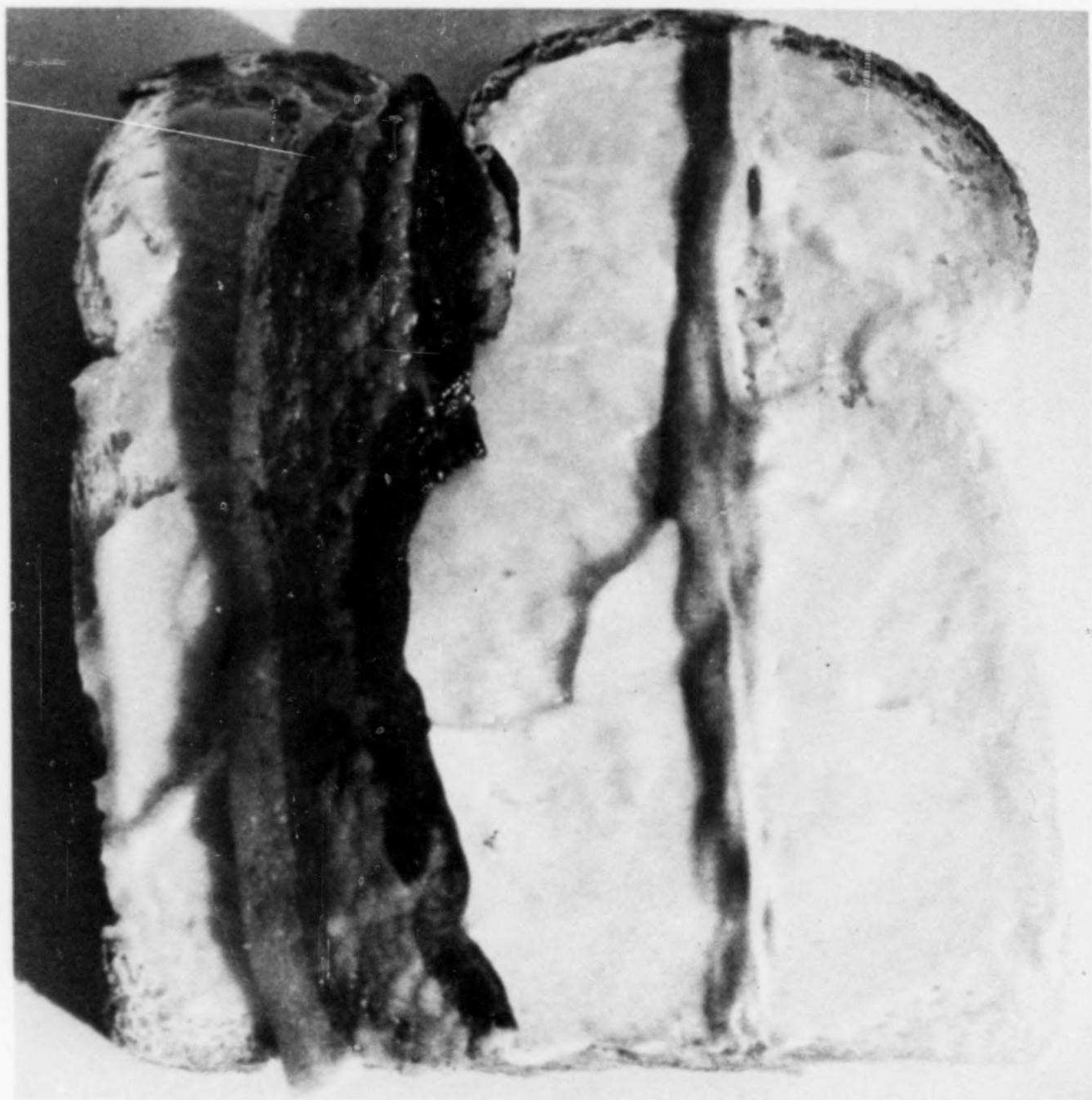
Willem de Kooning. Sandwich IV 1953. Mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup, and lettuce on four joined pieces of bread.



Barnett Newman at lunch in 1966. He has just ordered his sixth sandwich.

Barnett Newman: *The Sandwiches of the Cook*

Unlike the sandwiches of the other abstract expressionists, Newman's were marked by their simplicity. Many of his artist friends and critics thought his menu was too meager—"What a spare meal," said one—especially his *Vir Heroicus Sandwichus* of 1952, a forty-inch roll with only two lines of mustard and one of mayonnaise on a bed of ketchup. In 1958 Newman made two sandwiches on white bread, using only a strip of bacon and mustard. In 1960 he made two more, and then decided to expand the menu to 14, which he completed in 1966. That same year he added a dessert sandwich of honey and butter, called *Bee II*.



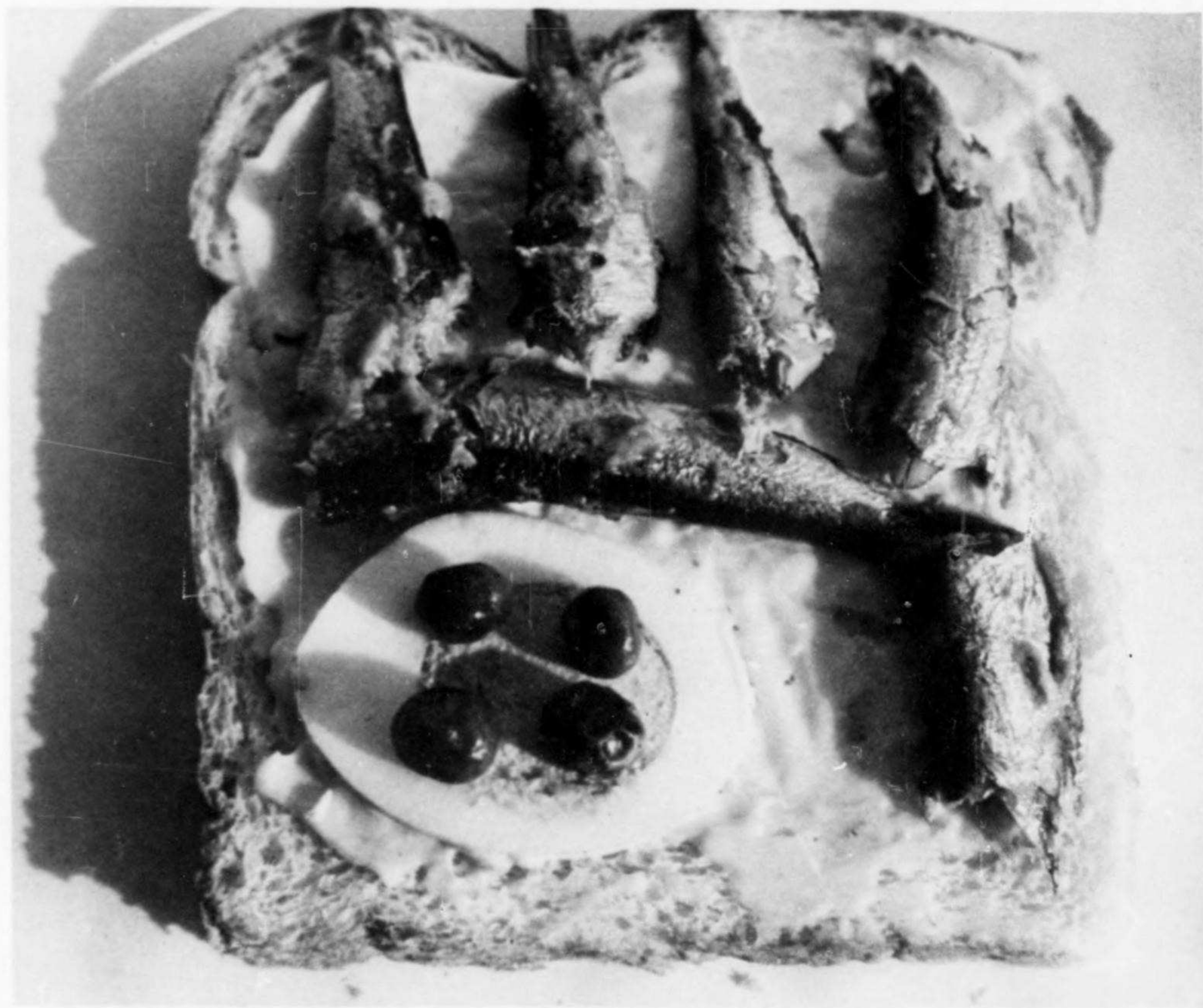
Barnett Newman. Sandwich 9. 1964-65. Bacon and mustard on white bread.



David Smith eating lunch in autumn, 1962, after his return from Voltri. The white pizza pan he is holding was shipped to him from Italy so he could continue his Spoleto sandwiches.

David Smith: *The Voltri Lunch*

In 1962 David Smith was invited to make breakfast for the Spoleto Festival. Smith accepted, and decided to work in an abandoned café in Voltri. Not speaking Italian, he misunderstood his project, and instead of breakfast, made lunch. Smith's original idea was to make one giant sandwich, but when the oven proved to be too small, he began his series of twenty-six sandwiches. He was clearly inspired by the Italian setting, and his Voltri sandwiches take on a pizza flavor. He used ingredients found in the Voltri café, among them sardines, tomatoes, and chewing gum. After he was finished—"I never made so much—so good—so easy"—the sandwiches were displayed on a cart in the ancient amphitheater in Spoleto.



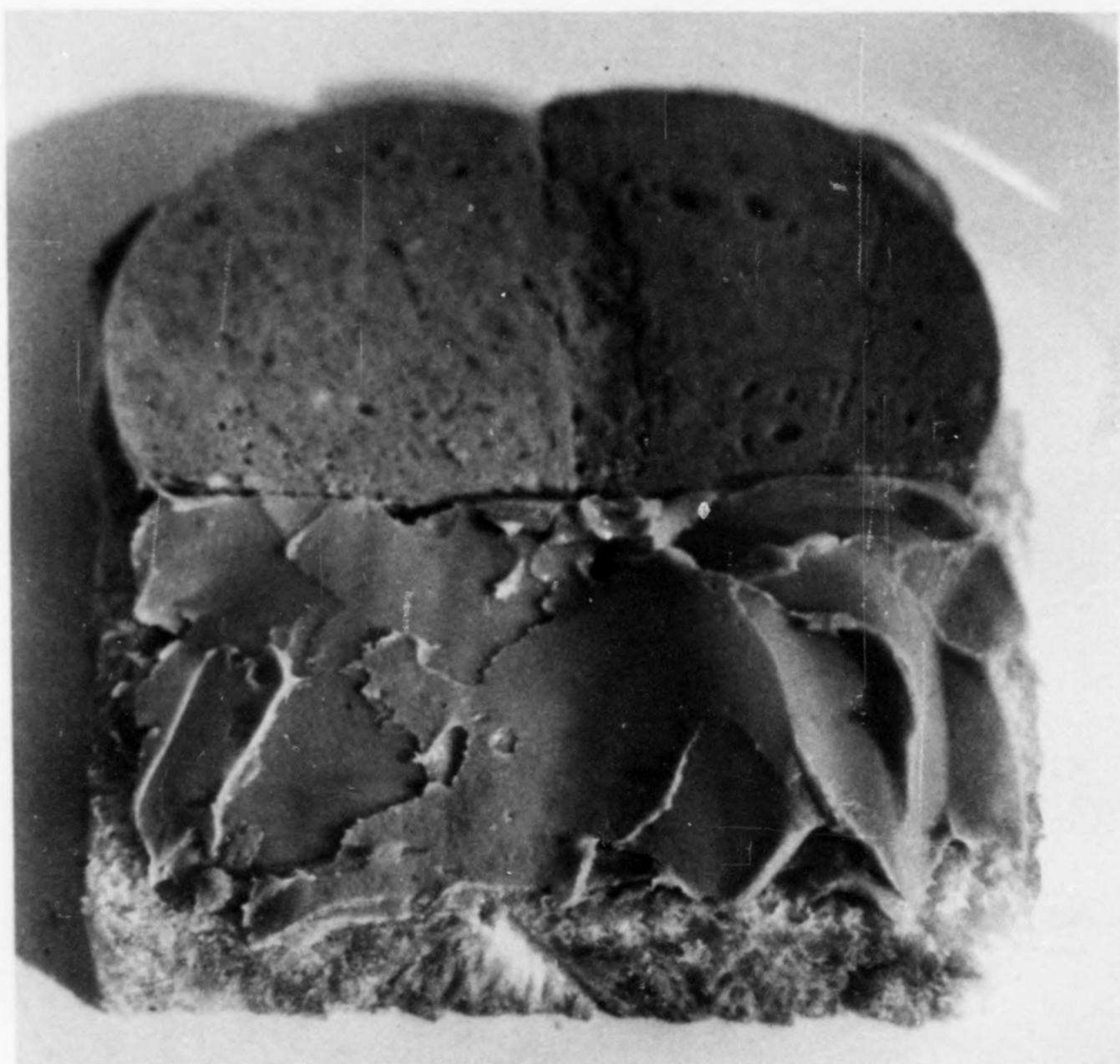
David Smith. Voltri Sandwich VII. 1962. Sardines and tomato slice on bread, with capers.



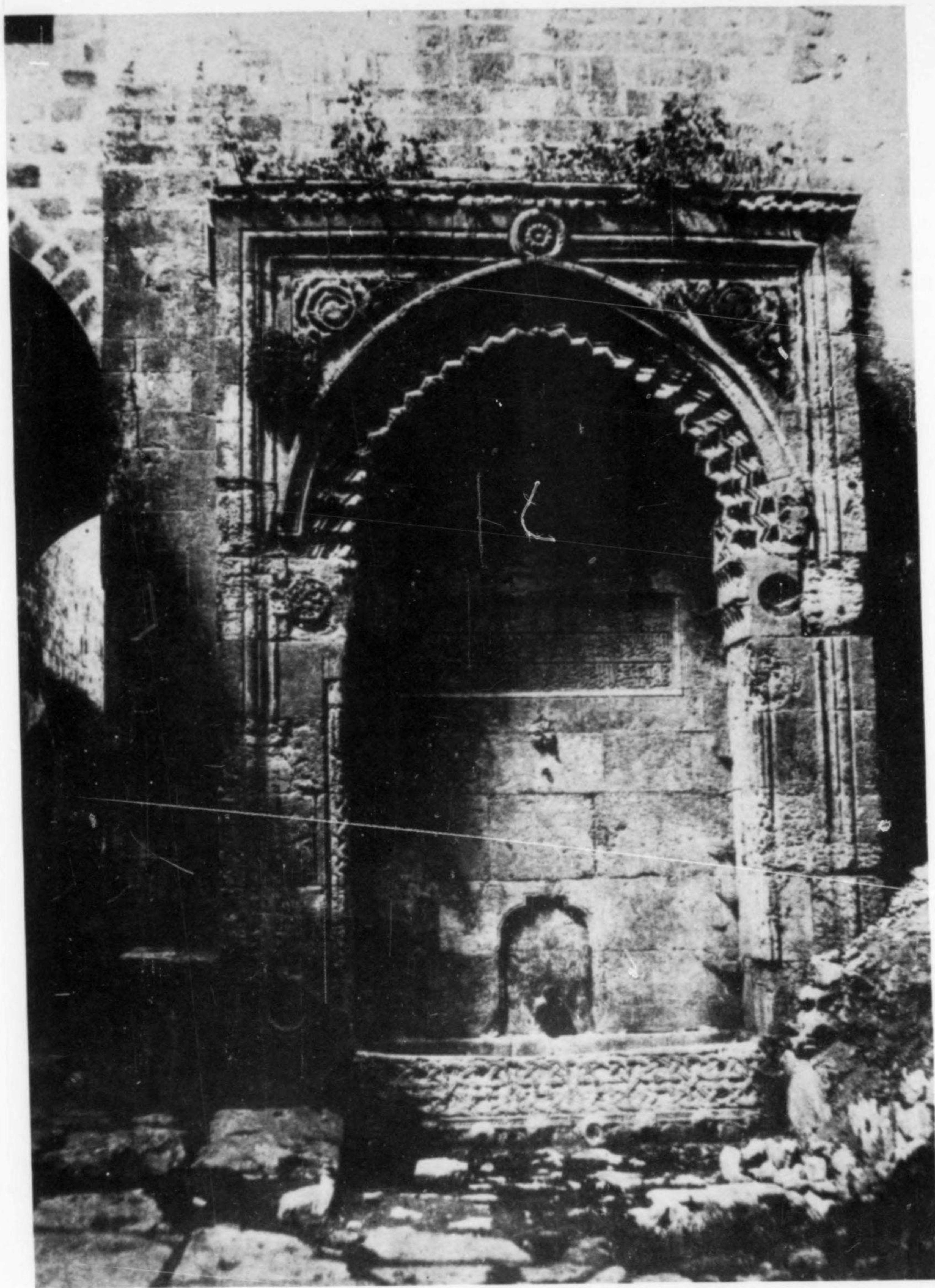
*Mark Rothko ordering by phone from a delicatessen.
He has just learned that the price of liverwurst is
\$1.25/lb.*

Mark Rothko: *The Brown and Gray Sandwiches*

Rothko's sandwiches of the 1950s, his most popular, are marked by the free use of colorful ingredients: mustard, ketchup, and lettuce. "Mark was always interested in produce," recalls Motherwell, "but once he got mad when I said a hamburger he had fixed reminded me of a salad by Matisse." In 1958 Rothko was asked to fix lunch at the Four Seasons restaurant, but he could not stand the idea of people drinking while eating his sandwiches. Nevertheless, at this point the idea of grouping his sandwiches must have entered his mind. In 1962 the De Menils asked him to prepare a menu for Houston, leading to the intense *Rothko Chock-Full*. His last works, the brown and gray sandwiches, combine liverwurst and peanut butter. They differ from earlier sandwiches where Rothko spread the filling to the edge of the bread; here he cut off the crust, leaving the sandwiches with a clean white border.



*Mark Rothko. Brown and Gray Sandwich. 1963.
Liverwurst and peanut butter on white bread, with
crusts removed.*



*Auguste Salzmann. Jerusalem: Islamic Fountain
(Fountain of the Gate of Chain). c. 1855.*

Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene

BEN LIFSON and ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU

Solomon-Godeau: In your position as photography critic for the *Village Voice*, you've had four years of observing the trajectory of photography's ascent. How would you begin to define it?

Lifson: It has to do with the easiest possible imagery, packaged in the most seductive way, for the easiest possible consumption.

Solomon-Godeau: The muzak of the visual arts?

Lifson: Precisely. Look at the vogue for pictorial photography, which never seems to go away. That's the easiest form for consumption, so long as you put it in the right package. One thing I like to do, which never gets into any of my articles, is listen to the salesmen sell their wares to customers in the photography galleries: "This artist is using her body like a body artist. . . ." "This artist is learning from pattern painting: . . ."

Solomon-Godeau: That's the appropriation of an art-historical or art-critical vocabulary for photography. Once it's determined that you're dealing with an art form, you naturally use an art discourse to package it, to sell it, to criticize it, to categorize it.

Lifson: But why not call it an art form despite that? Why throw out the baby with the bath?

Solomon-Godeau: Because photography is an art form only part of the time and an art-critical vocabulary is now being employed almost all of the time. I think this is one of the central issues in photography today. The first thing that happens with such an approach is that the subjects of photographs are jettisoned in favor of the artists. It's no longer a question of Egypt, Palestine, Syria; it's a question of Du Camp, Salzmann, Frith.

Lifson: I agree; to a certain extent that's an ahistorical approach. We don't care that Teynard or Frith or Beato were photographing Egypt at a time when England and France had certain interests in the Middle East. God forbid the artist should have political opinions! God forbid Frith should be considered a propagandizer! But at this point it's a difficult problem because we don't know much about what those photographers thought they were doing. Our problem is to find out.

Solomon-Godeau: Regarding nineteenth-century photography, we're not going to find out much, because in most cases there is very little information. In any case, the present pursuit of intentionality is conducted in the hope of proving that those photographers were making art—why else pay thousands of dollars for their photographs?—and to that extent I think the wrong questions are being asked. What is involved is the imposition of a certain view of photography that is not supported by the facts. You need artists, so you look for artists. This has much more to do with the necessities of the contemporary art market than the realities of photographic practice in the 1860s, notwithstanding the beauty of the photographs. I don't think Desiré Charnay was making art. Why assume that?

Lifson: We can assume that in making photographs, he was thinking about what a photograph might be, how a photograph should look, how it could create surprise, drama, how it could invent meaning.

Solomon-Godeau: Sure, but that's not necessarily the same as making art. One of the interesting things that you discover by going through the bulletins of the Société Française de Photographie, or any of the various French photography reviews of the 1850s and '60s is the complete absence of references to the intentions of the photographers who are now taken to be artists. You find cookbook recipes for various photographic processes, articles comparing the relative merits of various photographers, but almost nothing to support the claim that these were artists making art.

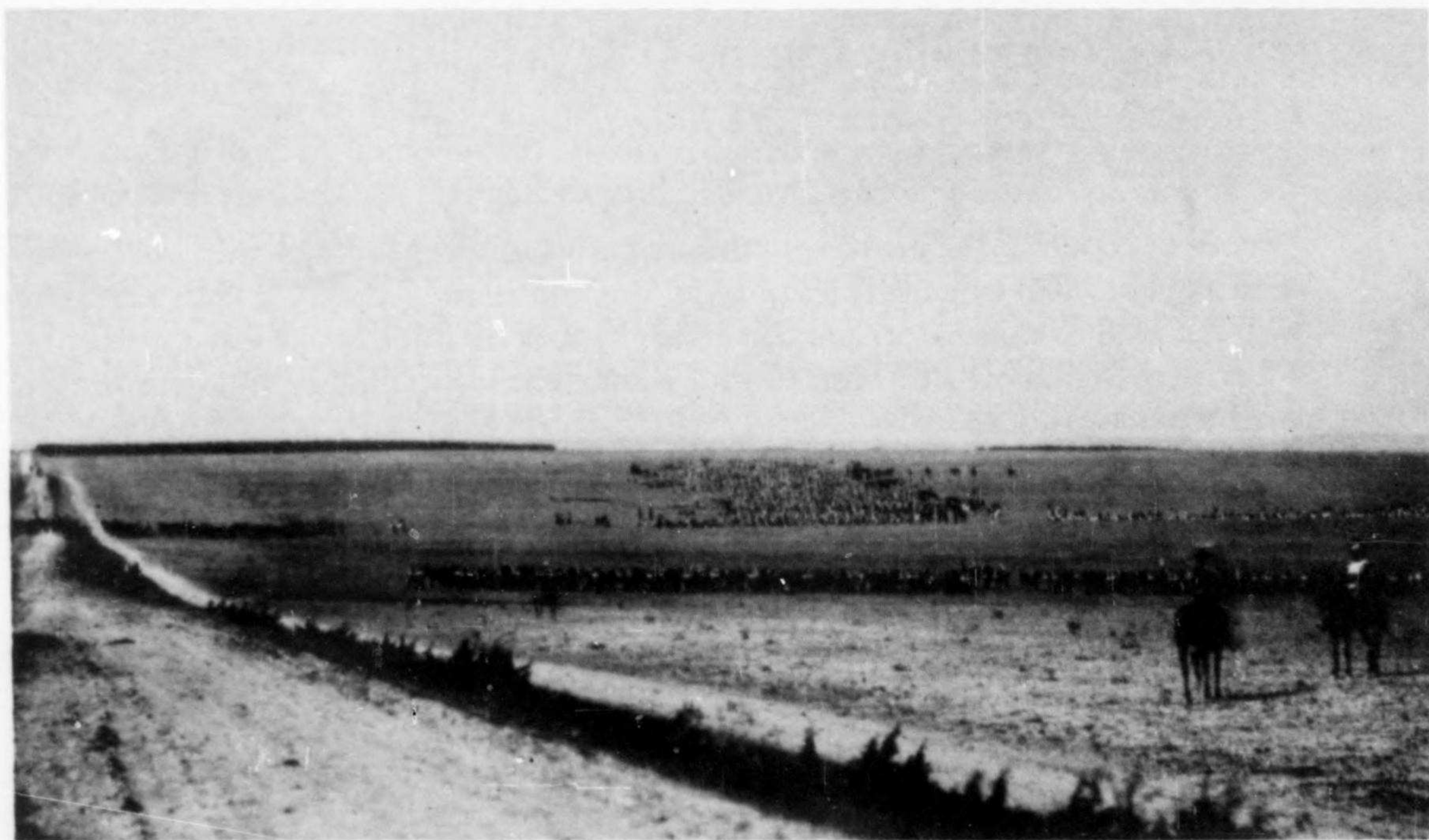
Lifson: Then how does one discuss nineteenth-century photography?

Solomon-Godeau: One way to discuss it, it seems to me, is as a history of the medium's intersections with other endeavors: how was it used? by whom and for whom? for what purposes? in what interests? Many of the uses of photography in the 1860s were the same as its uses now. Napoleon III, for example, understood the value of photography as a propaganda tool. When he had Gustave Le Gray photograph the Empress Eugénie in prayer, he created a classic propaganda image.

Lifson: What do you suppose Napoleon III thought of Le Gray's photographs of the army maneuvers at Châlons?

Solomon-Godeau: And what did the Ministry of Public Instruction think of Salzmänn's photographs of Jerusalem? The interesting thing about such photographs is the dissonance between their ostensible purposes and what the images look like to us today. We look at Le Gray's Châlons photographs and Salzmänn's Jerusalem photographs and say, "My God! They're abstractions." But of course they're not abstractions. It was impossible for Le Gray to have thought about making abstractions. You can only think what it is possible to think at any moment in history.

Lifson: That's true. But if you look at those little lines of soldiers stretched across the horizon, little smudges of darks and lights, daubs of tone . . . the roads and plains surrounding them, certainly Le Gray had sketching on his mind, and there *were* such things as sketches in the world. Watching him discover how a camera sketches the world differently from a brush is to watch him come to grips with his medium. And perhaps that means watching him break with other visual mediums, follow his sense of what a photograph can do, and to come to see in ways we might call abstract but which he just called photographic. As for propaganda, surely there were photographers who could have fulfilled Napoleon III's purposes at Châlons better than Le Gray.



Gustave Le Gray. Camp at Châlons: View of the Drill Field. 1858.

Solomon-Godeau: I don't believe that one sketches with a camera, no matter how minimal or reductive the image—I think one takes pictures with a camera. When you talk about daubs and smudges and the camera sketching you're speaking metaphorically, and it's significant to me that the metaphors are from painting or drawing. I object to it for precisely that reason. The distinction between a work of mechanical reproduction and traditional art forms is, for me, basic. As for Le Gray's commission, I would expect that in 1857 people got commissions the way they get them now. Le Gray was well-connected.

Lifson: But those photographs hardly glorify war, church, emperor. And just a few years later Le Gray was bankrupt.

Solomon-Godeau: That's another interesting question. Why did Le Gray go bankrupt? The fact is that by 1860, most of that heroic generation of photographers were out of business. Fenton went into law practice; Nègre spent the last twenty years of his life experimenting with photo-reproductive processes; Le Secq quit photography in 1856, Regnault repudiated photography, the Bisson Frères disappeared, Baldus and Salzmann disappeared . . .

Lifson: Well, it was a terrific ten years.

Solomon-Godeau: The traditional explanation comes from Nadar's memoirs and is reiterated by Giselle Freund and Walter Benjamin, only to be repeated by Helmut Gernsheim and Beaumont Newhall. They claimed that the commercialization of photography by hacks like Disderi drove out the earlier generation, but that thesis hasn't been sufficiently demonstrated. Trying to answer such questions seems to me more interesting than writing an art history of photography based on categories of style.

Lifson: Except that the answers to those questions may have something to do with meanings implied by categories of style. But you're the second person in two days who has said to me that to impose an art history on photography is a distortion. This is particularly disturbing in that I am right now engaged in attempting to write such a history.

Solomon-Godeau: Is that what you really want to write? Just now, you spoke of photography's social and political aspects.

Lifson: Absolutely, but I think those are aspects of content, of intent. In a recent interview, Pierre Apraxene said that he would exclude Eugene Smith's photographs of Minimata from the category of art because they're too explicit, because they don't respect the ambiguity of the medium. But if Apraxene doesn't like to look at those photographs, perhaps it's not because they're not art, but because

they have content. Quite independent of what Gene Smith wanted us to think about this situation, this is the content of human suffering.

Solomon-Godeau: That would explain why the recent ICP show of Capa, Seymour, and Taro has received very little press. You cannot comfortably put those photographs into an art context.

Lifson: I don't think that's necessarily true. I am willing to consider Capa and Seymour as artists, as photographers who were self-consciously experimenting with photographic syntax. They had, in part, inherited their syntax from a generation of photographers working in the late twenties, but in fact their photographs break with many of the old journalistic conventions of only a few years earlier.

Solomon-Godeau: But what was really significant to these men? that they were photographing on the Loyalist side and showing the German bombardments or that they were exploring photographic syntax? To say that Capa and Seymour are good photographers who do formally innovative work is surely secondary. The principal thing is that they've taken a particular side and want to show it.

Lifson: I don't see how that conflicts with what I've said. What is significant about Goya's *Disasters of War*, Goya's politics or his style?

Solomon-Godeau: That you would compare early nineteenth-century engravings by Goya with war photographs from the 1930s does not clarify the problem; that is the problem. I don't think the two can be compared at all. And if you deal with Capa and Seymour primarily as artists, you will end up suppressing the explicit political content of their work. When you forget the context, the manifest purpose, and speak of aspects of style and structure within a certain photographic genre, you run the risk of making the politics invisible. The trouble with this kind of conversation is that if I say I do not consider Capa an artist, it sounds as though I'm denigrating him, which is not at all my intention. Calling a photographer an artist has become equivalent to conferring excellence and seriousness upon his work, and I think this falsifies the issue. Put a Capa photograph of the Spanish Civil War next to a Weston photograph of a pepper and it is perfectly clear that they are two very different things, which require different vocabularies for their analysis.

Lifson: I prefer the Capa and I think Capa was the greater artist.

Solomon-Godeau: Why?

Lifson: Because he transforms his subject photographically in a much more interesting way; he turns it into a fiction of his creation in a way that has more to

do with the way the camera transforms the world. Weston's photographs of peppers seem to me banal exercises in imitation modernism.

Solomon-Godeau: What about Stieglitz?

Lifson: Stieglitz is, for the most part, a similar story. I think that the true modernist photographers are not those photographers who simply imitated the programs of modernist painting. My strongest criticism of the current photography scene is that it favors those photographers who only repeat modernist painting's vocabulary of forms, no matter which *ism*. I would be willing to say, for example, that it was Walker Evans, not Alvin Langdon Coburn, who most profoundly understood what cubism could mean for photography.

Solomon-Godeau: Do you reject a modernist photographer such as Rodchenko?

Lifson: No, I think Rodchenko is one of the supreme modernist photographers.

Solomon-Godeau: I had thought you were indicating that the modernist aesthetic was the historical villain for photography. Why do you accept Rodchenko's modernism and not Weston's?

Lifson: The specific social gravity of Rodchenko's subject matter is never lost, whereas I think Weston's interest in art overwhelms his interest in the peppers, and with photography that's skirting inanity.

Solomon-Godeau: If what you're attempting to do is to establish a photographic canon based on a balance between a self-conscious use of the medium and an explicit social content, you will necessarily be excluding most of photography. You would include Rodchenko but not Weston or Stieglitz. You would like to include Capa and Seymour as well, but I think that the inclusion of photojournalism, no matter how expert, excellent, and beautifully executed, is problematic. And, as we've said, all of nineteenth-century photography resists placement in such a category.

Lifson: The situation is that nobody yet knows how to categorize photography, even you and I, who try hard to know, to achieve real knowledge as against falsely created knowledge. Take an exhibition like *After Daguerre*, where nobody really knows the material. There's no one to say, "No, that's not accurate history." My immediate take on that show was simply that there were a lot of beautiful pictures that I hadn't seen before and I was delighted to have the opportunity to see them. I love to see Nadar, or Le Gray. A new Le Gray is enough for me. Even to discover that there was a Barbizon School of photography is enough to give me a different

sense of the shape of the period from the one I had before. But if I'm perplexed by this show, organized by a serious scholar, in a museum, then, Good Lord, what happens at auctions?

Solomon-Godeau: Anything goes.

Lifson: Absolutely. They'll sell you anything. And so a Paul Outerbridge nude will go for \$6,000.00, while a Walker Evans will go for less than \$1,000.00.

Solomon-Godeau: And a John Coplans will cost as much as a William Klein. The thing about the photography market is that there has been such an influx of naive collectors. . .

Lifson: . . . who will listen to any authority. I once gave a talk at a midwestern museum in which I discussed the work I thought was interesting and thoughtful, and some which wasn't, and afterwards a collector came up and told me that what he'd thought was wheat, he now thought was chaff, and he would sell those pictures.

Solomon-Godeau: It seems to me that if there is a single determining factor in the current photography scene, it is this all-around lack of knowledge, with the result that anything goes. Who's to say what's good or bad, true or false? Do you agree? What do you think is the central problem of the photography scene?

Lifson: I think, as I've already said, that the prevalent problem for photography is the notion that it is painting which sets the example, which establishes the visual and intellectual undertaking, and that photography can be respectable only insofar as it repeats or rehearses the pictorial strategies of painting.

Solomon-Godeau: But in the exhibition that we have both recently seen at P.S. 1, *New York/New Wave*, the photographs did not bear any resemblance to the paintings.

Lifson: No. The P. S. 1 show is a different situation. That's fashion photography, *Soho News* photography. That's not what's happening in photography.

Solomon-Godeau: If the presiding "master" of the show is Robert Mapplethorpe, as Peter Schjeldahl's *Village Voice* review had it—and indeed those are Mapplethorpe's progeny at P. S. 1—then it is at least one aspect of what's happening in photography.

Lifson: Robert Mapplethorpe is just this year's Hoyningen Huené or George Platt Lynes.

Solomon-Godeau: What is phenomenal about this situation is that Hoyningen Huené is simply a fashion photographer, and yet he too is now considered an artist. But of course Mapplethorpe is not, in the strict sense, a fashion photographer. He's making "autonomous works of art."

Lifson: So he claims.

Solomon-Godeau: So he claims, but collectors, critics, dealers, and museums buy that claim. Mapplethorpe's photographs are ubiquitous. You can't open a newspaper or magazine anymore without being confronted by one of his pictures. What do you think makes it possible for him to be taken seriously?

Lifson: All he's done is taken the conventions of fashion photography—that studio, that lighting, that shallow space, that isolation of the subject—and plugged in people or parts of people that we don't expect to see in that situation. It would be like seeing a television commercial in which the woman opened her box of Tide and poured it into her washing machine and toads were to come out instead of Tide. It creates shock instead of meaning.

Mapplethorpe is an illustrator. He's illustrating, without critical examination, the needs and concerns of a class and a milieu of which he is a part. And his success depends upon that milieu's approval.

Solomon-Godeau: So this is that phenomenon in contemporary photography, which we might call coterie photography, in which the audience for the photographs are also the subjects of the photographs. There is a strict continuity between photographer, photographed, and collector, critic, and dealer. It is what the artist Barbara Kruger calls contemporary court photography, which presupposes, of course, that the photographer have a privileged access to the court.

Then I would like to extend this discussion to include another photographer who seems to me to be doing the same thing. You have written a devastating review of Mapplethorpe's work. Yet you recently wrote what I would call a rave review of John Coplans's debut exhibition at the Daniel Wolf Gallery. Coplans also showed portraits of the art-world milieu to which he has privileged access, and again it is this world which will validate his work. Where do you locate the difference between the two enterprises?

Lifson: John is a better photographer. He's more interested in how he creates his subjects. I think it's a more mediated vision. But of course I'm part of the milieu in question.

Solomon-Godeau: Being part of neither milieu, I find the two enterprises absolutely analogous. Coplans just seems an older, straight version of Mapplethorpe. How their photographs are seen is predetermined by who they photograph, where they show, and who will see them.

Lifson: I don't care who Mapplethorpe photographs. Every photographer has to depict or describe the milieu which fascinates him the most. You've got to go where your passion lies, where your feelings are most in conflict. But Mapplethorpe's feelings are glossed over. There is no feeling in that work. Common sense tells us that those situations are charged with conflict.

Solomon-Godeau: I doubt if Debbie Harry or Patti Smith are the least bit conflicted about posing. After all, they're rock stars. And I doubt that the men Mapplethorpe photographs are conflicted about the trappings of S & M sex.

Lifson: But that's the point. Mapplethorpe accepts the equation of posing with reality, believes the glossed-over conflicts of that sexual milieu. More than that, he photographs readymade imagery, which reduces photography to a recording device. Nothing about the style of his photographs displaces what he photographs, or removes it to a critical view, or submits it to a discourse other than the self-referential and self-aggrandizing discourse it comes already laden with. It would be as though Duchamp had taken the urinal from one plumbing supply store and simply put it in another. Nothing happens because of the move.

Both Mapplethorpe and Coplans deal with posing. But Coplans photographs in such a way that posing looks alien to his subjects. They look dislocated, subjected to a discourse out of their control, and therefore raw, more raw than Mapplethorpe's characters, who have no questions about who they are. Mapplethorpe's characters have gotten where they're going—his studio—and are glad to be there.

Solomon-Godeau: I'm not entirely convinced that Coplans's subjects are writhing with discomfort by being photographed in his studio. Perhaps it's easier for you to condemn Mapplethorpe's sensibility because it's alien to you, whereas Coplans's is not. Do you really think that Coplans has done anything to extend the conventions of portraiture?

Lifson: First of all, there's a difference between sensibility and aesthetic, and a difference between these and idiom. Coplans's idiom is essentially more flexible. It's a realist idiom and it points to the real world. John's style at least makes room for self-consciousness on the part of the sitters, while Mapplethorpe's style makes room for no consciousness at all.

Solomon-Godeau: The reason I'm pressing this is not really so much a question of the relative merits of these two photographers as it is the symptoms of the photography world's acceptance of just about anything. Let me put it this way: Both Max Kozloff and John Coplans were editors of *Artforum* through 1976. Not only were they powerful men in the art world, but they were instrumental in the change of *Artforum's* focus away from avant-garde art, with an attendant increase in the coverage of photography. Kozloff had turned to photography criticism and

Coplans was collecting photography. Kozloff has now published a book of his photography criticism, while Coplans has recently served as a guest editor of *Aperture*. And both of these men have had one-man shows of their photographs in prominent galleries this year. Now if, at the height of their power as art critics and editors, these two men had simultaneously had exhibitions of *paintings*, it would have been a scandal, and nobody would have taken them seriously as either critics or painters. But photography is so much about an arriviste mentality that this kind of thing can happen and nobody bats an eyelash.

Lifson: I agree. But Mapplethorpe and Incandella didn't have to work hard to get their shows at the Corcoran, either, and there must be similar uses of power in painting.

Solomon-Godeau: I think it's significant that the show immediately following Coplans at Dan Wolf was the Baron von Gloeden, which is pure kitsch. But no one's to know the difference.

Lifson: There's a lot of kitsch around. Most of the photography hanging right now in the Whitney Biennial is kitsch, if one of the ways we define kitsch is an extraordinary expenditure of means with very little result. Almost every photographer in the Whitney is another version of Mapplethorpe. It's not photography they're interested in, but some kind of signature style. And by and large that signature style is in reference to a medium not their own.

Solomon-Godeau: What do you make of Larry Clark in that company?

Lifson: Larry Clark has been working a long time and hasn't found a style. But I would say that the Whitney curators see him as a version of Robert Frank, at least from a point of view which identifies Frank as a naif.

Solomon-Godeau: Robert Frank is anything but a naif.

Lifson: Clark's photographs appear to be uncontrived snapshots; they attempt to say rawly, "Here are these street kids." For purposes of credibility the Whitney needed to pay lip service to the tradition of straight photography and they let Larry Clark stand for it. But they're not much in sympathy with that tradition and they don't really understand it, so they didn't look too hard for its best representatives. And there's also the fact that Clark is represented by the Friedus Gallery, which provided the Whitney with four or five other photographers.

Solomon-Godeau: There was a certain amount of talk that the Whitney curators' choices, both in painting and photography, reflected their relationship to certain dealers and to the media.

Lifson: Clearly there were a lot of politics going on. Why else get William Wegman from the Texas Gallery instead of Holly Solomon?

Solomon-Godeau: What do you think the Whitney emphasis on color was about?

Lifson: The Whitney is saying that color is important because painting is in color; its the same story: photography approximating the condition of painting.

Solomon-Godeau: But even that doesn't seem to be a consistent rationale. Jan Groover, for example, is known for her color work, but in the Biennial she's represented by black and white palladium prints that look as though they were made in the thirties. What does it mean when "avant-garde" photographers make works that intentionally evoke photography of fifty years ago?

Lifson: Like painters, they're making art directors' or art historians' references. And for that, I'd rather go to the movies and see *The Sting*.

Solomon-Godeau: It seems to me that there are two operative traditions in the photographers' work at the Whitney; a conscious "art" tradition which is about handwork or manipulation such as the work of Duane Michals or Benno Friedman, and another idiom governing the work of say, Groover or Mudford, or Cumming or Callahan, which is . . .

Lifson: . . . formalist. This is essentially the Whitney's position on art photography. My own sense of what constitutes the genuinely artistic in photography is exemplified by Cartier-Bresson's photograph of Matisse with the birds. The surprise in photographic terms is not that Matisse is placed in a corner of the room—there are precedents for that kind of picture making. Nor is it surprising that in the photograph there are a lot of things that refer to Matisse's paintings. Anyone who knows Matisse's paintings as well as Cartier-Bresson does could easily have pictured the windows as he did, to look like the windows in Matisse's paintings. But that he should have chosen to show those birds sitting on the cage, out of focus, and flat, and by so doing alluding to birds that might have been drawn by Matisse, thus creating the photographic fiction that those birds had been drawn, cut out, and set on top of the cage like an art object—that's art photography, and it's done using only the mechanisms of photography.

Solomon-Godeau: I don't quite understand what you mean here. You describe the work in the Whitney show as formalist, and you speak of it with contempt. But formalism as it is understood in its most precise sense is what you describe in the Cartier-Bresson photograph. Formalism involves the notion that an art form must acknowledge its own specific characteristics in order to describe the world. I think



Henri Cartier-Bresson. Henri Matisse. 1944.

what you object to in the Whitney show is either a debased formalism or a type of academic modernism.

Lifson: Exactly. I do think the Whitney selection overall represents the worst kind of academic modernism.

Solomon-Godeau: So that, to go back to the issue of color photography there, what is being privileged is a simplistic version of modernism wherein color photography is understood as exclusively about the conventions and color of photographic film, whereas formalism in fact is predicated upon a complex notion of the necessity of examining the medium through which the world is described, even as that medium is employed. And this kind of academic modernism we're talking about is precisely the framework that determines how photography—across the board—is now being viewed. It's the view of photography that is being retrospectively positioned onto nineteenth-century photography too. It's the way that photography is now being taught, and it is overwhelmingly the way it is now being produced. And if you combine the Whitney show with the

P. S. I *New Wave* exhibition, which is in essence about a fashion aesthetic—what's chic, what's trendy, a kind of Madame Tussaud's of the New Wave demi-monde—you've got a pretty thorough cross section of the photography scene.

Lifson: Being a Jeremiah is important. I try to do it as often as I can.

Solomon-Godeau: You're very much in the minority. Most current photography criticism is very enthusiastic; the euphoria is palpable. Of course, there's a problematic aspect to all this euphoria in that the very people who have the most to gain are themselves the self-appointed experts and the arbiters of taste and value. It's the collectors of photography who have written the books, organized the museum and gallery exhibitions, and in some cases launched the careers of photographers. Even the standard reference book—Gernsheim's *History of Photography*—stems from his research on his private collection. The American rediscovery of the French primitive photographers is a result of the exhibitions and catalogues of André Jammes's collection.

I find a striking analogue between the career of Bernard Berenson in the rediscovery of Italian Primitive painting and the current rediscovery of French Primitive photography. Berenson was not only writing about what was then a less well-known period of painting, but was buying and selling it as well; and, as he was the universally acknowledged expert and connoisseur, his attributions were crucial to the market value of the works. And a number of Berenson's attributions have since been proven wrong, in an inflationary sense. What happens in a new art market is that only a very few people are in any way expert or knowledgeable. Who's to know if some dusty predella panel fished out of a shop is a Fra Angelico? Isabella Stewart Gardner certainly didn't, although she was prepared to pay a lot of money if Berenson said it was. I'm not sure but that when the expertise and technical knowledge is concentrated in the hands of dealers and collectors there is not inevitably going to be a certain amount of license taken. *Caveat emptor*.

I noticed recently for example, a work exhibited in a gallery that was dated 1848 and given to Blanquart-Evrard. There were a number of things that made such an attribution questionable. The date was early since the scene depicted was almost an instantaneous view—quite amazing for an 1848 calotype. When I questioned the girl who worked in the gallery about it she said that of course it was a Blanquart-Evrard because his blind stamp was on the mount. But Blanquart-Evrard was principally a photographic printer—very few photographs taken by him are known—and all the photographs he printed by other photographers at his *imprimerie* have the same stamp, so that proves nothing. When I pushed the matter further, I was told that the gallery's attributions are done by one of the most prominent American collectors, a man whose prominence derives exclusively from the fact that he possesses one of the largest private collections of photographs.

I'm waiting for the first photographic forgeries to appear on the market.

Lifson: They've already appeared. Graham Ovenden, a British collector of Victoriana had some photographs made by a commercial photographer. They were sepia-toned, probably some kind of dry plate imitation. And then Ovenden invented a Victorian photographer, complete with biography and diary entries. He passed the photographs on to Valerie Lloyd of the Royal Photographic Society, where they were exhibited innocently in an exhibition of Victorian photographs of children. By sheer accident, the actual photographer saw the exhibition and recognized his work.

Solomon-Godeau: Since we're speaking of falsifications, it seems to me that one of the most fundamental falsifications of photography, in which nearly everyone dealing with photography now is complicit, is the transmutation of a medium which is by definition about plurality or multiplicity into one of scarcity, predicated upon false notions of authenticity. The entire structure of the photography market is based on the extraordinary value accorded the vintage print. You are especially disturbed by the ways photography imitates painting. It seems to me that what the photography industry most blatantly borrows from painting is its notion of authenticity, with a consequent emphasis on connoisseurship.

Lifson: Connoisseurship in photography has limited meaning and value. Connoisseurship in photography so far boils down to identifying vintage prints, and to a great extent that has only market value, and sometimes precious little of that, for in some cases an artist's later prints are much better than vintage prints, or define a different but equally valid version.

Solomon-Godeau: There are certainly many people who would be surprised to hear that. Connoisseurship concerns itself with differentiating between the so-called original and so-called nonoriginal print. Don't you think the distinction is absurd, at least on theoretical grounds?

Lifson: No, not at all. Papers have changed; developers have changed . . .

Solomon-Godeau: Certainly that's true. But the concept of authenticity as embodied in the vintage print is less mechanical than that. It means that the artist has made the print himself, and that he has done so "close to the aesthetic moment," as Ann Horton of Sotheby's has put it.

Lifson: What does she mean by that? The moment the picture was taken? The moment it was selected from the proof sheets? Are we to prefer Henri Cartier-Bresson's first selection from the several negatives of the bullfight guard by the barrier gate simply because he chose it in the early fifties when the later selection is the better image? Many photographers—Ansel Adams, for example, or Bill Brandt—have reinterpreted their negatives over the years; several different prints exist, each one connected to some kind of aesthetic moment. Surely some thought

went into the revisions. Which ones are the vintage prints? And when it comes to a photograph which sells for \$71,000, like Adams's *Moonrise, Hernandez*, which has gone through several printings, I don't see auctioneers or dealers making careful distinctions between early and late prints.

Solomon-Godeau: Earlier you spoke of Cartier-Bresson's photograph of Matisse as a paradigmatic photograph. But Cartier-Bresson didn't even print his own photographs.

Lifson: No, but he has always used the same printer, and it was an intimate working relationship.

Solomon-Godeau: Are you then forced to consider as "original" a print by Cartier-Bresson's printer, as against a print by, say, his printer's assistant?

Lifson: If Cartier-Bresson signs it, that's authenticity enough.

Solomon-Godeau: What I'm really asking is, is the difference fundamental, as fundamental as the market says it is?

Lifson: I tend to say no until I walk up and look at a photograph. I don't discount the value of reproductions. But there is a real difference between the reproductions of August Sander's photographs in books and Sander's actual prints, between the reproductions in *Water's Edge* and Harry Callahan's prints. There's a difference in the physicality of the object, in the physical description, the transfiguration of the world according to the photographer's control of light, contrast, etc. I was recently looking at a photographer's work prints—good prints, mind you, but not final ones—and he waved his hand over a segment of one print and said, "In the final print these buildings are much more buttery." But to fetishize this aspect of the photograph, its craft value, again overlooks what you call the discourse value of the image, and that depends a lot more on the photographer's eye, or on his camera work as opposed to his darkroom work. Bad photographers are often good—even magnificent—printers, better in fact, than lots of good photographers who often prefer to spend their time in the world making negatives than in the darkroom making prints.

Solomon-Godeau: What about facsimiles? Do the facsimile prints made by Joel Snyder's Chicago Albumen Works from the negatives of Atget, Nadar, and O'Sullivan supply us with the essential photographic information contained in those photographs?

Lifson: There's certainly no reason not to show them. Atget himself didn't make such perfect prints. Certainly you can recognize the construction of the image in Snyder's facsimiles, but I don't think he succeeds . . .

Solomon-Godeau: For me the question is whether the distinction between an artist's own print and a sensitive facsimile is real or artificial, whether it is an essential distinction or one which is borrowed from the connoisseurship of earlier forms of reproducible art. Walter Benjamin said that there is a *fundamental* difference between photography and earlier forms, and I think that the rejection of that insight—no, the suppression of it—is the single greatest fallacy in the discourse of photography today. Nobody wants to hear that photography has no aura, because all the current trade in photographs needs that aura to make good its claims. What's really at stake now is the transmutation of discourse value to commodity value.

Lifson: I agree. If an artist signs a print, that's enough. The rest is a matter of taste. Some late prints are better than so-called vintage prints. But I object to the idea that an artist's printing practices are irrelevant to his sense of meaning. Prints are an aspect of the discursive style, that is, a means to specify meaning—emotional, intellectual, historical, political. If you and I value photography, I think it's because of all it can tell us about how photographers saw the world, which includes their specific historical conditions. Going back to the photographs of Capa and Seymour at the ICP, those photographs have such a surfeit of discourse value, such an intense, passionate, public significance. That's just so much more interesting than most of what we see in the photography galleries now.

David Seymour. Republican Pilots, Spain. 1936.



The Prospect Before Us

ANNETTE MICHELSON

"But why *October*?" readers still inquire. Our reply: "This name—a title—is not a promissory note; it is a point of reference." Our initial statement five years ago declared our wish to celebrate a seminal period in which "social practice, theoretical inquiry, and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique."¹ That period had been epitomized in a film embodying the advances specific to it and propaedeutic for a modernism of the temporal arts short-circuited by history, by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Eisenstein's *October*, the complex aesthetic instance of a sustained theoretical effort within the problematic development of a postrevolutionary culture, is invoked as emblematic of our central concerns.

Our sense of the particular historical juncture in which our project for a journal was taking shape was that of a difficult transitional moment in which the modernist canon, the forms and categories which had defined it, the practices for which it provided a framework of intelligibility, were everywhere in question. The erosion of categories and dispersion of forms which characterize the situation we have come to know as postmodernist required, in our view, a special effort of reassessment and critical analysis. The understanding and support of significant contemporary artistic practice was our task. As members of a middle-class intelligentsia with no illusions of a revolutionary mission, we nevertheless felt impelled to invoke as appropriate to our enterprise a historical instance of the particular problematic of a theoretically significant artistic practice within a climate of growing reaction.

We are now five years from that beginning, and the crisis which soon brought Carter to Washington has intensified, installing corporate might and its imperatives even more firmly in power. There are few among us who do not read the immediate future as a demonstration of the naked, brutal force of unrestrained corporate greed. The crisis of American imperial policy, demonstrated in the Iranian revolution, continues, and the new administration, barely inhibited by internationally articulated fears of a "new Vietnam," has hastened to obscure,

1. "About *October*," *October*, no. 1 (Spring 1976), 3-4.

though certainly not to modify, the nature of its material aid to the repressive order in El Salvador.

The clearest and most immediate impact of the present administration on the community of artists and intellectuals has been swiftly registered in the appropriate superstructural areas: large and crippling cuts in aid to students, educational institutions and programs; and the strenuous reduction of funding for both the NEA and NEH. It is now, however, that greater, compensatory increases in military expenditure in conjunction with drastic reductions in welfare and a discriminatory tax policy must be expected to complete the dysfunction of the national economy.

In March of this year the administration disclosed as well, though under pressure, its resolve to reactivate surveillance and infiltration policy and techniques, to reinforce the powers of the CIA with respect to those modes of investigation officially designated as "intrusive." The restrictions of such activities, including the category "Restrictions on Certain Collection Techniques," which applied to basic controls established by the preceding administration, are to be replaced with orders for "Conduct of Intelligence Activities" and "Use of Certain Collection Techniques" within a procedural framework in which the role of the Attorney General in scrutinizing the legality of intelligence activities will be diminished.² This restoration and extension of electronic surveillance in the United States would reverse the laboriously gained restriction of a vast apparatus whose repressive function and unlimited domain have acted, both here and abroad, to implement "the fight against terrorism."³

Faced with these developments, those concerned as we are with the conjunction of artistic practice and theoretical discourse must reckon with the constraints, the conditions of practice, the climate generated not only on the level of superstructural modification but also within the *foundation* of that synthetic terrain of workshop, classroom, laboratory, library, museum, performance and gallery space, which constitute the site of our collective enterprise. Our response should be directed not only to those cuts in cultural funding which have elicited signs of anxiety. It must also be directed to a consideration of the ways in which artists and intellectuals so affected share in the consequences of the general economic and political repression, the manner in which their cause is also that of those working men and women, students, pensioners, who are also marked for sacrifice to the installation of a war economy and its support of a war machine.

The current estimate of construction costs of the MX Missile Project, whose imminent implementation has been confirmed, is estimated at a sum which ranges curiously between 35 and 145 billion dollars. And, once the actual site and appropriate refinements have been settled, we may expect a further increase, to be

2. Robert Pear, "Intelligence Groups Seek Power to Gain Data on U.S. Citizens," *New York Times*, March 10, 1981, A1.

3. *Ibid.*

"balanced" by more substantial cuts in welfare, education, and cultural funding. This project has been described by Edward Thompson in the following terms:

The MX Missile Project is noble in scope, greatly exceeding prospects of any prior civilization in its grandeur. . . .

Undoubtedly, the MX Missile-system will be the greatest single artifact of any civilization. It will be the ultimate serpentine temple of exterminism. The rockets in their shelters, like giant members pointing to the sky, will perform "for the free West" not a military but a spiritual function. They will keep evil spirits at bay and summon worshippers to the phallic rites of money. Within the aura of these gigantic nuclear circles, the high priests of ideology will perform ritual sacrifices of taxes. At distant outposts of the faith, at Westminster, Brussels and the Hague, Druidical servitors will bow low to the West and incant missileic runes.

Many millennia afterwards, visiting archaeologists from another planet will dig among the still-radioactive embers and debate the function of the great temple. The debate will be in vain. For the temple will be erected to celebrate the ultimate dysfunction of humanity: self-destruct.⁴

Let no one then accuse our State of vulgar philistinism. Let us rather reflect upon the precise sense in which we may construe the completion of MX as compensatory, indeed, for the superstructural modifications attendant upon the drastic revision of budgetary priorities. What the Right Hand removes, the Left Hand will restore. Can we not view the fulfillment of this plan as the State's culminating, co-optive articulation of that movement originating in the transgression of the limits of exhibition space, of that impulse which propelled sculptural enterprise out of the gallery, museum, and municipal plaza toward the distant horizons of the American landscape? The earthwork, as exemplified in the *Lightning Field* (elsewhere described in this issue), has, in accordance with the inflationary dynamic of the economy, escalated in scale and in the bureaucratic elaboration and control of its mise-en-scène. The early intimations of Robert Morris—his study of Stonehenge as model for sculptural scale and procedure;⁵ the prescient fables which argue a sense of the troubling ambiguities in the marriage of art and technology before the altar of perceptual experimentation⁶—deserve recall and some deliberate meditation at this time. Beside the State's proposed

4. Edward Thompson, "The Logic of Exterminism," *New Left Review*, no. 121 (May-June 1980), 15-16.

5. See Annette Michelson, "Three Notes on an Exhibition as a Work," *Artforum*, vol. VIII, no. 10 (June 1970), 62-64.

6. Robert Morris, "The Art of Existence: Three Extra-Visual Artists, Works in Process," *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 5 (January 1971), 28-33.

preemption of land art's scale and drama, Dia's projects shrink; neither singly nor in concert can the efforts of Marvin Blane, Robert Dayton, Walter De Maria, and Jason Taub rival the force and immensity, the potential for perceptual shock, of this sinister master project.

It is our conviction that discursive and artistic practice in the era of late capitalism is multiple, shifting, contradictory, overdetermined. Its comprehension requires the construction of a theoretical and critical framework radically distinct from "progressive" presuppositions of continuity as the ground of cultural pluralism and identity as the criterion of coherence. We have therefore consistently chosen to publish together Eisenstein and Foreman, Vertov and Borges, Enzensberger and Cornell, with no fear of misappropriation. As *October* prepares to reconsider the role and function of a journal within the present historical conjuncture, we retain these convictions. They are in fact confirmed by the persistent crisis generated by postmodernist practice and the sense of a growing urgency of effort solicited by intensifying contradiction and dispersion within the context of the two successive elections that have occurred during the short life span of *October*. Our sense of a deeply oppositional relation to dominant critical practice is renewed daily, as it were, and most recently by the publication in *Salmagundi* of the transcript of the proceedings of a symposium celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of that journal's founding. The transcript's title: *Art and Intellect in America*.⁷

I do not wish to minimize the interest of that journal's past interventions in cultural studies, nor the usefulness of *Salmagundi*'s presentation of the historical and theoretical legacy of the Frankfurt School, nor its efforts to engage debate and critical redefinition of psychoanalytic issues within a specifically American context. The journal's increasingly problematic role has, of course, already been articulated in its recent drives against "The Politics of Anti-Realism." The appearance of the recent symposium's text, however, does more than confirm the growing conservatism of the journal. *It signals the achieved integration of the presuppositions—historical and epistemological—of a cultural establishment whose estrangement from and ignorance of significant contemporary artistic practice and the theoretical options appropriate to its understanding are by now complete.* We once again assess the terms of that ignorance, and its price, as *October* prepares to consider the shape and manner of its own work in the coming difficult years. And we do so because the views, assumptions, value systems, assertions, silences, and omissions generated at this gathering are those of staff members, editors, regular contributors to publications (*The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*) and representatives of major academic institutions which do indeed compose a dominant group within the cultural establishment of this country, and their collective voice is that of an anachronistic, self-perpetuating hegemony.

7. *Salmagundi*, no. 50-51 (Fall 1980-Winter 1981), 53-253.

The opening address, the definition of issues, and direction of debate was therefore quite naturally assigned to George Steiner. The rhetoric of this particular exercise in homiletics was, as always, altiloquent, grandisonant, lexiaphanic. One recognized the characteristic conjunction of archness and solemnity; the self-dramatization in the implicit identification of the speaker as heroic survivor, as dissident witness; the nagging insistence on the pathos of the redemptive role of the intellectual and, most especially, of the critic, "sick with thought," "infected" with its "leprosy," in the sacrificial destiny of that "loving, clairvoyant parasite," "obsessed servant," "crazed cleric." One watched yet again the parade of those personae through whom Steiner projects the hysterical appropriation of the demonic aura formerly reserved for the artist as subject of the Romantic Agony. And with this crowd of figures we are offered that "supremely charged particle" which traverses not the "cloud-chamber of society" alone, but the metaphoric steam of Steiner's ritualized tours of Western Civilization in its Decline.

Beginning then, as usual, from before the Flood, Steiner produces the synthetic and definitive assessment of American cultural practices as primarily custodial in relation to those of the Old World, our "Archives of Eden" unproductive of those instances which may lay claim to "classic occasion." Those instances are offered as a trivium: music, mathematics, metaphysics. And with that proclamation we are propelled into a time warp from which the panelists, generally discomfited, vainly struggle to escape, pointing to the richness of native jazz, the flowering of Balanchine's ballet, the vitality of American movies.

It will not do, however, to flail about defensively (nor even to question the authority of Steiner's evaluation of the work of American as against European mathematics). There remains the set of presuppositions, historical and methodological, which subtend this assessment, the manner in which this discourse, with its panoramic invocation of a humanist vocation issuing in the literature of Soviet dissidence, ignores the determinant conditions of American cultural practices: the theocratic settling of this country and the subsequent founding of a secular nation of immigrants within that extended dissolution of metaphysics by intensive epistemological inquiry. The practices of each successive generation of American artists have articulated the multiple and asynchronous tensions at work in the process of secularization, rehearsing its attendant contradictions as they develop within the establishment of an industrial, imperial power, and the eventual erosion of a humanist discourse increasingly at variance with those determinant conditions and processes.

It is through the development of traditional forms and, more strikingly still, through their radicalization and the invention of wholly new practices specific to the culture—cinema, photography, earthworks, performance, and a choreography so radical in its premises that it may be said to constitute a new invention—that both problematic and fruitful aspects of this dissolution of metaphysics are most powerfully articulated. For ours is an art whose theoretical implications continually question, redefine, and shift the role and site of signification and pleasure.

The culture mapped by Steiner and disputed by his colleagues, however, is one whose limits and terms of assessment are those of a now distant past, in which instances may or may not have claim to "classic occasion," may or may not possess the "major seriousness" of works of literature, may or may not "enter crucially" into the notion of culture. I pass over the group discomfiture, the nervous gestures of defence, the efforts of Henry Pachter and Leslie Fiedler to urge the cause of popular culture, the prim submission of Charles Molesworth and Susan Sontag to this "courageous" and "frankly elitist" stance. The general despair and embarrassment is summed up in Cynthia Ozick's bland determination to see this indictment as a "fiction" and her refusal to account for such a response.

It is into this breach that Ronald Paulson steps, brightening the day, bringing reassurance and relief with the exaltation of the autonomy, specificity, and power of "American-type painting." In a gesture of complaisant emulation addressed to the author of "Come Back to the Raft, Huck Honey," he develops an elaborate reading of a passage from a "classic" American text as a metaphor for the totality of our pictorial enterprise in the postwar period. Invoking Tom Sawyer's stratagem when confronted with the task of painting his Aunt Polly's fence, Paulson proposes that the nature and implementation of that stratagem (the enlistment of paid labor), the visual aspect and scale of the fence, its relationship to the landscape, provide us with the terms that will accommodate American art of the past four decades in such a way as to be comprehensible to all those for whom, as for this gathering, the literary text is the center and guarantee of cultural existence.

I will not here unpack this image in all its arch and seductive detail. Rather, I want to point to elisions and misconstructions in certain aspects of Paulson's argument and to the meaning and consequences of their uncritical acceptance. There is, first of all, the understanding of the entrepreneurial aspect of the enterprise, which Paulson identifies with abstract expressionism. Quite obviously, if one were to cast about for a historical moment that might entail the hiring of labor for the monochromatic covering of an extended series of standardized geometric forms standing outdoors in strict alignment, one would cite the minimal sculpture of the 1960s. But why abstract expressionism?

Paulson is at pains, however, in a lapse even more significant, to endorse the observation made by another quintessentially American Tom concerning the slight sense of fraudulence in "Tom's artistry"—which is to say, American artists generally.⁸ (Indeed, "It takes one to know one.") In other words, before embarking upon his defense of American art, Paulson feels impelled to offer his audience the assurance that he, like them, stands ready to call the artist to ultimate account for what, quoting Lawrence, he identifies as "the breaking away from all dominion."

8. For the definitive evaluation of Tom Wolf's *The Painted Word* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), see Rosalind Krauss, "Cafe Criticism," *Partisan Review*, vol. XLII, no. 4 (Winter 1975), 629-633.

Ever in search of a handy literary analogy, Paulson continues with two proposals designed to reassure his audience further: Lowell's *Life Studies* and Heller's *Catch 22* as the poetic and novelistic analogues of abstract expressionism. To this grotesque suggestion, one must reply that if abstract expressionism requires for its understanding the identification of analogous cultural practices, such practices would be wholly removed from Paulson's examples and might be represented more accurately by Charles Olson's redefinitions of poetic composition as deriving from the corporeal rhythms and energies of breath and utterance.

Paulson's central misconstructions are, however, located in those passages in which, abandoning literary guarantees, he proceeds to a misappropriation of an important art-critical text to explain the totality of recent American painting. Citing Leo Steinberg's invocation of the flatbed printing press as a model for the reorientation of the picture plane and consequent change in pictorial content in the art of Johns and Rauschenberg,⁹ Paulson, with a recklessly expansive gesture, extends the scope of that model to include the whole of postwar practice. He thus applies the very model which Steinberg had used to distinguish the specific techniques of the successors of abstract expressionism to the spattering and staining of Pollock, Rothko, and Morris Louis. Building on this indiscriminate confusion, he then assimilates painting's changing scale to a shift which centers now on the painter's bodily sense, now on the dimensions of our continent. The cultural image of the printer's flatbed, the artist's body, and the great expanse of the American landscape are fused into an undifferentiated continuum which assimilates one body of work to another in total violation of their particular historical developments. These, in turn, are fused into the generality of abstract expressionism as the prototypically American landscape art, whose roots lie in the European theorization of the sublime, transmitted through Wilson and Turner to Cole and Church, and thence to Pollock. We have, then, another historical panorama seen as a fluid progression through the discourse of the sublime, which denies not only the historicity of these practices but their meaning and critical specificities.

It is this travesty of art criticism which is greeted by the gathering as "impeccable," "brilliant," and as constituting (Sontag *dixit*) "the best possible case for this group of painters as major figures in the history of modern painting." The almost ecstatic relief which Paulson has provided his hearing in the form of the reassuring literary metaphor—promising, in its teeming circumstantial detail, genteel sophistication, and academic humor, the *key* to a complex body of work—is to be understood only in terms of the estrangement of the cultural establishment from the concrete instances of artistic practice of the past forty years. The provincialism and quite unconscious arrogance are all the more striking in view of individual claims to cosmopolitan sophistication, on the one hand, and to professional humility, on the other. It is Gerald Graff, the gladiator of realism,

9. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 55-91.

who provides, in his candid disclosure of his unfamiliarity with this "specialized" aspect of our culture, the suitable evaluation of this prestigious manifestation of *Art and Intellect in America*: "I'm not sure after listening to the talk here that I ought to care at all about these abstract expressionist paintings."

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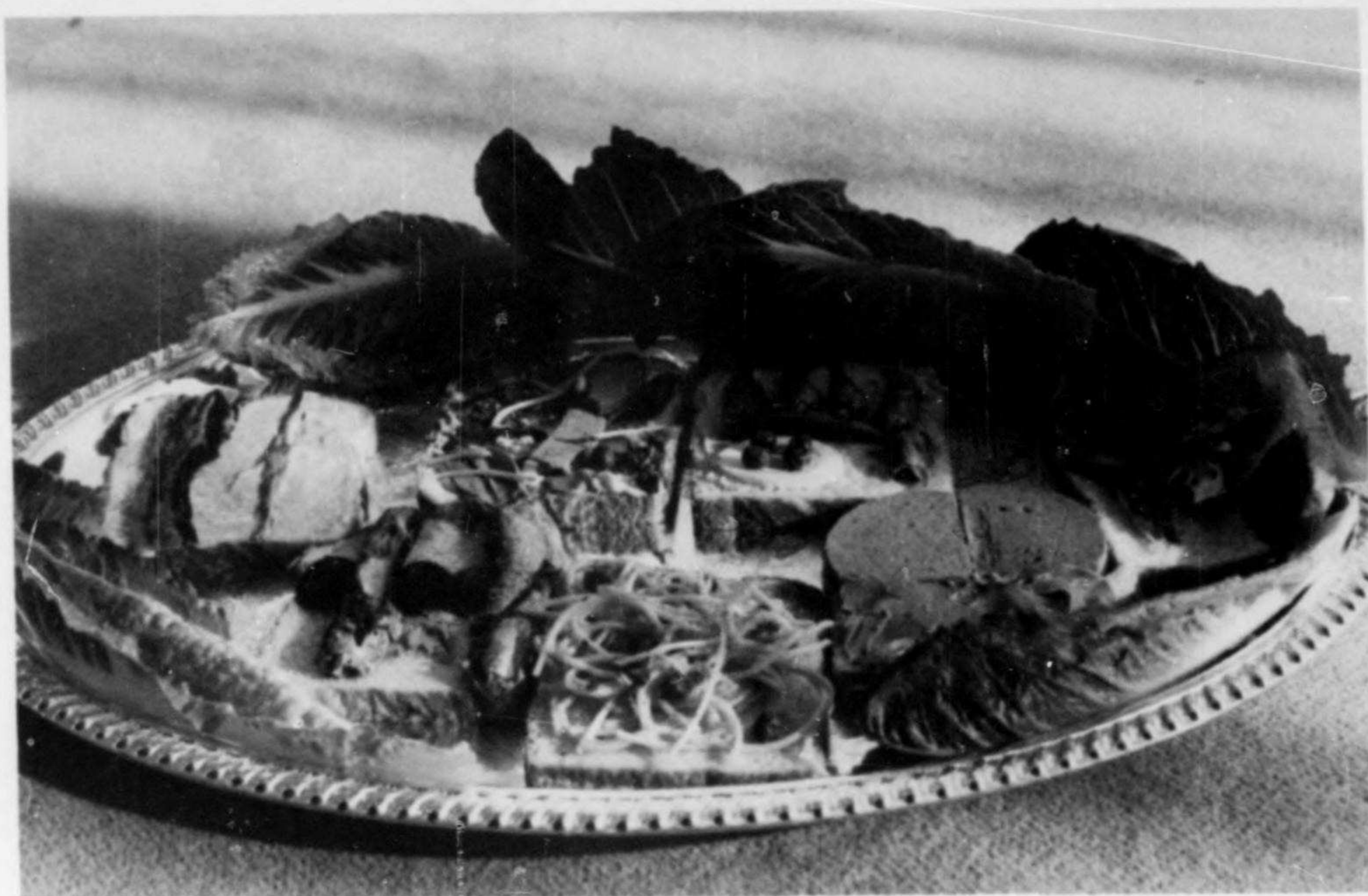
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