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Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism

MICHAEL FRIED

... vous n'êtes que le premier dans la décrépitude de votre art.
—Baudelaire to Manet, 1865

For twenty years or more almost all the best new painting and sculpture in the world have been done in America; I am referring to the work of artists such as Pollock, deKooning, Kline, Motherwell, Newman, Still, Frankenthaler, Rothko, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Louis, Noland, Olitski, Frank Stella and David Smith, to name only some of the best. I think it could be argued, in fact, that the flowering of painting and, to a much lesser degree, of sculpture that has taken place in this country since the end of the Second World War is comparable to that which occurred in American poetry in the two decades after 1912, regarding both the quality of the work produced and what might be called its intrinsic difficulty. The new poetry, however, found the criticism it deserved relatively soon, in the work of men like Blackmur, Ransom, Tate and others, while the critical essays of Eliot and Pound, although often not dealing with the new poetry itself, expounded many of its fundamental assumptions.

It is one of the most important facts about the contemporary situation in the visual arts that the fundamental character of the new art has not, in spite of the essays of Clement Greenberg, been adequately understood. This is not altogether surprising. Unlike poets, painters and sculptors rarely practice criticism, and the job of writing about art has tended to pass by default to men and women who are in no way qualified for their profession. Moreover, the visual skills necessary to come to grips with the new painting and sculpture are perhaps even more rare than the verbal skills demanded by the new poetry.

But if the inadequacy of almost all contemporary art criticism is not surprising, it is undeniably ironic, because the visual arts

—painting especially—have never been more explicitly self-critical than during the past twenty years. In this essay I want to attempt an exposition of what, to my mind, are some of the most important characteristics of the new art. At the same time I will try to show why formal criticism, such as that practiced by Roger Fry or Mr. Greenberg, is better able to throw light upon the new art than any other approach. To do this, I will have to consider more than once the development over the past hundred years of what Mr. Greenberg calls “modernist” painting, because the work of the artists mentioned above represents, in an important sense, the extension in this country of a kind of painting that began in France with the work of Édouard Manet. Sculpture is, to a certain extent, another story, and for reasons of space and simplicity I will not consider it here.

Roughly speaking, the history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality—or of reality from the power of painting to represent it—in favor of an increasing preoccupation with problems intrinsic to painting itself. One may deplore, if one chooses, the decision of critics such as Mr. Fry and Mr. Greenberg to concentrate their attention upon the formal characteristics of the works they discuss; but no one can doubt that the painters whose work they most esteem on formal grounds—Manet, the Impressionists, Seurat, Cézanne, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Léger—are among the finest painters of the past hundred years. This is not to imply that only the formal aspect of their paintings is worthy of interest. On the contrary, because recognizable objects, persons and

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places are never entirely expunged from their canvases, contextual criticism can add significantly to our understanding by investigating the role these play in their art. But contextual criticism has shown itself to be unable to make convincing discriminations of value among the works of a particular artist; and in this century it often happens that those paintings that are most full of explicit human content can be faulted on formal grounds—Picasso's "*Guernica*" is the most conspicuous example—in comparison with others virtually devoid of such content.

It is worth adding that there is nothing binding in the value judgments of formal criticism. All judgments of value begin in experience, or ought to, and if someone does not feel that Manet's "*Déjeuner sur l'herbe*," Matisse's "*La Leçon de Piano*" or Pollock's "*Autumn Rhythm*" are fine paintings, there is nothing in the arguments of formal criticism that will force him to feel it. On the other hand, one's experiences of works of art are always informed by what one has come to understand about them; and it is the special burden of the formal critic both to objectify his intuitions with all the intellectual rigor at his command, and to be on his guard against enlisting a formalist rhetoric in the defense of merely private enthusiasms.

It is also imperative that the formal critic bear in mind at all times that the objectivity he aspires toward can be no more than relative. But his detractors would do well to bear in mind themselves that his aspirations toward objectivity are given force and relevance by the tendency of the most important current in painting since Manet to concern itself increasingly and with growing self-awareness with formal problems and issues. When Mr. Hilton Kramer, writing in *Arts Magazine* (October, 1962) the most intelligent and serious review of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* that I have seen, complains that:

In Mr. Greenberg's criticism, the impersonal process of history appears in the guise of an inner artistic logic, which has its own immutable laws of development and to which works of art must conform if they are not to end up on the

historical ash heap. This inner artistic logic is purely a matter of the relations that obtain among abstract forms arranged in a decorative pattern. . . .

it is not entirely clear whether he is objecting more to a style of argument or to the modernist painting that Mr. Greenberg admires. In any case, his characterization of the former seems to me mistaken at several crucial points.

Nowhere in *Art and Culture* does its author appear to have forgotten that history, works of art, and essays in art criticism are all made by men, who live at a particular moment in history and whose perceptions and values are, therefore, no more than relative. There is, in a sense, "an inner artistic logic" in Mr. Greenberg's view of the history of modernist painting in France and America; but it is a "logic" that has come about as the result of decisions made by individual artists to engage with formal problems thrown up by the art of the recent past—decisions and formal problems that Mr. Greenberg has done more than any other critic to elucidate. Moreover, the element of internal "logic" in the development of modernist painting can be perceived only in retrospect, and I can think of no passage in *Art and Culture* that so much as hints at the existence of "immutable laws" that govern its unfolding. If a critic thought such laws existed, he would surely use them to predict what the modernist art of the future is going to look like. But there are no predictions in Mr. Greenberg's book, only repeated attempts—the most successful of which are exemplary—to objectify his experience of painting and sculpture in terms that derive from these media alone.

Elsewhere in his review Mr. Kramer maintains that Mr. Greenberg has employed "a principle of historical development drawn from Marx" to defend "a point of view which is completely hostage to the New York School." My own impression is rather that, starting from his experience of the works of Pollock, deKooning, Newman and others, Mr. Greenberg has come increasingly to perceive their relation to the modernist painting that pre-

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ceded them. But I think there is an insight in Mr. Kramer's reference to Marx which deserves some discussion.

Starting with Heinrich Wölfflin, critics of style have tended to rely on a fundamentally Hegelian conception of art history, in which styles are described as succeeding one another in accord with an internal dynamic or dialectic, rather than in response to social, economic and political developments in society at large. One of the stock objections, in fact, to exclusively stylistic or formal criticism of the art of the past—for example, of the High Renaissance—is that it fails to deal with the influence of nonartistic factors upon the art of the time, and as a result is unable both to elucidate the full meaning of individual works and to put forward a convincing account of stylistic change. Such an objection, however, derives the real but limited validity it possesses from the fact that painting and sculpture during the Renaissance were deeply involved, regarding patronage and iconography, with both the Church and State. But by the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, advanced artists were being forced to survive on virtually no patronage or sales whatever, and it was probably inevitable that, having been abandoned by society, their imagery became more and more personal and their art more and more concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself.

All this has, of course, been recounted before. But what has not been sufficiently recognized is that in the face of these developments the same objections that are effective when directed against exclusively formal criticism of Italian High Renaissance painting lose almost all their force and relevance. In comparison with what may be said in precise detail about the relations between High Renaissance art and the Church and State, only the most general statements—such as this one—may be made about the relation between modernist painting and modern society. In a sense, modernist art in this century finished what society in the nineteenth began: the alienation of the artist from the general preoccupations of the culture in which he

is embedded, and the prizing loose of art itself from the concerns, aims and ideals of that culture. With the achievements of Cubism in the first and second decades of this century, if not before, painting and sculpture became free to pursue concerns intrinsic to their respective media. Stylistic change within modernist art can now be adequately accounted for by the decisions of individual artists to engage with particular formal problems thrown up by the art of the recent past; the fundamentally Hegelian conception of art history that is at work in the writings of Wölfflin and Greenberg, whatever its limitations may be when applied to the art of the past, corresponds remarkably well with the actual development of modernism in the visual arts, painting especially.

I am arguing, then, that something like a dialectic of modernism has in fact been at work in the visual arts, painting more than sculpture, for roughly a century now; and by dialectic I mean what is essential in Hegel's conception of historical progression, as expounded in this century by the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs in his great work, *History and Class Consciousness*, and by the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty in numerous books and essays. More than anything else, the dialectic in the hands of these men is an ideal of action as radical criticism founded upon as objective an understanding of one's present situation as one is able to achieve. There is nothing in the least teleological about such an ideal: it does not aim toward a predetermined end, unless its complete incarnation in action can be called an end. But such an incarnation would mean the establishing of a condition of perpetual revolution, perpetual radical criticism of the existing state of affairs.

It is no wonder this ideal could not be achieved in the realm of politics; but it seems to me that the entire development of modernist painting has been toward a state of affairs that could be described in these terms. This development has not been toward any particular style of painting, although at any moment—including the present one—one particular kind of painting

is more advanced, more radical in its criticisms and will prove more fecund in its results than any other kind. The chief function of the dialectic of modernism in the visual arts has been to provide a principle by which painting can change, transform and renew itself, and by which it is enabled to perpetuate virtually intact, and sometimes even enriched, through each epoch of self-renewal, those of its traditional values that do not pertain directly to illustration and representation. Thus modernist painting preserves what it can of its own history, not as an act of piety toward the past but as a source of value in the present and future.

For this reason it is especially ironic that modernist art is often described as nihilistic and its artists characterized as irresponsible charlatans. In fact, the strains under which they work are enormous, and it is no wonder that, in one way or another, many of the finest modernist painters have cracked up under them. This tendency toward breakdown has been intensified in the past twenty years by the quickening that has taken place in the rate of self-transformation within modernism itself—a quickening that, in turn, has been the result of a general increase in formal and historical self-awareness on the part of modernist artists. The work of such painters as Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella not only arises out of their personal interpretations of the particular situations in which advanced painting found itself at crucial moments in their respective developments; their work also looks to present and future developments in modernist painting to provide what will be either its justification or a demonstration of its irrelevance. "History, according to Hegel, is the maturation of a future in the present, not the sacrifice of the present to an unknown future, and the rule of action according to him is not to be effective at any price, but above all to be fecund," Merleau-Ponty has written (the translation is mine). In exactly this sense, the ultimate criterion of the legitimacy of a putative advance in modernist painting is its fecundity.

But if one seeks to apply this formulation to the art of the recent past, one must

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bear in mind that the finest contemporary painting—the work of Noland, Olitski and Stella, among others—testifies to the fecundity not only of the art of Barnett Newman around 1950, but to that of Abstract Expressionism, and that this is the case because of, not in spite of, the fact that Newman's art amounts to the most radical criticism imaginable of the latter.

One upshot of the foregoing is that modernism in the visual arts has gone a long way toward effacing the traditional distinction between problems in morals and problems in art formulated by Professor Stuart Hampshire in his essay "Logic and Appreciation" as follows: "A work of art is gratuitous. It is not *essentially* the answer to a question or the solution to a presented problem." Whereas "action in response to any moral problem is not gratuitous; it is imposed; that there should be some response is absolutely necessary. One cannot pass by a situation; one must pass *through* it in one way or another."

Professor Hampshire's distinction holds good, I think, for all art except the kind I have been trying in this essay to define. Once a painter who accepts the basic premises of modernism becomes aware of a particular problem thrown up by the art of the recent past, his action is no longer gratuitous, but imposed. He may be mistaken in his assessment of the situation. But as long as he believes such a problem exists and is important, he is confronted by a situation he cannot pass by and that, in some way or other, he must pass through; and the result of this forced passage will be his art.

This means that while modernist painting itself has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure and complexity of moral experience, that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness.

In this sense, the formal critic of modernist painting is also a moral critic, not because all art is at bottom a criticism of life, but because modernist painting is at least a criticism of itself. And because this is so, criticism that shares the basic premises of modernist painting can play a role in its development only somewhat less important than that of new paintings themselves. Not only ought the formal critic to expound the significance of new painting that seems to him genuinely exploratory, and to distinguish between such painting and work that seems merely to exploit the formal innovations of prior modernists, but in discussing the work of painters he admires, he can point out flaws in putative solutions to particular formal problems; he is even justified in calling the attention of modernist painters to formal issues that, in his opinion, demand to be grappled with. It may be argued that this is an intolerably arrogant conception of the critic's job of work, and perhaps it is. But it has the virtue of forcing the critic who takes it up to run the same risks as the artist whose work he criticizes. In view of this last point it is not surprising that so few critics have chosen to assume its burdens.

