Modernism

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There are few terms upon which the weight of implication, of innuendo, and of aspiration bears down so heavily as it now does upon modernism. Recent interest in the idea of postmodernism has done nothing to lighten this load. On the contrary. The more it has seemed desirable or necessary to articulate a change of sensibility or of epoch—to define a postmodern condition—the more urgent it has become to identify just what it is that we are supposed to have outgrown or to have seen around or through. Fully to inquire into the meaning of modernism would be to do much more than to gloss a critical term. It would be to explore the etiology of a present historical situation and of its attendant forms of self-consciousness in the West.

It is a problem for any broadly conceived inquiry into the meaning of "modernism" that the term acquires a different scope and penetration in each different academic discipline. The inception of modernism in music is typically located at the close of the nineteenth century, while to talk of modernism in English literature is to focus upon a relatively limited if highly influential body of work produced in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the history of art, on the other hand, the student of modernism can expect to run a gamut from the French painting of the 1860s to the American art of a century later and may even be directed as far back as the later eighteenth century.

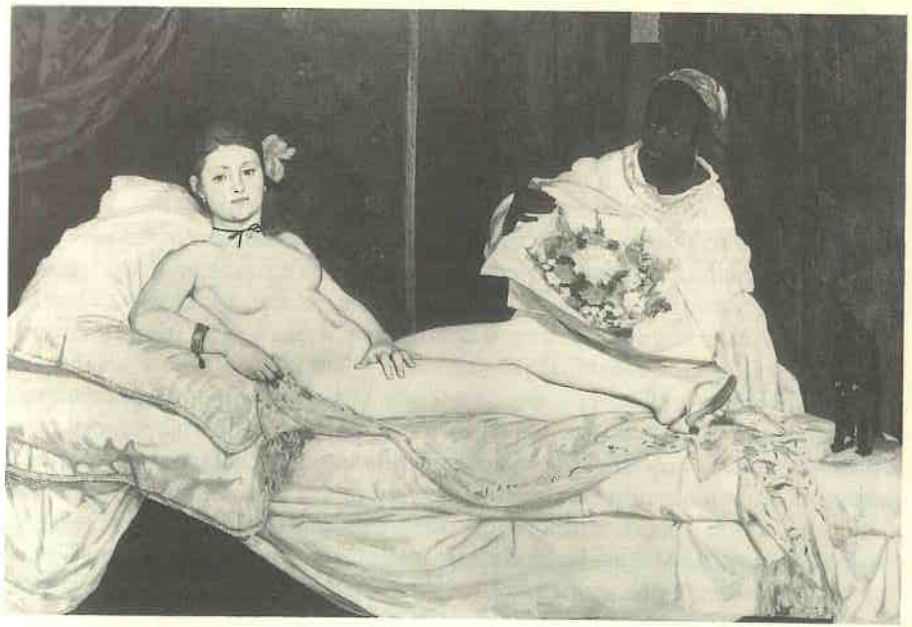
There are common features to each case, however. Alike in all the arts, modernism is at some point grounded in the intentional rejection of classical precedent and classical style. Modernism is always and everywhere relative to some state of affairs conceived of as both antique and unchanging. However else its parameters may be established, "modern history" is defined as the history of a period including the present but excluding the Greek and Roman epochs. "Modern languages" are those languages which are not ancient languages but which are still adaptable and transformable for the purposes of expression. To conceive the need for a modern art is to experience one's inherited resources of expression as if they were the forms of an ancient language, such that one's would-be spontaneous utterances are required to conform to established patterns of rhetoric. Loosely conceived as meaning a commitment to the modern, "modernism" thus serves to declare an interest in the revision or renewal of a language and a curriculum.

Within this broad area of definition, the concept of modernism has tended to function in the discourses of art history in three different ways, according to three different though interdependent forms of usage. Since these usages are

rarely explicitly distinguished, there is always a strong possibility of confusion in art-historical discussions of modernism. The first part of this text will therefore be devoted to an attempt to distinguish these different usages and to connect them to the respective interests they tend to represent. Once these differences are acknowledged it may be possible to reestablish some common ground.

First, then, and most widely, modernism is used to refer to the distinguishing characteristics of Western culture from the mid-nineteenth century until at least the mid-twentieth: a culture in which processes of industrialization and urbanization are conceived of as the principal mechanisms of transformation in human experience. At the commencement of his influential essay "The Metropolis and Modern Life," published in 1902–03, Georg Simmel wrote, "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces" (Simmel 1902–03, 130). In this form modernism is regarded both as a condition consequent upon certain broad economic, technological, and political tendencies and as a set of attitudes towards those tendencies. This first sense of modernism may thus be said to have both a passive and an active aspect. Under the former it refers to that cluster of social and psychological conditions which modernization accomplishes or imposes, for good or ill. Under the latter it refers to the positive inclination to "modernize." As thus understood, modernism may be vividly exemplified through the stylistic and technical properties of works of art, but it will also be recognizable in certain social forms and practices and in the determining priorities of certain institutions, such as museums, or universities, or financial markets.

In our first sense, then, "modernism" is the substantive form of the adjective "modern," while the condition it denotes is virtually synonymous with the experience of modernity. When Charles Baudelaire issued his call for a "painting of modern life," what he was asking was that painters should seek to capture this experience by isolating the distinctive appearances of the age: "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (Baudelaire 1863, 12; see also Baudelaire 1846). To speak in this sense of the modernism of a work of art is to refer to its engagement with preoccupations and spectacles specific to the age. Thus Manet's *Olympia* of 1863 (Plate 11.1) might count as a work endowed with modernism by virtue of the figurative terms in which it reworks the classical precedent it invokes: the type of the reclining Venus as painted by Giorgione and Titian. It is of particular relevance in this connection that Manet's staging of his picture serves to place the nude woman in the contingent situation of a prostitute or, more precisely, that it serves to place the spectator in the imaginary position of a prostitute's client. By this means, we might say, the painting brings home a kind of truth about the meaning of love in a modern world—a world in which sooner or later everything is brought to the marketplace to have its value estab-



11.1 Edouard Manet, *Olympia,* 1963. Musée Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris.

lished and to become a commodity. In the language of modernism the classical "goddess of love" thus becomes translated into "a prostitute."

The topicality of this image is easily enough established. In Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," for instance, a section on "Women and Prostitutes" follows the section on "Modernity." This highly influential essay was first published at the close of the year in which *Olympia* was painted. Historical research will further confirm that the prevalence of prostitution in the Paris of the 1860s was a matter not only of fascination in artistic circles but also of concern to the police and to the civil authorities. In this first sense of modernism, then, Manet's painting qualifies on the basis of its demonstrable relevance to the wider issues of contemporary social life.

The concept of modernism is also used in a more specialized sense, however, not to evoke the whole field of modern social existence but to distinguish a supposedly dominant tendency in modern culture. To employ the concept of modernism in this second sense is to convey an evaluative judgment concerning those aspects of culture which are found to be "live" or "critical." Modernism in this second sense refers specifically to the modern tradition in high art and to the grounds on which a truly modern art may be distinguished not only from classical, academic, and conservative types of art but also, crucially, from

the forms of popular and mass culture. The most influential spokesman for this view of modernism was the American critic Clement Greenberg. In his first major essay, published in 1939, Greenberg distinguished between the art of the avant-garde and "kitsch," by which term he derogated the synthetic products alike of the modern academy and of urbanized mass culture. The role of the avant-garde, he believed, was "to keep culture moving." Kitsch, on the other hand, was "the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times" (Greenberg 1939, 8–12).

It should be clear that where the impetus of modernism is thus associated with the practices of the avant-garde, the principal function of any generalization across different cultural forms and social practices must be to provide a background of *contrasts*. The point becomes clearer the more the concept of modernism is distinguished from its partial synonym, modernity. Modernity is a condition that the work of art both distills from and shares with the encompassing culture, which must include what Greenberg called kitsch. In its second form of usage, on the other hand, "modernism" implies a property that must be principally internal to the practice or medium in question. As thus understood, modernism is representative of the broad experience of modernity only insofar as that experience may have to be confronted in the continuing pursuit of *aesthetic* standards set by the art of the past.

These standards are defined by human capacities and they therefore remain as constant as those capacities themselves. The conditions of attaining them are continually changing, however, both because history *entails* change and because what has been once made cannot be made again as a vehicle for the same values. The achievement of modernism in art is thus seen as involving both a requirement of continuity and a crucial requirement of originality with regard to other—and specifically recent—art. According to the later suggestions of Greenberg, what specifically establishes the modernism of a discipline or a medium is not that it reveals an engagement with the representative concerns of the age, but rather that its development is governed by *self*-critical procedures addressed to the medium itself. "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (Greenberg 1960, 85). As thus understood, what modernism stands for is the critical achievement of an aesthetic standard *within* a given medium and *in face of* (though emphatically *not* in disregard of) the pervasive condition of modernity. The adjectival form of this "modernism" is not "modern" but "modernist." Thus, what Greenberg called kitsch may be modern, but insofar as it is defined as unself-critical and unoriginal, it cannot qualify as modernist.

According to this second usage, then, to label a modern form of art as modern*ist* is to stress both its intentional and self-critical preoccupation with the demands of a specific medium, and its originality with regard to the prece-

dents that medium avails. Thus for Greenberg, Manet's paintings "became the first Modernist ones" not primarily by virtue of their picturing of circumstances redolent of modern life, but "by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted" (Greenberg 1960, 86). According to Greenberg's scheme, "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art" (87). Insofar as flatness is thus identified as painting's unique "area of competence," the frank acknowledgment of surface becomes the condition to which the self-critical modernist painting must tend. Viewed from within this framework of ideas, the significant encounter staged by Manet's *Olympia* is not the psychologically or sociologically topical confrontation between prostitute and client but the technically critical relationship between pictorial illusion and decorated surface. Where the aesthetic tuning of this latter relationship is seen as the crucial condition of the painting's individuality, the real-life scenario to which that painting makes reference must be relegated to the status of a mere starting point or pretext. Within this frame of reference it will not be appropriate to ask whether modernism's testimony to the historical character of the epoch is of an active or a passive nature. Rather, it is assumed that the real testimony a painting such as *Olympia* has to offer is the incidental but inescapable product of an engagement with problems which are primarily aesthetic. That testimony is the more reliable for being involuntary, and in that sense disinterested.

In this second sense of modernism it will clearly be inappropriate to speak in one and the same breath of a modernist artwork and a modernist institution. There is no reason to assume that the practices and priorities which govern the conduct of a social engagement or the running of a museum will be consonant with those which determine the production of a painting. Nor is there reason to believe that the relative modernism of an institution can be an issue *in the same sense* that it may be where the critical development of a painting is at stake. Indeed, for those subscribing to the second sense of modernism, there is every reason to assume the contrary. Michael Fried wrote in 1965,

> While modernist painting 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 (Fried 1965, 773).

The apparent implication of Fried's thesis is that it is *only* by divorcing itself from the "concerns of society" that modernist painting has been able to draw upon the creative dialectic by which its aesthetic or ethical virtue is sustained.

In its second sense, then, the term "modernism" is used to refer to a supposed tendency in art in which a special, "aesthetic" form of virtue and integrity is pursued at the apparent expense of social-historical topicality or relevance.

According to this usage, it is commitment to the priority of aesthetic issues that primarily qualifies modernist art as the high art of the age. In turn, what qualifies the artist is a subjection to the demands of the medium, which has become indistinguishable from the demand of truth to oneself.

And so to the last of our usages. This third sense of "modernism" is distinguished from the second not so much by a difference in field of reference as by a distancing from the terms in which that field is represented. This distancing might be thought of as the equivalent of a shift from *oratio recta* to *oratio obliqua*. In this last sense "modernism" stands not for the artistic tendency it designates under the second usage, but rather for the usage itself and for a tendency in criticism which this usage is thought to typify. A Modernist, in this sense, is seen not primarily as a kind of artist, but rather as a critic whose judgments reflect a specific set of ideas and beliefs about art and its development. (From this point on, this third sense of "modernism" will be capitalized in order to preserve its distinctness from the first and second usages.) Thus understood, a Modernist critical tradition emerged in France in the later nineteenth century, to be first codified in the writings of Maurice Denis, was developed in England in the first three decades of the twentieth century, principally by Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and R. H. Wilenski, and was brought to its paradigmatic form in America between the end of the 1930s and the end of the 1960s, notably in the work of Clement Greenberg and subsequently of Michael Fried. (In fact, as implied earlier, there is now a gathering tendency to trace the origins of Modernist theories back before the beginning of the nineteenth century. The identification of Modernism with Greenberg's writing remains so firmly established in the sphere of art, however, that to talk of a tradition of Modernist art criticism is in effect to consider the antecedents of Greenbergian theory as these may be established with benefit of hindsight.)

It should be clear that to distinguish this third usage of "modernism" from the second—or to distinguish between modernism (conceived as an artistic tendency) and Modernism (conceived as a critical tradition)—is effectively to stand outside the framework of Modernist criticism itself. For Greenberg and the early Fried, modernist painting and modernist sculpture were the forms of art, at once self-consciously modern and qualitatively significant, which their criticism was intended to pick out. What *they* meant by modernism was the property or tendency they saw as common to the works thus isolated—works by Manet, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Pollock, Louis, Noland, Olitski—*not* the procedures by which their own singling out was done.

We have seen that Greenberg's sense of modernism depends upon the possibility of distinguishing an authentic, avant-garde, modernist art from an inauthentic, "kitsch" popular culture. From Greenberg's point of view these distinctions were intrinsically significant. From the perspective of broader cultural studies, however, no such distinction could be disinterested. It becomes clear that the ground on which distance is established from the valuations of the

Modernist more or less coincides with the first position regarding the meaning of modernism; with the view, that is to say, that the important distinguishing characteristic of a modern art is to be found—or ought to be found—in its manifest coincidence with the social and psychological condition of modernity. For the advocates of cultural studies—now certainly in the majority among students of the modern in art—there can be only one good reason to single out a modern *art* as "modernist"; that is when it is seen as subservient in practice to a Modernist theory already formulated in criticism or art history and when this subservience is regarded as a *limit* on its modernity. As regards such recent and current art as they approve, non-Modernists may well find the term "modern" sufficient. Indeed, it will be an *advantage* of this term that it enables and encourages theory to range over all forms of culture, high and "popular" alike.

An example will help to clarify the point. In discussing the "modernist art" of the 1960s, both Greenberg and Fried made various forms of reference to the work of the painters Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland and of the sculptor Anthony Caro. What these critics intended to convey by such references was that the work in question was both original vis-à-vis the modern traditions of painting and sculpture respectively and of critical significance vis-à-vis the "mere novelties" of consumer culture and popular art. But in the utterance of those to whom Greenberg and Fried appeared as ideologists of Modernism, the labeling of Olitski or Noland or Caro as a Modernist was a means to convey a quite different valuation. For the non-Modernist, the term tended to carry the pejorative implication that the artist's work was submissive to a form of critical prescription, and was thus unoriginal. On the one hand this submission was seen as preventing the work in question from being fully engaged with the modern in all its aspects. On the other the supportive criticism was seen as masking the work's actual implication in forms of privileged consumership.

Controversy over the meaning of modernism can now be seen as having been central to modern debate about the meaning and value of art and culture. The relevant issues have conventionally been polarized along the following lines. Should we measure all forms of cultural production alike according to what we might summarily call their realism, meaning the extent of their implication in the pressing concerns of human social existence, the adjustment of their technical properties in the light of that implication, and the consequent breadth of their potential constituency? Is art, in the last resort, subject to the same kinds of critical demands as we might apply to any other component of the social fabric? Is *Olympia* to be esteemed for the truths it seems to make palpable—truths about the nature of exploitation and oppression (of one class and gender by another class and gender) and about the forms of hypocrisy and alienation which are required of the respective parties to the resulting exchanges? Or is a preoccupation with such issues in the end distracting from the actual properties of this or any painting, that is, distracting from those properties the painting has as distinct from such properties as may be attributed to the motifs it illustrates? Does the true critical potential of culture lie, as the Modernist would have it, in its autonomy vis-à-vis social and utilitarian considerations and in its pursuit of the aesthetic as an end in itself? Are the forms of *fine* art distinguished by the fact that they enable an unusually concentrated pursuit of this end? Should we aim to judge *Olympia* on its formal properties *as a painting* and thus to set aside whatever emotions may be aroused by the scene it depicts—or, as Greenberg would put it, by its "literature" (see Greenberg 1967, 271–72)?

As implied, the priorities of "realism" and Modernism are here presented so as to appear more clearly polarized than they tend to be in practice. I mean to make amends in due course. We should first acknowledge, however, that Modernism has indeed been widely represented as a critical tendency incompatible with realism—and with some apparent justice. In all phases of its development Modernist theory has rested upon three crucial assumptions. The first is that nothing about art matters so much as its aesthetic merit. In Greenberg's words, "You cannot legitimately want or hope for anything from art except quality" (Greenberg 1967, 267). The second is that for the purposes of criticism the important historical development is the one that connects works of the highest aesthetic merit. As already suggested, the true Modernist is interested in the whole "visual culture" only as the background against which exceptional works may be distinguished. Greenberg again: "Art has its history as a sheer phenomenon, and it also has its history as quality" (267). The third is that where aesthetic judgments appear to be in conflict with moral judgments, with political commitments, or with the concerns of society, what should be examined first is not the aesthetic judgment, which the Modernist considers involuntary and thus not open to revision (265), but the grounds of the moral judgment or the political commitment, or the relevance of the social concerns. In the words of the English Modernist Clive Bell, "when you treat a picture as a work of art, you have . . . assigned it to a class of objects so powerful and direct as means to spiritual exaltation that all minor merits are inconsiderable. Paradoxical as it may seem, the only relevant qualities in a work of art, judged as art, are artistic qualities" (Bell [1914] 1987, 117). This issue of relevance is crucial to Modernist concepts of the autonomy of aesthetic value. In Greenberg's view moralizing judgment is typically rooted in response to the illustrative content of the work of art and is therefore irrelevant to the quality of the work's aesthetic effect, *unless,* that is, it can be shown just how it is that that effect becomes "impregnated" by the illustrative content (Greenberg 1967, 271).

There are various questions which these assumptions have seemed automatically to invite. How are we to assure ourselves that what the Modernist critic represents as aesthetic merit is actually an objective and separable property of the work of art? Or to put it another way, why should we accept the view

that judgments of taste are involuntary and unsubjective and thus categorically distinct from mere assertions of preference and self-interest? What if it transpired that the supposed aesthetic properties were actually the reflections of the critic's own psychological disposition and self-interest? What if the Modernist's requirement of relevance to the quality of effect were a mere formalism—a methodological device serving to protect works of art, and judgments about them, from inquiry into the historical and ethical materials of which these works and those judgments may actually have been constituted? Whose interests are likely to be best served by maintaining high art as a realm insulated against troubling social considerations? It is not hard to see where this line of questioning might be taken. Nor is it hard to understand how it has come about that, while "modernism" remains available as a term of reference to Western culture during the course of a specific (possibly elapsed) historical period, "Modernism" is now often consigned to the company of such terms as "conservatism" or "the ideology of the ruling class" or "business as usual."

It is as well that these different points of view should be identified. As suggested earlier, discussion of the meaning of modernism is liable to be confused and confusing so long as it remains unclear what kinds of critical programs and positions are variously at stake. Now that the grounds of opposition have been described, however—perhaps, for the sake of argument, slightly exaggerated—we can finally attempt to reestablish some common ground. The aim is twofold: to sketch out a framework of practical observations upon which an understanding of modernism may be allowed to expand, and to see whether certain of the procedures and priorities of Modernism may not after all be rendered compatible with "realist" interests. With this end in view we return to the much-cited example of Manet's *Olympia*.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that what is meant in talking of the modernism of *Olympia* is not adequately substantiated either by reference to the topicality or realism of its theme, *or* by reference to the self-critical frankness of its formal and decorative organization. Rather what is at issue is the position in which the painting places its spectator. The notion of a hypothetical position here functions to bring together in the experience of the spectator two aspects which Modernist criticism has tended to prize apart: the painting's topical pictorial aspect, or its "modernity," and its self-critical formal aspect, or its "modernism." Thus what I mean by "position" is the same imaginary state that is defined for the spectator not only by the painting's pictorial theme (when it has one) ***but also*** by its formal and decorative properties. What I mean by "spectator" is someone who is not only competent to identify the pictorial theme (when there is one), and not only disposed to view the painting's formal and decorative properties as significant of some human intention, but also disposed to exert his or her critical and imaginative faculties in pursuit of the intention in question. This spectator is a person who works.

As regards the pictorial theme of *Olympia,* we have already suggested that

this functions so as to induce the spectator into the imaginary role of the client. Richard Wollheim has suggested that there are paintings by Manet which include a "spectator in the picture" as part of their content (Wollheim 1987, 101–85 passim). This is not actually a person represented *in* the picture but someone whose experience or "repertoire" is supposed to be represented *by* it, as if he or she were standing in front of the scene in reality and experiencing it *as the painting shows it*. In proposing that *Olympia* has a "spectator in the picture" we would effectively be saying that no experience of the painting can be adequate—whether it be the experience of a male or of a female spectator—unless it involves some imaginary occupation of the role of the client as the picture presupposes him.

The making of such a requirement on the painting's behalf would certainly be consistent with a claim regarding its realism. But we are also allowing it to be crucial to the effect of the painting that it is seen *as a painting*. This is to say that however absorbing the staging of the picture may be, the self-consciousness of the actual spectator—both his or her reflective critical ability and his or her bodily self-awareness—is never entirely lost before the decorated surface of the canvas. If we can talk of a position established by the painting, then, it must be one in which the spectator's occupation of the imaginary role of client can be made to *coincide* with his or her critical perception of the actual painted surface. This is not as bizarre a prospect as it may at first seem. It is an identifying condition of the spectator in the picture that "he can see everything that the picture represents and he can see it as the picture represents it" (Wollheim 1987, 102). But everything which the painting represents is also included in what the actual spectator sees. Wollheim suggests that the frank activity on the surface of Manet's paintings serves to recall the actual spectator from the imaginary world of the spectator in the picture to the experience of painting's "two-foldness" (168): the sense of its surface as at one and the same time literally marked and containing an illusion, which Wollheim sees as a condition necessary to representation (21). We might go further, however. As we attend to the literal nature of the surface, what are we to make of our imaginary identification with the position of the client? If we follow Greenberg and play the Modernist, as this identification becomes a part of the "literary content" of the painting, so it excludes itself from any responsibility for the quality of the painting's effect. The "position" the painting establishes, then, is one in which this identification is both included and, as it were, superseded through a process of aesthetic exertion. It is as if, in fully engaging with the surface of the painting, we were empowered to look past or through the spectator in the picture and to identify our looking with that which looks back: not only to admit the presence of the literal decorated surface, but simultaneously to occupy that imaginary position from which the woman lying on the bed looks out.

The moral seems to be that strictures on relevance are not necessarily re-

stricting on inquiry into works of art. They may rather function as forms of self-critical injunction, serving engaged spectators to distinguish the grounds of their interests and assumptions from the realistic materials of which a given work is composed. In the case of a painting, these last will include both its topical connections with the world and its literal decorated surface. In the case of *Olympia,* it is at the point at which the *formal and practical* properties of the painting are allowed most fully to determine our experience that we are perhaps closest to seeing what it is that the painting must indeed have been made of. It is as if we (including the female we) had to pass *through* the route of what the client is defined as seeing—self-critically to match that seeing against a more assiduous form of attention in which the literal surface makes its presence felt—before we can come to see what it is that the surface actually makes visible.

It would be unduly sentimental to associate this "making visible" with the self-consciousness of the represented woman. There can be only one consciousness at work in the encounter between painting and spectator. What is thought and felt is what is thought and felt by this spectator alone. But there may nevertheless be a quite specific form of thinking and feeling for which the antecedent consciousness of the spectator is not a sufficient condition and for which the painting is the *necessary occasion*. What we can say is that the painter of *Olympia* has so marshalled and organized his practical and figurative materials that a quite specific condition or moment of self-consciousness is represented in the imagination of the sufficiently engaged spectator: a spectator, that is to say, who will see everything the painting shows *and nothing that it does not*.

The claim, then, is that it is crucial to the effect in question that it be dependent *both* upon the modernity of the painting's figurative scenario, rooted as this is in a specific form of social and psychological context, *and* upon the modernism of those formal properties which are independent of that scenario's particularities: the relative explicitness of the facture and the consequent stressing of the picture plane, the relative flatness of the pictorial space, the tendency for the literal framing edge to be acknowledged as a significant compositional element or limit, and so on. This point will become immediately clearer if *Olympia* is compared—as it was at the time of its first exhibition in 1865—to the kind of more standard Salon composition in which a recognizably "classicized" Venus is located in a virtually limitless illusionistic space, on the other side of an entirely transparent picture plane. Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* won the official laurels in the Salon of 1865 and has furnished grounds of contrast to Manet's work ever since. In the deep space of (neoclassical and thus unmodern) fantasy such as this the represented woman is left undistinguished by the signifiers of class, which is to say she is available to serve as an ideal. In this world there are neither prohibitions nor prices. The space of Manet's painting, on the other hand, is the space of (modern) imagination. I take imagination to be a *realistic* faculty, and thus to be radically distinct from fantasy—albeit it is the persistent tendency of modern culture to conflate fantasy and imagination.

Olympia's world, that is to say, is a world in which actions have imaginable consequences and pleasures are paid for, in which flesh bruises and others also have minds.

In 1965 Michael Fried wrote of Manet as "the first painter for whom consciousness itself is the great subject of his art" (Fried 1965, 774), thus revising the terms in which Greenberg had five years earlier set Manet at the commencement of modernist painting's trajectory. I do not think it matters whether or not it is Manet's consciousness that we see *Olympia* as representing: whether, for example, we conceive of what we "see" in looking past the client as the painter's empathetic projection into the *woman's* role. The point is that the form of attention the painting both demands and defines is one that results in a form of critical consciousness: a responsive awareness not only of the painting as object, but of the rich but determinate range of metaphorical meanings the surface of that object, in all its plenitude and its particularity, is enabled to sustain; a self-consciousness awareness, that is to say, of that which is other.

I propose that it is precisely in the painting's capacity thus to determine the attention of the spectator that both its realism *and* its modernism may be said to lie. And I do not believe that it would be particularly easy or helpful, at this juncture, to distinguish just which sense of modernism is at stake. What we can say is that it is just this possibility—the possibility that, however each and every spectator actually responds to the given work of art, insofar as any response is determined by the work of art, it is critically determined *in exactly the same way for each person*—that allows the Modernist to conceive of taste as possibly objective. For if the picture can indeed be said to be the final arbiter of that which it is relevant to say of it, then we will be availed of a powerful control on mere expressions of self-interest. Of course to propose that the work of art is the final arbiter of our relevant experience is to talk of how "experience" may be sensibly conceived for the purposes of criticism. It is emphatically not to attribute to works of art a mysterious agency which would allow them somehow to control interpretations. Nor is it to claim that all or any *accounts* of the experience of a given work of art must converge on a single pattern isomorphous with it. Why should we expect such convergence to be a tendency of our speakings and writings about art?

It will not be equally true of all works of art that they succeed in determining what it is relevant to say of them. Indeed, the degree of their success in doing so may be significant of other forms of relative success or failure. I assume that a painting which achieves an identification of realism with modernism will have earned its capacity to determine the spectator's attention. To put the matter in the form of a generalization, we might say that any and all art is impaired to the extent that, when it is considered as intentional under some description, modernism and realism respectively can with justice be predicated of different and separable aspects and properties. (The generalization serves to make the point that the "unity" of a composition is far from being a simply technical

issue.) A painting which fails or evades the challenge to identify realism with modernism may well find itself left without significant remainder in the face of *supervening* critical interests. To talk of conservative realism or of antirealist modernism is to conjure up forms of art capable of holding the spectator's attention only when critical and imaginative faculties are for one reason or another subjected or suspended.

In this essay much has been made to hang upon a painting now well over a century old. What of subsequent developments? I have meant to suggest that the supposed modernist "orientation to flatness" and the matching Modernist stricture on relevance may alike be interpreted as means to address the realistic conditions of self-consciousness in the modern spectator. Another way to put this point would be to say that the *continuing* function of a modernist culture—an "avant-garde" culture, if we borrow Greenberg's distinction—is to confront the occasions of fantasy and distraction with the requirements of imagination and critical self-awareness. Pictorial scenarios such as *Olympia*'s are *among* the means by which the modernist work of art may summon up the inauthentic modes of experience—the dead areas of culture—that it means critically to diagnose and to distance. But, as Greenberg and subsequently Fried were concerned to make clear, however engaging such scenarios may seem to be—however vividly they evoke a history and a sociology—they are not *necessary* to the successful undertaking of the modernist critical task. This was the crucial lesson of the abstract art of the early twentieth century. Later painters such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman showed that a field of color could be enough, so long as it was made the occasion of some dialectical play between the literal and the metaphorical. It transpired that all that is required for the achievement of modernism is that the work of art should establish its comparability to some current *mode or style* of the inauthentic (the idealized, the sentimental, the euphemistic in our culture), and that it should be capable of making its own critical distinctness palpable in the experience of the imaginatively engaged spectator. I say "all," but of course this achievement is no easier or less complex in so-called abstract art than it is in figurative work. It follows that there are no reasons in principle why the realism of Rothko's work or Newman's should not be valued as highly as the realism of Manet's. Insofar as they have worked to explain the requirements in question, those labeled as Modernist critics can with justice be viewed as qualified representatives of modernism in art, while insofar as these requirements may still be relevant to the conduct of art, associations of Modernism with conservatism may require some reconsideration. A fortiori, announcements of the demise of modernism or of Modernism may turn out to be self-interested, or premature, or both.

Suggested Readings

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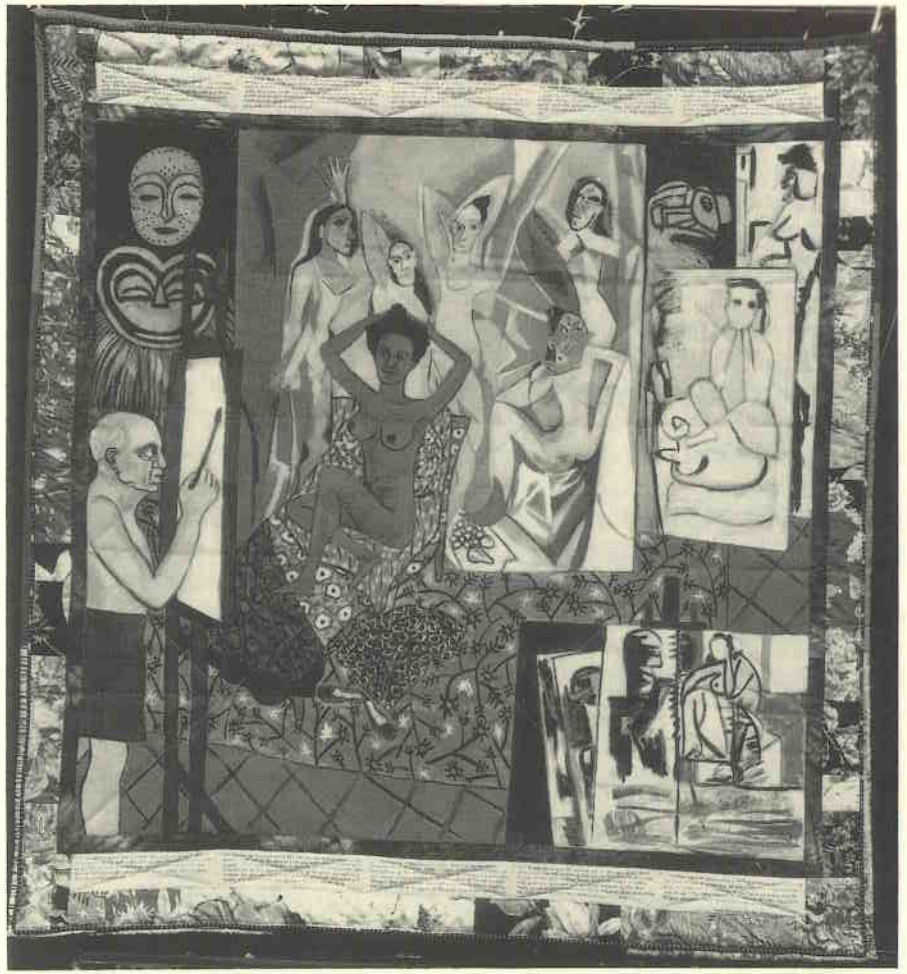
Avant-Garde

Ann Gibson

Faith Ringgold's 1991 *Picasso's Studio* (Plate 12.1), number 7 in her *French Collection* series, exemplifies avant-garde as well as what have been called "anti-avant-garde" (Harvey 1989, 59), "anti-aesthetic" (Foster 1983, xv) or, simply, "postmodern" tendencies. Ringgold's quilt painting displays the intellectual iconoclasm and playfulness usually associated with the anarchic spirit of the avant-garde, but not its characteristic sense of "universal and hysterical negation" (Huyssen 1981, 30; Calinescu 1987, 125, 140). *Picasso's Studio* is self-reflexive: it is *about* the definition and the centrality of the avant-garde in the history of modern art. It thus extends the premises of the avant-garde into the late twentieth century by affirming some of its characteristics while critiquing others. Most useful for this essay, as an allegory of avant-garde production it reuses avant-garde strategies for "anti-avant-garde" ends, and so offers an opportunity to explore both past and present conceptions of the avant-garde.

Picasso's Studio is painted on pieced, quilted, and stuffed fabric. The artist has relegated Picasso nearly to the margin, crowded between a border of decoratively pieced flowered material, overlapping patterns of painted fabric, a bored but alert model, and his famous *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907. At one side of the painting are numerous sketches of the abstracted female figure. Brush poised, Picasso—perhaps the twentieth century's most famous embodiment of the avant-garde—stands before a blank canvas. His model, an imaginary alter ego invented by Ringgold, represents what members of the avant-garde like Picasso were *not:* females of non-European descent who were more often, in Meyer Schapiro's words, art's "object-matter" than its makers (Roth 1992, 8; Schapiro 1957, 38). As an antipatriarchal parody, one that aims to "transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism)" (Foster 1983, ix), it tells us about the avant-garde by "what [it] talk[s] about," that is, through its "*substantive* revision of, rather than [its] apparent *formal* allegiance to, the European avant-garde" (Suleiman 1990, 162, quoting Spivak 1981, 1967).

But art lovers may still feel indignation, on one hand, at seeing Picasso, the epitome of the heroic avant-garde, marginalized in terms of his model and, what's more, in a work whose narrative naturalism he played a part in discrediting. Naturalism was characterized by artists and critics like Baudelaire, Maeterlinck, and Mallarmé as well as later writers such as José Ortega y Gasset as falsely and superficially totalizing because it employed the surface likeness of mimesis, of the copy, instead of exploring the "deeper" similarities available to metaphor. The continuing vitality of this response to naturalistic representation



12.1 Faith Ringgold, *Picasso's Studio,* 1991, The French Collection, part I, no. 7. © Faith Ringgold Inc.

is instructive because it represents as avant-garde an optimistic traditionalism, to which some would deny the title "avant-garde" altogether, calling this aspect of the avant-garde "modernism." Members of the avant-garde who worked in this modernist vein often sought a way to accept the flux of modernity with its ruptures and fragmentations. This is a part of the modernist criteria by which Picasso's abstractions—along with those of Manet, Cézanne, Proust, Torres-García, Pound, Kandinsky, Joyce, Benn, Mondrian, Eliot, Pollock, Stella, and other artists from the Enlightenment until at least the 1960s—remain of critical

interest. They have held out the hope that the disruption caused by modern progress in the arts and sciences will result in the end not only in the control of nature to humanity's benefit, but will also promote universal justice, moral progress, and happiness (Habermas 1981, 9; Huyssen 1981, 26–27; Calinescu 1987, 96–97; Fló 1992).

On the other hand, reactions of dismay to *Picasso's Studio* may also be caused by the absence in it of the "universal and hysterical negation" of that other anarchic and even nihilistic wing of the avant-garde rooted in elements of Dada and surrealism typified in the readymades of Duchamp and Man Ray, and seen in work by others such as Tzara, Brecht, and Warhol (Calinescu 1987, 140–41). However, as Nicos Hadjinicolaou and Andreas Huyssen have pointed out, the 1970s saw a revival of interest in the "*notion of avant-garde*" (Hadjinicolaou 1982, 39; Huyssen 1986, 25). One of the earliest signs of this revival was Robert Venturi's anti-avant-garde manifesto, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). "I prefer 'both-and' to 'either-or,' black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white," he wrote (16). The critical revival that this kind of thinking sparked, in terms of the outlines broadly and effectively suggested by Ringgold, is the springboard of this essay.

Using *Picasso's Studio* as its center locates the vantage point of this discussion firmly in the late twentieth century. In doing so it echoes what is perhaps the major surviving manifestation of the politics of what Peter Bürger has called the "historical avant-garde," evident in the tendency of some contemporary art and criticism "to name an identity and mechanism of oppression that structures it." This tendency, analyzed in an essay by Christopher Reed and demonstrated in the arguments mounted in two panel discussions published in *October* magazine in 1993 and 1994 on "the politics of the signifier," characterizes the current anti-avant-garde's rejection of purity as it extends and focuses earlier postmodernism's noncommittal play of recognizable and often socially significant images (Reed 1994, 281; Foster, Krauss, et al. 1993; Foster, Buchloh, et al. 1994).

In the United States, postmodern estimations of the nature and value of the avant-garde have frequently been funneled back through the conflicting claims of two readily available book-length studies: Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde,* published in Italian in 1962 and in English in 1968 (though conceived in the late 1940s) (Calinescu 1987, 113), and *Theory of the Avant Garde,* an amalgam of Peter Bürger's writings published in German in 1974 and 1979 and brought together in English in 1984. I will discuss their claims with those of some of their contemporaries and then continue, via Ringgold and theoreticians like Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Susan Suleiman, Carol Duncan, Daniel Herwitz, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Shiff, and Andreas Huyssen, to more current estimations of the avant-garde and its projects.

Poggioli and Bürger did agree that the term "avant-garde" was originally used to designate the conjunction of revolutionary sociopolitical tendencies and artistic goals. They saw the avant-garde as had Walter Benjamin, attempting

"to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (Benjamin 1968b, 255), interrupting the sense of continuous development in the arts by its transgressions against anything established as a given. They differed, though, in their estimates of what counts as exemplary avant-garde art and therefore in their descriptions of both its history and its legacy.

For Poggioli, the alliance of what he called "the two avant-gardes," one cultural-artistic and one sociopolitical, survived in France only until about 1880. What is commonly understood as avant-garde art, he wrote, concentrated after the third quarter of the nineteenth century on formal creativity, rejecting conventional habits and incorporating "the cult of novelty and even of the strange" (poet Ezra Pound, Russian formalists such as Victor Shklovsky, and critic Harold Rosenberg have all commented on this aspect of the avant-garde). But Poggioli claimed that his autonomous, cultural-artistic avant-garde did not leave behind its social task when it was no longer specifically critical of society. Unlike Mondrian, whose utopian goals for neoplasticism he saw as "antiseptic" (Poggioli 1968, 203), and also unlike Breton's surrealism, whose insistence on the " 'omnipotence of the dream' " Poggioli believed could produce only a "quasi-mechanical product, a passive reflection" (205), Poggioli held that the most effective avant-gardes reformed society by functioning as cathartic therapy for a language of art, music, and literature that had degenerated through thoughtless and habitual formulas. "It is absolutely indispensable to distinguish the spurious from the genuine avant-gardism which results in art," he wrote. The need for value judgments, he believed, must not be obviated by "nonaesthetic considerations" (164–65). Poggioli is thus allied with Theodor Adorno in his belief that art should be autonomous (i.e., that artworks should "point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life"). For Adorno (as for Poggioli), "every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art." Adorno supported this claim with the observation that apparently apolitical art (he used the examples of Kafka's novels and Beckett's plays) "have an effect by comparison with which officially committed [i.e., politically aligned] works look like pantomime" (Adorno 1962, 317, 314).

Bürger, on the other hand, saw Poggioli's definition of the avant-garde as too elastic. Bürger felt Poggioli, by permitting "avant-garde" autonomy to be identified as far back as the late eighteenth century, allowed the avant-garde to separate itself from "real" life and social issues. He preferred to understand art not as single works produced by individuals but, following Walter Benjamin, as entities within an institutional framework that includes artists, dealers, critics, museums, collectors, etc. (Bürger 1984, 83–92). This framework, he insisted, determines what art is supposed to be and do. Thus for Bürger, the avant-garde cannot be separated from society, but is inescapably implicated in it. For Bürger, the radical shift occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, when aestheticism gave way to a historical avant-garde that attacked art as an institution.

Bürger's historical avant-garde (those instrumental in contesting the deadening effects of art's institutionalization) included Italian futurism and German expressionism to a limited extent, cubist collage, and especially movements of the 1920s, including dadaism, the Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution, and particularly surrealism (109 n. 4). In the radical break that produced this historical avant-garde, he posited, collage and montage techniques were crucial, since they broke not only with the idea that perspective was equivalent to representation, but also with the idea that to be art, a work must be an organic whole. While Bürger contested the validity of autonomous art supported by Adorno and Poggioli, he nevertheless found certain of Adorno's arguments useful. Citing Adorno's caveat that nonorganic structure may offer escape from a system whose preference for the organic has congealed and ossified it, Bürger embraced elements of the concept of allegory advanced by Walter Benjamin, who wrote that the allegorist extracts elements from life or art, isolating them from their function there, and then combines them into a new work of art. Allegory's artificiality offered just the kind of antiorganicism that Bürger saw in the historical avant-garde (68–73, 90–91; Adorno 1984, 242, 266–68). Although Bürger and Poggioli disagreed about surrealism's status as a model avant-garde (given their disagreements on art's autonomy, it was predictable that Bürger liked surrealism, and Poggioli didn't), they agreed, as Poggioli put it, that "when a specific avant-garde that has had its day, insists on repeating the promises it cannot now keep, it transforms itself without further ado into its own opposite" (Poggioli 1968, 223).

Poggioli's views were conceived before the ideas encapsulated in the term "postmodern" had achieved currency (Calinescu 1987, 113). He did not relate his definitions of the avant-garde to such issues as appropriation, meaning as audience reception rather than artistic intention, representation as the construction rather than the mirror of reality, originality as function rather than fact, or issues of gender or race. Peter Bürger, writing a generation later, found himself at the beginning of the widespread currency of these issues, but gave short shrift to what he called post-avant-garde art. He was unable to accept postmodern art's pluralism, its reenshrinement of narrative and mimeticism, and its insistence on the importance of the difference of artists who worked unrecognized, even when their anti-institutional strategies paralleled those of the anti-institutional avant-garde he affirmed.

Bürger notes that Herbert Marcuse's essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture" led him to model his focus on the avant-garde's anti-institutional strategies as opposed to the merits of individual works. But he was also much influenced by Marcuse's claim that while the idealistic, transcendent art favored by bourgeois society showed "forgotten truths," it also served to detach those truths from any influence they might have in real life. Art, wrote Marcuse, bestowed on its audience "a beautiful moment in a chain of misfortune," thus offering them "the illusion of a resolution of the contradiction between a bad

material existence and the need for happiness." It could present this illusion better than religion or philosophy because, unlike these disciplines, art could offer satisfaction in the here and now (Marcuse 1968, 94–96, 99, 102, 117–120). Although Bürger found Marcuse wanting in both theoretical and material sophistication, he nevertheless extrapolated from his definition of "affirmative culture" as autonomous art in which "freedom of the soul was used to excuse poverty, martyrdom, and bondage of the body" (Marcuse 1968, 109; Bürger 1984, 12–14).

Referring to Jürgen Habermas as well, Bürger argued that the historical avant-garde (in such manifestations as Duchamp's *Fountain*) negated the preconditions for "affirmative," autonomous art: the disjunction of art and life, individual production, and individual reception (Bürger 1984, 25, 50–53). But even avant-garde art's anti-institutional character could be destroyed by its incorporation in institutions such as museums and academia (27, 89). Bürger believed that reusing avant-garde strategies only confirmed their institutionalization (57–59). In this he followed Poggioli but focused Poggioli's complaint on art's institutional frame, elevating the "historical avant-garde" to the highest pinnacle of ethical worthiness. This permitted Bürger to see later art that attempted to repeat the manifestations of the historical avant-garde as merely derivative and later art that departed from this model, no matter what *its* historical motivations, as regressive. He was thus unable to come to a positive assessment of the "post-avant-garde," or the "anti-avant-garde" of postmodernism.

More recent investigators of avant-garde practices have criticized Bürger for his repression of the heterogeneity of the avant-garde's response to modern, popular, and industrialized culture, a response that included, but was not limited to, the goal of Berlin Dada (Bathrick and Huyssen, 1989, 8). As Maud Lavin pointed out, that goal *was* to protest the institutionalization of art in order to reengage it with life—but in conjunction with, not in opposition to, its embrace of "affirmative" popular culture. After 1922 Berlin modernism was not concerned primarily with rebellion, but with "how to respond to commerce, politics, and new forms of mass communication, and with which appropriately modern styles." However, meshing art with technology, mass culture, and popular entertainment seldom included an imperative to engage (as Ringgold does) the politics of race and gender. Even Hannah Höch, in Dada circles in Berlin, who in her collages displayed an exceptional concern for the objectified position of women, was less critical of her society's derogatory attitude toward ethnographic others (Lavin 1993, 50, 17–19, 160).

Thus Faith Ringgold may be seen as continuing and sharpening Höch's project. Like Höch's collages, Ringgold's quilt affirms qualities once considered the province of the avant-garde: its central plane of fabrics on which the model poses, for instance, which in traditional perspective would appear to be horizontal, and therefore perpendicular to the picture plane, is tipped up, à la Degas and so many other modernists, to coincide with the picture plane instead. It

meets Poggioli's demand that the avant-garde be formally transgressive. But in doing so with methods already established as elements in the tool kit of an earlier generation, it also performs both Poggioli's and Bürger's recipe for the avant-garde's opposite: by conforming to what is now expected of the avant-garde it thus adapts to the "theory-death" (Mann 1991) of its institutionalization.

Picasso's Studio, like *Demoiselles,* is a one-of-a-kind production, too, an object made by a nameable person—an "individual"—who has set herself both with and against a number of now-institutional conventions. One of these is the art market; since Ringgold's quilts have readily entered a number of collections, both private and public, she has aligned herself in this regard with the autonomous avant-garde. For Bürger, such an adaptation to the market accounts for the "arts-and-crafts impression that works of the avant-garde not infrequently convey" (1984, 53). One must recall that not all avant-gardes were obsessed with modern technology. The hand-making traditions emphasized by the British Arts and Crafts movement and Jugendstil were extended by the avant-garde arts and crafts workshops of Bloomsbury, de Stijl, the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and el Taller Torres-García. In deliberately making reference to "craft," (*Picasso's Studio* really *is* a quilt, complete with decorative stitching, printed, pieced fabric, and scrapcloth batting), Ringgold ratcheted up the pejorative ante with which the avant-gardes Bürger promoted viewed "craft" by making it synonymous with the ground whose materiality that same avant-garde championed. Rather than being (as it is in Matisse) merely a represented element or (as it often is in Picasso, Braque, and Schwitters) an element that brings reality into the picture metonymically rather than mimetically or metaphorically, Ringgold's printed fabrics form a part of the very base on which her figures are painted. They not only refer to, but are, the material from which quilts are traditionally made. So while she throws into question one aspect of the avant-garde's continuation of traditional art's separation of art and craft, she tacitly extends another.

Ringgold's painted story quilt also displays cubism's abstracted forms, juxtaposing them with their so-called "primitive" inspirations—the masks on the upper left—and their human source, the model. By collaging together not only Picasso's cubist transcriptions of African masks and feminine form but also simplified naturalistic representations of the masks and of a live model, along with the transgressive elements of "craft" processes and the actual narrative text in bars at the top and bottom of the quilt, Ringgold meets, and in fact exceeds, the revolutionary quality—the breaking of the illusion of organic unity—that Bürger ascribed to the admission of actual fragments of empirical reality when they were incorporated into artworks (Bürger 1989, 78). Not only does her collapse of the "decorative," supposedly superficial aspect of craft into the tipped-up plane of modernist painting exceed the imperatives of both Poggioli's autonomous avant-garde and the economic definitions of the institutions re-

sisted by Bürger's historical avant-garde, but her placement of an actual narrative on the quilt's surface catches all the elements on display in a net of meaning that reestablishes the organic congruence of the parts and the meaning of the whole that collage technique was supposed to destroy.

Ringgold's painting technique in *Picasso's Studio* throws into question a primary route through which the avant-garde has manifested its desire to produce works whose procedures and appearance place them outside of "art" conventions: primitivism. Her representation is constructed not only through crafts techniques and collage, but also acrylic paint with which she renders figures, furniture, fabric. Naturalistic but not academic, Ringgold's techniques are somewhat reminiscent of those of artists such as Horace Pippin, whose untutored style was sometimes called "primitive." Ringgold, however, is not untutored. She is a professional who took her M.A. in art in 1961 from City College of New York. "I'm using whatever method I need to use," she has commented. "It's not that I don't know how to do it another way" (Ringgold 1990, 7). Her "neoprimitive" style, then, might be more appropriately likened to that of other trained artists such as William H. Johnson, whose *choice* of an untutored technique has prompted critics to use this designation, or, more pointedly for the purposes of this essay, Picasso or Matisse (who, with his painting *La Danse* and his model, the same Willia Marie Simone, is the subject of another quilt in the *French Collection* series). Significantly, Picasso and Matisse, both of whom attempted to escape Europe's academic beaux-arts heritage via alliances with colonized nations' art and what were prevalently understood as its spontaneous art techniques, have not been seen as "neoprimitives," but as "avant-garde." In choosing this style, Ringgold might be seen as following them; but as Poggioli remarked, avant-gardists are opposed "to the principle of spiritual and cultural inheritance," and their favorite myth is "the annihilation of all the past, precedent and tradition" (Poggioli 1968, 47).

So, does this mean that Ringgold's quilt is an example of failed avant-gardism? I think not, since Ringgold's purpose in selecting a neoprimitivizing rhetoric is in an important way exactly opposite to that of most members of the avant-garde. Jürgen Habermas's observation on the avant-garde's use of the so-called primitive is instructive in this regard: it exhibited, he wrote, an "anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history," often by replacing historical memory with "the heroic affinity of . . . a sense of time wherein decadence immediately recognizes itself in the barbaric, the wild and the primitive" (Habermas 1981, 5). Thus it could annex the stereotyped "wildness" of both internally and externally colonialized peoples without eliciting charges of plagiarism or political insensitivity. By painting in one nonacademic style to question the ascendancy of what has become another one, Ringgold raises questions that strike at the heart of this aspect of the avant-garde enterprise: In the attempt to break away from the status quo, whose reversals are acceptable? Who benefits? and Who decides?

Equally disconcerting is Ringgold's dislocation of what Rosalind Krauss has called "the originality of the avant-garde" and what Richard Shiff has termed "the technique of originality." Both Poggioli and Bürger remarked briefly on the importance of novelty to the avant-garde enterprise, although to different ends: Poggioli notes its usefulness in creating unpopularity and Bürger (following Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") its support of the aura, the mystique of art's ritual status as an irreplaceable product of an individual genius (Poggioli 1968, 50; Bürger 1984, 28). But for Krauss and Shiff, the demystification of the avant-garde's claim to originality was a crucial postmodern task. When the double, the copy, is seen *with* the original, wrote Krauss, the double destroys the pure singularity of the original (Krauss, 109). As both Krauss and Richard Shiff have remarked, originality, that prime directive of the avant-garde whose sign is spontaneity, or self-expression, is a quality that, paradoxically, is rather laboriously produced by copying (Krauss 1981, 162; Shiff 1983, 119). Following Derrida, however, Shiff identifies a yet more radical political potential of the copy. Observing that doubling merely reverses the avant-garde's priorities in the opposition original/copy, he concludes that the anti-avant-garde has not finished its work until the toppling of the myth of the original has been followed by the displacement of the entire system of which that myth was a support (Derrida 1977, 195; Shiff 1983, 118).

In *Picasso's Studio,* Ringgold does go further than the mere doubling of Picasso's painting. She presents a copy of *Les Demoiselles* accompanied not only by cubistic drawings—traditionally preparations for painting—but also by representations of two kinds of "originals" for the mask-faced nudes in the historic avant-garde painting: African masks and the slim figure of Simone, Ringgold's stand-in. Ringgold's repetitions accomplish several things: they push Picasso's "masterpiece" into the background, obscuring it with the sketches, the "star" of the painting, Simone, and the masks hovering hieratically in the background; and they deny Picasso's "masterpiece" its spontaneity and thus the originary genius of its maker by showing its sources and the preliminary kinds of labor needed to produce it. Ringgold questions not only the status that Picasso's presumed originality granted to him as representative of the avant-garde, but also the supporting role the art of colonialized nations and its feminine objects played in the avant-garde's modernist enterprise.

Following the insistence of theorists such as Susan Rubin Suleiman, I would claim also that a worthwhile theory of the avant-garde must include a poetics of gender (but I'd add to that a poetics of colonial and postcolonial experiences) (Suleiman 1990, 84). Ringgold's use of her invented alter ego, Willia Marie Simone, to demythify and historicize the nature of the split between the representor and the represented—often a gendered as well as a racializing separation—characterized the historical avant-garde as much as it had traditional art. "The virulence of kitsch, this irresistible attractiveness," Clement Greenberg

had worried, was "crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another" (Greenberg 1939, 14). The implication was that popular, that is, non-avant-garde, culture was somehow seductive and diseased (the image of a prostitute leaps to mind) and, what is more, that this feminized populism (as opposed to the "real" art of the colonizers) would dilute and displace "pure" native cultures. The presupposition was that excellence was European and male and, as Andrew Ross has argued, that a "native culture" that responded to the Western images it received (as we in the West had, of course, responded to theirs) was both diseased and feminized (Ross 1989, 43–47). As Carol Duncan (and, more recently, Griselda Pollock) has pointed out, the avant-garde (or vanguard) artist had been universalized as male well before "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was published in 1939, a status confirmed by opposing his active, heterosexual masculine agency to the passive, feminized and objectified status of his art and the females it so often represented. From late-nineteenth-century artists like Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch through the beginning of the "historic avant-garde" (Picasso and Matisse), including fauves like André Derain and Maurice Vlaminck, Brücke artists Ernst Kirchner and Erich Heckel, dadaists and surrealists like Duchamp, Schwitters, Max Ernst, and Giacometti, to abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, women were the vehicle, not the drivers, of art that examined what were understood as the central problems of existence in terms of middle-class European males' struggles against the economic and psychological structures of modern bourgeois society. Even Duchamp's *Fountain* is a male fixture (though not unambiguously so) and his *Nude Descending a Staircase* is riven, like the architecture surrounding her, by a dynamized cubism, rather than being the agent of its activity. Michele Wallace has extended Duncan, arguing that the anti-avant-garde's deconstruction of the modernist avant-garde's primitivizing really echoes, rather than rejects, primitivism's xenophobia. Wallace, however, was interested also in another aspect of the avant-garde's apartheid, its exclusion of artists of color as the *makers* of important art because it understood the arts and artists of Africa and elsewhere in the third world as worthwhile primarily as inspiration for the European avant-garde. The understanding of African and Oceanic art as productions whose worth is dependent on European validation is repeated, Wallace claimed, by most postmodernists' inability to take into account anything but the production of European-descended artists and critics. Thus, she concluded, both the masculinity and the whiteness of the historic avant-garde was continued by the anti-avant-garde, the postmodern generation.

It is just this situation that is countered by the narrative told in the borders of this quilt painting in the voice of Simone, an artist herself, but also Picasso's model. In opposition to the usual silence of the one who is painted, Simone recalls her responses to her Aunt Melissa's advice, to the whispered observations she ascribes to the masks of her ancestors on Picasso's wall, and to the prostitutes in his painting. "My art is my freedom to say what I please," asserted

Simone in response. "*N'importe* what color you are, you can do what you want *avec votre* art" (Ringgold 1992, 33). The format and narrative style of the quilt itself represent Ringgold's position in the art world, since quilts, as Patricia Mainardi has noted, "have been underrated precisely for the same reasons that jazz, the great American music, was also for so long underrated—because the 'wrong' people were making it, and because these people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not been allowed to represent or define American culture" (Mainardi 1982, 344). Like jazz, the tradition of narrative quilts is strong in African-American communities, although its preeminence there is still undetermined (Grudin 1990, 13–17).

Ringgold maintains a subjectivity that combines artistic identity with a compound of retrieved African heritage and a feminine sexuality—a gesture that runs contrary to the merely metaphoric or metonymic (even when sympathetic) meshing of these terms by the creative roster of both the avant-garde and the anti-avant-garde. Her position as a subject is, however, situated on the idea that art offers an arena of individualistic freedom, a standard claim of one of Poggioli's two avant-gardes, the cultural-artistic one. This anomaly reveals the paradox at the heart of the avant-garde's claim to universal relevance (Huyssen 1981, 38; Reed 1994, 273): its freedom is circumscribed; its universality partial. As Daniel Herwitz has suggested, perhaps "the tendency of contemporary art and theory to treat theorizing about art and culture as if it is the one remaining avant-garde activity on the face of the earth" is the proper continuation of earlier avant-gardes (Herwitz 1993, 272–73).

Following Herwitz's observation, one could say that Ringgold not only reveals the paradoxes at the heart of the avant-garde, she participates in them. As noted, members of various manifestations of the avant-garde, especially at their most revolutionary moments, have been dissatisfied with art's commodity status in capitalist society and with the traditional hierarchy of media. Avant-garde status, however, is defined in relation to a society's traditions, and to achieve recognition or even embodiment it must take advantage of some of its resources. Clement Greenberg commented that no culture can develop without economic support and that the avant-garde, despite its assumption that it was cut off from the elite ruling class, was actually "attached by an umbilical cord of gold" (Greenberg 1939, 10–11). Historically, the avant-garde has negotiated this realization with a variety of more or less adaptive strategies. Nicos Hadjinicolaou and Peter Wollen, following Poggioli's formulation of "the two avant-gardes," observed that the twentieth century has seen the formation of a "progressive" left-wing and a "conservative" right-wing avant-gardism. The assumption that a political and revolutionary left wing tended to privilege realism, illusionism, and literature while an apolitical or counterrevolutionary right wing favored abstractionism, self-reflexiveness, and a Greenbergian modernism, however, is frequently contradicted in practice. Artists like filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and even Jean-Luc Godard, as well as Picasso in *Les Demoiselles,* for

instance, notes Wollen, display a startling loosening of conventional connections between form and meaning, but without permitting their concerns with abstract and experimental form to force them to abandon either realistic or expressionistic treatment of their subject matter (Wollen 1982, 98–101; Hadjinicolaou 1982, 44–46). Unlike the avant-garde productions most preferred by Bürger, such as futurist and Dada performances, and the least salable of surrealist constructions, Ringgold's quilts seem to affirm not only their status as a commodity by appearing in galleries as luxury objects for sale but also to assert the hegemony of painting, since its appearance on what is a nominally usable object (i.e., "craft") promotes her quilts to the status of "fine" art.

However, there are two relevant points to be made here. The first is that there is a difference between rejecting something one may reasonably hope to attain and something that has historically been unavailable. Ringgold represents a constituency—women of color—who, as a theme that runs through *The French Collection* series, were rarely considered eligible to be members of the avant-garde. Her identity marked her as one like those who had been considered by the dominant society, including the avant-garde, to be much more likely to produce "craft" than fine art. For an artist in Ringgold's position to *refuse* to accept the roles assigned to her by the traditional avant-garde, by elevating quilting to painting's status and then by selling it at painting's prices, was to put herself outside of some definitions of the avant-garde, but to remain inside others (as Hadjinicolaou notes, the "right-wing" current of avant-gardism has since the beginning been the most powerful [1982, 45]). *Picasso's Studio* places both definitions into question. But on another level, to break a cultural apartheid enforced by conventions that still, early in her career, were so deeply imbedded in both avant-gardes (as well as in the burgeoning anti-avant-garde in the ascendancy when this piece was done) that most institutions denied their existence is to participate in what many commentators identify as the overriding key to the most common definition of the term "avant-garde": to be inventive. It also—and not incidentally—reflects a sociological understanding of avant-gardism, one that sees it as opposing not only obsolete norms but also voids in social memory where past artistic developments (like African art and women's art) have been repressed (Hadjinicolaou 1982, 40, 48).

The second point regards originality. Despite her use of and reference to avant-garde characteristics, Ringgold appears here to have set herself against at least three aspects of avant-garde production: its frequent (though not unexceptional) prejudice against "craft"; its refusal of narrative; and, perhaps most significant, its outlawing of the copy in the name of originality. It might seem as if Ringgold is really attempting to annihilate the avant-garde. After all, the allegorical mode she employs in *Picasso's Studio* empties its objects, including the idea of the avant-garde itself, of any claim to immanent meaning by reanimating them with her concerns. But, as Paul Mann has noted, even to talk about the death of the avant-garde is to recuperate it, and recuperation is (also)

the spectacle of the internalization of the margins of cultural discourse that appears to be peculiar to the late capitalist culture that produced the avant-garde in the first place (1991, 14–15). It is more accurate, I think, to admit Ringgold's participation in the contemporary fracturing of the avant-garde "into a number of related shards, each of which retains one or more avant-garde features—political, stylistic, theoretical, rhetorical, obnoxious, and so forth" (Herwitz 1993, 273). This permits us to ascribe to *Picasso's Studio* a "triple-voicedness" (adapting a conclusion of Susan Rubin Suleiman's), and a "complexity and contradiction" (echoing Robert Venturi), that is composed of Ringgold's allegiances to the formal experiments and some of the cultural aspirations of the historical avant-garde. But through her feminist critique of the dominant culture and her postcolonial deconstruction of the racializing practices of the European and American avant-gardes, Ringgold moves beyond their limits.

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