

# CONVERSATION PIECES

COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION IN MODERN ART

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THE EYES OF THE VULGAR

WHILE THE DIALOGICAL PROJECTS that I described in the introduction are located far afield from the gallery and museum spaces that we typically associate with works of art, they still address the belief systems that operate in these spaces. It is necessary, then, to establish more clearly what these belief systems are and how historical and institutional forces unique to the modern period have shaped them. In this chapter I describe the emergence and consolidation of a general discourse of avant-garde art during the twentieth century. This discourse links otherwise disparate artists and movements through a common set of ideas about the relationship between the viewer and the work of art. Specifically, it is based on the assumption that the work of art should challenge or disrupt the viewer's expectations about a given image, object, or system of meaning and that the viewer, in turn, requires this disruption to overcome his or her reliance on habitual forms of perception. I trace the gradual evolution of this view from the early-twentieth-century criticism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry through the formalist approach of Clement Greenberg, up to the writings of Michael Fried in the 1960s and 1970s.

This chapter provides a historical context for issues that will emerge in the rest of the book. It is intended, not as a comprehensive survey of avant-garde art theory, but as a (necessarily selective) reading of the way in which value has been assigned to the intelligibility of the work of art in this tradition. I will not be outlining a detailed theoretical model of dialogical art practice until Chapter 3, but I do want to clarify the relevance of this material by comparing two works that elucidate the differences between a dialogical approach and the avant-garde discourse

outlined above. The two projects, produced in London's East End during the early 1990s, offer a striking contrast. One was written about widely in the art press and mainstream media and was praised by the *Independent* as "one of the most extraordinary and imaginative sculptures created by an English artist this century."<sup>1</sup> The other received little fanfare or critical recognition. What makes a comparison instructive is that they were produced in close proximity to each other, in a working-class district in the Docklands of East London. Thus they reveal the differing approaches of artists working in an avant-garde and a dialogical mode when they interact with a similar site and community.

The first project is Rachel Whiteread's *House* from 1993 (fig. 7). Whiteread, who won the Turner Prize that year, has established herself as one of England's best-known younger artists. *House* is a poured concrete cast of the interior space of an Edwardian terrace house in the Bow neighborhood of Tower Hamlets, one of London's poorest boroughs. Local councils there provide nearly 60 percent of the housing, and unemployment levels are consistently high.<sup>2</sup> The house had been scheduled for demolition as part of an effort to gentrify the Bow neighborhood with ornamental park gates and "Bow Heritage Trail" plaques. The pouring technique was taken from Whiteread's earlier (gallery-based) sculptural works in which she explored the significance of negative, and domestic, space by casting mattresses, the interiors of rooms, and so on. The casting process registers the surfaces and volumes of a given object in exacting detail. Whiteread's *House*, like a photograph, is linked to an absent original—in this case the actual house whose destruction brought it into existence.

*House* was based on the classic avant-garde recipe of shock, disruption, and ambiguity. A full-scale succès de scandale, it produced suitably outraged reactions from conservatives and "disaffiliated class warriors" alike.<sup>3</sup> Some dismissed it as a boondoggle, others resented its mausoleum associations, and still others embraced it, either for the attention it brought to the Bow neighborhood or as a great work of art in its own right. In 1995 Phaidon published a catalog dedicated to the project that situates *House* art historically, politically, and culturally in the ensuing media cacophony. Critics and historians, including Jon Bird, Doreen Massey, Anthony Vidler, and Simon Watney, frame their accounts of the work with familiar tropes drawn from the traditions of avant-garde art. The theme of disruption is reiterated throughout the catalog, with Massey praising *House* for its "disruption of . . . social time-spaces" and "its capacity to throw awry 'the 'normal' time-spaces, and the ideas of

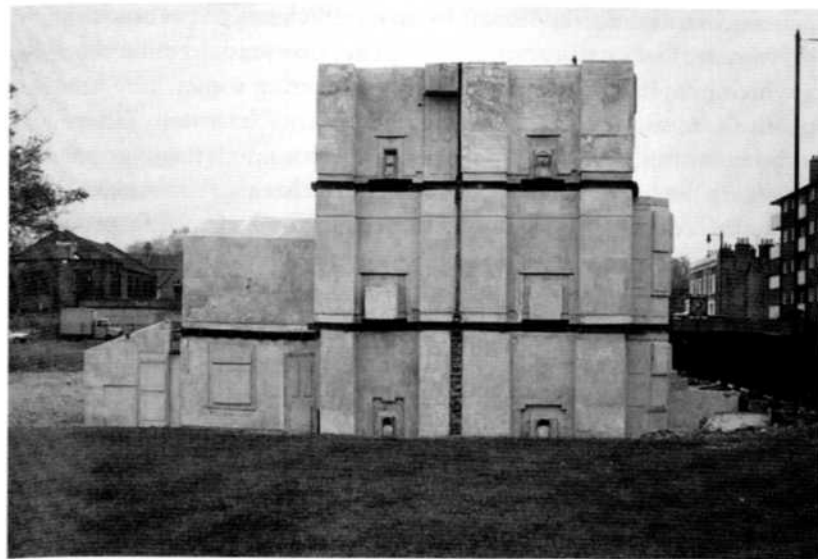


FIGURE 7. Rachel Whiteread, *House* (October 1993–January 1994), commissioned by Artangel. Photograph by Sue Ormerod, courtesy of Artangel.

time-spaces, which we construct in order to live our lives."<sup>4</sup> "*House* did not seek to manufacture some confectionary consensus, as many public works of art are compelled to do," according to James Lingwood of the commissioning organization Artangel Trust. "Indeed it laid bare the limits of language and expectation which afflict the contentious arena of public art."<sup>5</sup>

The avant-garde work of art in this scenario serves to reveal the inability of conventional language to grasp the infinite complexity of the world and the naive, and possibly reactionary, constraints of a "confectionary" consensus about that world. Here, consensus, or shared understanding, is associated with something inviting but insubstantial, or even unhealthy, while the rupturing of consensus takes on an explicitly therapeutic value. Lingwood describes a widening circle of dissension catalyzed by *House*: "There was no consensus amongst the inhabitants of the block of houses opposite, on the street or in the neighborhood, nor in the letter pages of local and national newspapers. There was no consensus amongst the local councilors. . . . There was no consensus even within the Gale family whom the council had moved out of the home which eventually became *House*."<sup>6</sup> At the same time that Lingwood grants *House* this disruptive epistemological power, he is insistent that

it not be seen as didactic. "It was by no means clear what values it sought to promote," he continues. "It did not seek to predetermine the ways in which people could respond to it."<sup>7</sup> Hovering somewhere between Adorno's inscrutable black painting and a Rorschach test, *House* was both semantically resistant and open and accommodating, "at one and the same time hermetic and implacable, but also able to absorb into its body all those individual thoughts, feelings and memories projected onto it."<sup>8</sup>

One might question the apparent disjunction here between *House* as the bold subverter of norms and consensus and *House* as the random or intentionless tabula rasa. The act of "laying bare the limits of language" implies a very particular, and directed, response. And this response is based on the value-laden assumption that recognizing those limits is in some way useful. Lingwood's comments reflect a core belief of avant-garde discourse. We are constantly framing our experience of the world through representational systems. To interact with others we require a shared language, and even our visual experience involves a kind of literacy as we learn to interpret the conventions associated with photographs, cinema, paintings, street signs, and so on. These systems are necessary but also dangerous. They lead us to believe that the world is a fixed and orderly place and that we occupy a privileged position of stability and coherence within it. The role of art is to remind us of the illusory nature of that coherence—to show us that our perceptions, and our very identities, are shifting, unstable, and contingent. The key gesture of avant-garde art from this perspective is to oppose forms of thought that are abstract and reductive with experiences that are open-ended and complex. Thus avant-garde art, while not didactic in the conventional sense, clearly seeks to educate and sensitize the viewer in a very specific way.

*House* did precisely what a good avant-garde work of art is supposed to do; it was provocative yet indeterminate, opaque yet open to differing responses. At the same time, I want to propose an alternate interpretation of Whiteread's work to identify some underlying contradictions in the discourse of avant-garde art. What is particularly striking about the view of *House* conveyed by the catalog is how few members of the nonart public seemed to "get it." The catalog essays give little or no validity to the hostile reactions the work provoked among the nonart public. These are interpreted as a philistine reaction, typical of those whose "social time-space" has been rudely disrupted. Essay after essay assails us with the lunacy, small-mindedness, and opportunism of councilors,

bureaucrats, journalists, anarchists, road protesters, local residents, and other benighted lookers-on when confronted with a challenging work of art.

The only viewers who really seemed capable of grasping the work in its full complexity, of braving the abyss that *House* opened in conventional expectations, were the writers themselves. Whiteread's work solicits the privileged gaze of the critic eager to combine the frisson of an initial semantic resistance with the deferred but all the more rewarding pleasure of eventual hermeneutic mastery. From another perspective, the success of *House* can be gauged precisely by the failure of its audience (or part of it) to comprehend it; shock, outrage, and hostility are presumably therapeutic precedents to some deeper grasp of the contingency of meaning *House* sought to catalyze. But the contributors provide little evidence that this was, indeed, the case. In fact, a number of the essays convey a subtle but palpable self-satisfaction, as *House* effectively established the critic's acuity relative to the philistine masses. Failing to graduate from hostility to insight, these viewers are abandoned as lost causes by most of the essayists.

*House* provoked a heated dialogue in the British press, but most of the attention focused on the artwork itself (Is it "art"? How much did it cost?) and on Whiteread, as an audacious young artist; the conditions of housing and community life in the Bow neighborhood served mainly as a political backdrop against which to measure the work's symbolic relevance. It was variously described as "a stark comment on social realities" and as "commemorating a century of domestic life even as it insists on the impossibility of recovering the lost lives spent within."<sup>9</sup> While the essayists celebrate the lack of consensus in responses to the piece by the public at large, their own interpretations display a striking uniformity. *House* functions as a reminder (either poignant or ironic) of the community once defined in Bow by the physical and symbolic space of the home but now fragmented by unemployment, poverty, and gentrification. This rhetoric of loss and absence complements Whiteread's working method, in which *House* was conceptualized without any direct interaction with the neighborhood's residents. If community in Bow is lost, or simply a nostalgic fantasy, then any attempt at consultation would be misguided.

I am not suggesting that *House* would have been a better work if Whiteread had conferred with the Bow community beforehand. This is clearly not part of her artistic methodology. But is it possible to imagine another way of working?<sup>10</sup> Is it possible to imagine an artwork that would



FIGURE 8. Loraine Leeson, *The Art of Change, West Meets East* (1992), textile/photographic montage displayed as a billboard photomural, 12 × 16 ft. Courtesy of Loraine Leeson.

retain the power to challenge fixed or conventional meanings without dividing its audience into philistines and cognoscenti? The second work I'd like to discuss, titled *West Meets East* (1992), was produced not far from the location of *House* in London's Docklands (fig. 8). Although it enjoyed none of the publicity of Whiteread's work, it still provides an instructive comparison. The piece is a textile and photomontage construction that was displayed as a twelve-by-sixteen-foot billboard on the Isle of Dogs. It was produced by Loraine Leeson, of *The Art of Change*, working in collaboration with a class of Bengali girls and their teachers at the Central Foundation School for Girls in Bow. The *West Meets East* image and several others created as part of related projects were displayed on billboards throughout the Docklands.

Leeson worked with Peter Dunn for nearly twenty years as *The Art of Change*, developing collaborative projects with community groups, schools, women's organizations, and other constituencies in the Docklands and East London.<sup>11</sup> Their projects emerged out of extended dialogue and personal interaction with the groups and individuals involved.

In the case of the *West Meets East* project, these dialogues led the young women at the Bow School to concentrate on their common experiences in living between two cultures. The image they developed to symbolize this concern features a Bengali girl joining a denim jacket to a sari with an industrial sewing machine. The students focused on textile production because of its connection with Bengali cultural traditions and the local economy, which relies on small garment factories where many of their family members work. The experience of living between two cultures suggested by the juxtaposition of the jean jacket and the sari is reiterated throughout the image. The hands of the young woman in the image are painted with traditional Bengali patterns associated with marriage ceremonies, but they have been applied with nail polish. A series of iconic images fill a decorative border around the image: a MacDonald's logo and a soccer player sharing space with scenes from village life in Bangladesh drawn from the students' memories. The young woman's identity is poised between the influences of Western and Bengali culture. But rather than posit a simplistic opposition between these two influences, the images suggest a complex process of negotiation: a struggle to form a new identity at their intersection. The joining of the jacket and the sari symbolizes a process in which identity is defined, or performed, through past rituals and traditions, the experience of daily work, and the influences of contemporary consumer culture. The young women hoped to challenge recent efforts to encourage cultural tourism in the area (based on its image as an exotic "Banglatown") by foregrounding their own hybrid Englishness. The questions of cultural identity raised by *West Meets East*, of what it means to be "foreign," were also important because of increased racial tension at the time between white Docklands residents and Bengali immigrants. There had been numerous cases of anti-immigrant violence encouraged by the National Front, and the *West Meets East* billboard was vandalized twice.

Many of the student collaborators in *West Meets East* were recent immigrants and spoke little English. As a result, Leeson relied on a process of visual communication to develop the project. The young women were asked to explore their ideas about cultural difference through the creation and juxtaposition of images, objects, and words (in Bengali and English) in a series of exercises. The production of the final montage served as the catalyst for collaborative interactions involving aesthetic and compositional questions, cultural politics, and so on. The young women of the Central Foundation School certainly didn't need Leeson to "lay bare the limits" of abstract systems of meaning. They were quite



familiar with the contingent and shifting nature of identity through their experience as immigrants. Nor does the project function through the cultivation of dissension; rather, the students were able to establish a collective identity through the shared experience of producing the montage. Leeson defines herself less as an object maker than as an artist who facilitates shared visions. In this case she was able to organize a process that gave form, complexity, and some measure of clarity to the cultural ruptures and differences that her collaborators were dealing with in their daily lives.

*House* and *West Meets East* represent two approaches to creating art. For Whiteread the object came first—the idea of physically enlarging one of her gallery-specific sculptures and locating it in public space. The exact location was secondary; Whiteread had considered terrace houses in North and East London and Islington before the Bow site became available.<sup>12</sup> Thus her choice had relatively little to do with the specific conditions of Bow or the concerns of its residents; it was simply a site where she could deploy her *a priori* idea (hatched “in the quiet of [her] studio,” as James Lingwood writes). For *The Art of Change*, and for most of the artists I discuss in this book, this approach is exactly the wrong way around. The starting point for their work is a dialogue with the community within which the work will be produced. The particular idea, object, image, or experience then emerges from this situated dialogue. Leeson and Dunn attempt to learn as much as possible about the cultural and political histories of the people with whom they work, as well as their particular needs and skills. Their artistic identity is based in part on their capacity to listen, openly and actively, and to organize scenarios that maximize the collective creative potential of a given constituency or site.<sup>13</sup>

Although I have expressed skepticism about Whiteread’s work, my intention is to claim, not that *West Meets East* is a better work of art than *House*, but that it makes a different set of demands on its audience and on the critic or historian. My goal in this comparison is less judgmental than heuristic. What can we learn by comparing conventional avant-garde and dialogical approaches to a similar site? There are clearly areas of overlap. *House* provoked a vigorous discussion in the British press, one that tended toward polarization and dissension. (For James Lingwood this dissension was central to the work’s value.) In contrast, the exchanges that took place in *West Meets East* allowed the young women to explore their shared experience as immigrants. At the same time, *West Meets East*, while less visually compelling than Whiteread’s

enigmatic work, was not without aesthetic appeal. The meaning of this image, however, especially for the young women and the Bengali community, was explicit rather than ambiguous. While the theoretical framework necessary to analyze *House* as a work of art is well established, this is not the case for *West Meets East*. How do we understand the aesthetic significance of the collaborative process itself? And how can we grasp as a work of art a project that changes the perceptions of its participants through conversation and collaborative production, whether in an East London classroom or in an Oakland parking garage or on a Zurich pleasure boat? As I will suggest, modern art theory can provide valuable resources in developing a collaborative and dialogical model of aesthetic experience, even as it retains a fundamental bias against art practices that operate outside the avant-garde framework of disruption and ambiguity.

#### AESTHETICS AND COMMON SENSE

The valorization of ambiguity evident in critical discussions of *House* is founded on a long-standing avant-garde tradition. The belief that art must resist comprehension or interpretation can be traced in part to the insular “art for art’s sake” aestheticism that exerted such a powerful influence during the late nineteenth century. As Oscar Wilde famously wrote, “The moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist.”<sup>14</sup> Working across a range of avant-garde movements, figures as diverse as Gauguin, Matisse, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gustave Moreau, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti would insist that art could remain pure only through poetic isolation and withdrawal (into an idyllic past, some exotic or Edenic other culture, or the subterranean reaches of the psyche itself). Only from a position of spatial or psychological distance from the experience of European modernity can artists, and by extension the viewers who participate in their vision, grasp its full, and terrifying, contours. An untrammelled imagination and a fiercely defended sense of individual vision are the last redoubts against a conformist and utilitarian bourgeois culture. And the products of this resistant subjectivity, far from being accessible to the average viewer, will inevitably appear perplexing, difficult, and strange.

This view is by now so well established as to constitute received wisdom, but in the nineteenth century it had the luster of newness, as part of a broader assault on academic art traditions and the bankrupt verities of Enlightenment reason. The tendency of early modern philosophers

such as Kant, Christian Wolff, and David Hume to describe aesthetic experience as a form of communication was consistent with the role played by art in eighteenth-century culture. Rococo paintings served as the decorative backdrop for the social life of the drawing room or salon. In a similar manner, fetes and perambulations in Georgian-era landscape gardens were intended to initiate shared reflection: to teach visitors about the harmonious relationship between the social and the natural worlds.<sup>15</sup> Painters and landscape architects shared a symbolic vocabulary with their patrons. The objects and environments they created facilitated exchanges that were central to the life of an (admittedly elitist) community of viewers. While preserving the ceremonial and performative dimension of earlier art practices designed to encourage veneration and obeisance (e.g., courtly or liturgical art), these works patterned that performance on a more open-ended pedagogical interaction.

In her innovative study *Watteau's Painted Conversations*, Mary Vidal challenges the belief that Watteau's canvases lacked seriousness, that they were little more than the frivolous products of a decadent aristocracy. His paintings of parties and other gatherings in fact expressed a highly developed culture of dialogue and conversation in which women often played a key role. They describe an unusually egalitarian space—an anticipation of the bourgeois public sphere—where the civilizing and harmonizing powers of free conversational exchange, and an informal, improvisational mode of learning, were valued over the brute expression of wealth and power. These exchanges were governed by discursive ethics. “There must be no tyranny in conversation,” as Madeleine de Scudéry writes in *Conversations sur divers sujets* (1680). “Let everyone have their share and have the right turn to speak.”<sup>16</sup> The paintings themselves were intended to both catalyze and reflect this egalitarian dialogue. As Vidal writes, Watteau “designed his paintings to elicit both visual and verbal responses from the beholder in ways that are analogous to the polite exchanges of the conversing aristocrats he represents. . . . There is an obvious and frequent acknowledgement of the viewer’s presence before the painting, for example.”<sup>17</sup>

With the emergence of an artistic avant-garde in the mid-nineteenth century, the survival of authentic art seemed to require that this potentially stultifying interdependence of artist and viewer be severed through shock, attack, and dislocation. The symbiosis of aristocratic patronage was replaced by a critical, adjudicatory relationship, informed by artists’ identification with the revolutionary rhetoric of the nascent working class. As a result, avant-garde art sought to challenge, rather than corroborate,

rate, conventional systems of meaning, whether through realism’s introduction of taboo subjects such as poverty and prostitution, impressionism’s rejection of the norms of academic realism, cubism’s attempt to render multiple perspectives in a single composition, or dadaism’s embrace of the absurd. The motive behind the avant-garde rhetoric of shock and disruption is complex (and even paradoxical): to make the viewer more sensitive and receptive to the natural world, other beings, and other forms of experience. Avant-garde artists of various stripes believed that Western society (especially its urban middle class) had come to view the world in a violently objectifying manner associated with the growing authority of positivistic science and the profit-driven logic of the marketplace. Under the influence of this perspective, people and things are valued, not for their intrinsic worth, but for their potential to create wealth or promote industrial expansion. For many artists this instrumentalizing way of seeing the world as a resource had become a habitual, even conventional, part of modern life, as evident in the commodification of art as it is in the dehumanizing regime of the assembly line.

The rupture provoked by the avant-garde work of art is necessary to shock viewers out of this perspective and prepare them for the nuanced and sensitive perceptions of the artist uniquely open to the natural world. We must “stop and listen for a response [to the world] in ourselves,” as Paul Klee writes. “This means becoming intimate with objects, reaching a stage . . . where we can wait attentively and silently until the essence of their being is revealed.”<sup>18</sup> The tension between the openness, sensitivity to difference, and vulnerability that characterize the artist’s own relationship to the world and the paradoxical drive to “master” viewers by violently attacking the semantic systems through which they understand and situate themselves in that same world remains unresolved. The artists I discuss in this book ask if it is possible to reclaim a less violent and more convivial relationship with the viewer while preserving the critical insights that aesthetic experience can offer to objectifying forms of knowledge. To answer this question it is necessary to examine more closely the earlier, communicative, model of the aesthetic that I alluded to above.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries long-established forms of spiritual and political authority, founded on the principle of divine right, were challenged by the rise of secularism and an increasingly ambitious mercantile class. During this transitional moment in European history the concept of the aesthetic emerged in its modern form.<sup>19</sup> The “machine” of aesthetic perception, to use Hume’s apt phrase, offered a

new principle of social cohesion based, not on the coercive force of God or king, but on the mental processes through which we experience the world. Kant would insist that these processes represent the fundamental precondition for all human knowledge.<sup>20</sup> They achieve their purest expression in aesthetic experience in particular because such experience distances us from the calculating, self-interested perspective that characterizes our normal daily interactions. Through the discipline of an aesthetic “dissociation,” as David Wellbery writes, the individual viewer can “slough off the prejudices of his age and background” and transcend his own banal subjectivity to become one with the “universal voice” of humanity.<sup>21</sup> The nascent middle class, for its part, embraced the concept of a cognitive “state of nature” as the locus of political authority in order to counter the aristocracy’s claim that its own right to rule had been passed down from time immemorial.

For Kant the feeling of pleasure that is produced by an aesthetic encounter (whether with an old master canvas or a brilliant sunset) is a visceral sign of the underlying harmony between the individual subject and the “universal voice” of humanity.<sup>22</sup> It reassures us that we are all, essentially, rational individuals, capable of reaching political agreement by virtue of our common cognitive experience of the world. Aesthetic reflection evokes a utopian future community in which collective experience validates our most personal and intuitive responses to the world around us. Further, it presupposes that a public sphere, based on the free and open exchange of ideas, will produce an eventual consensus because individuals are able to overcome self-interest and judge from the vantage point of a greater good.<sup>23</sup> The common sense or public spirit (*Gemeinsinn*) underlying aesthetic judgment is a postulate or an ideal in Kant’s philosophy rather than a description of current human interactions. Thus, while Kant stated that individual judgments of beauty have a “universal validity”— “[the viewer] judges not just for himself but for everyone”<sup>24</sup>—he was careful to point out that he was not arguing that everyone *has to* agree with our individual judgments, only that everyone *should* (assuming that these judgments were based on a properly “disinterested” attitude).<sup>25</sup>

Although the social equality necessary to achieve a “common sense” may not currently exist, the universality of cognition itself guarantees that it *could* exist. Our perception of works of art here and now allows us to glimpse the possibility of an ideal future in which we will be open to radical otherness, rather than view it as a threat to our subjective autonomy. The work of art is a token to be redeemed at a later date, when the entire social order will enjoy the “non-hierarchical, non-exploitative

relationship between subject and object” that we can only glimpse in aesthetic contemplation.<sup>26</sup> Aesthetic experience prepares us, so to speak, for entry into an idealized community of speakers. This experience is characterized by both negative and positive moments. On the one hand, it requires a willful amnesia; we must expunge whatever is specific and individual about ourselves (our “interests”). There is a tendency here to conflate “self-interest” (with its associations of greed and heedless disregard for others) with subjectivity per se, effectively naturalizing a possessive, market-based model of the subject defined solely by the desire for personal gain. At the same time, there is an enabling moment in the aesthetic. Rather than view others as a means to our own a priori ends, we are encouraged to rise above defensive self-interest and open ourselves to the transforming effect of social interaction.<sup>27</sup>

Enlightenment thinkers understood that only a handful of “men of delicate taste” were, as yet, sensitive enough to achieve the disinterest necessary for true aesthetic contemplation. But Kant, at least, assumed that this capacity would gradually encompass a larger population until the aesthetic telos of an ideal discursive community had been realized.<sup>28</sup> The capacity for aesthetic disinterest would not remain the sole province of a social or economic elite. Rather, the work of art and the highly attuned man of taste were merely placeholders for this more egalitarian society. The echoes of this egalitarianism resonate throughout twentieth-century art. “[Art] is no escapism, no ivory tower,” as the British sculptor Barbara Hepworth wrote in 1937. “It is an unconscious manner of expressing our belief in a possible life. The language of color and form is universal and not for a special class. . . . It is a thought which gives the same life, the same expansion, the same universal freedom to everyone.”<sup>29</sup>

But a specter haunts this utopian vision. An increasingly dominant market system, fueled by the irrepressible fecundity of mass production, generates its own characteristic cultural forms (advertising, mass media), which threaten to usurp art’s role entirely, even as they erode the public’s ability to distinguish a Rembrandt from the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Far from overcoming our narcissistic isolation, consumer culture feeds on it, transforming the redemptive power of an aesthetic communion into the banal transactions of the shopping mall and the eBay auction. We are reduced to an atomized pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition. The relationship between art, advertising, and propaganda constitutes a central point of tension in modern art theory. Art’s function as a form of emancipatory communication is almost always presented in opposition to a



malevolent other (kitsch, mass culture, etc.) that threatens to destroy or compromise it in some way. As a result, the “universal freedom” that art promises “to everyone” must be deferred as art struggles simply to survive against the encroaching flood of billboards, glossy magazines, and Hollywood movies. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, techniques of mass production and the consolidation of advertising as a cultural form designed to both incite and regularize consumer demand were making it increasingly difficult to establish a firm ontological boundary between the “work of art” and the commodity.

This slippage is exemplified in the controversy surrounding the painting *Bubbles* (1886), by the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais. Millais and the other Pre-Raphaelites abhorred the tawdry world of Victorian consumer culture, withdrawing into a fantasyland of chivalrous knights and chaste brides, insulated from the morally compromised blandishments of mass production by an impenetrable forest of rich tapestries and hand-painted wardrobes. In fact, as Kathy Alex Psomiades has convincingly argued in her study of British Aestheticism, the fascination of the Pre-Raphaelite painters with feminine virtue and the vicissitudes of the “fallen woman” reflected their fear that they occupied an analogous position, constantly in danger of finding their spiritually elevating artworks “prostituted” to the market system.<sup>30</sup> The resulting art-for-art’s-sake ethos promised a morally pure, noninstrumentalized form of culture that would refuse the means-end rationality of economic exchange. It was thus particularly distressing for Millais to find that a painting of his beloved grandson blowing soap bubbles in his nursery had been sold to the proprietor of the Pears Soap Company, who planned to use it as part of an advertising campaign. This unseemly and lascivious circulation of his image in public venues horrified Millais. His “fallen painting” was now condemned to wander disconsolately through neglected advertising hoardings and the fluttering pages of discarded newspapers.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between the commercial image and the work of “authentic” art mirrors that of the prostitute to the sanctity of bourgeois marriage—it threatens to expose the economic transaction at the root of an ostensibly spiritual experience.<sup>32</sup> This sexualized association between the work of art and the commodity was reiterated by the English critic Roger Fry in his essay “Art and Socialism” (1912), in which he decries the emergence of a “race of pseudo-artists” in mid-nineteenth-century academic painting. “As the prostitute professes to sell love, so these gentlemen professed to sell beauty, and they and their patrons rollicked good-humoredly through the Victorian era.”<sup>33</sup> The growing ubiquity of the

commodity form raises the disturbing possibility that the meaning of the work of art, far from being centered in an impenetrably dense expressive nexus, can be reduced to a set of easily replicated surface effects or physical characteristics. Further, the growing sophistication of the art market during the early twentieth century and the emergence of a system of internationally linked auction houses and dealers (associated with the rise of impressionist painting) suggest that works of art are purchased not simply for their spiritual power or beauty but as investments that are expected to appreciate in value. As a result, the attempt to differentiate the work of art from the commodity in the twentieth century will entail an emphasis on its radical difference from other cultural forms (e.g., advertising, popular entertainment, and mass media). In this process the status of communication in aesthetic experience will also be transformed.

The perceived failure of aesthetic knowledge in the modern period to realize its utopian promise, and artists’ varying responses to this failure, became an important point of reference for twentieth-century art and art theory. In fact, a significant feature of the modernist tradition is an ongoing meditation on the ruins of discourse—artworks that are about the artist’s inability to achieve the emancipatory communion that is anticipated by the aesthetic. For many modern artists the viewer and work of art are never existentially co-present in the act of communication, and the work of art simultaneously speaks to, and “through,” the actual viewer to an ideal viewer yet to be. It becomes, in the painter Barnett Newman’s poignant words, “an address to the unknowable.”<sup>34</sup> The remainder of this chapter explores the rhetoric of failure in modern art theory, as critics and theorists attempt to reconcile the Enlightenment legacy of an idealized aesthetic communication with a modern society in which even the noblest human gesture is susceptible to the corrupting powers of advertising and propaganda.

#### THE COLD WHITE PEAKS OF ART

All artists are aristocrats in a sense, since no artist believes honestly in human equality. . . . To take art seriously is to be unable to take seriously the conventions and principles by which societies exist.

Clive Bell, “The Pathetic Fallacy”

As I have already noted, the emergence of mass culture introduces a significant tension into the discourse of modern aesthetics. The work of art

seeks to evoke an alternative universe of utopian possibility: a world of color and sensuality, perceptual complexity and nuance. But at the same time, the borders of this cognitive Garden of Eden must be defended from the assaults of advertising and mass culture. Protecting the purified body of the aesthetic from co-optation requires the creation of increasingly formidable barriers. Thus we encounter in the modern avant-garde a series of strategies designed to anchor the meaning of the work of art so thoroughly in the recalcitrant individuality of the artist, and to frustrate existing norms and expectations so completely, as to render it utterly unpalatable to the appropriative powers of consumer culture. The act of semantic resistance gradually becomes an end in itself and one of the defining characteristics of avant-garde art. This counterhermeneutic paradigm, reiterated at several key points in the development of twentieth-century art theory, first appears in the critical debate around postimpressionism and cubism led by the English critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

Bell argued that the defining characteristic of great art was "significant form" ("lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms"),<sup>35</sup> which produces a highly individualized sense of "aesthetic exaltation" or "ecstasy" in the viewer. In the presence of such forms the viewer's experience approximates that of the mathematician "rapt in his studies . . . [who] feels an emotion for his speculations which arises from no perceived relation between them and the lives of men."<sup>36</sup> This deliberate distance from "the lives of men" is reiterated in Bell's analysis of the role of representation in art. In an often-cited passage he states: "To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space."<sup>37</sup> Only visual forms that suppress any reference to recognizable objects (the figure of a man or woman, for example, or the outline of a building or tree) are capable of eliciting aesthetic exaltation in the viewer. Significant form does "communicate" with the viewer, after a fashion, but only in a stringently self-referential formal language. The moment it acknowledges the specific cultural or historical context in which the viewer exists, the world of everyday language and experience, it ceases to be art.

Bell is thus critical of artists whose work relies on a shared symbolic or representational vocabulary: "The representational element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant" and, as he later contends, "a sign of weakness in an artist."<sup>38</sup> His proximate target here is the highly popular realist genre painting of the day (works by William Powell Frith, George Hicks, Harriet Martineau, and Lawrence Alma-Tadema) as well as newspaper photojournalism.<sup>39</sup> The only way to en-

sure the survival (and implicitly the cultural and moral superiority) of fine art against the proliferation of bad descriptive painting, mass media, and advertising is to erect around it an antirealist cordon sanitaire. Bell dismisses as "feeble" those viewers who rely on visual representation (embodied in the popularity of Frith's *Paddington Station*).<sup>40</sup> Rather than treat form as an "end in itself," they look "through" form to achieve emotional satisfaction from events in the world that the work of art describes.

Roger Fry, for his part, writes with withering contempt of a "populace whose emotional life has been drugged by the sugared poison of pseudo-art."<sup>41</sup> In his essay "Art and Socialism" Fry disparages the philistine doctor who fills his waiting room "with bad photo-gravures and worse etchings." The "truly creative artist" is "noxious and unassimilable" to "social man." As a result, "great art" must undergo a process of aesthetic "disinfection" to be made palatable to the general public. Fry describes how an innovative artist (perhaps Cézanne) achieves a creative breakthrough to a "new vision," which only a handful of viewers, blessed with the "faculty of aesthetic perception," can properly perceive. The rest of the public violently rejects this new vision because it threatens their comfortable perception of reality. Another artist, "clever" but uninspired, modifies that bold new vision, making an "ingenious compromise between it and the old, generally accepted notions of art." His or her work flatters the general public, who grasp it easily while congratulating themselves on their liberal openness to new ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Fry stages his account of the function of art through an organic, one might almost say digressive, rhetoric, in which the difficult but authentic work of art resists easy assimilation or consumption, evoking a gag reflex in the uninitiated (it is hard to swallow), while the products of mass culture allow for a facile readability. (One might recall here James Lingwood's curious use of the term *confectionary* to describe the consensus that ostensibly surrounds conventional public art.) Fry leaves it to a future socialistic "Great State" to remedy the gastric distress of modern culture and to "purify art of its present unreality." Under a socialist state (which would, nonetheless, manage to preserve "a large amount of purely private buying and selling," especially of art), we will "boldly face our responsibility" and declare artists to be "a new kind of kings." Anticipating Clement Greenberg's analysis two decades hence, Fry specifically links the extra "leisure time" that will be widely available under a socialist system to the expansion of aesthetic cultivation. ("[T]he Great State . . . is an organization for leisure—out of which art

grows.")<sup>43</sup> In the meantime, we must simply accept that only a small coterie—comparable to the eighteenth-century men of delicate taste—will fully appreciate true art.

Despite Fry's halfhearted nod to socialism, his writing, like Bell's, tends to naturalize the elitism of art as a historically inevitable condition. Thus we have Bell's rather remarkable statement in "Society and Art": "In saying that the mass of mankind will never be capable of making delicate aesthetic judgments, I have said no more than the obvious truth. . . . Only fools imagine that the power of nice discrimination . . . is not a peculiar gift."<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that Bell and Fry leave no room for the cultural aspirations of the working class. "So let the people try to create art for themselves," Bell generously offers. "Probably they will make a mess of it; that will not matter. . . . [T]he copious production of bad art is a waste of time, but, so long as it isn't encouraged to the detriment of good, nothing worse."<sup>45</sup> The masses are to be allowed art, after a fashion, but not the intellectually demanding art of Bell's (implicitly bourgeois) "universal" viewer. "After all," as Bell notes, "useful work must remain, for the most part, mechanical." Thus, if "useful workers" wish to "express themselves," Bell recommends the less cerebral and elevated pursuits of "dancing and singing," since it is "in dance and song that ordinary people come nearest to the joy of creation."<sup>46</sup>

If the pleasures of the working class evince a joyful collectivity, the rewards of an authentic aesthetic experience are considerably more austere and private. The quasi-spiritual "rapture" and "ecstasy" evoked by significant form are entirely individual and beyond communication. Bell contrasts the "snug foothills of warm humanity" (the domain of comforting realist painting) with the "superb peaks of aesthetic exaltation" in which the lone aesthetic mountaineer strips away all consciousness of other human beings and basks in the transcendent light cast by the work of art. For Bell, the less we know about the social or cultural context of a given work of art, the greater our ability to draw from it an authentic aesthetic emotion. Art cannot be expected to communicate anything aesthetically meaningful about the time and place in which it was created because the thing that makes it art in the first place is beyond history. In the presence of art our experience is akin to that of "the perfect lover," for whom "the profound significance of form is raised above the accidents of time and place. To him the problems of archaeology, history, and hagiography are impertinent. If the forms of a work are significant its provenance is insignificant."<sup>47</sup>

Historian Jan Heinemann describes Bell's rejection of symbolic lan-

guage as a form of "linguistic pessimism" symptomatic of a broader "neo-romantic" reaction against the soulless rationalism of positivistic science around the turn of the century. For Bell and other members of the Bloomsbury Group, language, or at least nonpoetic language, was implicated in a larger critique of reason provoked by the mechanized butchery of World War I. Heinemann thus relates Virginia Woolf's persistent aversion to language ("I have done with phrases. How much better is silence. . . . Speech is false")<sup>48</sup> to Bell's own "semantic anemia" and his deeply felt suspicion of representation in painting.<sup>49</sup> Despite this suspicion, Bell nonetheless assigns to the work of art the function of "representing" an essential reality that only the artist him- or herself is able to directly perceive. "What is left when we have stripped a thing of all its associations?" Bell asks. "What but that which philosophers used to call 'the thing in itself' and now call 'ultimate reality'? . . . [S]ignificant form [is] form behind which we catch a sense of ultimate reality."<sup>50</sup> If the work of art does not represent some discrete object in the "real" world, it is still given the task of evoking or embodying a metaphysical presence ("ultimate reality"). The work of art is presented as a kind of prosthetic device that makes available to the viewer a perceptual experience that approximates, but can never equal, the artist's own penetrating vision. Bell is insistent that the work of art is a good in and of itself—that it can be compelled to perform no ulterior function (even the function of representing the world). At the same time, however, he makes it the vehicle for the expression of the most profound epistemological insight, the conveying of an essential reality that lies behind everyday appearance.

We encounter a series of antinomic relationships in Bell's and Fry's writings. On one hand we find the assumption that the capacity to understand authentic art is universal and on the other the assertion that "the mass of mankind" will never be able to enjoy a true aesthetic experience. Bell and Fry are willing to acknowledge that the ability to experience significant form depends on having the (class-specific) leisure time necessary to master the complex codes of innovative new movements (e.g., cubism), but at the same time they deny that difficult art is discursively coded by claiming that it provides a presymbolic and unmediated access to the real. We find a halfhearted appeal to a socialist revolution that might someday universalize this aesthetic enlightenment, but it all too readily succumbs to the resignation that the elitism of high art is inevitable and to the consequent division of the world into a high-art elite and the "ungifted majority."<sup>51</sup> On one side stands popular "pseudo-art," rooted



in the familiar but banal associations of everyday life and language. And on the other stand the imposing alpine heights of ultimate reality conveyed by significant form through emotions that we typically associate with divine visitations. (We will encounter a similar secular spirituality in the writings of Michael Fried and, in a different form, in Lyotard's writing on the sublime.)

Despite their advocacy of postimpressionism and, later, cubism, Bell and Fry fail to provide a theory of avant-garde art per se (a tendency that is very much dependent on historical context and on the viewer's knowledge of earlier movements). As Bell describes it, significant form is as likely to be found in a Persian bowl or the windows at Chartres as in a canvas by Cézanne.<sup>52</sup> Bell's and Fry's works, however, contain many of the key elements (and biases) of an avant-garde discourse that will take on more coherent form later in the twentieth century. These include a concern with policing the boundaries between true art and kitsch (e.g., Frith's painting or the photographs in the *Daily Mirror*), which is seen as presenting the world in a facile and uncomplicated way, along with a related emphasis on purity and impurity in visual experience based on the perceived ease with which a given work can be understood.<sup>53</sup> Within this purview, collective, accessible cultural modes (working-class song and dance, for example) are condemned to mediocrity. Here, too, is the characteristic opposition between conventional forms of language, hopelessly compromised by the clinging tendrils of history and tradition, and the metalanguage of art, which eludes the constraints of symbolic discourse to confront the viewer with an immediate and overwhelming aesthetic force.

#### REPIN'S PEASANT

"Liberation" has become a much-abused word in connection with avant-garde and Modernist art.

Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting"

If Bell and Fry are identified with postimpressionism, Clement Greenberg's criticism is chiefly associated with the abstract painting and sculpture of the 1940s and '50s, especially the work of New York School artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, and Morris Louis. Greenberg's ideas have remained remarkably durable in art and in studio education. In fact, the past decade has witnessed something of a Greenberg renaissance. The University of Chicago Press published his collected

writings in 1995, and a major biography appeared in 1998.<sup>54</sup> At the same time former ideological foes such as T. J. Clark and Charles Harrison, who once reviled Greenberg for his insistence on the autonomy of the aesthetic from social or political values, have publicly reconsidered their views.<sup>55</sup>

One of Greenberg's most influential arguments concerned the movement toward abstraction in modernist art. According to Greenberg it is the task of each art medium in the modern period to gradually refine the formal characteristic that clearly differentiates it from other media. For painting, this characteristic is the reliance on a flat support, typically stretched canvas. As a result, flatness, along with an increasingly two-dimensional and nonrepresentational pictorial language, becomes the only appropriate destiny for advanced painting. This is not a destiny that the artist consciously chooses to pursue; rather, Greenberg attributes a kind of evolutionary agency to "painting," "art," and even "modernism" itself.<sup>56</sup> Thus "art" has the ability to "demonstrate its powers" and "capture . . . effects." "Pictures and statues exhaust" themselves; "the picture plane," like some organic life-form, "grows shallower and shallower"; and, in a heroic combat with its own conditions of existence, the "pristine flatness of the stretched canvas . . . struggles to overcome every other element."<sup>57</sup>

Greenberg was notoriously indifferent to the professed intentions of the painters and sculptors about whom he wrote because he had a story to tell that was much larger than the actions of any single artist, no matter how protean or creative. It was the story of modernism's essence, slowly revealing itself over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> There is a concept of aesthetic communication in Greenberg's theory, in the lingua franca of "flatness" and "form." But it is not the artist who engages in this act of communication so much as the autonomous work of art, taken in its collective development. Painting becomes the interlocutor in an ongoing dialogue with its own past, a dialogue that is "overheard," so to speak, by the trained historian or critic, who emerges as the ideal viewer.

The nonexpert viewer has a somewhat less straightforward experience, according to Greenberg, who fears that kitsch or popular culture has dulled the discriminatory powers of the urban masses.<sup>59</sup> For Greenberg art differs from kitsch in its ability to frustrate simplistic translation or communication. The artists of the New York School themselves partly shared his view, fearing that their work would lose its aesthetic power if it became too accessible to viewers. "The earliest written history of hu-



man desires," according to Barnett Newman in 1947, "proves that the meaning of the world cannot be found in the social act."<sup>60</sup> And "nobody understands art but the artist" is sculptor David Smith's defiant claim, about five years later.<sup>61</sup> For painters such as Rothko, Reinhardt, and Newman, any attempt to produce easily intelligible work represented an unforgivable surrender of artistic integrity to the forces of cultural and political conformity. In his well-known essay "Art as Art" (1962), Ad Reinhardt usefully illustrates the tendency to collapse an artwork's semantic availability into its capacity for commercial exploitation: "Everything into irreducibility, unreproducibility, imperceptibility. Nothing 'usable,' 'manipulable,' 'salable,' 'dealable,' 'collectable,' 'graspable.'"<sup>62</sup>

Reinhardt reiterates the "linguistic pessimism" that Heinemann detected earlier in Bell and makes the same connection between semantic availability and commodity status. (What is "graspable" by the viewer is also "salable.") The work of art constitutes an act of resistance to socially shared meaning or communicability. By refusing to communicate with the viewer (or at least with the kitsch-sodden viewer), the artwork asserts its difference from, and resistance to, banal mass culture.<sup>63</sup> As a result it becomes a litmus test, revealing the viewer's acuity and sophistication. In an article published in 1948, *Life* magazine convened a panel of "art experts" to comment on the emergence of abstract painting in the United States in the postwar period. One of them suggested that the viewer wishing to engage with modern, abstract painting "should look devotedly at the picture. . . . If it conveys nothing to him, then he should remember that the fault may be in him, not in the artist."<sup>64</sup> Barnett Newman expresses a similar sentiment in an interview with Dorothy Sackler in 1962: "Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly, it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism."<sup>65</sup> Newman's statement is striking for its staggering ambition, combined with an equally staggering economy in its means of achievement. Here, indeed, is the anticipatory power of Kant's aesthetic writ large. The bathos of Newman's statement lies in the disjunction between the physical artifact (patterns of pigment on stretched canvas) and the profound consequences that it purports to catalyze. If only we could read Newman's paintings "properly," all the evil in the world would drain away. Or is it that a world populated by people who know how to read Newman's canvases properly would never generate totalitarian or capitalist societies in the first place? Is the canvas an anticipation, a quixotic gesture, or an agent of political change? Newman,

as a visual artist, has done all he can. He has produced a work that solicits, even demands, a sublimely enlightened viewer. The artist is under no obligation to those existing viewers who cannot read his or her work properly. Rather, aesthetic communication is defined in terms of an ideal viewer-yet-to-be, and the artist is accountable only to posterity.

This insularity and withdrawal, and the pronounced distaste for the limitations of the average viewer (recalling Bell's "ungifted majority"), had much to do with the political context in which the abstract expressionist painters came of age. Many of them were supporters of leftist Popular Front organizations during the 1930s, but the rise of Stalinism destroyed their youthful faith in political alternatives to capitalism. They were also quite critical of the populist American Scene movement associated with painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, feeling that it promulgated clichéd images of American life in a stylistically conservative manner. The political resignation experienced by artists like Pollock, Rothko, and Robert Motherwell isolated them from mainstream American society in the post-World War II period. The *Life* magazine article captures some of this anomie. "Civilization . . . has lost a sense of communal values"; advertising and political double-talk have contaminated the symbols artists might have used to communicate with the society around them. The article goes on to define modern art by its "remoteness from the symbols and values of the majority of men." The artist has been stripped "of many of the useful standards that sustained the artists of the past and helped to make them comprehensible—religious beliefs, moral codes, esthetic dogmas—the absolutes of other ages. He is on his own. And his one remaining criterion is a kind of personal honesty, a kind of integrity."<sup>66</sup>

The only refuge for the artist disenchanted with socialism and disgusted by capitalism was to withdraw into a resistant subjectivity and to reject "comprehensibility" entirely. The artist's individuality becomes the primary content of the work—both the artwork and the artist must be rendered opaque and inscrutable. In fact, the artist emerges as an exemplary subject, showing viewers how to live an authentic life, in touch with their individual creative energies, in the midst of the gray-flannel conformity of the 1950s. The very idea of translating their work into a discursive form, of making it intelligible through criticism, was anathema to many of the New York School artists. In 1943 Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Newman responded to the self-professed confusion of a *New York Times* art critic about their work with a "Statement" disparaging critical exegesis as "program notes" for the "simple-minded." "No

simple set of notes can explain our paintings," they contended, because their images contained an "intrinsic" meaning that resisted translation. They went on to juxtapose their paintings, which derived from the "world of the imagination, fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense," with the "trite tripe" represented by "interior decoration; pictures for over the mantel; social pictures . . . the American scene; the National Academy, the Corn Belt Academy, etc."<sup>67</sup> The authentic artist must "abandon his plastic bank-book," Rothko wrote elsewhere, "just as he has abandoned other forms of security. Both the sense of community and of security depend on the familiar. Free of them, transcendental experiences become possible."<sup>68</sup> The work of art that ventured outside the gallery or studio took a great risk. To send a picture out into the world is "an unfeeling act," according to Rothko. "How often it must be permanently impaired by the eyes of the vulgar and the cruelty of the impotent."<sup>69</sup>

#### THE ELEGIAC IMAGE

A curious formal manifestation of the withdrawal into individualism took place in Pollock's paintings during the 1940s. Pollock's use of larger canvases during this period was influenced by the Mexican mural movement. (He worked in David Alfaro Siqueiros's Experimental Workshop in New York City during the 1930s.) For Siqueiros, along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, the mural's location in public buildings and plazas necessitated a large scale. Murals imply viewers in open public spaces for whom the image must be intelligible and formally engaging from a considerable distance. Further, they provide a visual framework for collective activities in these spaces, such as rallies, demonstrations, festivals, and so on. In Pollock's canvases, however, viewers are no longer implicitly located in a public or collective space, seeing the image from a distance. Rather, they are inside a gallery, or later a museum, which, while arguably public, is certainly not collective in the same sense as a square or plaza. Pollock's large canvases recode the public gesture of scale in terms of an individual viewer who is meant to be physically close enough to the canvas to be swallowed up and overwhelmed: to perceptually inhabit the privatized space of the painting. The individual body becomes a surrogate for a social body: a fragmentary expression or reminder of the previous commitment to a public scale. Similarly, Rothko worked on a large scale out of a desire to create images that were "intimate and human."<sup>70</sup>

For Pollock and Rothko the painted image became an elegy for the

lost promise of a more fully public and collective art practice (rendered impossible by the failure of communism and the unfettered advance of the market system).<sup>71</sup> In fact, in *Arts of Impoverishment* (1993), Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit use this concept of failed communication with the viewer to situate Rothko's painting. Bersani and Dutoit mark a division in Rothko's career between his earlier canvases ("too easy to like") and his later canvases that work against this earlier "readability" and demonstrate "the difficulty of the very act of seeing."<sup>72</sup> Thus Rothko's later works "disturb our reading of traditionally stable elements" and "deconstruct . . . the boundaries needed to identify objects in space." The viewer reels before those "disorienting" images, reaching out for the conventional navigational markers of pictorial space but finding only "compositional ambiguity," a confusing world where "it is difficult to say which hue came first" and where "there can be no certainty."<sup>73</sup> For Rothko the only appropriate response to a world filled with vulgar eyes is silence and withdrawal ("I have nothing to show you," is how Bersani and Dutoit characterize his position as an artist). This is less a case of the artist struggling against the inherent limitations of his or her medium (as in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Cézanne's "doubt") than it is a self-conscious withdrawal from meaning itself. "Everything changes," Bersani and Dutoit write, "when the work of art becomes stubbornly inhospitable and opaque. . . . There is nothing that can be done to make the paintings in the Houston [Rothko] Chapel easier to see."<sup>74</sup>

Bersani and Dutoit effect an important transition in avant-garde discourse by linking the critique of representational art initiated by Bell and Greenberg to a broader set of philosophical assumptions about the constitution of human subjectivity. Although this connection was always implicit in Bell's and Greenberg's work (both felt that authentic art solicited or implied a viewer who was particularly receptive to new experiences), Bersani and Dutoit make it explicit through a rapprochement with neo-Nietzschean critical theory. Thus Rothko's "sacrificial or crippling" moves (his refusal to produce paintings that the viewer can read or understand) are opposed no longer merely to the semantic instrumentality of kitsch or representational painting but to the very coherence of the viewer as a speaking and reasoning subject. In Bersani and Dutoit's post-modern version of Rothko, the artist has "taken as his subject the illusion of subjects as a category, perhaps not only as an aesthetic category but also as a category of thought itself."<sup>75</sup>

For Bersani and Dutoit, recognizable images are linked to a fascistic demand for cognitive "order" and to an oppressive Cartesian subjectiv-

ity. The very condition of speaking—speaking *to* the viewer—for them depends on a subjectivity that seeks only to master and negate the other. Thus discursive experience is always/already compromised by its association with an “appropriative consciousness.”<sup>76</sup> It is inconceivable for Bersani and Dutoit that one could ever speak *with* viewers, only at or against them. Rothko, Samuel Beckett, and the filmmaker Alain Resnais are said to represent the possibility of an “anti-authoritarian” or “non-sadistic” stance. They are artists who, heroically, refuse to speak to the viewer and remain instead sealed inside the “narcissistic” universe of their own creations. As Bersani and Dutoit write: “Rothko gives us a perceptual lesson in the constitution of the real rather than an epistemologically or morally superior (and intensely ‘expressive’) version of an already constituted real.”<sup>77</sup> Here, as I noted above, Bersani and Dutoit can conceive of a relation to discourse or representation (“a version of the real”) only as something that requires one of the interlocutors to take up a position of “superiority” and negation relative to the other. Yet Rothko clearly *does* take up a position of superiority over the viewer. His work, according to Bersani and Dutoit, will “train us in new modes of mobility (or modes to which we may have become blind).”<sup>78</sup> The concept of “training” here echoes Greenberg’s description of the preparation that viewers must undergo to appreciate a challenging work of art. It evokes the image of the artist as an epistemologically (and, I would suggest, morally) privileged subject who will teach the “ungifted majority” how to grasp the illusory nature of the real.<sup>79</sup>

#### THE POLITICS OF SEMANTIC LABOR

According to Greenberg the work of art must resist the accessible meanings associated with kitsch and emphasize instead the “opacity of its medium.”<sup>80</sup> In the case of painting, the viewer’s attention should be focused on the physicality of canvas and pigment (“the ineluctable flatness of the support”).<sup>81</sup> Greenberg’s “opacity” operates in two registers. First, it suggests that one cannot look “through” the medium of the painting to something in the world that it represents. It is not that the medium has no significance *per se* but that it arrests the chain of signification at the level of its own materiality (instead of extending it into a symbolic, and hence discursive, form). The meaning of the work resides in its surface materiality (the layers of color in a Rothko painting, the impasto of a de Kooning). However, this “opacity” also functions relative to Green-

berg’s arguments about kitsch, in that the work of art should frustrate or forestall the viewer’s understanding or interpretation—it should be difficult rather than easy, as Greenberg writes.<sup>82</sup> Whereas in the first, literal, use of the term, the meaning of the work lies on its surface, in the materiality of paint and canvas, the second use of the term suggests the viewer’s desire to penetrate beneath this surface to a hidden significance. The representational depth rejected in the first instance reappears as a semantic depth about which Greenberg is considerably more ambivalent.

Related to both of these responses is the contention that the viewer’s initial experience of the work of art is bodily rather than cognitive—“pure painting and sculpture seek . . . to affect the spectator physically,” as Greenberg wrote in “Towards a Newer Laocoön.”<sup>83</sup> Greenberg’s contention that the experience of art is physical poses a conundrum—how can art be bodily (and, by implication, more immediate or direct in its impact on the viewer) without becoming “easy”? But it is specifically a discursive form of understanding that Greenberg wants to defer rather than sensory assimilation. His model of aesthetic experience begins with an immediate physical response to the work of art but concludes with the reassertion of cognitive mastery as the work is situated in the pantheon of previous great works. Greenberg contrasts this approach with a “literary” or descriptive one that surrenders the painting’s meaning to viewers without sufficient effort on their part. “Modernist painting,” as Greenberg writes, “asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art—which means it’s being translated in such a way that it entirely loses its literary character.”<sup>84</sup>

The individual painting resists discursive assimilation; it challenges the existing categories by which we recognize and define works of art. It generates “infinite possibilities” of meaning, as Greenberg wrote of poetry, “approaching the brink of meaning and yet never falling over it.”<sup>85</sup> Greenberg endows this ambiguity with a high moral value. It is all that stands between fine art and the consumer culture that constantly threatens to engulf it. In the “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” essay, Greenberg actually links difficult or complex art with the mission of socialism.<sup>86</sup> But the difficult painting must eventually surrender its resistant status and take up its assigned position within the ongoing narrative of modernist art. It must allow itself to be situated relative to “the intelligible continuity of taste and tradition.”<sup>87</sup> It must become, in short, discursive and understandable. Its attainment of discursive status, however, must be preceded by



a sustained experience of deferral and resistance that forces the viewer to struggle for the reward of categorical mastery—a formalist Puritan work ethic.<sup>88</sup>

It is notable that Greenberg associated the capacity for this semantic labor with the viewer's class position. The "elite," the "ruling class," and "the rich" are the natural audience for avant-garde art. They are the ones who "command the leisure and comfort that always goes hand in hand with cultivation." This leisure time is necessary for "initiation into [the] craft secrets" of advanced art and for refining one's receptivity to the nuances and challenges that such art poses.<sup>89</sup> Only those who are intimately familiar with the art of the past can fully appreciate a new, innovative work that challenges normative standards, and only those who are liberal and open-minded can accept this new work as a contribution to, rather than an undermining of, those standards. Greenberg compares this "ruling class" art viewer to a hypothetical Russian peasant who must "work hard all day for his living," whose "rude, uncomfortable circumstances" give him insufficient "leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso."<sup>90</sup> Greenberg's choice of terms here is striking. The appreciation of advanced art does not come naturally but requires an extensive and specialized education: it must be "trained" for like a sporting event. As a result, the peasant prefers the facsimile of authentic art provided by an academic painter like Ilya Repin. Greenberg links the semantic labor required by difficult art to the physical labor of the working class, which makes possible the leisure of the "ruling class" while also ensuring that the worker never has enough spare time to master authentic culture.

Although this summation makes Greenberg sound like an apologist for upper-class privilege, he was not. In fact, when he wrote the "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" essay he described himself as a Marxist. But rather than simply dismiss the culture of the elite (specifically avant-garde art) as decadent, he recognized its positive value. For Greenberg, avant-garde art represented the highest expression of human creativity and imagination—the culture that is possible when the problems of material scarcity and economic production have been solved and we can devote all of our energies to self-cultivation. It marks the promise of a postrevolutionary future in which everyone will have the leisure time to master difficult art and in which kitsch itself, no longer able to feed off the depleted and alienated desires of the oppressed, will wither and die. Avant-garde art is important because it holds out the promise that in an ideal future the leisure time required to appreciate it may be available to everyone. Green-

berg returns us, again, to the promise of enlightenment contained in the Kantian aesthetic. Art is a reminder of the utopia of plenitude slumbering in the lap of bourgeois capitalism.<sup>91</sup> There is no point in imposing avant-garde art on the uneducated masses, whether in the United States or the USSR, without a political and economic transformation that will make this universal leisure a reality. "The state is helpless in this matter," as Greenberg writes, "and remains so as long as the problems of production have not been solved in a socialist sense. The same holds true, of course, for capitalist countries."<sup>92</sup>

By 1965, when Greenberg wrote his "Modernist Painting" essay, his "mordant hostility to capitalism" (as T. J. Clark described it) had been replaced by a conspicuous silence about the political implications of semantic labor.<sup>93</sup> In his later writings Greenberg gradually uncouples the idea of a formalist, self-reflexive art practice from the revolutionary moment of shock or dislocation precipitated by complex art. The significance of art is determined no longer by its oppositional nature, relative to kitsch, or by its presentiment of a revolutionary future, but by its position in the history of modern art. Moreover, the history that Greenberg presents is carefully pruned of any troubling deviations from the formalist narrative that he privileges (e.g., dadaism, surrealism, constructivism, pop, and minimalism are either ignored or marginalized). In a characteristic tautology, he writes: "Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art."<sup>94</sup> The semantic labor needed to comprehend that history, and to recognize the proper placement of current avant-garde art within it, is simultaneously naturalized and depoliticized.

Greenberg's abandonment of a critical model of avant-garde art later in his career is not entirely surprising. By the 1960s and 1970s it had become increasingly obvious that the resistant strategies of Reinhardt, Newman, and Rothko did nothing to prevent their work from becoming both "salable" and "graspable" as crowds flocked to the Rothko Chapel and the Museum of Modern Art like supplicants to the altar of modernism. As Greenberg himself recognized, the half-life of difficult art is quite brief, as it rapidly becomes part of the tradition against which subsequent works must rebel. This period also witnessed a growing convergence between fine art and consumer culture as pop artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and others, far from holding kitsch at arm's length, made it the very content of their art, actively courting the celebrity and mainstream acceptance that would have been anathema to Reinhardt's generation. The conventional opposition between complex art and sim-



plistic mass culture was also difficult to sustain in a world in which innovative advertising agencies began to employ the same strategies of shock, dislocation, irony, and self-reflexivity that had been mainstays of twentieth-century avant-garde art practice.<sup>95</sup> The privileging of the expert viewer, the implicit superiority of complex or opaque art, and the insularity that are central features of Greenberg's aesthetic were severely tested by changes in both the art world and consumer culture during the 1960s. At the same time, the core avant-garde principles of complexity and inaccessibility were freed from their roots in quasi-revolutionary art theory and made available to other uses and other justifications.

#### THE PROSTITUTE AND THE PALACE GUARD

Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried? Consider a subdivided progression of “Frieds” on millions of stages.

Robert Smithson, Letter to the Editor,  
*Artforum*, October 1967

Michael Fried is perhaps the best-known contemporary critic to elaborate on (and modify) the formalist paradigm associated with Greenberg. For Fried, writing in the midst of the rapidly expanding art market of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the danger that high art would be carried away in a flood of mass culture was considerably less immediate than it was for Greenberg in 1939. Art has less to fear from mass culture than it does from the collapse of its own qualitative distinctions and hierarchies. Thus in Fried's writings, especially his influential essays “Three American Painters” (1965) and “Art and Objecthood” (1967), the depredations of kitsch are replaced by the threat posed to a discriminatory aesthetic sensibility by the dizzying profusion of new art movements in the 1960s (pop art, *arte povera*, conceptual art, and especially minimalism).

Fried responds to this interdisciplinary excess by reasserting the critic's traditional prerogative to differentiate authentic from inauthentic art, applying such conventional (albeit subjective) categories of judgment as “quality,” “value,” and “sheer rightness.” Following Greenberg, these conditions are most discernible in works that refine and purify the perceived essence of a given medium (what clearly differentiates the experience of one art form from that of any other).<sup>96</sup> As he writes, “The concepts of quality and value . . . are meaningful . . . only within the in-

dividual arts.”<sup>97</sup> Fried dismisses forms of art such as installation and performance that engage in a promiscuous dialogue with other media or frequent the dark borderland “between” disciplinary boundaries as “non-art” or “theatrical.”<sup>98</sup>

Fried uses the concept of theatricality to describe certain minimalist artists (Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd) whose works reference contextual factors such as light, scale, and the physical configuration of the gallery. In various ways their works “anticipate” and play off the viewer's physical and cognitive responses through the manipulation of size, shape, color, and surface appearance. “One is more aware than before,” as Robert Morris writes, “that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.”<sup>99</sup> That investigation ultimately leads artists such as Hans Haacke and Adrian Piper to expand their analyses of aesthetic meaning to include the social and political (as well as the spatial and cognitive) “context” that surrounds and legitimates the work of art. I examine Piper's work in the chapter that follows.

The theatrical work sacrifices some of its autonomy and agrees to conform, at least partially, to the viewer's expectations—to meet the viewer halfway, so to speak. But for Fried even the nominal “dialogue” with the viewer enacted by one of Morris's or Judd's sculptures threatens authentic aesthetic experience. Theatrical art communicates to viewers through formal cues that make them conscious of the fact that their ostensibly transcendent encounter is in fact highly conditional—that aesthetic meaning is not immanent in the physical object but is created through and by their very situatedness in space and time before it. Fried casts the “theatrical,” or “literalist,” art object as a garrulous co-worker who sidles up to you at the office New Year's party to bore you with snapshots of his children, “obstinately” ignoring all your attempts to politely signal lack of interest.

Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder . . . almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him. And inasmuch as literalist work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it *has* been waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him.<sup>100</sup>

Elsewhere Fried describes the “disquieting” experience of encountering a literalist work “unexpectedly,” like a mugger lurking in a “darkened room.”<sup>101</sup> In contrast, the works of authentic artists, like the English

sculptor Anthony Caro, are blissfully indifferent to the viewer's physical presence or normative preconceptions. The authentic modernist work surrounds itself with a hermetic field that deadens or restricts the viewer's awareness of contextual conditions or determinants. "In the grip of" such a work one is able to attend to the object and only the object, achieving an almost metaphysical form of focused consciousness that Fried describes, fittingly enough, as a "state of grace."<sup>102</sup> One is no longer aware of the impact that one's own position in space has on the work's meaning, nor is one's perception of the work built up through a sequence of reflexive observations about the mediating effects of the gallery space, light, scale, or physical proximity.<sup>103</sup> Rather, the work presents itself immediately and all at once ("At every moment the work is wholly manifest," as Fried writes), evoking a phenomenon that he describes as "presentness": "It is this continuous and entire *presentness*, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."<sup>104</sup>

Thus the authentic work of art does not engage in a dialogue with other art forms or even with the viewer—it simply and irresistibly compels "conviction." Its meaning is given over to the viewer pure and fully formed through an immaculate perception, rather than constructed in the messy space between the viewer and the work of art. Fried's authentic art is stoically self-sufficient and independent of the viewer, like a Buckingham Palace guard who refuses to interact with curious onlookers. The insolently theatrical work, on the other hand, depends "on the staging, the conspicuous manipulation, of its relationship to an audience."<sup>105</sup> The theatrical work, like the kitsch object, appeals to and openly "solicits" the viewer's attention, encouraging the "appropriative consciousness" feared by Bersani and Dutoit. The authentic work has the opposite effect: it helps us lose our sense of self through an unselfconscious "absorption" in the work as an immediately apprehended totality.<sup>106</sup> Only by studiously ignoring the viewer's presence can the authentic work avoid the indignity of selling itself to the viewer like a cheap commodity.

Fried is troubled by the prospect of an aesthetic perception that unfolds diachronically through a series of exchanges between the work and the viewer, in which the work of art deploys certain codes that the viewer is able to recognize, interpret, and assemble into a larger meaning. Fried's theoretical framework, however, still relies on a concept of duration. The

perception of authentic art *begins* with a sense of "conviction" that is immediate and independent of any awareness of the conditional nature of aesthetic meaning. But that intuitive response, resistant to any "exhaustive analysis," is subsequently validated by a more conventional art historical perception based on a standard of quality derived from comparisons with past works. In fact, Fried distances himself from Greenberg, or from what he sees as the stereotypical account of Greenberg's formalism, by arguing that his own evaluation of art is premised, not on the belief in some "irreducible essence" specific to a given medium, but on the artwork's capacity to "convince" him "that it can stand comparison with . . . the painting of the past."<sup>107</sup> Fried seeks to cover over the durational and contextual operations of comparison and judgment by insisting that they are ultimately founded on a compelling intuition of "sheer rightness." The relative "authenticity" of a work of art is tested by an almost physiological, preanalytic response that fortuitously corresponds with the established norms of artistic excellence. Definitions of quality are thus insulated from any direct contact with, or determination by, the contingent forces of history, culture, or politics.<sup>108</sup>

For Fried the authentic work of art is a totemic object, before which we surrender our desire to manipulate and instrumentalize, and which refuses to manipulate or instrumentalize us in turn. It trains us to silence our ravenous "appropriative consciousness" and to respect the unique and anomalous nature of things in our encounters with the world. This receptive openness to the world runs throughout avant-garde discourse, in Bell's and Fry's rejection of normalizing representational conventions, in Greenberg's assault on the clichés of kitsch, and in Fried's criticism of theatrical art that shamelessly importunes the viewer. In each case, however, it is assumed that this openness can be purchased only at the expense of an indifference to (or assault on) the viewer and his or her associations and prior experiences. Once the work interacts with the viewer through a shared language, familiar visual conventions, or even an implicit acknowledgment of the viewer's physical presence in the same space, it sets off down the slippery slope of violence and negation. The artists I discuss here ask if there are other ways to actualize the commitment to openness, outside the glacial isolation of the recalcitrant object. In the next chapter I examine attempts to reframe this ethical and cognitive ideal around the very "theatrical" approaches that Fried dismisses as inauthentic.

*Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 38-47; and Tom Finkelpearl, "Five Dialogues on Dialogue-Based Public Art Projects," in *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 270-75.

Other key works in this area include Lucy Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multi-Centered Society* (New York: New Press, 1998); Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, eds., *Cultures in Contention* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985); Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989); Mark O'Brien and Craig Little, eds., *Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990); Carol Becker, *Social Responsibility: The Place of the Artist in Society* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1990); Carol Becker, *Zones of Contention: Essays on Art, Institutions, Gender and Anxiety* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Nina Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson, and Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, eds., *The Citizen Artist: Twenty Years of Art in the Public Arena. An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978-1998*, vol. 1 (New York: Critical Press, 1998); and Grant Kester, ed., *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998). In addition, there has been ongoing coverage in alternative arts publications such as *Afterimage*, *Drama Review*, *Fuse*, *High Performance* (before it ceased publication), *Mix*, *New Art Examiner*, and *Public Art Review* in North America and *AN*, *Control* (published by Stephen Willats), *Circa*, and *Variant* in the United Kingdom.

7. Critic Suzi Gablik introduces the concept of a "dialogical" approach to art making in her book *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991). On Bakhtin's concept of dialogics, see Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" and "Art and Answerability" in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. and annot. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). I have titled this book *Conversation Pieces* in reference to the interactive character of the projects that I am discussing, but the term originally referred to a portrait genre popular in European painting during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Berman Rames (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 57.

9. There are exceptions here: kinetic sculpture, certain forms of installation art, more recent developments in "interactive" digital or computer-based art, and so on. My point is directed toward the more general orientation of object-based art criticism.

10. Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 7.

11. This was the reaction of a number of U.S. critics to the 1997 Documenta exhibition (Documenta X), organized by the French curator Catherine David,

which established a continuity between conceptually oriented projects from the 1970s (e.g., works by Hans Haacke, Dan Graham, and Marcel Broodthaers) and more recent "public" works by artists such as Christine and Irene Hohenbuecher, Lois Weinberger, and Christine Hill. Ken Johnson, writing in *Art in America*, coined the term *post-retinal* to describe much of the work in the show. Although Johnson intended this term as a pejorative (he complained that the exhibition "offered little in the way of traditional visual pleasure"), I feel it is quite useful in capturing the ways in which dialogical projects resist the tendency to collapse the aesthetic into visual sensation. The reliance of contemporary criticism on the writer's "personal" response also has the effect of treating subjectivity (Steiner's "I like") as an unquestioned, a priori principle instead of recognizing the extent to which the critic's individual taste is at least partially conditioned by forms of identification based on class, race, gender, and so on. See Ken Johnson, "A Post-Retinal Documenta," *Art in America* 85 (October 1997): 80-88.

12. Critic Patricia C. Phillips writes of the danger posed by the attribution of "good intentions" in community art practice. "Should we bring different critical expectations to this work? Does community-based work fail because of unreasonable critical positions? Or does it succeed because good intentions are irreproachable? Clearly, critics must guard against cynicism or seduction." Patricia C. Phillips, "Public Art's Intentions, Indignities, and Interventions," *Sculpture Magazine* 17 (March 1998): 18-25.

13. This attitude is not confined to writing on more conventional media. Here is critic Gene Youngblood discussing the aesthetics of digital video: "[W]e need only remember that art and communication are fundamentally at cross-purposes. . . . [A]rt is always non-communicative: it is about personal vision and autonomy; its aim is to produce non-standard observers." Gene Youngblood, "Video and the Cinematic Enterprise" (1984), in *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future, a Survey of Two Decades*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 43.

#### CHAPTER 1. THE EYES OF THE VULGAR

1. Andrew Graham-Dixon, "This Is the House That Rachel Built," *Independent*, November 2, 1993, p. 25.

2. See Nick Couldry in "Speaking Up in a Public Space: The Strange Case of Rachel Whiteread's House," *New Formations* 25 (Summer 1995): 98.

3. Iain Sinclair, "The House in the Park: A Psychogeographical Response," in *Rachel Whiteread House*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p. 21.

4. Doreen Massey, "Space-Time and the Politics of Location," in Lingwood, *Rachel Whiteread House*, p. 36. The language of contemporary art criticism is rife with similar examples. A 2002 promotional flyer for Artangel Trust describes a project by Francis Alys (*City Scenarios*) as an effort "to invert and confound our everyday experiences of the metropolis."

5. James Lingwood, "Introduction," in Lingwood, *Rachel Whiteread House*, p. 8.

6. *Ibid.*



7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. *Time Out*, October 27–November 3, 1993, and the *Times*, November 5, 1993, quoted in Couldry, "Speaking Up," p. 100.

10. As Massey writes, "What *House* did not do" was "problematize, at the level of locality, the memory of what that past was. Although its location was important, *House* did not say much about the East End as a wider area or about Bow within it: as a place of cohabitation of radicalism and racism." Massey, "Space-Time," p. 49.

11. See Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, "The Aesthetics of Collaboration," *Art Journal* 56 (Spring 1997): 26–37. Dunn and Leeson have recently divided up their artistic practice, forming two new "legacy" organizations. Leeson's cSPACE (centered at the University of East London) is concentrating on social art practice on the Internet and the development of virtual learning environments. Dunn's ART.e builds on work that he has developed over the past several years in connection with the Agenda 21 sustainable development initiatives that came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

12. Lingwood, "Introduction," p. 7.

13. *Entering Buttermilk Bottom* (1995), a project by the U.S.-based collaborative group REPOhistory, provides a comparable example. REPOhistory met with the former residents of an African American community in Atlanta that was displaced by urban renewal. Through a series of meetings and dialogues they were able to reconstruct a history of the neighborhood (using stories, photographs, and family memorabilia) that was then communicated and preserved through signs, street markings, an installation, and a (now annual) reunion among the residents. For more information see the REPOhistory Web site: [www.repohistory.org/](http://www.repohistory.org/). As their name suggests, REPOhistory seeks to "repossess" forgotten histories and lives associated with specific sites.

14. Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde, 1908–1922*, ed. Robert Ross, vol. 8 (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), p. 300.

15. See, for example, Tom Williamson, *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

16. Quoted in Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 132.

17. Ibid., p. 130.

18. Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbooks* (1953), quoted in Werner Haftmann, *The Mind and Work of Paul Klee* (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 89.

19. Some of the material in this section has been expanded from Grant Kester, "Learning from Aesthetics: Old Masters and New Lessons," *Art Journal* (Spring 1997): 20–25. My somewhat unorthodox interpretation of aesthetic philosophy has been influenced by new work in this area over the past several years by scholars such as Christine Battersby, David Beech, Susan Buck-Morss, Howard Caygill, Terry Eagleton, and John Roberts.

20. As Kant notes in the *Critique of Judgment* (1792), "[T]he cognitive powers brought into play by [aesthetic] presentation are in free play, because no determinant concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition. . . . This state of free play of the cognitive powers . . . must be universally communicable; for cognition, the determination of the object with which given presentations are to harmonize (in any subject whatever) is the only way of presenting that holds for everyone." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 62/Ak218.

21. "[T]he aesthetic affords access to the universal ground of all representations. . . . [W]e act as particular individuals here and now, but at the same time discover a transpersonal, universal dimension that we can otherwise know only indirectly in theoretical speculation." David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 65.

22. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 60/Ak216.

23. Kant describes judgments of beauty as being "public." Ibid., p. 57/Ak214. David Wellbery links this "public" status to the concept of an "ideal speech situation" in the work of Habermas and others: "The ideal of transparency, which in the Enlightenment was conceived in semantic terms, reappears in the work of Habermas and Apel as a pragmatic ideal: a communicational exchange in which subjects are transparent to themselves and others. . . . As was the case in Enlightenment theory, aesthetic representations point forward to a state of freedom in which the compulsions and opacities of speech are finally overcome." Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoön*, p. 242.

24. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 58/Ak212, 55/Ak215.

25. Ibid., p. 86/Ak237. As Kant notes, "[A]ll that is postulated is the possibility of a judgment that is aesthetic and yet can be considered valid for everyone. . . . Hence the universal voice is only an idea." Ibid., p. 60/Ak216.

26. Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 48.

27. See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1992).

28. This transformation would be accelerated by the diffusion of enlightened thinking made possible by the unfettered circulation of ideas and commerce (what Kant, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, describes as "Büch und Geld"). Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

29. Barbara Hepworth, "Sculpture," in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1992), p. 377.

30. Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). One of the best examinations of this dynamic is Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 47–62.

31. In an interview with the art historian Mary Luytens, Millais's grandson, Sir William James, describes the incident:



One day . . . a representative of Pears Soap came to Palace Gate (Millais's studio) and told my grandfather that Pears Soap, the company, had bought the picture [*Bubbles*] from the proprietor of the *Illustrated London News* and were going to use it as an advertisement. Well he was furious. He thought it a most dreadful thing to do with one of his pictures. But he took legal advice and found there was no copyright on the picture and he couldn't stop it. The copyright had gone. And so of course very soon, I can remember it even now, the whole country was flooded with these Pears Soap advertisements.

Mary Luytens: Of course it must have lowered, and it did I think, his prestige all over the country when *Bubbles* became an advertisement which I suppose was one of the reasons he was so absolutely furious about it.

Geoffrey Millais, *John Everett Millais* (London: Academy Editions, 1979), pp. 20–21. For a more detailed account, see G. H. Fleming, *John Everett Millais: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1998).

32. See Peter Watson's *From Manet to Manhattan: The Rise of the Modern Art Market* (London: Vintage, 1992) for an account of the increasingly mercantile nature of the art world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also see Gene H. Bell-Vilada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790–1990* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

33. Roger Fry, "Art and Socialism," in *Vision and Design*, ed. J. B. Bullen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 41. James McNeill Whistler, in one of his "Ten O'Clock" lectures, remarks, "Art is upon the Town!—to be chucked under the chin, by the passing gallant!—to be enticed within the gates of the householder—to be coaxed into company, as proof of culture and refinement!" *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings of James McNeill Whistler*, ed. Nigel Thorp (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 80.

34. Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist" (1947), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 159.

35. Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," in *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 17.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

39. "Who doubts that one of those *Daily Mirror* photographers in collaboration with a *Daily Mail* reporter can tell us far more about 'London by day' than any Royal Academician?" *Ibid.*, p. 23. Bell would have included Millais himself in this category.

40. Those who lack the power of expression are "God's failures. . . . They should be kindly treated along with the hopelessly idiotic and the hydrocephalous." *Ibid.*, p. 23. Bell probably had in mind Frith's *The Railway Station* (1862), one of a series of scenes he painted that featured crowds at various public spaces or gatherings. Others included *Derby Day* (1858) and *Ramsgate Sands* (1854). See Aubrey Noakes, *William Frith, Extraordinary Victorian Painter: A Biographical and Critical Essay* (London: Jupiter, 1978).

41. Fry, "Art and Socialism," p. 46.

42. *Ibid.* In his influential essay "Some Intentions of Cubism" (1919), the

critic Maurice Raynal reiterates the classic opposition between the easy seductions of kitsch and the austere demands of great art: "But if you are not moved . . . if you cannot vibrate to the relationships of a representation never before seen, if you prefer to let yourself be taken in by over ingratiating arabesques . . . by the seduction of easy arrangements, if in a word you wish to take the bait offered by the cleverest anglers too readily, it is because the factor of self-control in your sensibility remains anaesthetized and because you are powerless to contain, as you should from time to time, the flux of your narcissistic instincts." Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916–1928* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 157.

43. Fry, "Art and Socialism," p. 54.

44. Clive Bell, "Society and Art," in Bell, *Art*, p. 172. As Dave Beech and John Roberts write in their essay on the figure of the "philistine," "Without any diminution of the class conflicts within industrial capitalism, Fry and Bell forsake the interpretation of class positions in cultural attitudes so prominent in the nineteenth century, speaking instead of a single division between those who are inside the experience of modern art and those who are not." Dave Beech and John Roberts, "Tolerating Impurities: An Ontology, Genealogy and Defense of Philistinism," *New Left Review* 227 (January–February 1998): 56.

45. Clive Bell, "Art and Society," in Bell, *Art*, p. 189.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

48. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931).

49. Jan Heinemann, "The Revolt against Language: A Critical Note on Twentieth-Century Irrationalism with Special Reference to the Aesthetic-Philosophical Views of Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell," *Orbis Litterarum* 32 (1977): 212–28.

50. Clive Bell, "The Metaphysical Hypothesis," in Bell, *Art*, p. 46.

51. Heinemann, "The Revolt against Language," p. 227.

52. Bell writes: "What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia, and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form." Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," p. 17. Paul Crowther has pointed out that the concept of significant form offers no way to confidently differentiate the "work of art" from any other visual event or experience in the world: "Bell cannot . . . provide us with adequate criteria for distinguishing significant artistic form from insignificant non-artistic form." Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 57. Bell openly attacks what he terms "historical criticism": "To praise or abuse or be interested in a work of art because it leads or does not lead to another work of art is to treat it as though it were not a work of art. The connection of one work of art with another may have everything to do with history: it has nothing to do with appreciation. . . . Though the development of painting from Giotto to Titian may be interesting historically, it cannot affect the value of any particular picture: aesthetically, it is of no

consequence whatever. Every work must be judged on its own merits." Clive Bell, "Art and History," in Bell, *Art*, p. 75.

53. "[T]he majority of the charming and intelligent people with whom I am acquainted appreciate visual art impurely; and, by the way, the appreciation of almost all great writers has been impure. But provided that there be some fraction of pure aesthetic emotion, even a mixed and minor appreciation of art is . . . one of the most valuable things in the world." Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," p. 32.

54. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols., ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986-93); Florence Rubinfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribners, 1998).

55. Dave Beech and John Roberts provide a useful overview of this transition in their essay "Spectres of the Aesthetic," *New Left Review* 218 (July-August 1996): 102-27.

56. Greenberg follows Wölfflin in endowing the work of art with a capacity for autonomous action. "The history of forms," according to Wölfflin, possesses an irrepressible fecundity. It "never stands still. . . . [E]very form lives on, begetting, and every style calls to a new one." Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950), p. 230.

57. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 40, 43. As Charles Harrison notes, in Greenberg's prose, "modernism" is "personified, given human agency—does this or that; it appears to think and judge, to contain its own 'alertness,' to make its own 'declarations.'" Paul Wood, Francis Francina, Jonathan Harris, and Charles Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 60.

58. As Greenberg insists in "Modernist Painting," "No one artist was, or is yet, consciously aware of this tendency, not could any artist work successfully in conscious awareness of it." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 9. This is the version that was published in *Art and Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1965): 193-201. An earlier version was published by the Voice of America as a pamphlet in 1960. See *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 1957-1969, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 85-94.

59. Thomas Crow's essay "Modernism and Mass Culture" remains one of the best studies of Greenberg's relationship to mass culture. See *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1983), pp. 215-64.

60. Newman, "The First Man," p. 170.

61. David Smith, "Aesthetics, the Artist and the Audience" (1952), reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 578.

62. Ad Reinhardt, "Art as Art," reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 809.

63. We can discover a more sophisticated expression of this view in Hans

Robert Jauss's "reception theory." For Jauss the quality or authenticity of an aesthetic experience, and its capacity to avoid the condition of "entertainment," is measured by its deviation from the viewer's existing "horizon of expectations." As he writes:

The way in which a literary work, at the historical moment of its appearance, satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience obviously provides a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value. The distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the "horizontal change" demanded by the reception of the new work, determines the aesthetic character of the literary work according to the aesthetics of reception; to the degree that this distance decreases, and no turn toward the horizon of the yet-unknown experience is demanded of the receiving consciousness, the closer the work comes to the sphere of "culinary" or entertainment art.

Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, introd. Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 204.

64. "A Life Roundtable on Modern Art," *Life*, October 11, 1948, p. 68, quoted in Bradford R. Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 286.

65. Barnett Newman, "'Frontiers of Space': Interview with Dorothy Gees Sackler" (1962), in O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, p. 251.

66. Collins, "Life Magazine," pp. 286-87.

67. Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, "Statement" (1943), reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, pp. 562-63.

68. Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted . . ." (1947), reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 563.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 565. We actually encounter two conflicting views in the writings of the New York School painters and sculptors. One is a rejection of "communication" per se (art is "a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication," according to Barnett Newman), and the other replaces dialogue not with indifference but with an orthopedic aggression: "It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way, not his way." Newman, "The First Man," p. 170, and Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman, "Statement," p. 562. For a useful overview of the politics of New York School art during the 1950s, see David Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

In a lengthy review of Craven's book, Claude Cernuschi challenges the argument that the New York School painters deliberately set out to make their works obscure. Following a series of quotes from figures such as Adolph Gottlieb ("My belief is that art should communicate") and Mark Rothko ("I communicate . . . basic emotions"), Cernuschi argues that these painters' "counted communication among their most important goals. Whether or not New York School abstractions actually communicate these emotions to the average spectator is beside the point, since what is at issue here is whether their works were intended to engage or to frustrate communication." But Cernuschi fails to acknowledge that when these artists discuss "communication" they have something very specific in mind.

It is the point that this work will be inexplicable, that communication will fail, for the "average viewer." A full reading of this period would have to account for the frequency with which figures such as Gottlieb, Rothko, and others disparage the stupidity of the uninformed and reject the idea of "communication" embodied by the American Scene painters and consumer culture. Claude Cernuschi, review of David Craven's *Abstraction Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period*, *Archives of American Art Journal* 39, nos. 1-2 (1999): 41.

70. Mark Rothko, "A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting and Sculpture," *Interiors* 110 (May 1951): 104, quoted by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit in *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 97.

71. In *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties*, Jonathan Harris speculates that for Pollock the "mural or 'quasi-mural' form may have held out . . . the possibility of developing a new kind of 'history painting' . . . capable, at some future point perhaps of being tied into a realm of public meanings." Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute*, p. 52.

72. Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 102.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 116, 109, 107.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Rothko "returns us to a moment of looking we may have skipped, to an effort to establish boundaries that a certain economy in human evolution may have succeeded in sparing us[,] . . . making concrete the indeterminate nature of being, an indeterminacy otherwise obscured in the empirical space of realized forms." Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 121.

79. Bersani and Dutoit defend their analysis from the charge of elitism by trying to distance themselves from traditional attacks on "cultural vulgarization." In advancing the "impotent" strategies of Beckett, Rothko, and Resnais as perhaps the only acceptable form of cultural resistance in contemporary art, Bersani and Dutoit place themselves well above the exigencies of actual political and cultural struggle: "[I]n our own wish to protest . . . against the imperialist aesthetic that demands from art models of mastery over the real, we may simply be withdrawing from the field of cultural politics altogether. Given how rapidly the most antagonistic groups on that field begin to sound alike, there may in fact be no shame in such a withdrawal." Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 8.

80. As Greenberg writes, "To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized." Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," p. 42.

81. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 6.

82. In a defense of Greenberg's criticism, Michael Fried cites a 1968 lecture in which Greenberg condemned what he termed "novelty art" (such as dadaism) as "easy" art that is "knowingly, aggressively, extravagantly masked by the guises of the difficult." Fried dismisses the kind of criticisms that Duchamp's work raised about the institutionalization of fine art as "pseudo-questions" concerned with "art as such" that merely evade the "real" question of artistic quality. See Michael

Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark," in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, p. 78.

83. Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," p. 42.

84. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 8.

85. Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," p. 42.

86. "Today we no longer look to socialism for a new culture—as inevitably one will appear once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now." Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 21.

87. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 10.

88. Paul Crowther points out the apparent contradiction between Greenberg's insistence (in the "Laocoön" essay and elsewhere) that an authentic aesthetic response must constitute an "unanalysable act of intuition" and his appeal to the viewer's capacity to situate a given work relative to "broader developments within the medium." Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p. 58. I would suggest that these two conditions must be understood as sequential components within an unfolding process of aesthetic perception.

89. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," pp. 8, 9.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 18. Greenberg continued to link class status and aesthetic discrimination long after he stopped identifying himself as a Marxist critic. In an interview in 1992, shortly before his death, Greenberg noted, "You have to have dignified leisure in order to cultivate taste in any of the arts, not the leisure of an unemployed stevedore. . . . That's why the rich acquire better taste than the poor. That's why the best art has been elitist ever since before Giotto." Robert Burstow, "On Art and Politics: A Recent Interview with Clement Greenberg," *Frieze* 18 (September–October 1994): 34–35.

91. Regarding the contrition expressed by Charles Harrison and T. J. Clark over their earlier critiques of Greenberg (see note 55), I would suggest that the criticism to be made of Greenberg is not simply that he treats the aesthetic as if it were autonomous from social or political values (this is clearly not the case in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch") but the way in which he comes to define the elitism of fine art (and, by extension, the class system on which it is based) as a quasi-naturalized human condition. Aesthetic perception, as defined by Greenberg, may or may not be "universal," but our ability to enjoy the privileged lifestyle that is most suited to the achievement of this perception is clearly constrained by contingent, nonuniversal forces.

92. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 18.

93. See T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, p. 47.

94. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 9.

95. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counter-culture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

96. Fried, "How Modernism Works," p. 75.

97. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 164. In the introduction to this book Fried



provides a lengthy explication and defense of his controversial "Art and Objecthood" essay.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
99. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture" (1966), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 233.
100. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 163.
101. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
102. *Ibid.*, p. 167, 168.
103. "One's experience of a Caro is not incomplete, and one's conviction as to its quality is not suspended simply because one has seen it only from where one is standing." *Ibid.*, p. 167.
104. *Ibid.*
105. Fried, "How Modernism Works," p. 78.
106. This is Charles Harrison and Paul Wood's paraphrase of Fried in Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute*, p. 191.
107. Fried, "How Modernism Works," p. 69. According to Fried, modern art underwent a "fundamental change" in the 1960s and, as a result, can no longer define itself through an appeal to an immanent essence (of form or material). Instead, it is forced to locate its identity reactively, through its opposition or resistance to the condition of some external threat (i.e., "theater"). It becomes, as a result, relational, contextual, and contingent. But this relational basis, this dependence on that which is "not art," must be concealed by the operation on the viewer of an "overwhelming" somatic force that "compels" the viewer's assent that *this* is, without a doubt, an "authentic" work of art. This is what allows Fried to confidently distance himself from Greenberg's formalist immanence. But the parallel between Greenberg's account of kitsch and Fried's concept of theatrical art is, as I have tried to suggest, equally relevant.
108. In his essay "Three American Painters" (1965), Fried contends that the historian of modern art is justified in ignoring the social, economic, and political context in which a given work is produced because "ambitious" art within bourgeois society has "become more and more concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself" (i.e., "formal problems"). Leaving aside the tendency here to ignore the relevance of constructivism, dadaism, and surrealism for this argument, Fried seems to assume that the decision to withdraw into the realm of pure form is not in itself political (as it clearly was for many of the painters of the New York School). Michael Fried, "Three American Painters," in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 771.

#### CHAPTER 2. DURATION, PERFORMATIVITY, AND CRITIQUE

1. David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 40-41. In a Dia Art Foundation talk from 1987, Rosalind Krauss provides an interpretation of Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" essay that parallels this concept of a secularized divine cognition. As Krauss writes, for Fried the "authentic" viewer is "abstracted from his bodily presence and reorganized as the non-corporeal vehicle of a single stratum of sensory experience—a visual track that is magically,

illusionistically unsupported by a body, a track that is allegorized, moreover, as pure cognition. What we have here, then, is not exactly a situation of non-presence but one of abstract presence, the viewer floating in front of the work as a pure optical ray." Rosalind Krauss, untitled contribution to the forum "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," in *Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, No. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), p. 61.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
3. This is by no means intended as a comprehensive account of the formative influences on contemporary dialogical art practice (a history that remains to be written). There is a long activist tradition within the arts (e.g., the arts and crafts movement, the Film and Photo League, the workers' photography movement in Germany, the Mexican and later the Chicano mural movements, the Art Workers Coalition and the art and labor movements of the 1970s, community media activism in the 1970s and '80s, and the "community arts" movement in the United Kingdom) as well a broader activist political tradition (e.g., the settlement house movement; Progressive-era urban reform groups such as the National Child Labor Committee; the civil rights movement in the United States; May 1968, New Social Movements, and Autonomia in France, Germany, and Italy) that has provided an important foundation for many of the artists and groups I am discussing.
4. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 213.
5. Regarding the relative status assigned to visual forms of knowledge during the modern period, it is interesting to read Barbara Stafford, who contends that the visual was actively suppressed within modernity, against David Michael Levin, who argues that the visual is the most privileged form of knowledge in the modern era. See Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), and David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
6. It is this curious parallel between the visual economy of impressionism and the capitalist division of labor that led Hermann Bahr to describe impressionism as "an attempt to leave nothing to man but his retina. . . . [H]e becomes a mere instrument, a visual gramophone. . . . [H]e serves the machine." Hermann Bahr, *Expressionism* (1914, 1916), excerpted in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1993), p. 119.
7. Crow, *Modern Art*, pp. 214-15.
8. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 232. This essay originally appeared in *Artforum* in two parts (February 1966 and October 1966).
9. As Fried describes it, "[T]he implication of this [Greenberg's position] was that such a core had been the essence of painting all along. . . . I wanted to find an alternative theoretical model." Michael Fried, untitled contribution to the forum "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," in Foster, *Dia Art Foundation Discussions*, p. 61.
10. Thierry de Duve, "Performance Here and Now: Minimal Art, a Plea for a New Genre of Theater," *Open Letter* 5-6 (Summer-Fall 1983): 255-56.