

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

TOWARDS A NEWER LACUNA

by

LES LINFOOT

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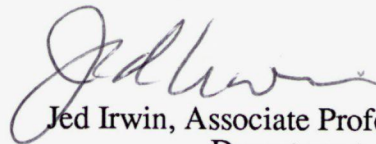
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a support paper entitled *Towards a Newer Lacuna* submitted by Lesley Walter Linfoot in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



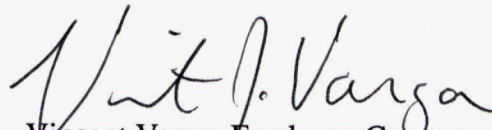
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## ABSTRACT

Depending upon your point of view, this support paper consists of either three, four, or nine sections. In all cases the first section consists of a discussion of the nature of theses and support papers and describes my approach to the problem of writing a paper about painting.

The centre section (chapters 2 through 8) could possibly be seen as two centre sections intertwined. One traces the history of modernism and the other, intricately woven into the fabric of that history, traces the development of critical art and theory within that modernist history. Central to this section is the idea that critical art subverts conventions on a complicit level rather than openly and vociferously defying them. The work of four subversive artists - Manet, Duchamp, Fischl, and Salle - is enlisted in support of this idea.

The final section deals with my own work, tracing its roots in the conflict between Greenbergian dogma and the prevalent movements of my undergraduate years: Minimalism and Conceptualism. Connections in the areas of doubt, subversive intent, and self-consciousness are noted between my work and the work of other artists, especially the four artists dealt with in earlier chapters, though no causal relationship is posited.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## PREFACE

### A NOTE CONCERNING SOME ODD ALIGNMENTS

Central to this paper is the idea of history as more than a line of events. In opposing the idea of a vertical history, it would be inappropriate to align the historical references herein contained in the normal vertical fashion. Hence the odd arrangement of the page containing the table of contents upon which Manet is seen to be linked horizontally with the idea of subversion as well as with Duchamp, while vertically he is linked with Fischl and this author who are both linked to the group consisting of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida as well as to Salle, et cetera.

Please note that discussion of the work of particular artists, though it does not hesitate to creep into the other chapters in the body of the paper, has been kept to the sides in the menu of contents. This is because, though this author cannot claim to have been ignorant of Manet and Duchamp, he has, up until very recently, attempted to keep them at arm's length, so to speak, in order to disallow any *direct* influence. The work of Salle and Fischl can be seen as paralleling that of this author. That this coeval trio should have something in common is not so surprising - they have experienced the same breakdown of modernism. What is perhaps surprising - and this explains their positions at the sides of the page - is that this author has only recently become aware of their work and could not, even if he so desired, claim them as influences.

Chapters 2 and 4 might have been placed consecutively - they are chronologically connected - had not this author felt that both artmaking and historical interpretation are pointless without the possibility of subversion (including

the notions, discussed in the paper, of critical opposition and therapy) existing at their core.

That the title of this paper plays upon that of Clement Greenberg's 1940 essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon", is not meant to belittle or ridicule the theories of one of modernism's great critics as much as it is meant to comment upon the effects the institutionalization of those theories has had upon a generation of artists. Lacuna does not, as some advance readers of this paper have suggested, indicate meaninglessness. Rather, it points to the futility of assigning exclusive and final meanings by indicating the possibility of absence residing at the core of all meanings.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the best way to introduce this thesis is to state firstly the equivocal nature of that term when applied to the written discourse of a graduate level art student. To term this a thesis is to suggest that it is "a formal proposition, advanced and defended by argumentation".<sup>1</sup> This definition proposes a method of presentation that may work well in a great number of fields of inquiry, especially the sciences and perhaps history and philosophy, but the crucial difference between these fields and art is this: the artists' research, enquiries, or experiments are displayed separately from the written component rather than constituting the core of that component. This "thesis", then, would be better described as a supporting paper.

If the thesis has been painted and is displayed as a "thesis exhibition", the supporting paper should function as annotation or explication appended to that thesis. It should provide a context for a more expedient and fuller understanding of the work in terms of its relationship to its author, the student who has produced the work - an aim that it is not always necessary to consider when viewing the displayed paintings but is apparently requisite to the judgement of the student/candidate's academic credentials.

The purpose of this paper, then, is not singular. It has been prepared, certainly, to disclose a schedule of academic qualifications, and for that reason will include a number of references to scholarly writings, but it will not limit itself to quoting as appeal to authority. Nor will it, through authoritative quotation, historical citation, implementation of logical or pseudo-logical argumentation, or any other means

normally associated with the presentation of data in support of an academic thesis, attempt to *close* arguments or narrowly define categories. To do so would be to present an antithesis, a written "thesis" in opposition to the painted one which, among its multifarious aims, can be said to be about both the inability of categories to fit neatly into structures and the fallibility of closure.

Though this paper will deal with certain aspects of philosophy, philology, historical interpretation, literary criticism and even art criticism, it cannot be said that its aim is to exist comfortably within the confines of any of those disciplines or that any amount of research in those fields can *justify* a work of art. Artworks do not illustrate theories. The best artworks function instead in a critical mode, often appropriating theories that exhibit affinities. This affinitive enlistment can be viewed as a process similar to the one used to prepare this paper wherein Jaques Derrida may be enlisted to point out similarities between the philosophical-literary approach to criticism generally known as Deconstruction and certain trends in current painting which, though never declared so by their practitioners, have been, for the purpose of explanation, equated with it. This equation has, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the popular notion that a painter like David Salle, for instance, can be analyzed and explained in terms of his adherence to the tenets of Derrida's theory. This simple process of equating combined with a long tradition of created hierarchies tends to present a picture of art as subservient to philosophy and science - as a secondary method of presentation, useful in a *supplementary* way.

The fact is that art is more complex than that. Certainly particular forms of art have aligned themselves with movements in other fields - Surrealism and psychoanalysis, Minimalism and Phenomenology are two examples - but the best works remain independent, refuse to become servants of the master theory. Rather, intentionally or otherwise, they function to critique the very theories within which

they are free to act.

An art that takes up residence within a philosophical structure is not necessarily surrounded or controlled by that structure. Combined with art's ability to simultaneously exist within numerous structures, this ability to at once critique and support (be inside and out, connected and independent) makes art immune to simple strategies of categorization such as the very prevalent one of substituting labels for explanations.

This is not to say that this paper - written by an artist in support of his own work and, therefore, privy to the realities underlying the construction of that work - will be able to avoid labelling altogether. (All conventions have their occasional uses). The patience of the examiners as well as the restricted printing budget of the student will combine to impose upon this essay less than the encyclopaedic scale that total avoidance of convention would demand.

Having said that art follows no pre-existing theoretical construction, it is necessary here to disavow another possible misconception - that of art modeling itself upon other art. The idea that one artist might appreciate the work of another does not imply that he is willing to follow that other to the point of making his own work either pale imitation or endless homage. Again, the citing of artistic influences tends towards the creation of false hierarchies. If a paper is constructed around a critique of Artist X, it is easy enough to assume that an interpretation of X's work controls the production of the author's. If Y and Z are given less print, it is often assumed that they have had less influence. But it may not be that simple. Everything may have an influence and the prominence of one influence may be contingent upon many factors. For the sake of manageable brevity, this paper has essayed to construct a selective hierarchy that omits literally hundreds of

recognizable influences from the discussion of the exhibited work.\* The absurdity of these sorts of contradictions is obvious but unavoidable.

That Manet, Duchamp, Fischl, and Salle have been singled out in order to clarify certain connections does not imply that they occupy exclusive and stable positions in a pantheon. Manet's work, for instance, was largely unknown to me until very recently. *Olympia* is the only work of his that I can remember having seen in the flesh, so to speak. Fischl's work only came to my attention very recently when a fellow student noted a resemblance between my work and that of the New York artist and suggested I view a catalogue of his work from a show she had seen. I have yet to see a painting by Fischl in any form other than a reproduction. Salle's work is more familiar to me because, by chance, I happened to be in New York for his mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum in February 1987. I credit that chance encounter with his huge canvases - none of which I had seen before, even in reproduction - with confusing more than enlightening me. Duchamp has long fascinated me and a recent research project for the art history component of my studies at the University of Calgary and a trip to Philadelphia to view the Arensberg Collection have combined to supply me with more data to process in an attempt to understand his relationship to my work.

Of the four artists mentioned, only Duchamp could be termed influential. The fact that I can isolate him as a primary cause of many of my periodic disavowals of painting begs the question of the "goodness" of that influence but, as will be shown, certain aspects of his meta-ironical approach may have had their beneficial effects. The work of Fischl, Salle, and Manet is discussed in this paper not as influence but, rather, as paralleling my own if, as is the case with the latter, the reader is willing

\* Among them the works of Jasper Johns, (early) Rauschenberg, Richard Hamilton and other early British Pop artists, Warhol and numerous American Pop artists, Robert Morris, and certain Conceptualists such as Baldessari, Acconci, and Huebler.

to suspend a concept of rigid chronology and accept that parallels can exist across one hundred years.

What interests me about all the influences I may cite (and some that I will not) is not the look of their work or the possibility that their works function as paragons of a variety of 'schools' of art, or even the possibility of their being labeled new and revolutionary (as, in fact, some of them have). Rather, I am interested in what might be called their subversive natures, which I see as compatible with my own approach to art. This statement raises at least two questions: first, what do I mean by subversive and second, why, in an academic paper, a "thesis", am I concerned with constructing a pattern of compatibility, a concept which, I suspect, has no credibility among scholars.

The second question, though it takes longer to ask, is easier to answer. This is not a research paper in the standard art historical mode. It is, in fact, a supporting paper to a thesis exhibition of my art. I see, therefore, no reason to limit myself to standard academic procedures in its writing. Whereas, in a research paper, I would resist the urge to indulge in any sort of unsupportable speculation, I feel that, as this paper is meant to support an exhibition of paintings, it might conceivably utilize some of the processes of the studio. Included within that category are the sorts of imaginative leaps that might be termed associative and, therefore, implied in the subject matter of writing or painting.

The first question - that of subversive intent in art - shall be pursued in chapter three, where it can be viewed in relation to the chapter on modernism (chapter two) and the chapter outlining the supplanting of certain modernist ideas by what has become known as postmodernism (chapter four).

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM MODERNISM TO MORE MODERNISM

Modernism began in Paris in the latter half of the nineteenth century and counts among its pioneers such figures as Courbet, Manet, Cezanne and the Impressionists. It reached its peak in New York a little over a hundred years later. Today some regard it as as moribund and others as a corpse. The end of modernism is almost as complex as its beginnings. Attempts are often made to separate modernism into sections for the purpose of analysis. This paper will deal with two distinct periods of modernism in two different fashions: early modernism, especially the work of Manet, will be dealt with in terms of its relation to the author's own work and will be shown to share with postmodernism certain qualities, while high modernism, the modernism championed by Clement Greenberg will be reviewed in this chapter in order to shed some light upon the recent turning against it in painting.

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"The scope and aim of Manet and his followers (not proclaimed by the authority of dogmas, yet not the less clear) is that painting shall be steeped again in its cause," wrote Stephane Mallarme in 1876.<sup>1</sup> Certain critics have pointed to this statement as a foreshadowing of later, mainstream modernist prescriptions such as Clement Greenberg's obsession with self-reference.<sup>2</sup> But, as T.J.Clark points out,

The stress on exactness, simplicity, and steadfast attention is something which was to recur in the next hundred years, but it can hardly be said to be characteristic of the art to which Manet gave birth. The steadfast gaze rather quickly gave way to uncertainty....Doubts about vision became doubts about almost everything involved in the act of painting; and in time the uncertainty became a value in its own right; we could almost say it

became an aesthetic. A special and effective rhetoric was devised...in which the preference of painting for the not-known, the not-arranged, and the not-interpreted was taken largely as an article of faith. Painting has a subject...and it is rightly that area of experience we dismiss in practical life as vestigial and next to nothing. Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; Therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished, the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.<sup>3</sup>

Though Clark rightly claims for the above the status of "approximate definition of modernism" he has, by thoroughly assessing the contemporary *milieu* and social structure in which the artists he discusses were involved, managed a fine description of early modernism which we can instructively compare with the narrower definitions of theorists from Fry and Bell to Greenberg and Fried.

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If modernism had originally been the "painting of modern life", painting 'vestigial' subjects at 'the edges of things' in the last half of the nineteenth century, by the time of the First World War it was a confusing explosion of apparently contradictory styles. Normally we think of Post-Impressionism as having replaced Impressionism, which had replaced Realism, etc., but all these 'isms' did not exist separately; they overlapped and appropriated from each other. Such was the case by the time Roger Fry and Clive Bell undertook to "elaborate a plausible theory of aesthetics".<sup>4</sup> Between 1909 (Fry: "An Essay in Aesthetics") and 1912 (Bell: "The Aesthetic Hypothesis") the public was faced with trying to sort out the movements mentioned above, which had by no means disappeared, as well as the peculiar work of Cezanne, the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, Metzinger, Gliezes, Leger, and Gris, the various shades of Fauvism from Vlaminck to Matisse, as well as the Synchronism of the Delaunays and the beginnings of Vorticism. All these forms were being

discussed alongside continuing defenses of premodern styles. Into this confusion stepped Fry and Bell to attempt to classify, to bring under control this runaway modernism through a description of the essential qualities of art.

What Fry saw as essential to good art was its focus on the "imaginative life" as opposed to "actual life".<sup>5</sup> Art needed to exist separately from reality and therefore from moral responsibility;<sup>6</sup> it must involve a "pure vision abstracted from necessity".<sup>7</sup> While his idea that "in the imaginative life...we can both feel the emotion and watch it",<sup>8</sup> seems to almost connect with Clark's description of modernism as dealing with the discrepancy between what painting depicts and what it *is*, his later use of the term "disinterested"<sup>9</sup> shows him to be involved with reasserting Kant.

While Fry was certainly influential, he was somewhat overshadowed by Bell in that it was Bell's terminology that was carried from this transitional phase of modern criticism and applied to later art - until Greenberg's high formalism replaced it. Bell's most significant contribution to the lexicon of modernist criticism was the term "significant form" which he proposed as "the one quality common to all works of visual art"<sup>10</sup> and the stimulus responsible for the "aesthetic emotion".<sup>11</sup>

Bell's use of the term "emotion" should not be seen as directly linking him with Romanticism, for emotion here is a state of mind not differing greatly from Fry's interpretation of Kant's disinterestedness. When Bell claims that,

In pure aesthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object: for the purposes of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object, into the state of mind of him who made it,<sup>12</sup>

he is proposing that the viewer enter a realm of form separated from all other realms. In speaking of Cézanne, he refers to "the thing that matters -... 'the thing in itself'... 'the essential reality',<sup>13</sup> eerily anticipating a phenomenologically inspired Minimalism that would eventually "subvert(ed) modernist theory, at that time most ably articulated by the followers of Clement Greenberg, simply by taking it



literally".<sup>14</sup>

In both Fry and Bell representation is discussed; but whereas Fry holds nothing against representation, and in fact feels it will enhance the formal power of the art so long as it is first removed from nature, ordered "with an order and appropriateness altogether beyond what Nature herself provides",<sup>15</sup> and reinserted, Bell sees it as "a sign of weakness"<sup>16</sup> and "always irrelevant".<sup>17</sup>

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The ten years preceding World War II constituted an intensely political decade the problems of which, as John Russell states it, were

problems in regard to which no ambiguous or intermediate position could be held: one was for or against Hitler, for or against Franco, for or against Roosevelt. Whoever hedged on these issues was a scoundrel.<sup>18</sup>

This political polarity was reflected in the same culture's approach to art:

The 1930s was also a period during which there was a genuine divide between high art and kitsch. The big artist...was a sainted hermit, rarely seen in forum or stoa and quite untainted by what were to be known twenty years later as 'the mass media'.<sup>19</sup>

Though it is often considered a document of the early sixties, having been republished in *Art and Culture* in 1961, it was during this "either/or" decade that Clement Greenberg's famous "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" essay was written. As Cavaliere and Hobbs have it, "His aesthetic biases were formed in the thirties; the problem is that they remained there."<sup>20</sup> The rigid definitions and polarized attitude of Greenberg's original thesis, which he surrounded with various other essays developed from it in the tremendously influential *Art and Culture*, came to represent high modernism's underlying truth, its "given" in a metaphysical sense. The either/or of reductivism became modernism's unassailable centre, a kind of Papal Edict. That Erich Segal remembers the "maverick, *heretic* feeling in the atmosphere"<sup>21</sup> when he

went with another young artist, Alan Kaprow, to visit the studios of Johns and Rauschenberg, two artists attempting to offer an alternative to the prevailing attitude of either/or, indicates that casting Greenberg as pontiff is not unwarranted.

Central to Kay Larson's view of Greenberg and his influence is the possibility that in postmodernism "the Modernist impulse has not yet exhausted itself; what is 'post' is Greenbergian formalism."<sup>22</sup> It is that Greenbergian formalism that is the approximate equivalent of what this paper terms high modernism.

"Greenberg's ideas...which for a time assumed the authority of *a priori* propositions outside which no thought seemed possible"<sup>23</sup> still have a great effect upon artists the whole thrust of whose work seems *postmodern*. This paper will not be predisposed to take a positive view of high modernism but, having made that bias clear, it is important to state that it will attempt to avoid crucifixion. Rather, using Larson's article as well as others from the 60s - the heyday of high modernism as well as its crisis point - Greenberg's own writings, and the sympathetic analyses of Donald Kuspit, it will attempt to expose both the good and bad points of Greenberg's formalism. For modernism, as Larson, among others, points out, may yet be alive in - may even be the compelling force behind - postmodernism and, before becoming an 'impresario' and 'prophet in the New York art world',<sup>24</sup> Greenberg was *the* critic who attempted "to lift himself above the mire of blind intuition and create a criticism based on reasonable concepts"<sup>25</sup> - concepts grounded in the Enlightenment, and specifically in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>26</sup> - in order to investigate modern art.

A second point in Greenberg's favor is that he managed to successfully oppose an oppressive provincialism that centred attention upon the "School of Paris"<sup>27</sup> at the expense of American artists living in New York. "The quality and courage of Greenberg's insight was recognized as well,"<sup>28</sup> when he "championed Pollock, Gorky,

De Kooning, Smith, and Robert Motherwell to the public at large in the 1940s."<sup>29</sup>

But the negative legacy of Greenberg makes itself known after the publication of his *Art and Culture* in 1961. According to Reise, the advent and subsequent success of Pop art and "Greenberg's failure to predict and inability to discuss - or even 'see' - this type of art seriously threatened his established position as Prophet of Future Trends"<sup>30</sup> and led to his "increasingly defensive and academic stance".<sup>31</sup>

Against the representational and often kitsch-inspired Pop, Greenberg positioned Post Painterly Abstraction, a type of painting that maintained Abstract Expressionism's concern with scale and abstraction but removed the expression. According to Barbara Reise, Greenberg backed his choice of Post Painterly Abstraction as the only authentic painting through recourse to the theories of Heinrich Wölfflin "which abstracted 'painterly' (*malerisch*) and 'linear' form from Baroque and Renaissance art and pronounced their *inevitable* dialectic evolution throughout art history."<sup>32</sup> By removing the expressionist element, painters like Louis and Noland (who had been featured in Greenberg's "Emerging Talent" show at the Kootz Gallery in 1954)<sup>33</sup> were apparently participating in that dialectic in the same way the Abstract Expressionists had been when they revolted against "the tightness of synthetic cubism".<sup>34</sup> It was through his insistence upon the *inevitability* of a historical process, combined with the "perverse magnetism of the authoritarian personality, the charm of contemptuousness" which "was one of his most powerful weapons",<sup>35</sup> that Greenberg managed to

poison the well he drew from; he is responsible, directly or indirectly, for a long list of roads not taken, options ruthlessly closed off, and proscriptions drawn up, to be obeyed by a generation of artists on pain of critical banishment to the grim gulags of the retrograde.<sup>36</sup>

Larson suggests that a 'social history' of Greenberg's influence would be in order to explore his

dealings with artists, particularly the stories about 'birthday presents' from

artists whose reputations he made, his role as executor in the repainting of David Smith's sculpture, and his habit of giving studio critiques that came only a millimeter away from how-to instruction.<sup>37</sup>

Reise also notes that "artists like Anthony Caro, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland sought his criticism and advice" and cites as her source Greenberg's most prominent disciple, Michael Fried.<sup>38</sup>

Larson speculates that her 'social history' of Greenberg "would also track his legion of followers, asking how he came to have so much influence over so many",<sup>39</sup> a task partially undertaken by Reise who suggests that the "academic training in formal analysis of a quasi-dialectical evolution of styles" of three Harvard post-graduate students of art history - Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and Jane Harrison Cone - "complemented Greenberg's approach; and their espousal of Greenberg as Guru provided an implicit corroboration of his methodology by gilt-edged academic credentials".<sup>40</sup> Reise continues

In the writings of his Harvard student-disciples...the constant quoting of Greenberg's statements and respectful footnoting to each others' ideas leads one to believe that they are unaware that any alternative view of art exists. Their sense of history is equally linear, their penchant for cubby-holing art into purist media and style label is more pronounced, and choices of whom to write about are almost hypnotically repetitive of Greenberg's 1960s enthusiasms. The qualitative excellence of being in the forefront of Greenberg's progressive Modernism is so pervasive an assumption among them that they plot artists' positions like sportscasters describing a horse-race.<sup>41</sup>

While Greenberg was to later fall back on Wolfflin's "inevitable dialectic" in order to explain Post Painterly Abstraction, Kuspit points out that he already had in place, as early as 1949, his own notion of 'dialectical conversion'.<sup>42</sup> Simply put, this term described "the way a thesis or possibility of art negates itself to become its opposite or antithesis - an unexpected actuality - in the course of realizing itself."<sup>43</sup> But while Kuspit is willing to attribute to Greenberg an openness in terms of his expectations for art under this theory,<sup>44</sup> many other critics and artists saw it as

outlining an inevitability. Kuspit, however, maintains that

Greenberg, then, does not know where history is going, but he knows that where it goes will be determined in part by a dialectical response to art. This response will convert the past into what seems irreconcilable with it, and as such is a point of departure for new work.<sup>45</sup>

Kuspit's argument that Greenberg's belief in "historical necessity"<sup>46</sup> and the critical structure shaped by it may not have been as rigid as we have come to believe it to have been hardly changes the fact that by the mid-60s most art bent upon subversion or revolution was aimed at that very structure.

### CHAPTER 3

#### SUBVERSION

Thus perception is not the passive process it was thought to be two hundred years ago. Perception has nothing to do with the eye as a camera; we do not 'see' the images on the backs of our eyeballs. Instead, what we see is the result of an active, inquisitive search of our environment, and an active, intellectual *process of assigning learned meanings* to this information we gather. The fact that we are unaware of this continuous effort does not make it any less real."<sup>1</sup>

Meaning is intimated but tantalizingly withheld. It appears to be on the surface, but as soon as it is approached it disappears, provoking the viewer into a deeper examination of prejudices bound inextricably with the conventional representations that express them."<sup>2</sup>

The process of assigning learned meanings to information, as Crichton points out, is not always a conscious one. Often it is habitual, involving little or no searching or intellectual inquiry. Things occur within the field of our vision without our paying the slightest attention to them because we subject those occurrences to a process that allows them to be filed under existing categories. Our minds, for the sake of expediency, gather and store information in the simplest manner possible and it is not unlikely that information received and stored according to preconceived categories is often stored in the wrong file. As the famous German pathologist, Rudolf Virchow pointed out, "we see what we know". Virchow's dictum arose out of the inability of medical students to identify symptoms of a diseased organ when the disease was one with which they had not been previously familiarized. It is quite possibly equally applicable to the viewing of a painting, sculpture or any other type of artwork.

The idea that people view art through a set of conventions is not a new one.

Viewers raised on the pre-Renaissance constructions of Cimabue and Giotto found it very difficult to accept the introduction of systematized linear perspective into painting just as many of today's more innocent viewers, raised on illustration of the most rigid sort, find it difficult to accept the rejection of that particular canon by many artists. But the switch from seeing a la Giotto to seeing a l'Alberti was rather easy and uncomplicated compared to the shifts required of today's art viewer. For one thing, prior to this century changes were introduced more slowly; a revolutionary discovery in Italy might take a decade to reach Flanders. Today a few minutes is all that is required to notify the world of the latest development in any field, including art. The speed with which information is conveyed today complicates matters further by introducing us to more information in a week than the average pre-Renaissance man would encounter in a year. In order to cope with this information we must either ignore great chunks of it totally or process it quickly and conveniently in order to turn our attention to the next task. Often we combine the two functions, processing and rejecting as unworthy of our full attention information that does not easily fit our system of categorization or categorizing only by the most superficial characteristics of the subject.

It is not surprising that even an educated audience for art is subject to the unthinking utilisation of conventions as this is the main thrust of the teachings carried on in the name of 'art appreciation'. Whether it be in a continuing education course at a university or college, a night class at the local high school, or even a guided tour of a gallery installation, the emphasis is on simplified categorization.\* Constructing a code by which to recognise and categorise art seems to be a deeply rooted need. Once constructed, these conventions are difficult to dismantle. But, if

\* Emile Zola: "Knowledgeable people - those who have studied art in moribund schools - are annoyed, on examining the new work, not to discover in it the qualities in which they believe and to which their eyes have become accustomed." (in Frascina/Harrison, p.37)

we follow the line of thinking presented above by Tom Lawson, an active New York painter and critic, art can work against preconceived or "conventional representations" and their inherent "prejudices".

In this chapter the idea of subversive art will be presented and, with the help of Lawson's 1981 article, "Last Exit: Painting", will explore the nature of that subversity, noting its differences in respect to revolutionary art\* and its dependence upon the ideas of complicity and the privileged position of painting. Critical or subversive art, it will be seen, has its roots in the early days of modernism - particularly in the work of Manet and Duchamp - and is today often viewed in its relation to the "therapeutic" (to use Megill's term) aestheticist philosophies of such writers as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.

That a type of art is termed subversive does not imply that it is designed to *overthrow* the existing order. Subversive and revolutionary often overlap but are not necessarily the same thing. Subversive art aims to throw perception into question and throwing perception into question means, if we follow Crichton's statement above, disrupting the connection between learned meaning and information. Subversive art undermines a system of signs in our culture the way a CIA handbook suggests that agents should undermine political stability in third world nations: by creating confusion through the introduction of doubt. Just as a government cannot operate in a climate of non-confidence, so do art dicta become, if not inoperative, then at least ineffective in the absence of faith.

Our 'inquisitive search of our environment' is all too often simply not

\* This is a distinction that Lawson fails to make but one that I feel is important.



inquisitive enough. Instead we scan and process according to established procedure. In 1910, having learned the vocabulary of cubism, art viewers could begin to discuss a Braque, and for a few years felt good about their ability to understand modern art. But, in 1912, when Duchamp tried to exhibit his depiction of a nude descending the stairs, even the experts (his colleagues in the Puteaux group) were perplexed: something was wrong with it, it was unacceptable. It threw doubt upon the cubist system of signs by containing (to return to Virchow) visible but unrecognizable symptoms of an unknown disease.

That Duchamp consciously attempted to throw into disarray a system of conventions - learned signs, so to speak - in 1912, would be difficult to prove. That he nonetheless did so is common knowledge. What I hope to make clear in this thesis is that Duchamp was neither the first nor the only artist to illustrate the inadequacy of a prevailing set of conventions without claiming to have a replacement set of conventions at hand. To oblige the faithful by replacing one set of conventions with another would be contrary to the character of the artists I will be discussing. It is their ability to question doctrine - often unconsciously - that unites such otherwise unallied artists as Edouard Manet, Marcel Duchamp, Eric Fischl, and David Salle.

A criticism of the above list might be that it is too short: certainly these are not the only artists in the long history of art that could be classified as subversive. What of Dada and its practitioners? What of the Surrealists? Were they not subversive? Only insofar as they wanted to change the existing order. The Surrealists, however, wished to replace it with another, equally rigid order, one based upon exploration into the psyche (psychoanalysis) in which they apparently believed. The difference between the Surrealists and an artist like Duchamp is the degree of belief. (People who believe join movements and it is worth noting here that numerous high profile Surrealists became members of the Communist party,

putting their faith in the ability of an ideology cum doctrine).

It is the sincere polemic of Dada that keeps me from including it in my category of subversiveness. The Dadas attempted to undermine a prevailing social order (which included a certain aesthetic) not because they had doubts about its authority but because they had no doubts about its lack of it. They were convinced (perhaps rightly so) that the reigning philosophy of scientific positivism had led to a resurgence of imperialism among European nations that had led to the First World War. That they would combat insanity with insanity was perhaps subversive but that they were combatants, waging a front-line battle, was revolutionary. Dada might also be excused from participation in this thesis because of its literary nature. Of the Zurich Dadas, for instance, only Arp and Janco were primarily concerned with the visual arts. In Berlin, under the leadership of Huelsenbeck, the movement was very political and, with the exceptions of Grosz, Heartfield, and Hoch, produced very little that functioned in the arena of the visual arts. Paris Dada was almost completely literary. Only in New York did Dada, in the persons of Duchamp and Man Ray, produce memorable and singularly subversive artworks.

Defining subversive is a difficult task because it involves attempting to put intuitions into words; finding the words that will describe and explain the difference between a revolutionary like Courbet and a subversive like Manet. Until very recently, due in part to the tendency to analyze it in terms of the concept of the avant-garde as a series of tumultuous revolutions, the focus of attention in art history has been upon the revolutionaries. Occasionally these revolutionaries have also been subversive, but just as often they have not. Many artists have attempted to turn art upside down without subverting it because they introduced little doubt and that which they introduced was meant to persuade rather than perplex.

Herein lies what may be one of the distinguishing traits of the subversive

artist: he proposes no programmatic solutions to the problems he has worked to expose. His intent is to expose the inconsistencies in art - in culture - and leave it to the viewer of the work to cogitate upon answers. Many subversive artists are convinced that there are no answers - or, rather, that there are so many answers to each question that it would be inconceivable that they should propose any single, or even a few, solutions. To do so would be to oversimplify and allow the viewer of the work to walk away with a false impression of the world and a light workload of thinking to do.

This expectation towards the audience for art may be another distinguishing characteristic of the subversive artist: he respects the intelligence of the viewer and feels he must involve him in the work. He must exercise the viewer's intelligence in order that the work be completed. Though it often functions in a way that seems to be wholly concerned with art, his is not an art for art's sake. Unlike the work of those painters who claim to paint only for themselves, or who claim only to be reporting on canvas what they see, the subversive artist makes art about his relationship to art and the world that must be tested in the world. The involvement of the viewer on an intellectual level is paramount to the painting's success and in order to arouse the interest and intellectual curiosity of the viewer, it is necessary that the work somehow challenge him and yet not totally alienate him. It must deviate enough from the norm to appear queer while conforming enough to be comforting at first glance. For these reasons, Duchamp's most successful works may not be his most scandalous. Urinals in an exhibition of oil paintings and cast bronzes and marbles certainly have an alienating effect. The shock value is enormous. But works like the *Large Glass* still manage to perplex and *Etant Donnee*, his last work, simultaneously goes with and against the grain of modern art in such a fashion as to make itself one of this centuries most compelling conundrums.

Admittedly, the audience for works like the ones mentioned above is predominantly an educated one. Few of the artists that I will deal with in this thesis have claimed to have been reaching out to the common man in order to bring the enrichment of art to his life. That, it seems, is a job for the more zealous revolutionaries.

Perhaps a useful analogy could be drawn from Duchamp's favorite game, the one for which he was rumored to have abandoned art. Most people play chess to win. To the subversive the ultimate goal is stalemate.

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While it was still a creative force modernism worked by taking a programmatic, adversary stance toward the dominant culture. It raged against order, and particularly bourgeois order. To this end it developed a rhetoric of immediacy, eschewing not only the mimetic tradition of Western art, but also the esthetic distance implied by the structure of representation - the distance necessarily built into anything that is to be understood as a picture of something else, a distance that sanctions the idea of art as a discursive practice. With modernism, art became declarative, we moved into the era of the manifesto and the artist's statement, justifications which brook no dissent.<sup>3</sup>

Today...modern art is beginning to lose its powers of negation. For some years now its rejections have been ritual repetitions: rebellion has turned into procedure, criticism into rhetoric, transgression into ceremony. Negation is no longer creative. I am not saying that we are living at the end of art: we are living at the end of the *idea of modern art*.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that modernism has surrendered its critical or negative role, that it "became a practice concerned only with itself, its own rules and procedures....its deliberate sparseness worn through overuse"<sup>5</sup> has brought us, according to Lawson, to, if not a crisis point, then at least a crossroads of the type described by Barthes when he cites the etymology of *trivialis* as concerning the prostitute who positions herself at the intersection of three roads.<sup>6</sup> Artists can choose to "continue to believe

in the traditional institutions of culture...and...register a blind contentment with the way things are. They can dabble in 'pluralism', that last holdout of an exhausted modernism", or, "exploiting the last manneristic twitches of modernism, they can resuscitate the idea of abstract painting". They can even "invest their faith in the subversive potential of those radical manifestations of modernist art labelled Minimalism and Conceptualism", keeping in mind that "these, too, appear hopelessly compromised, mired in the predictability of their conventions, subject to an academicism or a sentimentality every bit as regressive as that adhering to the idea of Fine Art".<sup>7</sup> Lawson continues with an exploration of the failings of these particular alternatives and suggests that what a new art should be doing is discovering a way to reinvest itself with a subversive, critical attitude, the very attitude discarded, it seems, when modernism, having reduced itself to empty, ritual formulae, found its practitioners "becoming little more than anxious apologists for the system".<sup>8</sup>

The artists that Lawson singles out for discussion in his essay are mostly painters active in New York and/or Europe, particularly Germany and Italy, in the late seventies and early eighties and most of them have been labelled as both postmodernist and neoexpressionist. In "Between Modernism and the Media", Hal Foster chooses to examine this same group of artists and attempts to split them into four groups according to the type of art they produce.

Briefly they can be described as: 1) An art, mostly American and Italian, that is ironic about the types of the modern artist but embraces them nonetheless (in particular the masks of the artist as child or madman). 2) An art, mostly German, that revives a modern style (Expressionism) and a modern type (the artist as primitive) in a less than ironic way. 3) A form that until recently existed both *outside* modern art and *against* the media: graffiti art. And finally: 4) An art that, critical of both modern types and media forms, seeks to use them against themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Foster places Salle and Lawson in the fourth category. Lawson criticizes the work of Jonathan Borofsky, Luciano Castelli, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi,

Rainer Fetting, Salome, and Julian Schnabel (most of whom are also discussed in Foster's article) on the basis of their "nostalgia for the early days of modernism" that leads to a "generalizing mythology" and thus to "sentimentality".<sup>10</sup> Some of this work is openly modelled upon or appropriates imagery from "the production of artists of the '30s and '40s who openly rebelled against the mainstream of radical modernism" but this earlier, antimodern work was

difficult only in the sense that a naughty child is difficult; that is, art that misbehaved within a strictly defined and protected set of conventions. Art that misbehaved to demonstrate the need for discipline. Art that advocated a forced return to 'eternal values', in both the esthetic and political realm."<sup>11</sup>

While criticizing the artists under discussion for their failure to do more than superficially exploit this type of art, Lawson admits to the possibility "that recent work appropriating this art could have a critical import."<sup>12</sup> He also refuses to dismiss the work as merely "camp", claiming that "something more sinister is at hand". That something, he suggests, might be "a declaration of presence signifying only the ambition of the artist to be noticed."<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to these artists, Lawson offers us David Salle, whose work balances "precariously between an empty formalism of the sort practiced by Clemente and Schnabel, and a critical subversion of such formalism."<sup>14</sup> It is in his discussion of Salle that Lawson returns to the idea - central to this thesis - of subversion. For, whereas the art of most of the pseudoexpressionists "remains narcissistic at base, Salle's appears more distant, a *calculated infiltration aimed at deconstructing prevalent esthetic myths*."<sup>15</sup> Lawson writes despairingly of the possibility that Salle will be eventually co-opted by the very structure he has infiltrated, a possibility he claims is becoming a reality as he writes, but, he continues

Nevertheless, Salle's paintings remain significant pointers indicating the last exit for the radical artist. He makes paintings, but they are dead, inert representations of the impossibility of passion in a culture that has institutionalized self-expression. They take the most compelling sign for

personal authenticity that our culture can provide, and attempt to stop it, to reveal its falseness. The paintings look real, but they are fake. They operate by stealth, insinuating a crippling doubt into the faith that supports and binds our ideological institutions.<sup>16</sup>

It is painting that offers the "last exit" because

it is painting itself, that last refuge of individuality, which can be seized to deconstruct the illusions of the present. For since painting is intimately concerned with illusion, what better vehicle for subversion?<sup>17</sup>

Lawson introduces a quote from Theodor Adorno, author of *Minima Moralia*, that quite succinctly sums up the state of the art viewing public, as it approaches the end of modernism:

Cultivated philistines are in the habit of requiring that a work of art 'give' them something. They no longer take umbrage at works that are radical, but fall back on the shamelessly modest assertion that they do not understand.<sup>18</sup>

It is here that Lawson infers the parallels between radical art and open protest and describes the futility of implementing either, knowing that the system against which the protest is lodged has constructed a mechanism for deflecting such protest.

Given the accuracy of Adorno's observation it is clearly necessary to use trickery ...by resorting to subterfuge, using an unsuspecting vehicle as camouflage, the radical artist can manipulate the viewer's faith to dislodge his or her certainty. The intention of that artist must therefore be to unsettle conventional thought from within, to cast doubt on the normalized perception of the 'natural', by destabilizing the means used to represent it, even in the knowledge that this, too, must ultimately lead to certain defeat. For in the end some action must be taken, however hopeless, however temporary. The alternative is the irresponsible acquiescence of despairing apathy.<sup>19</sup>

Among the many important aspects of this statement, two must be here singled out: first, "normalized perception of the 'natural'" refers here to mediated perception, an idea central to the criticisms of the deconstructivists to be discussed in the next chapter, and second, the idea of working 'within' implies more than infiltration, it raises the question of complicity.

Lawson notes that "art made on the peripheries of the market remains marginal"<sup>20</sup> and infers that for all its good points this was a problem for such

radical activities as Conceptualism, as well as for certain types of recent work utilizing photography and video. These obviously radical works are "too easily dismissed as yet another avant-garde art strategy".<sup>21</sup> "More compelling, because more perverse, is the idea of tackling the problem with what appears to be the least suitable vehicle available, painting."<sup>22</sup> Painting is the suitable vehicle for subversion because it is so involved with misrepresentation and because it "allows one to place critical esthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble".<sup>23</sup>

Foster, however, finds fault with the idea that artists can be complicitly subversive because he seems to believe that it necessarily involves submission on the part of the artists to "discredited forms" whereas Lawson, while admitting to the possibility, does not seem to view it as inevitable. But while expressing his lack of faith in complicit subversion, Foster makes clear some connections that are important both here and in the discussion of postmodern philosophies and approaches to criticism to be dealt with in chapter four.

This theory of complicity is based indirectly on the deconstructive criticism of Jacques Derrida: in particular, on the idea that any critique of a tradition must use the forms of that tradition - must commandeer them, in effect. But where deconstructionists like Derrida would reinscribe these discredited forms, 'complicity artists' like Lawson and Salle submit to them. And although this submission may be corrosive of tradition, it is submission nonetheless.... Acquiescence to given types remains the fate of the artist.<sup>24</sup>

The irony of this is that Foster apparently misses the important point that *the appearance of acquiescence* is crucial to the infiltration stage of the subversive stratagem.



## CHAPTER 4

### REINTERPRETATIONS OF MODERNISM (POST-GREENBERGIAN CRITICISM & POSTMODERNISM)

Unable to accept the rumored death of modernism, Hal Foster, in his "Postmodernism: A Preface", claims firstly, "that the project of modernity is now deeply problematic"<sup>1</sup> and, only a single paragraph later, "modernism... seems 'dominant but dead'". To understand this we must realize that Foster distinguishes between modernity and modernism and, when he combines these two categories with the concept of the avant-garde, he comes up with what he calls "the modern project", which must, if it is to be saved, be exceeded.

But how [he asks] can we exceed the modern? How can we break with a program that makes a value of crisis (modernism), or progress beyond the era of Progress (modernity), or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism)?"<sup>2</sup>

There has emerged recently a type of art and an attendant criticism that is often called postmodern. Like any label, this one is both insufficient and deceptive. Should we view postmodernism as a new kind of modernism that has simply chronologically overtaken modernism? Or should we view it as a reaction against modernism, an attempt to overthrow the dictatorial constraints of a powerful style and celebrate a return to a premodern tradition? Or is it, as Foster prefers it to be, something "which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo"?<sup>3</sup> Is postmodernism intent upon the complete destruction and replacement of the modernist aesthetic or is it critically selective?

Before dealing with any of these questions specifically, it is necessary to consider this possibility: The answer to them all might conceivably be John Cage's Yes-and-No. (Foster actually suggests that there are two postmodernisms; the

reactive and the deconstructive or "oppositional").<sup>4</sup>

Postmodernism, as a label, has been so liberally applied to all manner of dissimilar works that it has, in fact, forfeited any descriptive power it might have once carried. It is not only an art label, it is also applied to literature, philosophy, architecture, and almost any cultural undertaking imaginable. This is not surprising if one views it as replacing modernism, for that term, too, was as widely used and, consequently, abused. In art, postmodernism has come to signify the anti-reductivist view in which, contrary to the tenets of modernism as formulated by Greenberg and his disciples, embraces the ideas of inclusiveness, impurity, inconclusiveness, and the avoidance of a single, given underlying truth in art. Superficially, this has meant that postmodernism in art has been identified as any art that breaks Greenberg's "rules", especially painting that refuses to conform to the purist aesthetic of self-reflexivity, flatness, or abstractness. Postmodernism has come to mean especially figurative painting because this kind of painting deals with the representation of illusionistic space rather than the self-referential space of the canvas by referring to things outside itself and treating a "real-life" subject in a representational rather than an abstract manner.

But postmodernism is more than a matter of painting the figure; it is a way of approaching and understanding the world, and, most importantly, of critiquing it. It is philosophical as well as aesthetic and is not really "post" at all in the chronological sense. Allan Megill, in his *Prophets of Extremity*, returns to Nietzsche (1844-1900) in order to explore the philosophy of this aesthetic.

Moreover, it is the aestheticist and not the naturalist who is the crucially original Nietzsche, the thinker marking an epoch in the thought of the modern period. Others before Nietzsche called for an immediate relation between thought and "life". Others before Nietzsche spoke of the primacy of irrational forces in nature or in man. Others before Nietzsche attacked established codes of morality and rejected bourgeois convention. But no one else made the aestheticist move, though Schelling, at least, came close to it. Like Schelling, Nietzsche sees the world as a work of art. But in

Schelling there was an author standing behind the work: as Schelling puts it, the world is "the original, still unconscious poetry *of the spirit*." In Nietzsche, all authorship is excluded. The world is "a work of art" - but one that, as a consequence of God's death, "gives birth to itself". The notion of the world as aesthetically selfcreating constitutes an absolutely stunning innovation in thought, laying the basis for much of what follows Nietzsche... To put it in the simplest terms: Nietzsche stands as the founder of what became the aesthetic metacritique of "truth", wherein "the work of art", or "the text", or "language" is seen as establishing the grounds for truth's possibility.<sup>5</sup>

Megill calls himself "a commentator and historian"<sup>6</sup> and notes that "the present work is in the first instance a work of history, not a work of criticism - though I hold it as axiomatic that the two cannot be separated".<sup>7</sup> He examines four important thinkers of our age - Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida - and ends up with a book that "is *about* modernism and postmodernism, though this will certainly not be evident on every page".<sup>8</sup>

What emerges in Megill's discussions of these four thinkers (the category "philosopher", while it has been comfortably applied to Nietzsche and Heidegger, seems to be too limited to contain Foucault and Derrida) is their aestheticism rooted in crisis, their "irrationality" (or, as Megill prefers it, at least in his discussion of Nietzsche, "nonrationality")<sup>9</sup>, the "reactive"<sup>10</sup> and "therapeutic"<sup>11</sup> intent of their thoughts, and their immense effect upon Western thought in general and art and literature in particular.

While admitting to the importance of all four of the subjects of Megill's fascinating book, I must, if I am to keep this paper to a reasonable length, curb my desire to include everything and instead concentrate upon the two "prophets of extremity" to whom my work owes an acknowledged debt: Nietzsche and Derrida. Explaining, or at least commenting upon the nature of those debts will constitute the central focus of this chapter.

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My readings in philosophy have, admittedly, been sporadic and undisciplined. I have never, with the exception of three or four audited classes of an undergraduate seminar concerned with aesthetics, formally studied the subject at an educational institution. When I have read the works of philosophers, it has been because I was interested in them, in discovering what they had to say and attempting to understand their arguments. I have never had a tutor who could implement a watertight curriculum to guide me around or smooth out the rough spots in order to prepare me for exams. Perhaps my lack of selectivity could be viewed as a fault but I am not about to apologize for reading out of order. In fact it is possible that a certain advantage has been gained by my reading Nietzsche immediately after Plato because the antagonism expressed by the former towards the latter, combined with my innocence and impartiality (these were probably the first two philosophers I read) plunged me into a beneficial state of confusion. Both of them made a certain amount of sense, but neither of them could totally convince me of his "rightness". Between the two of them, to put it simply, they managed to fertilize my natural skepticism. Though I continue to read it with great interest, I certainly have no faith in philosophy. It seems as if I suspend belief, or at least receptivity, and concentrate instead upon unearthing the inconsistencies within the writings.

If I seem to be implying that I have become anti-philosophical, it is not intentional. I find many things to agree with - and even more that are occasionally useful - in the writings of philosophers the totality of whose concepts I find flawed.

Which brings us back to Plato and his Socratic dialogues, those carefully contrived dialectical arguments that are so impressively indisputable upon first reading, but which leave the reader feeling, nonetheless, as if he has been tricked. It was Nietzsche who undertook to confront and expose that trickery as it exists in

Plato's dialogue, *The Gorgias*, where Socrates apparently crushes rhetoric. Christopher Norris has summarized this episode as follows:

Nietzsche's response is not to deny the potential aberrations of rhetoric but to argue, on the contrary, that Socrates himself is a wily rhetorician who scores his points by sheer tactical cunning. Behind all the big guns of reason and morality is a fundamental will to persuade which craftily disguises its workings by imputing them always to the adversary camp. Truth is simply the honorific title assumed by an argument that has got the upper hand - and kept it - in this war of competing persuasions. If anything, the sophist comes closer to wisdom by implicitly acknowledging what Socrates has to deny: that thinking is always and inseparably bound to the rhetorical devices that support it.<sup>12</sup>

The nurturing of a healthy skepticism is not all that I have to thank Nietzsche for, however. The last sentence of the above quote shows that Nietzsche was capable of supplying a direction to which I could tune that attitude: the recognition of hidden rhetorical support structures in language, both verbal and visual, has provided me many years of pleasant diversion, if nothing else. But there is something else. It has led me to pursue the writings of other thinkers interested in rhetoric, among them Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Husserl, Levi-Strauss, Saussure, Mukarovsky and the Prague School, Merleau-Ponty, Lukacs, Foucault, and most recently Derrida. To it could also be attributed my interest in the word play of visual artists such as Duchamp (from whom I learned of the existence of the delightful works of Roussell) and the various works of such literary figures as Barth, Barthes, Borges, and Pynchon. Joyce and Beckett, with whom I was already acquainted when I first encountered Nietzsche, have been subject to repeated rereadings on his account.

Considering that I began my curious and selective readings in philosophy before I committed myself to the structured study of art\* it is not surprising that I found

\* My interest in painting proceeded untutored from age 14 to 20, during which time I studied theatre at both high school and college. In 1972, I was encouraged, on the basis of a chance meeting and an interesting conversation with John Dobereiner, then chairman of the Visual Arts Department at the University of Victoria, to assemble a portfolio and apply for admission to the art department. The portfolio was a miserably forgettable collection of photographs and drawings not really worth his consideration and so I like to think that I was accepted because of John's quirky sense of humour,

it difficult to accept some of the more rigid aspects of high modernism as it was then being taught. (It must be noted that the teachings in art institutions, especially those removed from the main centres of production and criticism, are always a bit behind the times and, when I began my undergraduate studies, the avant-garde appeared to be, if not embodied in the works of Noland, Louis, and Frankenthaler, at least still dependent upon the dicta of their mentor, Clement Greenberg).

I attempted to keep Greenberg's Kantianism at arm's length throughout my schooling by continuing to read outside of art. I read, if one wishes to look at it this way, to arm myself against modernism and, in doing so, found myself often at odds with people who respected that modernism and, in reading the same material, bent their conclusions to different theses. While I was alarmed by the rapid development of a teleological reductivism in the new minimal art, fellow students, professors, and respected critics seemed to overlook that danger and embrace it as a continuation of what they knew to be the "rightness" of an impregnable modernism. For many of them, it seemed, phenomenology offered a program every bit as rigid and reassuring as Greenberg's doctrine, one that could replace that doctrine without discrediting it and simultaneously *appear* radical and progressive. To me phenomenology was another suspect philosophy aiming at a truth - that perception could be separated "from representation in such a way that the latter - the realm of mediated signs and impressions - should not interfere with the primary self-evidence of knowledge".<sup>13</sup> It is, even now, difficult for me to articulate in the *correct* philosophical terminology why I could not then embrace the Husserlian thesis. But I take a certain comfort in reading the following by Emmanuel Levinas, who studied under Husserl and Heidegger, and eventually came to be "governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy".<sup>14</sup> In his *Theory of Intuition*

and I imagine him chuckling in his grave while I write this.

in *Husserl's Phenomenology*, originally published in 1930 and released in English in 1973, he writes that Husserl

may have been wrong in seeing the concrete world as a world of objects that are primarily perceived. Is our main attitude toward reality that of theoretical contemplation? Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of activity or of *care* - to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?<sup>15</sup>

While I was never comfortable with the apparent alliance between minimalism and phenomenology, I must admit to being somewhat attracted to aspects of conceptual art, especially those works that included humor (often ironical and even occasionally unintentional) and the unpredictability of human interaction. Often these works also included pretentious references to writings on phenomenology or semiotics but I was able to see these references as attempts to establish a field of operations from which the work could proceed rather than as statements of alliance intended to *verify* the work.

While this chapter is not intended to present any sort of history of my own work, I think it is, nonetheless, important to note that during the time that conceptual art carried the banner of the avant-garde, my work was changing in order to try to reflect my interest in that "movement". I was doing less painting and more reading. I was, quite frankly, trying to read in order to appropriate ideas that I could incorporate into paintings and, finding that many of the ideas that I was reading would not submit to rearrangement into painted forms, I began working on plans and maquettes for large three dimensional works (most of which were never realized). It was a frustrating period, characterized by an intellectual tyranny enacted by the "serious" conceptualists\*. The readings I had formerly undertaken out

\* Thomas Lawson, in his "Last Exit: Painting" (*Artforum*, October, 1981; reprinted in Hertz), describes the tyranny thusly: "...the periodical *October* has been publishing swingeing jeremiads condemning, at least by implication, all art produced since the late '60s, save what the editors consider to be permissible, which is to say art that owes a clear and demonstrable debt to the handful of Minimal and Conceptual artists they lionize as the true guardians of the faith. From a position of high moral

of curiosity and for intellectual pleasure had become a burden of necessity in order that I be able to interpret the latest work by Kosuth or Buren, works so aesthetically barren that I felt the need to use them as points of departure for an art that was somehow more open, more alive. I failed to finally create those works at that time and instead retreated from art altogether and spent a great amount of time renovating a house, applying to graduate schools, and reading little more than the daily news. It wasn't until I had access to a university library and bookstore that I once again began to read and be excited by that reading.

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Having found the art section of my new university bookstore particularly barren of thought (though not of expensive glossy reproductions), I recently found myself wandering down the aisle marked "Literary Criticism", where I was able to discover some writings that seemed to have something to do with my doubts about painting. Literary criticism, it seems, had begun to stake out a territory in philosophy and, by extension, in all areas of cultural endeavor - including art - examined by that philosophy, under the umbrella of textual criticism.

A complete review of textual criticism is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, but an attempt must be made to illustrate certain of its major points in order to clarify its connection with postmodern art and, in particular, the art of this author who has often admitted not only to being a *reader*, but also to reading literature and philosophy.

Generally speaking, textual criticism and especially the deconstructive practice of Jacques Derrida is about language as a representation of thought and about the

superiority these elitists of another sort, intellectual but antiesthetic, condemn the practice of "incorrect" art altogether, as an irredeemably bourgeois activity that remains largely beneath their notice.(p.144)



discrepancy between language and thought. One is tempted to group it, then, with other theories concerned with language, from Wittgenstein through Levi-Strauss to the present. But deconstruction does not always fit. Often pictured as an outgrowth of Heidegger's transcending of Hegel, Derrida's deconstruction does not hesitate to criticize the writings of its "father figure".<sup>16</sup> We shall return to this in a moment, but first we must posit a simplified statement that may explain the decided attractiveness of such philosophical-literary criticism: essentially Derrida's brand of textual criticism is anti-Kantian. His "attitude, roughly, is that most twentieth-century concern with language is Kantian philosophy in extremis";<sup>17</sup> that is, that it attempts to discover a final truth through, in Kant's case, the transparency of scientific language or, in the case of those language-oriented philosophers after him, through an understanding of sign/signifier relationships. For both types of philosopher, this primary truth that is the object of their search pre-exists and awaits discovery in spite of language; "For it is characteristic of the Kantian tradition that, no matter how much writing it does, it does not think that philosophy *should* be 'written'".<sup>18</sup>

Rorty distinguishes between two types of philosophy and speaks of

the differences between a philosophical tradition which began, more or less, with Kant, and one which began, more or less, with Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally - as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation... This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together. The difference is not one between 'correspondence' and 'coherence' theories of truth - though these so-called theories are partial expressions of this contrast. Rather, it is the difference between regarding truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal objects which we try to locate and reveal, and regarding them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter.<sup>19</sup>

Heidegger is criticized by Derrida specifically for his logocentric longings:

Heidegger, though struggling manfully...against the notion of the 'research

project' as a model for philosophical thinking, in the end succumbed to the same nostalgia for innocence and brevity of the spoken word. His substitution of auditory for visual metaphors - of listening to the voice of Being for being a spectator of time and eternity - was, Derrida thinks, only a dodge.<sup>20</sup>

For Derrida, this longing for the directness of the logos, the direct expression, unmediated by writing, that can be seen as the unifying concept of all philosophies since Kant, misses the point.

When philosophers like Derrida say things like 'there is nothing outside the text' they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantical arguments. Rather, they are saying, cryptically and aphoristically, that a certain framework of interconnected ideas - truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation - ought to be abandoned. They are not, however, claiming to have discovered the *real* nature of truth or language or literature. Rather, they say that the whole notion of discovering the *nature* of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon - part of what Heidegger calls 'the metaphysics of presence', or 'the onto-theological tradition'.<sup>21</sup>

'Literature as imitation' as a convention of philosophical thought - that is, writing as secondary or supplemental to speech - provides the text upon which Derrida, in the larger context, has chosen to write his criticism.

Specifically, Derrida's practice is carried out in someone else's text; either in the margins, between the lines, or even over the words already there. In *Of*

*Grammatology*, he singles out the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose

"conviction that mankind had degenerated from a state of natural grace into the bondage of politics and civilized existence" paralleled and promoted his belief in

speech as the originary form and the healthiest, most 'natural' condition of language. Writing he regarded with curious distrust as a merely derivative and somehow debilitating mode of expression...an index of the degree to which nature is corrupted and divided against itself by the false sophistications of culture.<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, Derrida does not subscribe to this theory of the "supplemental"

nature of writing\* and proceeds to literally *read* Rousseau in order to discover the faults in his theory. What this reading reveals is that "Rousseau's text...is subject to a violent wrenching from within, which prevents it from carrying through the logic of its own professed intention"<sup>23</sup> and Rousseau, therefore, ends up unintentionally confessing "that thought is incapable of positing a pure, unadulterated origin for speech".<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, this might be seen to be similar to the outcome of Nietzsche's interpretation of Plato as recounted earlier in this chapter.

Derrida's deconstructive readings, though often read as negative, are not simply meant to embarrass the authors he uses as starting points. They are meant to point to "the *necessity* with which what he [the original author] *does* see is systematically related to what he does *not* see".<sup>25</sup> It can be seen that "deconstruction is a form of what has long been called a *critique*".<sup>26</sup> and, as such, it is "not designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system's *possibility*".<sup>27</sup>

That the analysis of possibility is being explored by artists today will be taken up in chapters seven, eight, and nine. That the process was begun during the first stages of modernism will become clear through the examinations of the work of Manet and Duchamp in, respectively, chapters five and six.

\* One of the chapters in *Of Grammatology* is titled "The Dangerous Supplement" and in it "Derrida's starting point is the rhetoric of Rousseau's discussions of writing, on the one hand, and masturbation, on the other. Both activities are called *supplements* to natural intercourse, in the sense both of conversation and copulation". (Barbara Johnson in her translator's introduction to *Disseminations*, p.x)

## CHAPTER 5

### EDOUARD MANET

To propose that Edouard Manet was a subversive painter is, today, not likely to provoke much argument. Yet much of the literature on him does its best to convince us that all he really wanted out of life was to be accepted as a great artist, proof of that acceptance coming in the form of the Legion d'Honneur.<sup>1</sup> This desire for acceptance does not fit well with our conception of the radical artist. Over the course of his career Manet submitted thirty-seven paintings to nineteen of twenty-one possible salons and, though he was completely rejected four times, twenty-six of his paintings were hung and catalogued.<sup>2</sup> If acceptance by the dominant cultural institutions of the day is considered evidence against radicalness, then Manet was not radical. But, as we shall see in the case of Salle, acceptance does not rule out subversiveness and, though many aspects of Manet's social structure differed from Salle's, the fact that the subversive is most effective when operating from within the system has not changed. To be effective - to challenge the conventions of his day - it was necessary for Manet to show to a vast audience, to display his particular approach to painting among the approximately four thousand works in the Salon, many of which supported the kind of conventional thinking with which he was apparently at odds. Though the accounts of Manet's life proffered by Antonin Proust are suspect,<sup>3</sup> in the absence of the artist's own words we are forced to rely upon them for information regarding Manet's aims for his painting. In the following passage from *Souvenirs*, published in 1913, Proust purports to be quoting Manet who, when questioned about his refusal to exhibit with the Impressionists, apparently replied, "The Salon is the true field of battle - it is there that one must

measure oneself. The little arenas bore me."<sup>4</sup> This is an odd statement to be made by a supposedly "radical artist", especially one whose apprenticeship under Couture included little or no preparation for the grand competitions of the day.\*<sup>5</sup>

Anne Coffin Hanson, perhaps inadvertently, reveals a glimpse of the tenaciously subversive nature of Manet when she writes

During Manet's early career several critics saw promise in his work, and offered their advice in an apparently generous spirit, only later to lose (sic) hope that the artist could learn to 'behave'. Others, in spite of their adversary positions, found themselves unable to reject Manet's technical proficiency, and grudgingly admitted his importance.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the writings on Manet by his contemporaries and friends do not always offer as much substance as one might expect - at least when it comes to dealing with Manet's ability to befuddle the art world of Paris. Baudelaire's essay, *The Salon of 1846: On the Heroism of Modern Life*, certainly contains elements that predict Manet's approach to painting and his famous *The Painter of Modern Life* of 1863, has often been applied to Manet even though it was written about Constantin Guys. As Anne Hanson explains

Certainly Manet seems to qualify for this description. The cosmopolitan with his enthusiasm for life but a *flâneur* resistance to explosive emotion, equipped with dazzling technical facility might well have met Baudelaire's ideal. But the timing was wrong. When Baudelaire wrote *The Painter of Modern Life* in 1859 Manet had completed only some student works and perhaps *The Absinthe Drinker*. Even when the essay was finally published four years later, Baudelaire could have seen relatively little of Manet's production.<sup>7</sup>

One of Manet's earliest supporters was Emile Zola but his writings offer us little more than his prescription for a simple and direct form of painting. "He neither

\* Couture, though remembered for his *Romans of the Decadence* of 1848, was not, as we are wont to classify him, a history painter. Hanson (p.47n) notes that a catalogue of his works completed in 1951 by J.W.Howe, Jr. reveals that of 244 works only 70 were in the historical mode. Many of these historical works were sketches for paintings never completed. The other 174 works were portraits or genre paintings.

knows how to sing nor to philosophize. He knows how to paint, and that's all."<sup>8</sup> Zola refuses to enter into the question of the sources of Manet's imagery, to view his work as commentary or critique. He goes so far as to say of *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* that

all the artist had sought to do was to obtain an effect of strong contrasts and bold masses. Artists, especially Manet, who is an analytical painter, do not have this preoccupation with subject matter which, more than anything else, worries the public."<sup>9</sup>

That Zola predicts the mainstream Modernist approach as early as 1867 does not necessarily mean that Manet shared his views. Certainly he did not proceed to incorporate those views into his painting, much to the disappointment of Zola who, in 1879, in an article in a Russian journal, expressed his dissatisfaction with Manet's later works.<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of a good story, Stephane Mallarme simplifies, hyperbolizes and otherwise bends the facts of Manet's career in his *The Impressionists and Edouard Manet* of 1876. He infers that Manet's work was rarely accepted by the Salon, he calls him a preacher of a new doctrine and suggests that he was Baudelaire's favorite painter.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, the first inference is false, the third unlikely and the second, as this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, is either an oversimplification or a misunderstanding. But of these things legends are born. Later in the same essay, Mallarme revises his 'preacher with a doctrine' approach and, in discussing *Olympia*, speaks of Manet's assembly of objects about the nude as "undoubtedly intellectually perverse in their tendency"<sup>12</sup> and charges him with the responsibility of educating "the public eye - as yet veiled by conventionality".<sup>13</sup>

Though some of his literary friends hinted at Manet's subversiveness, none of them offer the proofs needed to establish the fact, for all of them are really interested in writing about one or more of the other aspects of his work. We must assume that the idea of complicitous subversion was not a common topic of the day.

But that there was, in his approach to his painting, an attitude of perverse complicity can be inferred from the recollections of Proust who claims that, "while strolling along the banks of the Seine at Argenteuil... Manet spoke of Giorgione's *Concert Champetre* in the Louvre"<sup>14</sup> and, "seeing some Parisians bathing he said..., 'It seems I must do a nude. All right. I'll do one for them.'"<sup>15</sup> But the difference between his Salon nude and the normal example is that Manet's *Le Bain*, as it was originally titled,<sup>16</sup> managed to "democratize Giorgione and Raphael, drag them into the nineteenth century, and so put at risk the function of art, as seen by Napoleon III, as one of the bastions of imperial authority."<sup>17</sup> While this last statement by Bernard Denvir might, at first, seem to overdramatize the event of the first exhibition of *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, lending to it political import that may have been beyond its scope, it must be remembered that the audience for the Salon show was composed of two very distinct elements: one, a very bourgeois one that had recently witnessed the death of the ill-fated Second Republic and its replacement by the Second Empire under the rule of "a third-rate Napoleon"<sup>18</sup> and, as such, was very sensitive to the concept of authority; and, two, the privileged proprietors of the nation's culture, many of whom were in the employ of that very government that Denvir claims utilized art to support its authority. While it is not the intention of this thesis to depict Manet as a fomentor of revolution, it is necessary to refer to the power of art, and especially art that was viewed by such a wide audience, to provoke discontent.

Manet was certainly not the first to use the Salon as a theatre for the destabilization of bourgeois ideals. In 1851 Courbet had exhibited the *Stonebreakers*, the *Burial at Ornans* and the *Peasants of Flagey*, paintings that T.J.Clark claims were "public and political. Not just art that caused an outcry, but images which undermined the bourgeois sense of what was art and what was bourgeoisie".<sup>19</sup> Clark

continues

...art's effectiveness, in political terms, is limited to the realm of ideology. This is a real limitation, though occasionally the nature of politics means it is not a crippling one. In other words, the political struggle *is* always, partly, a struggle of ideologies; and at times the clash of ideologies takes on a peculiar importance; it is the form of politics, for a moment. In certain circumstances, works of art can attack, dislocate, even subvert an ideology.<sup>20</sup>

Clark continues with his discussion of Courbet, rather clumsily mixing his metaphors to state that the Realist painter's political effect was closely connected to his discovery of "the weak link" in a "web of ideologies"<sup>21</sup> and attributing to this discovery the setting of the stage for Manet to paint "a public picture, a picture to state exactly what its audience did not want to know".<sup>22</sup>

There is no denying that Courbet set the stage for Manet but this is not to imply that their paintings were as similar as some critics have made them out to be. Both were painters of modern life, it is true, and both at some point in their careers, dissatisfied with the Salon's rejection of some of their works, held private exhibitions to display those works to the public, but their differences far outweigh their similarities in any comparison. The main difference was perhaps their commitment to revolution: Courbet not only sympathized with the men who fought at the barricades in 1848 he also, when the next opportunity arrived in the guise of the Commune of 1871, acted and was jailed for his part in the destruction of the Vendome column.<sup>23</sup> Manet, on the other hand, while known to have made at least one work on the subject of the revolution - *The Barricade*, watercolor, 1871 - was, according to Clark, "non-committal".<sup>24</sup>

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In his recent book on Manet and the rise of Impressionism, *The Painting of*



*Modern Life*, Clark discusses the structure of the society in which Courbet, Manet, Monet, Degas, Pissarro and many other "radical" artists existed and worked. The book is a valuable one and must be read in its entirety to fully understand the complex nuances of Haussmannized Paris and the "nouvelles couches sociales" created therein. To attempt, as one must do in a thesis of limited length, to synopsise it is to do it an injustice. Regardless, the main arguments established by Clark can be outlined as follows:

(1) The book proceeds from some lines by Meyer Schapiro in which he claims that "the art of Manet and his followers had a distinct 'moral aspect', visible above all in the way it dovetailed an account of visual truth with one of social freedom";<sup>25</sup>

(2) "That it is tempting to see a connection between the modernization of Paris put through by Napoleon III and his henchmen - in particular by his prefect of the Seine, Baron Haussmann - and the new painting of the time"<sup>26</sup> and "That in depicting a prostitute in 1865, Manet dealt with modernity in one of its most poignant and familiar, but also difficult aspects..." because, in Haussmannized Paris,

the difference between the middle and the margin of the social order became blurred; and Manet's picture was suspected of revelling in that state of affairs, marked as it was by a shifting, inconsequential circuit of signs - all of them apparently clues to its subject's identity, sexual and social, but too few of them adding up";<sup>27</sup>

(3) "That the environs of Paris from the 1860s on were recognized to be a special territory in which some aspects of modernity might be detected" - that is to say that such areas as Bougival and Argenteuil,

where industry and recreation were casually established next to each other, in a landscape that assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas) allowed, there modernity seemed vivid, and painters believed they might invent a new set of descriptions for it";<sup>28</sup>

(4) "That the adjective 'popular', applied to persons, manners, or entertainment

in the later nineteenth century, came to mean too many, too indefinite things..." and that

Popular culture provided the petit -bourgeois aficionado with two forms of illusory 'class': an identity with those below him, or at least with certain images of their life; and a difference from them which hinged on his skill - his privileged place - as a consumer of those same images. Painting was mostly a complaisant spectator of this spectacle, perfecting the petit bourgeois's view of things and leaving behind the best picture we have of what it amounted to. But there are certain canvases which suggest the unease and duplicity involved in this attaining to a new class; something of the kind is claimed... for Manet's last painting, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere*;<sup>29</sup>

(5) and finally that only Seurat succeeded in truthfully depicting the 'nouvelles couches sociales' in his *Dimanche apres-midi a l'ile de La Grande Jatte*.<sup>30</sup>

This last argument of Clark's need not really concern us here as Clark states that he is, throughout his writing, searching for painting that is able to "picture class adequately", one that was "able to devise an iconography of modern life, one capable of being sustained and developed by succeeding generations".<sup>31</sup> That Manet, according to Clark, was unable to accomplish this, should in no way affect our evaluation of the import of his work in the terms outlined for this thesis, i.e., in terms of its attempt to question, cast doubt upon, subvert, or deconstruct a standardized system of perceptual conventions connecting "art" to "real life", for Clark aims further than we do. He wishes to see a new "iconography" established to replace the old, worn out one of the academic salons. This thesis, however, maintains that the more important act is the initial one of subversion. In this aspect of artistic evolution Manet (and here, Clark agrees, particularly in reference to *Olympia* and *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere*) was quite successful.

The arguments that truly concern us are the ones numbered 1, 2, and 4. The first is not really an argument, to be sure, but rather an important point of departure - for if art can be subversive, what shall it subvert? Other art? Schapiro, by introducing the concept of a "moral aspect" and connecting "visual truth" with

"social freedom" constructs for us the arena of our arguments, an arena which encloses both art and life.

The import of the second argument, for us, is that it hinges upon the social upheaval connected with Napoleon and Haussmann's modernization of the city which affected the art of the time by affecting the outlook of the bourgeois - a class to which most of the important painters of the day either aspired or belonged. By "evicting the working class of Paris from the centre of the city"<sup>32</sup> in order to construct the wide new boulevards, Haussmann had succeeded in creating a new, engineered, bourgeois ghetto, a city which no longer contained a healthy mix of classes and an economy based upon neighborhoods, but, rather, a no man's land ruled by a single, unfocused class. The fact that Clark argues that this project was undertaken, at least in part, to defuse revolutionary emotion by uprooting potential proletarian revolutionaries and exiling them to the *banlieue* to the north and south of the city, though interesting, has little effect upon our examination of Manet: for Manet was still in the city and, though perhaps unconscious of *all* the implications of the changes around him, was certainly aware of some of the changes in the social strata (*couches sociales*) occurring about him.

The second part of the second argument proposed by Clark depends upon this concept of the flux and lack of focus of a class in order to present *Olympia* as a scandalous picture because of its depiction, not of a prostitute - for prostitutes had been depicted in art often enough that they were no longer scandalous, but of a prostitute of *indeterminate class*. Manet's *courtisane* was constructed in such a way as to broadcast a confusing array of signs, defeating the spectator's desire to classify and thereby immobilize her enigmatic reality.

Clark's third argument, inasmuch as Manet frequented Argenteuil, plays a part in our discussion of him, but it must, for now, remain a minor part.

That Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere* pointed to a "duplicity involved in attaining to a new class" and, by inference, that it constituted a criticism of that duplicity forms the core of Clark's fourth argument in which he posits a system of control instituted by the ruling class and a countervailing attitude of subversion in the popular forms of entertainment such as the cafe-concert.

Those who possess the means of symbolic production in our societies have become expert in outflanking any strategy which seeks to obtain such effects consistently; but they cannot control the detail of performance, and cannot afford to exorcise the ghost of totality once and for all from the popular machine.<sup>33</sup>

This paper, however, will attempt to show that art, and specifically the art of the salons offered an opportunity for subversion that could in turn outflank the censors. It is Manet's complicitness, his desire to work from inside, that gives power to his painting.

Clark's chapter on *Olympia* is one that, though I had not read it before June of 1987, has become crucial to the understanding of my approach to painting. Though he concentrates on the idea of class, he addresses the wider concepts of social structure in a very thorough manner. Both the Paris of Manet's time and the art that appeared in that city are analysed in terms of their effect on Manet's work. Two hundred and sixty-eight pages of text and another forty-five of notes are put to the service of his analysis of Manet, Monet, Seurat and the phenomenon of Impressionism. Sixty-seven of those pages are devoted to *Olympia*. This thesis cannot possibly enter into such detailed analysis but neither can it shun the responsibility of familiarizing the reader with the main points of Clark's writing. Certain of these points have been introduced already but one of the most important aspects of Clark's criticism in terms of this paper is its ability to deal with *Olympia* within the context of "the nude" as a category of painting. In my dealings with my own paintings I have gone

so far as to ask those people responsible for publicizing them not to call them "figurative" paintings, stating that they are not *about* "the figure". "The figure", as term describing a category of painting, is synonymous with "the nude". I have not always known why I have in the past avoided painting "the nude" or even why I am opposed to the use of these terms to describe my painting now that I am painting naked bodies. Reading Clark's writings concerning the differences between *Olympia* and the other "nudes" of the time has been very instructive and, therefore, realizing that in synopsisizing or condensing it I run the risk of disfiguring it, I shall attempt to utilize it in order to explain its relationship to my approach to painting unclothed figures.

"Desire," claims Clark, "was never quite absent from the nude".<sup>34</sup> "Most writers and artists," he claims, "knew that the nude's appeal, in part at least, was straightforwardly erotic."<sup>35</sup> Various figures, including Pan or other satyr-like representations of desire, or Eros, usually in his harmless, Cupid-like form, were used as stand-ins to indicate man's (animal) desire and woman's desirability. "Desire appeared in the nude, but it was shown displaced, personified, no longer an attribute of woman's unclothed form."<sup>36</sup>

A key example of this type of nude painting is Ingres' *Venus Anadyomene* of 1848, in which

a body, addressed to the viewer directly and candidly, but grandly generalized in form, [is] arranged in a complex and visible rhyming, purged of particulars, offered as a free but respectful vision of the right models, the ones that articulate nature the best".<sup>37</sup>

It is this purging of particulars, this generalization, and the displacement of desire to the attendant putti in Ingres' work that allows this nude to be revered by the following generation. But the painters of the 1860s were unable to continue in this vein. Modernity begins creeping into the paintings in terms of specifics. "A genre is disintegrating... The nude is a matter... of artistic conventions, and it is these that

were floundering in the 1860s".<sup>38</sup> The rise of the bourgeois had its effect upon the demise of a particular type of painting, maintains Clark, but not necessarily in the way it was then interpreted.

Certain contemporary critics centred upon a change in moral standards which they felt needed correcting and they were willing to transfer the terms of this argument to art. But Clark feels that "if there was a specifically bourgeois unhappiness, it centered on how to represent sexuality, not how to organize or suppress it."<sup>39</sup>

Sexuality is what many of us imagine *Olympia* to be about. She is undoubtedly a prostitute. Sex is her business. But it is partly this idea of sex as her business that created a disruption. As far back as 1656, Vermeer had depicted a scene of prostitution replete with pawing, leering, and the exchange of coin and the painting, we now assume, was meant to stand as a moral allegory whose signs were meant to be easily read. By Manet's time, however, the simplicity of prostitution as depicted in *The Procureess* by Vermeer no longer existed. It had evolved into a complex of role playing and class transgression in which the leading player was the *courtisane* whose role consisted, in part, of the emblem of the *demi-monde* with which the "real" society liked to flirt. Being seen with a fashionably risque escort became the desirable thing to do; at first naughty or cheeky but soon acceptable among a social vanguard and eventually imitated by the bourgeoisie.

The *courtesane* (like the escort in today's Canadian cities) was veiled in unspokenness, so to speak. The public was aware that the real nature their profession was something of which the *moral* person should disapprove but, as long as they maintained a certain standard of glamour and as long as money could be

either disassociated from the topic or shown to be an agent of that glamour,\* the profession could be more than tolerated,+ it could be depicted as part of the social fabric. And they were depicted without any particular scandal. Clark cites many examples both pre- and post-dating *Olympia*<sup>40</sup> including "a *Compagnes de Sappho* :- ..which was inspired by Baudelaire's *Femmes damnées*, and known to be so."<sup>41</sup>

The question remains: What made Manet's *Olympia* so scandalous? The answer lies in the idea of depicting or representing.

The *courtisane* was a category...one which depended not just on a distinction between *courtisane* and *femme honnête* - though this was the dominant theme of the myth - but also on one between *courtisane* and prostitute proper. The category *courtisane* was what could be *represented* of prostitution, and for this to take place at all, she had to be extracted from the swarm of mere sexual commodities that could be seen making use of the streets.<sup>42</sup>

What separated her was her glamorous pose, her ability to transgress class distinctions, "to be a woman of no identity and many",<sup>43</sup> as well as her price. "What she had to offer her guests...was the fact of her own falsity."<sup>44</sup> This falsity, for a time, acted as a shield for "the whole untidy place...suggested of the prostitute in class society"<sup>45</sup> by the words *insoumise* and *petite faubourienne*. The *courtisane* was a disguising myth, and

What the myth essentially did...was offer the empire a perfect figure of its own pretended social playfulness, of the perfect and fallacious power of money. '*Les hommes boursicotent, les femmes traficotent*' - and class, in the game, was merely another kind of masking. The *courtisane* put on the mask occasionally, and was appreciated for her falsity in this as in all.

\* Clark cites the theories of both Georg Simmel and his contemporary Karl Kraus to explain this phenomenon. Of Simmel, he says that he "believed that in prostitution both women and money were degraded, and the latter abasement was hardly less serious than the former. 'Money loses its dignity,' he wrote, and can only regain it if the price of the sexual act is increased beyond reason, till the sheer glitter of gold obscures the woman's tarnished reputation." For Kraus, "prostitution had a kind of glory, and certainly a symmetry; in it sex was given a genuine value, the only one left, and money was at last *desired* in the way it deserved." (Clark, TPOML, 102)

+ Clark claims that the idea of the 'prostitute' is necessary because "it is a *category*: one that authority tries to keep in being on the edge of social space, as a kind of barrier against nature - against the body's constant threat to reappear in civilized society and assert its claims." (Clark, TPOML, 102)

other things.<sup>46</sup>

The *courtesane* operated as a kind of metonym for prostitution, a substitution of falsity and glamour for untidiness and pain.

In order to disrupt the myth, it was necessary to deal with the contradictions within it. To depict a courtesan as a transgressor of class - i.e., as a woman of low origins in possession of the trappings of distinction - would be meaningless, as this is what she was appreciated as. But to show her with all these things - a maid, turkish slippers, silks, etc. - *and* as a naked material body, confused the issue. After all, "her power was her body, which only money could buy."<sup>47</sup> "Olympia is depicted as nude and *courtisane*, but also as naked and *insoumise*; the one identity is the form of the other, but the two are put together in such a way as to make each contingent and unfinished."<sup>48</sup>

Clark, whose brilliant sleuthing in the era of Manet has brought us to the edge of understanding *Olympia*, surrenders at this point to the thesis he has brought into the discussion. He wishes to convince us that *Olympia* is about *class* - and we must concede that he is, to a certain extent, right. But she is also about something else, something that relates more closely to the work that this paper is intended to support and Clark, admirable writer that he is, indicates, through a footnote, the doorway that opens onto that other possibility. He refers us to Georges Bataille's *Manet: Biographical and Critical Study*, in which Bataille uses certain lines from Paul Valery as a point of departure. As Valery has it, Olympia is

woman pre-eminently unclean, she whose status requires guileless ignorance of all decency. Bestial vestal dedicated to absolute nakedness, she sets the mind musing on all the primitive barbarity and ritual animality lurking and sustained in the ways and workings of big-city prostitution.<sup>49</sup>

But Bataille wishes to dispute Valery's attempt to assign *Olympia* to a pre-existing category of "realism" that depends upon "an older, established, pseudo-sacred text of prostitution".<sup>50</sup> Of the quotation above, he says,



It is possible (but debatable) that something of this was the initial *text* of *Olympia*. But text and painting part company, just as *The Execution of Maximilian* parts company with the newspaper account of the tragic events at Queretaro. In both cases the picture *obliterates* the text, *and the meaning of the picture is not in the text behind it but in the obliteration of that text*.<sup>\*</sup> *Olympia* is meaningful... to the extent that Manet was unwilling to say what Valery said, to the extent, on the contrary, that Manet flushed out of the picture the literal sense Valery read into it.<sup>51</sup>

Bataille, like Clark, views her as deliberately situated outside of normal categorization. Valery's poetic description of prostitution may be present in the painting but it has, to use Heidegger's term, been placed *sous rature* (under erasure) in order to simultaneously bring it to the viewer's attention while denying it any value as *truth*. "All we have is the 'sacred horror' of her presence - presence whose sheer simplicity is tantamount to absence."<sup>52</sup> Manet had created something that repudiated, or at least defied, definition by deliberately refusing to position it within the bounds of pre-existent ones. Or, as Bataille has it,

Her harsh realism - which, for the Salon public was no more than a gorilla-like ugliness - is inseparable from the concern Manet had to reduce *what he saw* to the mute and utter simplicity of *what was there*. Zola's realism *located* what it described; Manet departed from realism by virtue of the power he had - at least in *Olympia* - of not locating his subject *anywhere*, neither in the drab world of naturalistic prose nor in that, typified by Couture, of absurd academic fictions.<sup>53</sup>

Numerous critics have taken Bataille's words "what he saw" and "what was there" as the basis of a reductivist program for modern art, choosing to ignore the presence of subversion implemented through the introduction of doubt via the ineffective obliteration of erasure. As we shall see, however, certain current painters have taken it upon themselves to reintroduce certain of Manet's strategies (often combined with the strategies of other subversives) into a dying modernism. Eric Fischl (chapter 7) and David Salle (chapter 8) have been especially successful in such

\* The translation quoted here is that of Wainhouse and Emmons which differs from the one used by Clark in his footnote. This translation has been chosen because, should the reader wish to refer to it, it presents the whole discussion, rather than the bits and pieces presented in Clark's note. See bibliography.

matters. That the paintings produced by the author of this paper bear a relationship to the question of "Olympia in the taxonomy of women"<sup>54</sup> shall be taken up in chapter 9.

## CHAPTER 6

### MARCEL DUCHAMP

If subversion can be viewed as the undermining of faith, perhaps the most subversive artist of all was Marcel Duchamp who, when asked by Pierre Cabanne what he believed in, replied

Nothing, of course! The word "belief" is another error. It's like the word "judgment", they're both horrible ideas, on which the world is based.<sup>1</sup>

When asked "What is taste for you?", he replied, "A habit. The repetition of something already accepted."<sup>2</sup> Taste, judgement, and belief are tightly interconnected; acceptance implies a previous judgement and a present state of faith against which Duchamp steadily worked. His conscious indifference was aimed at undermining acceptance or belief and it is this need to pull away an assumed and unquestioned support structure that marks him as a subversive. It is his role as the supreme doubter that has made him important to the work of so many artists. Gianfranco Baruchello, an Italian artist and author, describes Duchamp's role in his work in the following terms:

It's easier to talk about Duchamp when you're talking about something else. It was easier to talk about Duchamp when we were talking about Agricola Cornelia; he slipped into the argument almost unobtrusively since the argument revealed that it had a place where he was suddenly and unexpectedly pertinent. That's one of the most curious things about Duchamp; he's always appearing in unlikely places, in unlikely contexts. That's a part of the mystery of him, and that's what makes him effective as an *empecheur*. But when you try to face up to him directly, you immediately run into difficulty, and you don't quite know what to talk about.<sup>3</sup>

It is in the role of *empecheur* (from *empecher*, to impede) that Duchamp exerts his influence. He has carefully sown the seeds of doubt. If one paints, one must doubt painting. If one strives to make an original or unique work of art, one must

question that work's uniqueness in terms of the Ready-made. (Even paintings, according to Duchamp, were a form of Assisted Ready-made being made from prepared oil colors sold in tubes). He is inescapable - in theological terms, the fallen angel constantly questioning the divine, the artist as anti-artist, apparently abandoning painting in order to initiate a series of diabolical *trebuchets*.\*

Duchamp's presence is felt by such a wide variety of artists that to attempt to catalogue his influence would be beyond the scope of this paper. Since his 'official' recognition by American critics in the form of a retrospective exhibition at the Pasadena Museum in 1963, almost every major artist in America has, at some time or other, been discussed in terms of his or her relationship to Duchamp. These connections are usually stated in terms of wit, irony (or meta-irony), indifference, or negation and the artists cited are usually said to possess and/or explore the possibilities of one or more of these Duchampian qualities.

This paper will endeavor to explore Duchamp's position *as artist* in a fashion similar to the way in which, in later chapters, David Salle, Eric Fischl, and the present author will be discussed in terms of their knowledge of art history and their relationship to and explication of their own self-consciousness. That is to say that, inasmuch as the work of David Salle, for instance, can be said to be about his 'knowing' relationship to the 'other' and/or specific 'others' in a post-philosophical world, Duchamp's work can be viewed as an earlier example of a similar sort of self-awareness and the problems it causes, as well as the possibilities it presents in the production of art.

\* From *trebucher*, to stumble, as in *faire trebucher quelqu'un*, to trip someone up; *trebuchet* can also refer to either an assay balance (scale) or to a bird trap. (Adapted from *Harrap's Shorter English/French Dictionary*). In chess, Duchamp's favorite game and the one he was rumored to have abandoned painting for, a *trebuchet* is a trap wherein a piece is apparently offered to the opponent who, it is hoped, will ignore the dire consequences of accepting that piece and thereby compromise his position.

It is Duchamp's role as *empecheur* that has precipitated the profusion of doubt that has had such an enormous effect upon art in this century, and particularly upon artists uncomfortable with the assured, doctrinal approach of Clement Greenberg. He stands, if not as a father figure, then at least as a kind of strange uncle to a stylistically wide range of subversive works by artists such as Johns and Rauschenberg, Warhol, Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, Bruce Naumann and to the present generation of postmodernists. It is more than his incessant questioning of dicta that relates him to later artists, it is his *realization* of the irony of the existence of a belief-laden art in a world in which belief was becoming a mechanistic error.

A condensed history may be in order here in order to explain the nature of Duchamp's leap from Cubism to iconoclasm. The big break happens when he submits a work to be exhibited with the works of his brothers and their colleagues known as the Puteaux group but the seed of disbelief is evident in the course of Duchamp's earlier work. His two older brothers, Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon, were artists, as was his sister, Suzanne. Art was not considered in any way an heretical practice in the Duchamp home in Blainville. (This short history is adapted from Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*). Marcel learned from his brothers, who were to become important in the Cubist movement and, after he left home to live in Paris, occasionally attended classes at the Academie Julian. The first concrete evidence we have pertaining to his ability to paint is the 1902 oil painting of a church at Blainville, completed in a competent Impressionist manner when he was fifteen years old. The fact that over the next eight or nine years Duchamp experimented in a number of current styles of painting, abandoning them when he had apparently mastered the mechanics of each, can be seen as evidence of his having found in them something lacking.

In 1909 Duchamp began attending the meetings of the Puteaux group which included, besides his brothers, Albert Gliezes, Roger de la Fresnaye, Henri Le Fauconnier, Jean Metzinger, Picabia, Leger, Apollinaire and a varied group of critics and poets. Duchamp, who was at this time beginning to investigate fauvism and the possibilities of Cezanne later recalled that

the few polemical discussions were probably the same as fifty years before, but with different words. Picabia and I had already opposed the very idea of a valid theory, well aware of how far one's grey matter is from one's lips.<sup>4</sup>

But, within a few years, as more and more of the artists in the group undertook excursions and explorations into Cubism,

the inclination for dogmatizing and theorizing on the part of Gliezes and Metzinger - who later became the authors of *Du Cubisme* - could hardly fit in with Duchamp's noncommitment. ...Gliezes and Metzinger regarded Cubism as a point of arrival, as a school. Duchamp and Picabia could not accept the idea that a movement which for them was merely a conceptual point of departure for further speculation should demand a passive adherence to fixed canons.<sup>5</sup>

Duchamp's own investigations of Cubism included a few subjects apparently anathematic to the purists amongst the Puteaux group: Nudes and machines.<sup>6</sup> A great row developed over Duchamp's wish to exhibit his *Nude Descending a Staircase* at the Salon des Independants and the attempt by Gliezes, Le Fauconnier, Delaunay, and Metzinger, to block its entry because "it was not Cubistic in their sense - it was off the beam of Cubism too much for them not to do something about it."<sup>7</sup> The painting was removed but an important 'field of battle' had been created.

The suspicion that the Cubists harbored for Duchamp was mutual. 'But that word Cubism means nothing at all - it might just as well, for the sense it contains, have been polycarpist. An ironical remark of Matisse's gave birth to it. Now we have a lot of little Cubists, monkeys following the motion of their leader without comprehension of their significance. Their favorite word is discipline. It means everything to them and nothing.'<sup>8</sup>

Schwarz goes on to isolate "discipline" as the "key word" in that statement and a good case is made. But the key could as easily be 'comprehension of...significance'.

Duchamp's seeing in the "little monkeys" of Cubism their lack of comprehension of their significance may have given rise to his own recognition of his role as an artist. Comparing his own lack of commitment to their blind faith could only reveal the absurdity of proposing a dogmatic truth as the centre of representation, especially at the centre of a style of representation claiming to champion the idea of multiple viewpoints. It is the recognition of this absurdity that caused Duchamp to disassociate himself from artists' groups and pursue his work independently.

But what is Duchamp's *Nude*? Why did it create such a fuss? In what manner was it "off the beam"? Speaking of the *Nude* and the works which immediately follow it, Octavio Paz maintains that, firstly, the idea of "delay", which Duchamp later applies directly to the *Large Glass*, is important in connection with the idea of motion in that it allows for analysis of static motion. Secondly, "the plurality of meanings and points of view of a work like the *Nude*" is a product of "self-analysis. The object is a metaphor, an image of Duchamp: his reflection on the object is at the same time a meditation on himself".<sup>9</sup> The sequence of paintings from the *Nude* to the *Bride*

is the myth of the nude woman and the destruction of this myth; it is machine and irony, symbol and autobiography....It is not the philosophy of painting but painting as philosophy. Moreover, it is a philosophy of plastic signs that is ceaselessly destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

The parallels of this self-destructive painting as philosophy to the critical philosophy of Derrida (ch.4) are not difficult to see. While 'delay' does not equal 'differance', the fact that they suggest each other allows us to connect them. "One thing seems undeniable," remarks Megill,

namely, that that central to Derrida's project is an importing into the realm of ideas of what was already present in practice in the realm of art. His attack on the frame is anticipated in Duchamp<sup>11</sup>

insofar as 'frame', as it is used here, is not limited to that which physically surrounds a work of art but can be extended to include the philosophical groundings

of art and art theory. An awareness of the Kantian "formalism"<sup>12</sup> and the artists' uneasy relationship to it, as well as being present in Duchamp, surfaces, with varying degrees of immediacy, in the work of Fischl (ch.7), Salle (ch.8), and this paper's author (ch.9).

The oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp is not a large one, but its importance in the development of late- and postmodernist art can hardly be overstressed. For the purposes of this paper, Duchamp's significance exists in his ability to address 'otherness' in his relations to art, language and philosophy as well as within himself. His use of negation (as in the suspension of motion) to arrive at the idea of delay, his depiction of the incomplete circuit (in the *Large Glass*) of male/female unification, his late, anti-modernist theatricality and his life-long exploration of the problems encountered in the representation of women deserve a closer scrutiny than they have been allowed here. Suffice it to say that they have created a field of enquiry that is exemplary and possibly inexhaustable.



## CHAPTER 7

### ERIC FISCHL

Donald Kuspit's text in the catalogue, *Eric Fischl: Paintings*, is titled "Voyeurism, American-Style: Eric Fischl's Vision of the Perverse". In it he discusses American Realism as operating

wherever there is an interest in immediate perception as transgressive of expectations, and thus as morbidly fascinating, voyeuristically engaging, fetishistically binding. In my theory, perception is a perverse activity with a perverse object - reality - but the perverse is implied not declared, suggested not declaimed. Indeed, the perverse is so implicit that it may not even be a real possibility in the scene but an illusion.

He goes on to speak of Fischl as "a master of such perverse realism, of implying the perverse as a response to the real."<sup>1</sup>

By unfixing the category 'realism' his work is perverse (a word which is intricately connected with subversiveness) not only as realist painting but also as Art. He not only attempts to depict the perverse in order to record it; he attempts to hold it up for viewing by an uncomfortable audience - his culture - in order that they may question the manner of their participation in his scenes. As I have elsewhere pointed out, the nature of subversive art activity is not to answer questions but to pose them. As the artist questions his relationship to society so he must involve the viewer in questioning his role. As Kuspit has it

Fischl's pictures have been generally understood, in a Barthesian way, as nonlinear texts implicating the viewer in an "unfixed plurality" of meanings. They are a structure of signifiers belonging to different narrative networks rather than a structure of signifieds issuing univocal meaning.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, they offer many solutions to the problem of 'what is this picture about' and no one solution weighs more heavily than another. All meanings become simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, making the erotic and/or moral content of Fischl's paintings as important or unimportant as any other element in the work.

Differences in meaningfulness will, however, be attributed to the different elements according to the 'baggage' brought to the situation by the viewer. But the very fact that the painting is obviously constructed in such a way as to negate an interpretation based upon a fixed hierarchy of meanings will tend to sow the seeds of doubt in the mind of anyone attempting to so interpret it..

"The style of our tragedy," as Kuspit calls it, consists of "a convention of intimacy within a convention of emptiness, all with the flat immediacy of the photograph."<sup>3</sup> There is something so factual, so mundane about Fischl's scenes - Kuspit speaks of them as giving "the bourgeois the illusion of being liberated from all compulsion"<sup>4</sup> - that they dispel, or rather erase (in the Heideggerian sense) the idea of darkness, of "sleaze". But the effect of placing anything *sous rature* is to simultaneously deny and emphasize its importance. *Master Bedroom* (1983) is a case in point. The painting depicts a woman wearing only underpants and hair curlers, kneeling on a massive and rumpled bed (which reminds one of Claes Oldenburg, Richard Artschwager, Holiday Inn) hugging her large black dog. The foremost implication is unthinkable: bestiality. And yet we do think of it, checking ourselves, stifling the thought before we realize that it is not so much there in the picture as it is in our minds. The picture is open and clear like a family snapshot. "In none of Fischl's pictures is there any sense of hiding, even those which are in private interiors."<sup>5</sup> But, as Robert Pincus-Witten points out, this openness is a carefully contrived element of "his skilled faux-naïf execution" which "intensifies a cunning iconography exactly suited... to a classical Freudian skin-flick".<sup>6</sup>

The Freudian nature of this 'skin-flick' is quite apparent in *Bad Boy* (1981) in which an adolescent boy reaches behind his back to steal from the purse of the (sleeping, dreaming?) naked woman whose exposed genitals are apparently the focus of his gaze. "Sexual symbolism equates monetary and visual theft, linking purse to

vagina and violation to penetration, yet it remains uncertain whether the crime, here, is adolescent pilferage or maternal seduction."<sup>7</sup> The painting while presenting us with a number of Freudian clues, refuses to become an illustration for any particular psychoanalytic theory and presents itself rather as a 'writerly' text. What at first appears to be a normal narrative in which "the reader assumes the role of receiver, reduplicating predetermined meanings, in a process of product consumption"<sup>8</sup> soon "counters linear structure and univocal meaning with meaning in dispersion, in unfixed plurality."<sup>9</sup>

The effect of this equivocation of meaning is to deny us recourse to easy categorization of the type that would allow us to say of, for instance, *First Love*, (1981), that it is a painting about mother-son incest, or about lax morals in suburbia (where else do they lie about on pool decks in the evening?), or even about the castration of Cronus by Zeus and the birth of Venus.<sup>10</sup> It is about all of these things while it is equally about the possibility of it being about all of these things.

The timely and the mythological are conjoined within the identical work. The story shuttles from one narrative register to another, and it is up to the viewer to make the parallels necessary to complete meaning."<sup>11</sup>

Just as Manet utilized the awareness and denial - that is, the complicity - of the public in the matter of prostitution and its masking in both *Olympia* and *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere*,

the patterns in Fischl's work repeat those recurring fantasies which, as Freud noted, form a signifying structure in human development. Like the experience of the suburbs, which is resident in the American psyche whatever the specifics of native locale, so the immanence of these paradigms of sexuality insures the spectator's complicity... in the narrative.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly the spectator is complicit, but this does not necessarily mean the paintings are tendered as invitations. As John Yau, speaking of *Bad Boy*, points out

In carefully composing the scene so that the viewer is looking over the boy's shoulder at the woman, Fischl delimits voyeurism as intrusion, looking as peeking.<sup>13</sup>

The realization that we are intruding (not only visually but also psychologically) makes us instantly uncomfortable. It has the same effect as the frontal gaze of Olympia; It warns us that there is a price to pay for looking. In Fischl's case, just as in Manet's, that price might be the discovery of something we don't want to know.

"Reading is a grasping at meaning, a process of active interpretation."<sup>14</sup> Fischl speaks of "grasp[ing] the intention of the picture exactly"<sup>15</sup> when he looked at Max Beckmann's *Departure*. What it offered him, more than exact meaning, was a series of cultural rather than art references,

so I could hook up certain parts of the image to political violence or historical moments or religious values - all those things that can belong to the general culture.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that Fischl's schooling took place at Cal Arts, a school with a "heavy emphasis on the West Coast conceptual tradition" and that his student works "stayed close to the traditions of refined minimalizing abstraction"<sup>17</sup> until his departure. Within a few years abstract imagery had become "bankrupt"<sup>18</sup> for Fischl.

The image always seemed to mean something hidden, so that I had to know outside references to know the particular meaning of that painting. And there was Beckmann's *Departure*, a work of art whose meanings were all inside it.<sup>19</sup>

It might seem contrary to say that a painting's intention can be grasped exactly and that art references are outside the work while cultural references reside within it, but this is in fact central to the idea of modernism as more than simply a style of painting.

Early modernism consisted primarily of the introduction of doubt into systems of conventional explanation and while it was oppositional to a point, it was also, to again invoke Megill's term, therapeutic. It was meant to initiate a catharsis of thought. Manet, as has been shown, was not intent upon creating a polemical, 'for-

or-against' situation when he undertook to create a new image of a prostitute. What, in effect, he was saying was that the old distinctions, many of which were polar, could no longer work. To carry it off he needed to both show his paintings in the salon and depict in those paintings subjects upon the field of which his methodology could be speculatively recreated by his audience. They must become readers in order to "reproduce[s] an author's meanings. Or...more positively result in the active initiation of new meanings."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps what Fischl is pointing to, when he says that Beckmann's meanings are inside the painting is that they are inside the viewer and the painter and they meet and interact on the painting.

The outsideness of the references in abstract painting refers here to the theories with which they are constructed and buttressed. Not that many people have actually read Clement Greenberg, and fewer still have any idea about the theories of a Mukarovsky or a Merleau-Ponty. Elitist High-Modernism places itself intentionally outside the field of reference of its audience and thereby makes its imagery untrustworthy.<sup>21</sup>

One of those fields of reference upon which Manet and Fischl (and Beckmann) construct their fragments of narrative is the one that contains relationships between men and women. Fischl has said, "The most interesting quality of Beckmann's storytelling is the psychological one - the relationships of men and women."<sup>22</sup> Inasmuch as the paintings this paper is intended to support have also been situated in the same field, the connections between them and the work of other artists - Manet, Fischl (Beckmann), Duchamp, and Salle - who have chosen to deal with the subject should be obvious. But it should also be obvious that the author's paintings are in no way meant to be derivative of the work of any of these artists, the products of

whom, in most cases, he had not seen until the early part of the present year.\*

\* In February, 1987, a Thesis Research Grant from UofC made possible a trip to Philadelphia to see the Arensberg Collection of Marcel Duchamp's work. While in the neighborhood, side trips were arranged to New York where both Beckmann and Salle's work were seen for the first time.

## CHAPTER 8

### DAVID SALLE

David Salle is, of all the artists examined in this paper, the easiest to identify with postmodernism, deconstruction, and equivocation. And yet, that he has become somewhat of a figurehead for postmodernism - a ubiquitous term, the meaning of which has become highly problematic - has led to confusion.

He has been accused of insincerity, disingenuousness, and of making 'facile conjunctions of abstraction and representation, a formula designed to satisfy every taste. He has been branded a 'plunderer of styles' and charged with 'taking appropriation too far.' He has also been criticized as ambivalent, 'a simulator of schizophrenia as a form of fetishistic fascination.' Furthermore, his work is often trivialized as a demonstration of the myth of bourgeois success, with emphasis on...parabiographical details.<sup>1</sup>

This trivialization is taken to its cynical extreme in the popular press where singleness and simplicity of explanation have traditionally been fostered as the goals of journalism. Robert Hughes, the conservative and often reactionary critic for the widely circulated popular newsmagazine, Time, has called him "one of the strongest candidates...for the title of Most Overrated Young American Artist" and summarily dismisses his work as "random citation from the image haze that envelops us, with some T. and A. for signature."<sup>2</sup> In dealing with the criticism surrounding the work Hughes is equally brusque. He refers to it as "modish nonsense" and a "flimflam of manipulation."<sup>3</sup> These attitudes reflect a despairing of the present,<sup>4</sup> a negation of the now that is intimately connected with the tradition of modernism. Hughes' longing for "an enhanced sense of the world's concreteness"<sup>5</sup> - a metaphysical presence or truth - that can be presented in opposition to Salle's deconstruction of representation indicates the source of his dissatisfaction and cynicism: he reads Salle's paintings as negations of hope.

Hope was one of modernism's main ingredients and it manifested itself in two

distinct ways. Firstly, through the theory of the avant-garde, which allowed that "art could safely be consigned to the future when an enlightened understanding would welcome it."<sup>6</sup> Secondly, through the machinations promoted by Greenbergian doctrine, art would be reduced to its own self-presence, an irreducible truth that would, ironically, pre-exist all the art and theory and philosophy invented in the service of its discovery. Dispensing with this dubious teleology of the perfect end, "postmodernism devalues the future and forces us to deal with the present; it asserts a position inside the culture, not at its margin."<sup>7</sup> That its position is, like modernism's, critical, creates a paradox for the history of modernism has taught us that the possibility exists that all criticisms will be subsumed or co-opted. But, whereas avant-garde modernism attempted to utilize a dubious philosophy as a vehicle to outrun the present, postmodernism accepts the present and attempts to deconstruct its machinery of co-optation.\*

Modernism provides Salle with a point of departure. His "complex relationship to minimal and postminimal planar/ground relationships"<sup>8</sup> is often overlooked by critics and imitators. Salle was born during the late stages of Abstract Expressionism, witnessed Pop, Post Painterly Abstraction, Minimalism and Conceptualism and was schooled in West Coast Conceptualism at Cal Arts where he was a classmate of Fischl in the early to mid-seventies. He has been witness to all the major strategies of American modernism and his work emerges self-consciously from them in order to treat "abstraction as an antecedent to figuration"<sup>9</sup> wherein "both are subsumed by a much larger program; the revitalization of the modern picture without any concessions towards ideology (aesthetic or otherwise)."<sup>10</sup> In the course of doing so, Salle (apparently willingly) sacrifices one of the distinguishing characteristics of

\* This is not to say that the work escapes the danger of being co-opted. As Robert Pincus-Witten observed during an interview with Salle, "Maybe everything is significant in your work now, and it may be a stupendous effort to resist your work being made conventional." (RPW/PP, 81)



modernism - its declarative and pseudo-authorative mode.

Modern painting asserted its autonomy, its "objectness", by stressing the process of picture-making itself - its own internal language of color, line, shape, surface. Salle takes this modernist self-reflexivity a step further. The process of representation is understood to include not only the disposition of lines, colors, and shapes on a flat plane, *but also the cultural forces* that establish interactions between the artist, the viewer, and those forms. In contrast to the declarative mode of modernist works - "Look at me! I am a real thing!" - Salle's address is interrogative: "Are you looking at me? Why? What am I?"<sup>11</sup>

Interesting in this context is Roni Feinstein's attempt to establish Robert

Rauschenberg's work as a precedent for Salle's. But even Feinstein must concede that

the differences between Rauschenberg and Salle are, of course, vast. Salle's art is of its own time and one finds in the work numerous modifications on Rauschenberg's aesthetic dictated by the intervention of both Minimal and Conceptual art. As against Rauschenberg's inclusiveness and excess (which reveal his origins in an expressionist era), Salle practices an economy and control that bespeaks his Conceptualist beginnings.<sup>12</sup>

Salle does, however, continue to work with one very important modernist convention, though even here he, like a deconstructivist critic, takes it to its breaking point. "The picture plane, to which Salle has given an extraordinary formal and metaphorical valence"<sup>13</sup> allows him to work with different levels of space, featuring certain images "like dirt marks on a window pane".<sup>14</sup>

The picture plane is oddly reinforced, almost as if it were a pane of glass, behind which deep space extends in abrupt and unexpected vistas. On this hypothetical glass, line drawings inscribe figures and incidents in another order of depiction.<sup>15</sup>

Here Salle has managed to both reinforce the modernist idea of the picture plane while (subversively) denying it by exploring a different type of space, raising questions as to whether the paintings are to be read as modernist, anti-modernist, a dialectical synthesis of the two, something else altogether (as in a four part, Derridean dialectic; see Megill, pp.272-75, for the possibilities created in undermining the Hegelian 'ternary rhythm').

By questioning its own connections to modernism Salle's painting becomes then 'a painting that undermines its own claim to truth or representative status', as Hal Foster describes it,<sup>16</sup> by introducing doubts about the authority of art.\* One difference, as Foster points out,<sup>17</sup> between the art of David Salle and that of other artists who oppose a dominant culture is that Salle's opposition works from within. He does not, as does the traditional antagonist, claim a 'negative, marginal space' from which to operate. Foster at one point<sup>18</sup> compares Salle and Tom Lawson to court jesters and notes that 'in order to be subversive ... they must be seen in forms that are culturally privileged - forms like painting.'<sup>19</sup> The success of Salle (and Lawson), he argues, 'shows that the life of a court jester is not all bad: if artful, one is rewarded by the king - and if *very* artful, one may even conspire against him.'<sup>20</sup>

Salle does, as Foster suggests, work from the inside. And his position is not only inside the art world, it is inside modernism and postmodernism. But, however postmodern he may be, his is not what Foster calls a "reactionary postmodernism."<sup>21</sup> His postmodernism is oppositional in that it is critical in the same fashion as Derrida's literary criticism. Whereas "Derrida's work assumes that there are problems with any theory that proposes meaning in a univocal way"<sup>22</sup> and sets out to deconstruct such literary and philosophical texts, Salle, as an artist, has, as insinuated by Lisa Phillips above, set out to oppose by deconstruction the "declarative, self-expressive, visionary, symbolic, or even 'pure' in the Greenberg sense"<sup>23</sup> meanings of modern art.

Deconstructive readings explore textual logic and their 'conclusions' are

\* Though Foster does not note the connection, it could be said that this was also among the strategies of Pop art, wherein the art icon was reduced to a mass media one or, if you prefer, the mass media image was elevated to the status of art icon. The effect was the same: art no longer commanded the authority it had once had in the age of a 'retreat to a timeless, preternaturally neat realm of essences, purities and apodicticities' (Ratcliff, A&R, p.9).

claims about language structures or rhetorical operations instead of the particular meaning of a particular text. Because deconstruction is never concerned only with signified content but examines the conditions and assumptions of the argument, it confronts the forces of culture or tradition that impose limitations on the text. Ultimately, Salle confronts the limits established for art activities by art theory, popular culture, mass media, and modernist painting and criticism. He upsets the presuppositions, conventions, and limits that govern the notions of high culture and popular culture; but, characteristic of deconstruction, he does not furnish a visionary solution nor attempt to change the system.<sup>24</sup>

As "dead" as they are,<sup>25</sup> Salle's paintings are not artificial or insincere. For, in the same way he works from inside the art world and the modernism/postmodernism debate, he works from inside sophistication. He cannot deny his knowledge. Though he has been identified with a revitalized expressionism, he really doesn't fit in that simple category. Dan Cameron has remarked on Salle's intelligence as something that separates him from a group of artists who appropriate period styles such as expressionism in a very fashion-conscious way because they "will not recognize that the difference between fashion and history is that the former cannot keep more than one idea in its mind at once".<sup>26</sup> In those paintings of his which resort to expressionistic gesture, Salle, on the other hand, is not opportunistically attempting to be an expressionist as much as he is attempting to determine what, if anything, it means to be an expressionist (or a cubist, or a realist and/or what it means not to be those things and yet pose as them, utilize their gestures, etc.). His expressionism is, in relation to both itself and to other 'isms', acutely self-conscious. Cameron, in attempting to explain the attraction between Salle's paintings and the critics - an attraction that "may in fact be responsible for more words-published-per- paintings-exhibited than perhaps any major artist since Johns (except, of course, for Myron Stout)"<sup>27</sup> - touches upon both this self-consciousness and the impossibility of the early expressionist label:

Moreover, they see Salle's studio decisions as humanistic ones, aspiring to the proportions of classical tragedy: here sits the reluctant creator, knowing he must subject his offspring to a hell they will share together.

We look over the shoulder of the artist, who cannot believe what he is putting on the canvas; rapt, we share in that disbelief. Salle's way of thinking publicly about his work is at once too empiric and too elliptical. We are thrown back on our resources, and wax confessional in our efforts to reconcile a Salle painting with our internal needs. So why trust an artist who forces us to acknowledge our increasingly shabby expectations about art? Because he knew American figurative expressionism was doomed from the start, and wants to remind us exhaustively of that fact?<sup>28</sup>

To be aware of expressionism is not necessarily to be an expressionist. For Salle, "if you're a painter...it's an extremely important technical idea...but I don't see why anyone else would be interested in it".<sup>29</sup>

Something that most people do show an interest in is Salle's depiction of women. Like anything in a Salle painting, a woman is likely to be simultaneously specific and discursive. Salle's knowledge of modernism and his experience "doing very menial stuff"<sup>30</sup> for a soft-core pornographic magazine naturally leads us to look in those two directions to establish some sort of explanation for his depictions of women. Strangely enough, the two directions are intimately connected. The history of the nude in modernist painting begins with breakdown (discussed in chapter 5) of the artistic conventions that accommodated both erotic desire and its sublimation. From Manet to de Kooning, as Lisa Phillips suggests, "the nude would play a central role even within the iconoclastic climate of modernism - specifically, the nude that transgressed and inverted the erotic ideal."<sup>31</sup> The modernist nude has sought to separate itself from pornography through its 'isms' - Picasso's cubist rendering of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, de Kooning's expressionist *Woman I*, etc. The 'isms' establish the seriousness of the work - its art status. The nude was certainly not promoted as a subject but it was tolerated so long as it could be interpreted as having more to say about painting than it did about women and desire.

Women, desire, and the portrayal of women as objects of desire were shifted to the field of photography. The following crude but amusing excerpt from an interview with David Salle, conducted by Robert Pincus-Witten, nicely underlines photography's

role in the propagation of erotic or pornographic images of women:

RPW: It's virtually impossible for me to imagine pornography in a state other than photographic.

DS: Yes, I think that...

RPW: There is, there's something about...

DS: ...isn't that perhaps why photography was invented?

RPW: ...that's what Nicephore Niepce was about. He wanted to get the barn *and* the pussy...

DS: I mean, why else would they have invented it?<sup>32</sup>

Salle has brought, not pornography, but an *awareness* of it, back to painting. For him "pornography is about representing - problems of representation"<sup>33</sup> By painting women in "quasi-pornographic setups"<sup>34</sup> he is initiating an investigation of the "mechanism of pornography".<sup>35</sup> That mechanism is normally photographic. Salle seems to be asking us to participate in an experiment to see what happens when the mechanism is shifted to painting. He is attempting to depict the "particular non-sentimental eroticism of pornography"<sup>36</sup> in painting and to do this he has attempted - likely fully aware of its ultimate failure to elicit the *same* response as a photo - to reproduce the essentials of the photo in paint. What is essential, we discover, are the staged, artificial poses that bespeak submission. The grisaille nudes that form the backdrop for so many of Salle's paintings act as washed out, faded remnants of man's desire to dominate women, a desire neutralized by art. Photographic pornography depends upon a type of naturalism for its effect, - i.e. its effect is partially dependent upon knowing "this thing you're seeing is not just what you're seeing; it's that what you're seeing was photographed",<sup>37</sup> and implicit in photography is the copying of reality, something that actually existed. The same associations of authenticity do not cling to painting. Even if they attempt realism, paintings are processed through the mind of the painter and not through a machine. Their subject, therefore, is distanced. No matter how photographic it looks, a painted nude is a representation of something artificial. Rather than painting women and subjecting them to pornography, Salle is painting pornography and subjecting it to art.

Salle's women function as more than a device allowing the exploration of the connections between art and pornography or painting and photography. They are also "object[s] of voyeuristic fascination and a metaphor for the fascination of watching (scopophilia)".<sup>38</sup> Sherrie Levine goes so far as to say that Salle "uses the female form...as a metaphor for the fetish that watches."<sup>39</sup> Phillips draws a comparison between women and artists,\* noting that both

are socially condemned to watch themselves continually as they watch themselves being looked at. They must consider the surveyor and the surveyed within as the two constituent yet distinct elements of their identity. Women, then, turn themselves into an object of vision - a sight. The contemporary artist makes objects of vision and shares the woman's duplicitous role of both active presence and passive witness to his/her own existence.<sup>40</sup>

Levine offers a slightly different explanation which embarks from the same idea of woman watching herself being watched, but places the artist - Salle - outside. Since Plato, she suggests, truth no longer resides within man. It is outside. It is in *the other*. Woman is the other in which truth is to be found and, "since women own truth, men must own women in order to possess truth, to become truthful, to exist."<sup>41</sup> Salle, she suggests is confessing his "wilful self-delusion" concerning the "sad consequences" of this "grand cultural error" by quoting "a naive masculine faith in the truth of the female experience." But his women maintain a skepticism that declines to take part in any discussion of truth. "This paradox defines their power over men." They remain the objects of fetishism but contradict the role by looking back.<sup>42</sup> Salle's painting, she writes,

is an expression of his most private anguish in the face of this awesome existential situation. He challenges the notion that language is our only prison. He knows that, in this age of postmechanical reproduction, the visual image shares equal culpability in the power of repression. He understands that there never has been *the* sexual difference, *the* woman, *the* representation, *the* style. The insinuation of his woman is that if there is going to be style, there can only be more than one.<sup>43</sup>

\* As we shall see in chapter 9, this idea is a subject of exploration in the author's own painting.

The fetish that watches might be an appropriate description of Manet's *Olympia*. Duchamp's *Large Glass* contains an Oculist Witness that could as easily be watching the viewer as the seduction, and few things are as interesting as watching people looking at his *Etant Donnee* through those two little peep-holes. Somehow, this sanctioned construction for the implementation of voyeurism verges on pornography.

An exhaustive recitation of the techniques used by Salle to achieve his deconstructions could itself amount to a book-length text that, in the end, would do little to support this author's work. Salle represents the possibilities; he is attitudinally exemplary in much the same way as Duchamp has been. In choosing to at least partially focus his work upon the problems of the representation of women, he like Duchamp, opens himself to charges of misogyny. Unlike Duchamp, Salle sticks around to face the accusations.

Again, relying upon the testimony of Levine, the female as other "and his relationship to it, is the true subject of Salle's work".<sup>44</sup> But it is not the only subject. In a larger context, Salle's painting could be said to be about

his simultaneous longing and fear of any true intercourse between one human being and another; or, to take the dilemma to its furthest extension, the impossibility of any individual's real congress with the world at large. Salle has come to the nihilistic understanding that there is no such thing as the 'Being of Being'. And its replacement, the 'Ownership of Being' - appropriation - is no real protection against the abyss.<sup>45</sup>

So, while he uses appropriated imagery, he does not, like certain of the pastiche artists - especially Chia, Cucchi, Castelli, Fetting, and Salome<sup>46</sup> - surrender his intellect to a simple act. He uses his appropriated images as agents in the deconstruction of representation. That "Salle's art is one of eruptive focus, where disparity, dissonance, and distance constitute significance"<sup>47</sup> begins to sound a bit like a description of the textual deconstruction of, for instance, Derrida, who has said,

Nothing neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.<sup>48</sup>



## CHAPTER 9

### OWN WORK: HISTORY

A number of years ago (c. 1975) I began experimenting in my landscape paintings with the idea of equivocation. I painted landscapes that were no longer landscapes yet contained numerous references to that type of painting. By altering my viewpoint, for instance, I could move the horizon up or down in the picture or even make it disappear from the canvas. Removal of that signal convention changed the viewer's conception of the painting and my landscapes suddenly became color field paintings and were thereafter criticized in the formal language developed to assess that particular type of painting. As I had little interest in making paintings that were merely about color on a flat surface, I resented the categorization and set about to confound it. I began by again shifting my viewpoint and painting the landscape from odd angles. As I moved higher and higher in relation to the horizon, I noticed that the paintings took on some of the qualities of aerial photos or maps and I began to capitalize upon this by actually deriving my imagery from aerial photos as well as including various cartographic conventions to represent mental constructs applied to the landscape. Dots of various sizes, for instance, could signify important or less important sites, dotted lines might be frontiers, invented names applied in Letraset or stencilled paint implied history, etc. Because I did not have an airplane and my source for aerial photos dried up, I began to construct my own imaginary landscapes, often collaging together features from various maps and adding features of my own invention.

Eventually the paintings became "not-landscapes". Nor were they easy to categorize under any other convenient label and I was harshly criticized (I was still an undergraduate student at the time) for making ambiguous paintings. But I was elated and pushed the idea further, removing all references to known locations yet retaining a kind of intuited geometry that suggested an organization of significant sites. These aerial landscapes eventually became maps of a place in which no site could be finally located and I called each painting in the group by the same title to further emphasize this lack of location/definition.

The *Mapping Aporia* paintings were, I felt, my first really successful works. They indicated landscape without being subject to categorization as such. Nor were they finally any of the other things - maps, color field paintings, etc. - that they also indicated. The fact that they all shared the same title indicated that they were interchangeable and, therefore, not specific as to place. That their title contained a present tense verb - an action not yet completed - and an object indicating the impossibility of that verb's intent was blatantly ambiguous and, to viewers accustomed to the idea that painting must make a statement, somewhat confusing.

After graduation I continued working on this idea of charting the unspecific in a number of variations including two groupings of paintings, each carried out over a period of years, which attempted to visualize the very idea of change or transformation. The first group contained many of the *Mapping Aporia* elements but scattered them, setting up a field of significant/insignificant sites apparently attempting to congeal into some sort of order. In a way, this group of paintings looks like it should have preceded the *Aporia* group. The response to these paintings when I showed them in late 1978 was disappointing. Because I had wished to include in them resonances of an explosive moment - I was trying to validate them with metaphor by referring to the first coalescence of cells in an otherwise

undifferentiated matrix - I had chosen to use colors that carried with them that resonance. Deep cadmium reds, cobalt and ultramarine blues, and a variety of blacks and umbers dominated the works and, apparently, the minds of the viewers. Content was lost to color.

The later group also utilized some elements from the Aporia paintings - especially the idea of concentrating certain of the elements in such a way as to suggest that a coalescence was already under way - leaving large areas of the painting unoccupied by specific incidents. The first paintings of this second group were completed on the Greek island of Naxos and, to a certain extent, reflect the structure of that landscape and the culture it dominates. Quasi-geometric shapes, loosely based upon Aegean architecture (including the primitive Cycladic as well as the later Hellenic types) began to constitute the incidents within the field and it occurred to me that I was painting the history of this civilization - the give-and-take struggle between nature (pure landscape) and its other (culture, the constructions of man). The significant point in this, I thought, was that there occurred a point in this transformation where nature was no longer nature, but not yet culture, and vice versa. (I did continue this group of paintings by turning them around and dealing with culture becoming nature). In fact, what I was trying to depict was nothing - that is, it was undefineable under a binary system of logic upon which our language and hence our whole way of thinking is based. And yet this nothing, this point of non-identity, was for me the essential moment in history (which I take to mean all histories, all transformations from past through present to future).

I painted what I considered to be some good paintings around this idea, structuring them in such a way as to provide clues to their meaning. A great number of them were diptychs with the incidents bordering precariously upon the chasm represented by the division between the two panels. Others were pseudo-diptychs

constructed as a continuous field of canvas with only the lack of paint signalling some sort of disruption at the centre. Titles like *Archaeology* were meant to indicate the process of detective work in time.

To a certain extent these paintings were successful. People seemed to recognize the presence of an attempt to put forward some sort of content within the structure of a recognizable and familiar form of painting usually presented for visual delectation alone, but they were hard pressed to elucidate that content. If the reactions of newspaper critics can be read as indicative of the general response, I would have to say that viewers declined to make the effort to read the paintings. The critic for the Vancouver Province chose to critique my dense and overly poetic catalogue statement rather than the paintings while the critic for Victoria's Monday Magazine simply referred to the works as "the latest thing" and proceeded to write about the motley crew attending my opening at a co-op gallery in that city's industrial area.

I am recounting this brief and incomplete history of my own work because I feel it is necessary to point out that I have always been interested in challenging viewing conventions and defying categorization. I have always desired to exist in the cracks (between two panels of a diptych?) between definitions. While my work is no longer specifically about Aporia or the spaces between incidents in time it is still about impending occurrences. It is still open-ended - it takes place in the middle of a series of events for which the spectator is responsible for supplying the beginning and end. The big difference is that now - with characters and locations - the paintings appear to occupy a space in a long tradition of narrative art. They appear to be more specific.

But appearances can, of course, be deceiving. My characters are drawn from different sources - mostly photographic. Some are strangers I have surreptitiously photographed with a 500 mm lens while they were going about their business. (I

become detective/ voyeur). Others are people I have hired or coerced to pose for studio shots. (I am author). Some are me. (I am actor).

How did I get from the interstices of time to these pseudo- dramas? Mirrors. It's all done with mirrors.

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When I first came to the University of Calgary I was trying to find my way out of a number of blind alleys. I had been attempting to frame my ideas within a medium other than painting in order to disallow a conventional reading of my particular paintings as serving the doctrinal ends of a particular known style. Paintings, after all, have a habit of being reassuring, thereby allowing the viewer to slip into the comfortably known.

My first year of graduate studies included more trips in and out of more blind alleys until, in early 1986, I began working with the idea of building actual thresholds to signify the transformative moments I had wished to deal with. I settled upon the image of a simple post & lintel structure (memories of Greek architecture?) to function as the architectural realization of the threshold and fashioned a few of them (about nine feet high by six feet wide) out of cedar and spruce beams. By themselves these rather plain structures managed to signify passage but they did so by emphasizing the before and after or entry/exit rather than the space occupied by the actual transformation between the two states. I had to invest the interior of the portal with more significance in order to effect a balance between it and the simple binary concept it was meant to subvert. To do this I first reintroduced the concept of painting to the sculpture in order to deny it as a simple functional object and

confuse it with an aesthetic one. The painting was introduced in such a way as to insinuate the idea of fetishism (strips of colored canvas were wrapped around the object) and create a ritual site. Next, a large sheet of transparent polyvinyl was suspended in the portal, making it all but impassable. The viewer could easily look through the membrane but only an act of considerable violence would effect a physical transformation to the other side.

The last element to be added was a pair of mirrors, each twelve inches square, mounted at approximately eye level, one on each side of the plastic sheet (back to back) calculated to introduce to the viewer doubts about his/her desire to pass through the portal at all. The mirror reflects what is in front of it and conceals that which lies behind it while being surrounded by an almost clear image of the future (the plastic is not as clear as glass and, in the process of construction, has been spattered with acrylic paint making it a painting, an artifice of bright colors that entices and obscures). The threshold had become a moment of reflection, a membrane between two states (Derrida's hymen?), one reflected, the other obscured, which introduces the possibility of a third state, the undefineable, aporetic *infra-mince* of non-identity.

*The Author(s) Reflect(s) upon the Threshold of Aporia*, as the piece was called, marked a critical transition in my work. What began as an examination of the significance of the threshold became (admittedly partially by accident) a participatory drama that was suddenly *all* threshold - that was suspended, awaiting the decision of an author.

Coincidentally, I was commissioned to create a painting and, lacking the sort of bank account that would allow me to refuse the deal, I returned to painting on canvas. While painting the commissioned work, which focused upon my inability to separate memories of a recently deceased friend, I began to consider how I might

paint an image which might in some way apprehend the subject of *The Author(s)*

*Reflect(s)*... and, combining my conceptualization of the membrane separating present from future with the idea of memory, I painted a woman on the threshold of an action, in the process of doubting the desirability of that action. *La Vierge de la*

*Memoire on the Verge of Memory* aptly describes the subject of the painting which functions for me as an icon of passage in the same way that Duchamp's *Passage from the Virgin to the Bride* does. In order to emphasize the iconographic importance of the piece I chose to paint the figure (the first figure I had painted in over ten years!) in rather unreal flesh tones of the sort that I had seen in Byzantine icons and inserted a series of fading haloes behind her head. Like Lot's wife she looks back over her shoulder even as she reaches forward out of the canvas. While most of the canvas is rendered in acrylic, her reaching hand is depicted in chalk, as if it has already entered another realm. Posed with her wine-colored, gold-bordered robe in a heap at her feet beneath a Romanesque arch, she calls to mind Lawrence Durrell's description of the central character of his novel, *Justine*: "She was the victim of truly heroic doubts."<sup>1</sup>

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With *La Vierge de la Memoire*... I came to a halt in order to consider my position vis-a-vis painting. After all, I had spent the last four years trying to avoid or at least minimize its easy aesthetic.

It was during this period that I found, while riding home on the bus, an image that offered possibilities. On the floor, about ten feet in front of my seat, lay what appeared, because of its color and the indistinct nature of its image, to be a small cheap lithograph reminiscent of the ones found in the houses of the Italian friends

of my youth depicting scenes from the scriptures. I retrieved the image which turned out to be a 4 x 5 inch color snapshot of two young women walking across a field of short grass. In the background was a complex of buildings in the anonymous institutional style that could have been a school, a hospital, a prison, or almost anything. The photo was taken from a low angle and the two women, who appear to have just walked into the frame from the viewer's left, are frozen against a massive, light blue sky. The two women are distinct as "types" but the photographer has caught them from such an angle and at such a moment that one overlaps the other suggesting a fusion - a two-headed, three-legged being.

A further interesting aspect of this snapshot was the direction of the gaze of its subjects. The two women are proceeding across the picture plane from left to right and the figure in the rear - the smaller and more "feminine" of the two - has her eyes fixed upon the ground about ten to fifteen feet in front of her. Her mouth is open as if she is talking. She carries with her an aura of innocence and deep thought. The foreground figure, with her short-cropped hair, shapeless tunic, long pants, and a black leather jacket slung over her shoulder by a flexed and almost muscular arm, stares straight at the lens. That there are obstructions intruding into the bottom of the photo - a bicycle seat and part of what appears to be the back of someone's head - indicate that the photo was hurriedly taken rather than carefully composed and this led me to question the relationship between the photographer and his subjects. The facial expression of the man/woman is inconclusive; it simultaneously appears to convey a challenge, a look of bemusement, arrogance and irritation. Nothing that this look conveys is any more real than anything else it might convey. I began to see this particular countenance as a mask.

A series of graphite and ink drawings suggested the mask idea to me and I eventually used it in a painting of the women in which I depicted it as an opera



mask (leaving the mouth uncovered) painted a color not much different from the rest of the face - a mask of flesh. That same painting capitalized upon the physical bearing of the man/woman - her right arm flexed, her left extended between the viewer and the frailer woman, the exaggeration of her thighs and buttocks due to the camera angle - to make her appear protective of her partner. Her attempt to control the situation, combined with the other particulars of that situation, made her, in my mind, a near-equivalent of the controlling figure in Duchamp's *The Bush* of 1911 or his *Baptism* of the same year. In both of those early paintings the French artist appears to be depicting a ritual of initiation played out by two women. I view them as direct antecedents for *The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride* of 1912 and have come to view my *Ceremony: Two Women* as being thematically similar to those works as well as to my *La Vierge de la Memoire* ... in which an unaccompanied woman faces, or declines to face, a similar transformative moment.

I have since deployed the image of the two women in other paintings, assigning them different roles in order to capitalize upon the mystery of their undertaking, the difference in their features and especially the impenetrability of the gaze. They became my models - essentially actors in my dramas which, not being very dramatic, resembled *tableaux* - and I transformed them as I felt necessary. I have depicted them both clothed and nude. I have exaggerated their physical qualities to present them as more or less masculine and feminine, than they might at first appear and, having done so, have proceeded to fuse their body parts to present them as Siamese twins or ineluctably paired but superficially different concepts. (I have, in one painting, even presented them as a sort of quasi-Nietzschean Apollo and Dionysus).

The idea that the disposition of two figures against an otherwise unremarkable field could be read in a great number of ways appealed to the same part of me that had embraced the idea of Aporia, which I had earlier described as the absence of

conclusiveness at the end of a precise reductivist method. That meaning might lie behind the image was not a point I was capable of refuting, but that behind the image lay a specific and primary meaning, exclusive of all other meanings, no longer seemed possible. My natural tendency to skepticism had led me to doubt the primal veracity of any of my particular interpretations of the image.

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Plainly, though I spent a number of years painting landscapes, I am interested in culture. The landscapes and landscape derivations mentioned earlier spoke as much about mankind's relationship to the landscape as it did about trees, grass, sky, et cetera. My paintings of the mid seventies to the early eighties have concerned themselves with arresting the moment when culture emerges out of nature or decays back into it. By isolating that moment, it seems to me now, I was implying too much significance to a transition that is in no way as final as it appeared to be in terms of the inevitability of nature's domination over culture. Some of my paintings now appear to me to be overly Romantic in this respect. I was interested in the loss of identity in the transformation, not in the subjects of that transformation except insofar as those subjects were the subjects of change. The polarized view of a nature/culture dichotomy was simply too charged to work with anymore but, when picking over the carcass of this era of my work, searching for scraps to feed new work, it occurred to me that what these paintings did not address was the nature of that culturally conditioned polarization which I had come to see as their main flaw. It then became important to me that my work deny, or at least minimize the presence of the type of value judgement that I was culturally conditioned to make.

The accidental discovery of a photo of two women allowed me to begin working

challenge was to attempt to avoid that commission.

The photo depicting two women fascinated me because I am not privy to the secrets of women. I know that our male dominated society has been unfair to women and though I loudly profess myself no criminal I am implicated in the crime. Even though, before 1985, the only paintings I had ever done of women were undergraduate student works assigned as technical exercises, I could not escape the accusations (simply stated - that men had denied women access to art and had depicted them as stereotypes and/or objects to be possessed) aimed by feminist critics at male artists. Could I, I wondered, paint these two women in a way that would allow them just to be - that is, not paint them as objects for males to own - and still include in the paintings the complexity of male bewilderment? Could I show them objectively? Only if objectivity, as a descriptive term, is allowed to free itself from the obligation to be simple and clear and present itself as a complex maze of contingent interrelationships upon which judgement, if not rendered impossible, is at least forced to be deferred. (This idea of deferral, I was later to learn, is central to the critiques of Derrida, who implies it in his neologism, *différance*).<sup>2</sup> The women, I felt, must be presented in a suspended state, a state that in some ways parallels that earlier interstitial state central to my Aporia and post-Aporia paintings; a state of non-identity that precedes definition by including all possible definitions simultaneously.\* The idea of non-identity verging on being became for me central to the idea of the (mis)representation of women. I must, in order to present them objectively, present them as irreducible. (one exception must be noted: If I were to reduce women to past stereotypes, it would be to throw into question, through parody especially, those stereotypes).

\* This state, I have since learned, could be viewed as similar to the fourth stage of Derrida's alteration of the Hegelian dialectic mentioned in chapter four.

There are images in my work that will elicit a knee-jerk response from those so inclined. This is intentional. It is also not where the paintings stop - that is, it is not their sole purpose. The conditioned or knee-jerk response is solicited for the purpose of defining the ground upon which the painting is intended to function. For instance, *The Judgement of Leroi* is superficially about a dog sticking his nose up a woman's skirt - an embarrassing and humiliating situation, but a common enough one; usually the sort of thing that everyone tries to laugh off while the dog is banished to the back yard as a sign of his owner's chagrin.

So what purpose is served by depicting woman's humiliation? As I have said, certain conditioned responses will be exhibited. In the real-life situation, Leroi is excused as "just a dumb dog who doesn't know any better". The painting of the incident, by way of its title and structure, attempts to critique that response by invoking the unsaid, by drawing a parallel between Leroi and Paris who was, after all, just a dumb mortal. The painting is made to resemble the myth in order to question our acceptance of it. It is here that the knee-jerk response plays its part, for if a viewer responds to *The Judgement of Leroi* by dismissing it as rude, crude, vulgar, or whatever, that viewer is trapped by the resemblance into applying the same evaluative criteria to the myth. And yet that myth enjoys a privileged status; it is taught as part of our grand Hellenic history and representations of it by respected artists are hung in many major museums. It becomes necessary to re-read the myth in order to separate it from this common, crude incident it resembles. It is also necessary to re-read the painting in order to make the distinctions necessary to discriminate between the two versions of the myth.

Certain questions will be raised in this re-reading of both the traditional myth and the newly presented one. The "dumbness" of Leroi and Paris we have already mentioned, but what of the attitudes of the women/goddesses, and where is the

prize? The apple appears in the traditional and the new version but Helen is conspicuous by her absence in my painting.

Inherent in the painting is the possibility that it will elicit laughter. But paintings, as opposed to 'popular illustration', are not traditionally intended to provoke such a response and the viewer may be left questioning the art status of the painting.

The fact that I believe that the story of the judgement of Paris contains elements that are quite insulting to women should not be read in such a way as to lead to the assumption that my *The Judgement of Leroi* is a condemnation of men or myth. I do not make statements. I question by implication.

I question the assumption of "dumbness" as an excuse for the acceptance of the darker implications of the myth that have allowed us to continue to see women as objects to be graded and bartered, but I am not willing to assign culpability to a single source. By replacing Paris with a Labrador retriever, I attempt to remove him from the centre of the myth, to make it more difficult to focus the blame upon him. (The versions of the myth with which I am familiar have him, after all, reluctant to judge). By removing him though, I also manage to relocate him, if not at the centre of the image, than at least at the centre of the consciousness of the viewer; his absence infers a question. The same could be said of Helen; why is she not here playing her part?

The characters remaining are the women/goddesses being judged and it is their reactions to the judgement that raise the most volatile question of all - that of complicity in the myth. Again, I expect to hear a certain amount of harsh criticism concerning the presumptuousness of my insinuation that women can author their own victimization but, considering that I have taken care to stage-manage this scene in such a way as to not allow Paris to get off the hook, so to speak, of the viewers'

such a way as to not allow Paris to get off the hook, so to speak, of the viewers' consciousness but have, rather, just shifted the focus a bit in order to let others share with him the spotlight, I feel that I shall be able to deal with any such criticism in good conscience. Besides, I suspect that I am not the first observer to see in the myth the sanctioning of victimization by the three goddesses.

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Paintings such as *The Detective(s)* work in a similar, but by no means identical manner. Again myth is invoked but here it is the myth of the modern detective of novels and films. Five characters are introduced in this painting and none of them are clearly identified as the titular characters. Three of the characters are looking at something (the central character at her mirror, the two characters located back and to the left are looking at a watch and at an empty section in the canvas). Are they the detectives? Who is the person fumbling with the pack of Camels? Could he also be a viewer/detective, whose eyes are located outside the frame while his hands participate in the making of the drama (a situation not unlike that of the artist)? The fifth character - indicated only by his absence; the chair, the grotesque shadow - might or might not be the focus of the woman's reflected attention. He, too, could be the watcher.

Meanwhile, the only truly defineable watcher stands in front of the canvas, presumably attempting to figure out what is going on - attempting, that is, to fit perceived data into preconceived categories in order to make sense of the situation. That the viewer becomes one of the detectives, another character no more or less central than the others, hardly needs to be pointed out. What is perhaps important, though, is the conditional nature of the viewer's involvement in a multiplicity of

the mirror stand for vanity and the watch for time? Is the woman looking over her shoulder, as I suggested earlier, or is she looking at herself? The ambiguity of the pose is not accidental. Nor are the poses of the other characters meant to suggest a single reading. The grotesque shadow, for instance, invites interpretation as threateningly phallic at the same time as it is moving away. The bodiless hand moving in from the left approximates that threat by way of replacement. I cannot object to the Freudian reading; it is one of many.

*Waiting on Jean-Paul*, painted simultaneously with *The Detective(s)*, participates in the same sort of guessing games. The central figure, however, appears to relate directly to the audience. Or does he? Perhaps he is only auditioning for his role as a waiter, as Sartre has suggested we all do.

The question of posing led me to to begin working with models in the studio - something I had always avoided because I had felt the artist's studio to be somehow emblematic of the removal of art from life. But posing crossed the line for me and allowed me to see the artist's studio as just one possible stand-in for the real world; a stage set not unlike those bare rooms to which Beckett's characters retreat.

*Working*, *Hiatus: Man at the Door*, and *Posing for Murphy* concern themselves with the idea of being on display for a purpose and introduce the ideas of commerce, labor relations, sex, role playing, presence and absence, nakedness and nudity, etc.

In *Working*, the artist appears in the background moving a canvas. The model waits. Who is working here? The model stares straight out at the viewer and her countenance could be interpreted in a number of different ways but one of the strongest readings is that of a sneer. The insinuation is certainly present that she is rejecting the viewer - that she has been bought and paid for by the artist. Her meter is running, so to speak, and she cannot accept another fare. The viewer cannot participate in the tradition of ownership of the nude so clearly outlined by

Berger in *Ways of Seeing* and since taken up by countless critics of Marxist and Freudian persuasion. She cannot pose for him; she, like Olympia, is already employed. If the viewer wishes to have this model submit to him, he will have to steal her away in fantasy.

This one reading, however, does not rule out others. In fact, certain clues have been placed in the picture in order to insinuate these alternative readings. The fact that the model rests her foot upon some sort of sleeping mat or bed opens up the question of her identity as a model in the first instance and could be read as implying a parallel between modelling and prostitution. In that context the artist could then be seen as either john, pimp, or another body in the bawdy house. It is not my intention, as I have said earlier, to make statements concerning the morality of these interpretations, as much as it is to point out the possibility of every action being open to that type of interpretation. In other words, that any act of commerce can be reduced to a type of prostitution does not necessarily imply that all acts of commerce, whether they are the buying and selling of paintings or the hourly rental of a model *should* be so defined and subsequently judged any more than it implies that the purchase of sex should be viewed as art and displayed as privileged forms as paintings are upon the walls of museums. I am presenting a model of *possible equivalence* in order to question the overlooked existence of an essentially moral, social structure within the aesthetic (privileged) mode.

What must be considered - and here we return to the point made in the introduction - is that the artist, though in the end responsible for his product, often has no foreknowledge of the territory into which he ventures. That David Salle (and, to a certain extent, Manet, Duchamp, and Fischl) has chosen to work with images of modernism and women and, in the process exposes "the tragic knowledge of his own wilful self-delusion",<sup>3</sup> is a product of his being "obsessed with facing the unknown"<sup>4</sup>



modernism and women and, in the process exposes "the tragic knowledge of his own wilful self-delusion",<sup>3</sup> is a product of his being "obsessed with facing the unknown"<sup>4</sup> and it is partly this that makes him admirable as an artist. He steps, not boldly or blindly, but "self-consciously"<sup>5</sup> into dangerous territory, risking accusations ranging from misogyny to mystification.

This author, too, feels that he is venturing into a territory in which he may become quite lost and in which he may be vulnerable to misunderstanding but, as Cameron so succinctly puts it:

To be misunderstood is surely the most vainglorious but necessary of artistic ambitions. Yet what better summarizes the (ahem) human condition than to insist that, collectively, we know practically nothing about what being human means.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

### CHAPTER 1

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### CHAPTER 2

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- <sup>26</sup> Kuspit, 1979, p.9.
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- <sup>28</sup> Reise, part one, p.254.
- <sup>29</sup> Reise, part one, p.254.
- <sup>30</sup> Reise, part one, p.255.
- <sup>31</sup> Reise, part one, p.255.
- <sup>32</sup> Reise, part one, p.255. Second italics mine.
- <sup>33</sup> Reise, part one, p.254.
- <sup>34</sup> Reise, part one, p.255.
- <sup>35</sup> Larson, p.77.

- 36 Larson, p.76.
- 37 Larson, p.77.
- 38 Reise, part one, p.254 and n., p.256.
- 39 Larson, p.77.
- 40 Reise, part one, p.255.
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- <sup>20</sup> Rorty, 1978, p.94.
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- <sup>18</sup> Ratcliff, 1982b, p.61.
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