

Introduction: (Late) Modernism

There is no system without its residue.

—Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka”

. . . to produce what is blind, expression, by way of reflection, that is, through form; not to rationalize the blind but produce it aesthetically, “To make things of which we do not know what they are.”

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In this work I offer a philosophical defense of modernism, of modernism as a philosophical claim, of modernism as art’s insistence that it has a philosophical claim that is both intrinsic to it and separate from it—hence a defense of modernist aesthetics as a cornerstone of a modernist philosophy in relation to a (here) painterly modernism that is its condition of possibility. This is also an accounting of the fate of modernism: its waning and remaining, its perpetual lateness. Modernist painting, as a stand-in for modernist art generally, as it will emerge in these pages, will have a not unfamiliar look; yet that look will be inflected in a distinctive direction, a direction that has not yet had its due, not in painting, not in the debates around and about modern painting. Crudely and quickly told, the standard story of modernist painting runs thus: At a certain moment in the nineteenth century, by virtue of its dawning awareness of its irrevocable autonomy, painting began to consider the source of its claim to rational attention, hence its rational authority, as lying within the specific character of its practice, entailing the necessity of making the elements of the practice palpable components of works. Initially, in a series of remarkable transformations, the representational content of paintings came to be marked, shadowed, or

resisted by being displayed through or embodied in features unique to the practice of painting: the brush stroke, the properties of the pigment, the flat surface, the shape of the support, the specific properties of color and line. This process of foregrounding and incorporating the components of painterly practice into works took on a distinctive profile in the early years of the past century. In Picasso's cubism representational content is at first sustained, while flatness is asserted through a fragmentation of the object and its decomposition into facets that alternately invoke other facets, implying volume and depth, or simply lie flat on the picture plane (*Girl with a Mandolin*, 1910). In time the facets all flatten onto the picture plane, becoming almost gridlike (*Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, 1910), till the moment in which representational content is wholly submerged, lost or nearly so, in the grid from which it has been (de-)composed (*Man with Mandolin*, 1911). (It is sometimes argued about this moment that Picasso's beginning to stencil the names of the absent object onto his paintings is meant to signify that, in any act of representing, the object is absent from the act, which is evident in language but had been suppressed by painting.) Conversely, at about the same time, in Kandinsky's abstract paintings representational content is (almost) forgone while the (immaterial) forms of painterly pictorialism—above all deeply saturated areas of brightly contrasting colors, but also shape, composition, and the relations between these forms—take on a hermetically expressive life of their own. One can think of cubism's representation without pictorialism, and of abstraction's heightened pictorialism without representation, as extremes or limit cases or ideal types that were employed in differing combinations and emphases throughout the first half of the century; finally, abstract expressionism dispensed with both representation and pictorialism. With abstract expressionism, the underlying and dynamic project that seems to have begun with Manet and Cézanne comes almost to an abrupt halt, nearly bottoms out, all but ends. What is this history about? Of what significance its (apparent) end?

Let me concede that no single telling of this history will ever be sufficient unto itself since there truly were competing projects and hopes, moments of achievement and promise that closed in on themselves, branchings out and diversions not to be ignored. Nonetheless, the emphatic character of the ending of it all seems to entail that *something* (all but) ended, and it is that *something* whose shape and fate need articulation. Since the shape of the history and the meaning of its end are what these chapters seek to provide, I

will here baldly state my governing idea: Modernism is modern art's self-consciousness of itself as an autonomous practice. Art's autonomy, however, is not the achievement of art's securing for itself a space free from the interference of social or political utility, but a consequence and so an expression of the fragmentation and reification of modern life. Autonomy is not, in the first instance, a reflective categorial accomplishment, but art's expulsion and exclusion from everyday life and the (rationalized and reified) normative ideals, moral and cognitive, governing it. Once expelled and aware of that expulsion, art *then* is forced to interrogate what is left to it, the meaning of its now isolated practice, and, simultaneously, the significance of its excision; in all, painting sought to uncover the possibilities of continuing, of its being able to authorize itself (or to fail to do so), and thus to remain a form of conviction and connection to the world in the absence of what had previously been supposed to be the source of its conviction and connection—representational content and evaluative ideals. Art would not have been ostracized from everyday life if what remained to it was not incommensurable with what the everyday itself had been forced to surrender and/or repudiate. The fact of autonomous art is thus already the beginning of an account of the meaning of modernity.

From the outset, modern autonomous art operates as a critique of modernity because its very existence derives from the ever-expanding rationalization of the dominant practices governing everyday life to the point at which those practices no longer emphatically depend on individuals' sensuously bound, embodied encounter with the world for their operation and reproduction. What hibernates, what lives on in an afterlife in the modern arts, is our sensory *experience* of the world, and of the world as composed of objects, things, whose integral character is apprehensible only through sensory encounter, where sensory encounter is not the simple filling out of an antecedent structure, but formative. Conversely then, what has been excised from the everyday is the *orientational significance of sensory encounter, sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world of things*. The emptying of sensory encounter of orientational significance is our mortification.¹ Artworks expound our mortification by evincing it, elaborating a subjectivity that is no longer subject or substance. In modern painting it is predominantly our visual experience of the world, our capacity for irreducibly visual encounter with things demanding visual/perceptual reckoning, that lingers, afterimages without originals.

Since, obviously, we all have sensory experiences all the time, the notion of “sensory experience” is too indeterminate to encapsulate what the arts attempt to salvage; experience in modernity is systematically equivocal.² The notion of experience that has become authoritative—the one contested by modernism—derives from Kant, or more precisely, achieves its most acute elaboration and legitimation in Kant’s epistemology. In what follows I employ Kant’s conception of experience in its literal, epistemological sense and metaphorically, as a figure for the structural divisions within modern social life.³ In a well-known passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states, “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (A 51 = B 75). Intuitions are singular representations that refer immediately to an object. Empirical intuitions are conveyed through sensory affection. Intuition, and hence the act of intuiting, stands for the immediate, sensory, embodied, object-dependent element in knowing. Conversely, concepts are products of the spontaneity of the human mind; they are general representations, representations of what several different objects have in common. Concepts thus enable us to comprehend objects through the recognition of the features and properties that they share with other objects. Knowledge—empirical experience—occurs when intuitions are subsumed under concepts. In a nutshell, that is Kant’s account of knowledge and experience. Its depth depends on comprehending concept and intuition not as two distinct and separate elements that are contingently brought into harmony or cooperation with each other in empirical knowledge, but as intrinsically indeterminate aspects of conceptual experience that reciprocally determine each other, are incomplete on their own, and thus realize *their own* rationality potential only in those acts where mutual determination takes place. Said another way, Kant’s account means to be more than harmonizing; it requires us to conceive of each component of cognitive experience, concept and intuition, as the *fulfillment* of the opposing component. Concept, so-called, and intuition are both *aspects* of the whole empirical concept, the concept as such; if we conceive of the concept as the minimal unit of cognition, then the so-called concept, concept without intuition, and intuition together are the components of rational encounter. (It matters to the history of all this that one aspect of the concept as such has been identified as “the concept,” with the moment of intuition thus figured as lying outside conceptuality, so outside reason and cognition.) Kant’s classificatory conception of the concept-intuition relation is structured around four du-

alisms, which, were the theory to deliver what it promises, would be fully reconciled with one another: concepts stand to intuitions, first, as *form* stands to *matter*, as what orders or structures in relation to what is ordered; second, as the *general* (or universal) stands to the *particular*; third, as the products of *spontaneity* or intellectual activity stand opposed to the products of *receptivity*; and finally, by implication, as what belongs to the domain of the *intelligible* stands opposed to what belongs to the domain of the *sensible*.⁴ In Kant these really are dualisms, broken and incommensurable aspects of a whole of experience; hence it is in the very duality of these elements that we can discover what is excluded from authoritative acknowledgment that ruins experience as such.

Even this minimal analysis of Kant's account of judging raises a puzzle, one that speaks both to a technical problem in Kant's theory and to the fading of emphatic experience from social life, since what it reveals is a lack of equality in the two moments. Without equality there cannot be mutual determination ("reciprocal subordination" as Friedrich Schiller puts it), and without mutual determination the very idea of the concept collapses, or at least becomes something so equivocal that the difference between the two possibilities, concepts with and without intuitions, all but fails to be a difference in kind (conceptualization without encounter is not a kind of encounter); without the possibility of a full concept, encounter lapses; if a subject cannot encounter an object, then there are neither subjects nor objects—it will come to that. The technical puzzle is simply this: according to Kant, intuitions can only cognitively matter to us by *first* being subsumed under concepts—that is, by being brought within the framework of our spontaneously produced conceptual scheme. We can only be aware of a particular *after* it has been subsumed under the appropriate concept. This thought is necessitated precisely by the claim that intuitions without concepts are blind. However, this is not as straightforward as it may appear. The raw data for conceptualization are provided, again, by sensory awareness. But if awareness requires conceptual articulation, if awareness of something *as* a unified thing with distinct properties occurs through the unifying and organizing functioning of concepts, then how can sensory awareness on its own be *awareness* at all? If the point of concepts is to articulate the sensory given, how can the sensory given *guide* or trigger conceptuality? If *only* concepts provide discriminating awareness, how can intuitions be discriminable? If conceptuality gives *to* intuitions their cognitive

significance, then what significance can intuitions have apart from concepts? But if intuitions have no cognitive significance apart from concepts, then what do concepts re-mark and discriminate? Kant seems to have given to intuition the role of providing for sensory encounter with individual objects, but in handing over all capacity for recognition to conceptuality and discursivity he deprived sensory awareness of the means of doing so. The result is a form of epistemological ventriloquism, the puppet intuitions saying only and exactly what the master concepts say, which is to acknowledge that the intuitions say nothing, have no voice of their own. (I take conceptual ventriloquism to be the deep source of the illusions that sensory matter is expressed in a concept rather than being its dummy. Puppetry is the direct converse illusion to illicit animism.) Intuitions, formally, are but dead (sensory) matter given *all* the meaning they can possess by what is essentially extrinsic to them. If concept and intuition are elements of the concept as such, then the Kantian concept is on its own terms broken, deformed, and alienated from itself, and we, as a consequence, are broken, deformed, and alienated from ourselves.

We do not need to track this puzzle into the labyrinths of Kant's epistemology to appreciate its significance.⁵ Although Kant's tale aims at being one of cooperation between the faculties of sense and thought, by making the senses utterly and irredeemably passive, and handing over all activity to the pure spontaneity of the mind, he fragments the subject into two. When I said that in modernity individual, embodied experience is increasingly and systematically vanquished, and with it the individual objects that are the internal correlates of such experience (the integrity and orientational significance of individual experience and the dignity of singular objects waning in direct proportion to each other), and so the subject that would have such experiences, I had in mind the way in which, in accordance with Kantian epistemology, sensory experience becomes a mere shadow cast by (abstract) conceptuality. In metaphorical terms, but terms that I argue are not merely metaphorical, Kantian conceptuality's increasing independence from its sensory bearer is enacted, cognitively, in the mathematical explanations of modern natural science, and practically in the rationalizations of the practices and institutions that legislate the shape and meaning of modern social life.⁶ The former entails the domination and hegemony of scientific reason; the latter yields life without emphatic experience, without those kinds of experiences that can transform everyday life and provide ori-

entation within it, hence without those experiences through which subjects attain their very subjective standing, their standing in relation to a world.

Whither then intuition, our immediate, singular representations of things through the senses? Significant sensory experience (and the unique objects and events that are its intentional substance) has been dispatched, delegitimated, left without any authority in the reproduction of the social world; but a fundamental element of our self-understanding of ourselves *as (autonomous) individuals* presupposes a self-image of ourselves as centers of agency and experience. Whither this element of our self-image? Whither that portion of intuition that would or could determine the abstract concept? The conceit upon which my argument turns is that *the arts have become the bearers of our now delegitimated capacity for significant sensory encounter: emphatic experience*—and it is because the arts do (or did) fulfill this role that, apparently beyond any reasonable accounting, seemingly beyond our reflective capacity to account for this fact, the arts matter and possess authority. The arts are just now the defused authority of emphatic experience. Only through emphatic experience could we be “in touch” with what is other to the products of the spontaneity of the mind, hence *others* in themselves rather than their being mere mirrors reflecting what has been imposed upon them by the mind’s spontaneous, general forms, hence truly sensible others. The arts provide, so to speak, the sensory experience of particulars writ large, writ as a complex and overdetermined social practice with its own distinctive history. More precisely, the institutional practice of *producing, exhibiting, and interpreting* works of a modernist kind is the bearer of the rationality potential of the repressed intuitive moment of the concept, repressed nature within and without. Hence what the arts configure, offer a reminder or promise of (in effigy), is the rationality potential of intuitions and intuiting—say, again, the arts are brute material inscriptions of an evacuated subjectivity. The task of the arts is to rescue from cognitive and rational oblivion our embodied experience and the standing of unique, particular things as the proper objects of such experience, albeit only in the form of a reminder or a promise.

Because art is the systematic bearer of such capacities and such objects, then it suffers, in part, from the same pressures that forced sensory experience and particularity into hibernation in the first place: delegitimation and progressive emptying. The project of modernist painting ends not because it realized painting’s true essence, but because it was *hounded* into empti-

ness by dint of its emphatic isolation from practical life; this is not to deny that modern art involves a quest—on this account, an anti-skeptical quest played out *through* the specific forms that give painting its distinctive capacities for producing irreducibly unique particulars that (normatively) demand to be responded to in their own right and on their own terms, the terms they themselves set: intuitions demanding a complex, discriminating, judgmental response that is incapable of being discursively grasped. But the hounding of art is there from the beginning;⁷ it is what forces art to become autonomous. In being autonomous, the claim of art is already vanquished, already constituted by being, in fact, *de jure* expelled from empirical experience, and in being expelled carrying its social illegitimacy with it. Modern art is always too *late*. Late modernism, in theory and artistic practice, modernism after its demise, is just the perpetuation of the *claim* of modernism after the *dynamic* history that revealed that claim and made it salient has ended; but again, since the claim of modernism emerges as what has been disclaimed, repudiated, and delegitimated generally, then lateness is inscribed in modernism's emergence. From the outset, the works of modernism are fugitives; or better, what they provide is fugitive experience, exemplars of emphatic experience in the midst of a world in which experience has been reduced to a Kantian shadow experience: experience of irreducibly unique material objects versus the kind of experience that occurs when individuals are submerged, and thus merely shadows thrown by the concepts articulating them. Rationalized modernity destroys emphatic experience, *Erfahrung*, leaving in its stead only a dull, anesthetized remnant, *Erlebnis*.⁸

Because art is the systematic bearer of the claim of intuitions and intuiting, and these are components of the concept as such, then it raises a philosophical claim in a manner that is irreducible to philosophical practice because philosophical practice is and remains on the (abstract, broken) conceptual side of the division between concept and intuition. Because art's claim matters to cognition and rationality as a whole, then it matters to philosophy. Modernist philosophy is the kind of philosophy that depends on art, emphatically (just as in the bad Kantian story concepts were *supposed* to depend on intuitions), which is to say, it is the kind of philosophy whose task is to acknowledge the irreducible moment of sensibility *within* the concept, which is not the sensible as such (that is the reduction of sensibility that the abstract concept carries out) but the insensible within the sensible that is not another (abstract) concept but its now repudiated con-

dition of possibility. Such art, in its turn, needs philosophy in order to reveal how its claim matters to cognition and rationality generally (how it is suppressed conceptuality writ large), how it stands as a repudiated moment of spirit. When the different aspects of this story are composed they yield an account of the rational authority of individual experience, the dignity of particular, indigent things, and the materiality of the social sign, the riveting together of the social sign with its material bearers, which are, must be, more than mere bearers. All this is given through the modernist experience of the absence of experience, that is, the production, exhibition, and interpretation of modernist works.

But again, and this matters, since art is the source of the authority of this claiming, and modern art constituted by a hounding that imposed this task upon it, then art's capacity to fulfill its imposed task is contingent and fragile, subject to indefinite harassment and eventual defeat. Its mortality and perpetual lateness belong to the *substance* of modernist painting. But to explicate the contours of modernism as exemplifying a form of claiming and meaning in relation to what hounds it equally entails that modernism cannot be reduced or confined to a particular style or look or school or canon of works. To say that modernism is always late is equivalent to saying that it always involves painting in the absence of painting—that is what makes modernism always late. Modern painting proceeds as the absence of painting because all modern painting (or sculpture, or music, et al.) secures its appearing fullness upon its existential emptiness: it is without actual content, its claim to fullness made possible by its being without empirical significance, its being semblance. One might consider this the mood of sadness, the melancholy that hangs over even the most resplendent works. All painting's power derives from its being without empirical purpose, its existential emptiness, that it can secure nothing, achieve nothing, be nothing. It is because the achievement of painting is only ever the absence of painting that modern painting at every moment is threatened by philosophical disenfranchisement. If every actual painting is a necessary failure, if every painting is abject with respect to the desire it configures (to be worldly and empirically mean), and that is the only form of success available, then it can appear as if every painting fails the idea of painting, thus making the idea of painting the transcendent measure of actual painting. This gets exactly wrong the source and meaning of painting's failure: it makes actual paintings fail with respect to a transcendent Idea, call it the

philosophical idea of painting, rather than failure being a consequence of achieving the idea of painting, painting in the absence of painting—failure the form of success now available to painting.

Said differently, painting in the absence of painting is painting in the absence of painting representing the world, aligning us with it. But if painting occurs in the absence of painting—because what matters about painting is not representational but categorial, an inscription of and a way of bearing the burden of the absence of experience, the default of sensuous particulars, the excision of bodily happiness—then modernist painting need not and indeed is not, always and everywhere, literally, *painting*. Modernism continues, its painting in the absence of painting continues in works that standardly have been interpreted as postmodernist. Such labeling, modernism/postmodernism, lets style and chronology determine meaning too quickly (as if, say, after Warhol, after April 1964, after the *Brillo Boxes*, a modernist claim could not, in principle, arise with any hope of vindication, authenticity, or authority).⁹ So one further inflection of the idea of late modernism is that there are works now, the pictures of Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois's *Cells*, that are as emphatically modernist as any of the canonical works that have rightly been found fundamental for eliciting its meaning and standing.¹⁰

There is one final nuance to the claim that modernism is perpetually late. One side of the claim of modernist art is that it proffers the defused and repudiated claim of sensuous particularity, and hence sensuous nature in relation to a rational freedom that arises *through* its separation from nature. But this entails that the force of the claim of sensuous nature is in part constituted through its clinging or lingering on as the murdered antagonist of rational freedom. Normatively, what the rational concept is dependent on is not the undiluted authority of sensuous particularity itself, but the *continuation of the slaughter of its authority* as the plenipotentiary of the authority of living nature. Hence the other side of modernist art's lateness will be its being *too late*; that is, the force of its claim will not be a claim to autonomous authority, as if living nature itself could (once more) provide the orientations necessary and sufficient for our leading purposeful lives, as if art could itself truly resurrect or reanimate the authority of living nature; rather, it is the irremediable loss of that claim that *is* its continuing claim, the claim of art against reason. Art cannot restore or reanimate the authority of dead nature, but it can, does, press the claims of the dead against the

living as the permanent condition for the living fending off cultural death. At its highest reach, art turns cultural melancholy into form.

Such, in the broadest possible terms, is the story I want to tell. It is not, of course, my story, but the account of the meaning of high modernism that T. W. Adorno worked out in numerous writings, most notably *Aesthetic Theory*. That Adorno, who wrote irreplaceable accounts of musical and literary modernism, did not attempt to provide an account of painterly modernism is intriguing, especially since the issues that I contend are focal to it—namely, the standing of perceptual experience as orientational, as providing conviction and connection to world, and the role of art mediums as stand-ins for the lost authority of nature—are most forcefully and radically raised in modernist painting. Modernist painting is the crux of the claim of modernism, of modernism as the philosophical self-consciousness of modernity, of modernism as philosophy. That as yet there has been no explicit Adornoian account of modernist painting means that what is without question the most systematic defense of the meaning of modernism has been absent from the ferocious and important debates around modernist art over the past half-century. For reasons I shall come to momentarily, the need for the saliences and emphases of Adorno's modernism turn out to be not only timely, but also a matter of urgency to contemporary art theory and practice.

My argument operates on three distinct levels of accounting: philosophical, historical, and critical. Although Adorno's aesthetics and philosophical modernism orient the argument of each chapter, I barely mention Adorno before Chapter 5, and when he does enter the discussion it is in the context of another theorist of modernism (Chapters 5, 7, and 8), or as the relevant background for the reading of modernist works (Chapter 9). The most robust philosophical elaborations of modernist aesthetics hence occur through the words of others: Kant and Stanley Cavell. With some perversity, the Kant chapter brings into play the materialist commitments of modernism, its binding of itself to the medium as the stand-in or plenipotentiary for nature, while the Cavell chapter attempts to make good the rationality potential exemplified by aesthetic experience and judgment. It is more than helpful for my purposes that the contours of modernist thought emerge from different locales and in terms remote from Adorno's own, even if those other perspectives take on the emphases they do through my allegiance to

Adorno's thought, since that shows that the depth of those contours is not dependent on the idiosyncratic features of Adorno's philosophy.

My explicitly historical story begins in Chapter 1 with the divorce between philosophy and painting, concept and intuition, in the seventeenth century in a speculative contrast between Descartes's dissolution of the sensible world into a mathematical one and Pieter de Hooch's reconfiguration of Dutch realism (which is here construed as a forerunner of modernism in its attempt to forge a perceptual world irreducible to ideas about it). In the following chapter, Kant's aesthetic theory is offered as the conflicted model of the link between aesthetics and nature; a conflict that is then traced—as my critical narrative kicks in—in the modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, Cavell (Chapter 3), Michael Fried's Greenbergian formalism (Chapter 4) and T. J. Clark's Greenbergian radicalism (Chapters 5 and 6). The goal of these chapters is to inflect the model of Greenberg's aesthetic modernism, which has served as the paradigm defense of painterly modernism in the Anglo-American world, in an Adornoian direction. So Chaim Soutine's adherence to paint-stuff performs a standing rebuke to Greenberg's self-loathing formalism, while the history of modernity hounding modernism from without, which is so painful in Soutine, reveals that the categorial abyss separating the modernist art Fried prizes cannot be realistically distinguished from the theatrical, minimalist art he despises; T. J. Clark's political diagnosis of the limits of modernism, even if correct, is too bound to the fantasy of a different kind of art for a different kind of social world to capture the epistemological achievements and rationality potential of modernism: its materialism, its defense of contingency, its abiding with the fragmentary. The next three chapters track the post-Greenberg, edgy, and ambivalent modern/postmodern contesting of modernism in the critical theories of, first, Thierry de Duve, and then Arthur Danto, Yves-Alain Bois, and by implication, in the art of Cindy Sherman.¹¹ De Duve's nominalism, finally, can make nothing of either the dynamic history of modernism or its binding itself to the demands of the medium, while Bois's defense of the arbitrariness of sign in the understanding of modernism makes his defense of Robert Ryman as "the last modernist" almost contradictory—again the submergence of the demands of the medium, which are everywhere in Ryman, are left unnecessarily and unintelligibly exposed. In my opening chapter I contend that realism is not primarily a matter of making likenesses of the world but a complex matter of

the *fitness* of the wholly human powers of art in relation to a particular, wholly human, and secular social world. The lack of fit that makes modernism necessary thus relates to the failure of the world to be fully habitable by beings like ourselves. Modernism as the forsaking of realism is hence the record of the sorrow of the world, its lack of human worldliness. Only this explains why modernism must be an art of failure, a painting in the absence of painting.

The weaving together of the philosophical, historical, and critical strands of the claim of Adorno's philosophical modernism should, ideally, enable its reception in the already well-formed debate about painterly modernism; equally, and perhaps even more important, it should enable a reception that is not narrowly tied to the development of Critical Theory, and hence exposes it to the interests of a wider and very different audience. Such, at least, was the task I set for myself from the moment the idea for this book first emerged.

Of course, the philosophical and critical portions of my argument would have little weight if they did not directly say something about modernist painting itself. Not being an art historian or a critic by training, I am ill-equipped to compose my own history of modernist painting. But the model of my first encounter with T. J. Clark, an encounter I extended in "Social Signs and Natural Bodies: On T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*," has proved efficacious. Rather than directly providing a reading of modernist painting, I forward the analysis and meaning of Adorno's modernism indirectly by engaging with those accounts of modernism that have proved to be the most challenging and telling in recent debates. Apart from the two essays on Clark, there are the essays on Fried, de Duve, Danto, and Bois.¹² Although Greenberg crops up in a variety of places, my most direct encounter with his thought occurs in "Judging Life," where I take issue with his interpretation of Chaim Soutine. My essay on Cindy Sherman's photographs should have managed an encounter with the writings of Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, but Sherman proved so demanding on her own that working out my differences with Krauss and Forster fell away. Indeed my encounter with Sherman was long, drawn out, and distinctive, since making sense of her works forced upon me a radical rethinking of my understanding of Adorno. In ways I have yet to fully digest, her pictures demanded that a family of concepts I had previously ignored or marginalized—life, death, death-in-life, decay,

organism, animality, animism, and suffering, which in turn led to further thoughts about art and melancholy—became central. What these notions help give precision to is the notion of the invisible within the visible that is not itself reducible to the concept, but needful of it—as well as, and more demanding, the uncanny liveliness of works that are, finally, composed of dead matter, and hence the intolerableness of their rebuke: they screen us from the mortification that their urgency (their sublimity, if you wish) exposes. The mark of that transformation is evident in “Judging Life,” “Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.,” and “Freedom from Nature?”¹³ I have always interpreted Svetlana Alpers’s *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* as a defense of modernist painting *avant la lettre*, explicating how modern art could secure for itself autonomy from the Italian model with its hierarchical structure in which ideal (read: concept) orders descriptive content (read: intuition). “Wax, Brick, and Bread” attempts to inflect Alpers’s account more explicitly in that modernist direction under the impact of the paintings of Pieter de Hooch. My limning of “Cavell’s Modernism,” in which the sculptures of Anthony Caro play a pivotal role, forms a bridge between Kantian aesthetics, of which Cavell proffers a distinctly modernist reading, and Fried’s thought, which is deeply informed by Cavell’s take on Wittgenstein and ordinary-language philosophy as well as Greenberg’s formalism.

Hence, although I offer nothing like a deep art-historical accounting, in each chapter I do attempt to engage with the relevant works, to offer recountings of them that bear directly on the conceptual issues at stake, and hence to sustain a fully internal relation between our experience and understanding of works and the theories that attempt to explicate the nature and meaning of their claiming. My difference in approach from traditional art theory and criticism is basic: what requires explanation is not, primarily, the meaning of works, but their capacity for *claiming*, for demanding or requiring acknowledgment and assent, and so, by extension, that they are objects we care about, and possess, in ways that remain almost unintelligible, a form of authority. I presume that works of art and aesthetic experience are puzzling, even insufferable, since, at a material level, they hardly seem worthy of the attention invested in them. In this respect, each essay in this work is haunted by a skeptical anxiety, an inner voice contending that painted expanses of canvas cannot conceivably deserve our involvement and engagement. In this respect, it is the voice of the skeptic and philistine

in each of us that is the real object of my analysis. In this setting, interpretation matters only to the degree to which it aids in explaining the normative force of works, that they do lodge a claim that requires heeding.

Routinely, the retrospective accounting for the normative force of a work or body of works diverges from the intentions and ambitions of their makers. That this is a routine occurrence in modernism is to be understood as a consequence of the fact that the setting for the enterprise as a whole, painting's salvaging of sensory significance in the context of its hounded autonomy, did not and does not uniformly and insistently impose itself on the *immediate* conditions of artistic production, exhibition, and interpretation. Autonomy and the kind of dynamic history it precipitated entailed that the immediate conditions determining art practices inevitably were contemporary practices, accomplishments, claims, and events. It became the task of the critic, the task that Greenberg's criticism exemplifies, to connect the indirect pressure of the general setting (rationalized modernity) to particular works and artists. Ignoring the weight and significance of the general setting in relation to the internal development of the practice with its immediate demands is the core of my criticism of Fried; conversely, I contend that T. J. Clark's method of analysis attempts to transform the indirect pressures of rationalization into immediate sociopolitical pressures (the valences of class) that can have readable consequences on painterly practice. The historical pressures of modernity, its hounding, are too remote, too insignificant in Fried's modernism, and too close, too intimate in Clark's—or so I argue. So some central works of de Hooch, Soutine, Caro, Ryman, and Jackson Pollock, along with Sherman, are given extended treatment, while there are a variety of lesser engagements with Jan Vermeer, Frank Stella, Louise Bourgeois, Joseph Cornell, Willem de Kooning, and others.

Doubtless the most exorbitant line of argument in this text relates to the notion of artistic mediums as stand-ins or plenipotentiaries for nature as a source or condition of meaning (intuition is, in part, the epistemological name for material nature); and it is just this notion of medium that is hounded out of aesthetics and eventually art by the reigning concept of the concept, the concept cut loose from its moorings in materiality and sensible experience, the abstract concept whose appearances include the increasing dominance of technological reason and rationality. In writing not included here, I have elaborated the emergence of this claim in eighteenth-

century aesthetic theory; in the writings of Gotthold Lessing, Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel is adumbrated the whole trajectory of art from modernism to postmodernism, with each moment in that development scored by the hounding of art that I contend is a central feature of modern art.¹⁴ By locating that hounding in the ur-history of modern and postmodern aesthetic theory, I intend to underline modernism's perpetual lateness, how painting in the absence of painting was urged on autonomous art even before Manet.

Equally, just how urgent and contemporary is this conception of artistic mediums was brought home to me when I read an essay by Michael Newman on the work of Tacita Dean. Newman begins by elegantly limning the notion of medium as it stretches from traditional to contemporary art.

The mediums of art are concretions of time. Such concretion takes a different form in each medium and in each work. Paintings and sculptures delay, condense and spread out time in their own way. So do photographs, films, and videos. Each medium and each work posits a distinct relation between past, present and future. The photograph re-presents the past as present in the trace of its absence. Film presents a record of the past's passing which is recreated in the present. Video acts as a real-time flowing correlate of the past as present.¹⁵

Newman goes on to sketch some of the dialectic between media (as technologies) and mediums (as complex apparatuses enabling particular artistic possibilities), how transformations in the former engender the possibility of transformations in the latter; and how even here Benjamin's notion that the "redemptive possibility of a technological form is glimpsed at the moment of its obsolescence" operates.¹⁶ This whole account, however, is put in place in order to set up the darker question that he thinks the work of Tacita Dean confronts. The question that requires attention is not, or is no longer, how to distinguish one medium from another or how to explicate the different uses of a medium that is provided by a particular state of technological development, but rather "*whether a medium as such is even possible* in the context of the technological transformation—specifically the digitalization of media as a whole."¹⁷ Newman then offers a long passage from the opening pages of Friedrich Kettler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* that argues that the "general digitalization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media" since those differences, voice and text, sound and image, are reduced to surface effects of the digital codes, the numbers, encoding them.¹⁸ Digitalization does for media what the Carte-

sian reduction of the piece of wax did for nature in general: it reduces material form into abstract numbers. Once this occurs, then in principle any medium can be translated into any other. The idea of a total media link on a digital base will hence “erase the very concept of medium.” Digitalization thus represents the apotheosis of concepts without intuitions.

This is not the place to either evaluate Kettler’s and Newman’s claims about digitalization or interrogate how Tacita Dean’s works raise and engage this issue, what the chances are for artistic resistance. It is enough that a *prima facie* claim for the existence of this collapse in this form should suddenly loom so compulsively on the artistic horizon.¹⁹ I am broaching the issue of digitalization and the looming erasure of the very idea of artistic mediums here in order to bring into focus how what appears to be the most pressing question confronting contemporary art, the very possibility of the continuing existence of art in a form continuous with its past, whether art still exists and has a right to exist, in order to cast an appropriate spotlight on the art and aesthetics of the recent past. If I am right about eighteenth-century aesthetics and about the suppressed meaning of modernism, the question of autonomous art has been from the outset the question of mediums, and the fate of the claim of art bound up with the possibility of their being artistic mediums at all. But this is just to say that our capacity for recognizing and analyzing the present danger is dependent on our understanding of modern aesthetics and artistic modernism. Fugitively, too late, always too late, modernist art flagged the danger, flagged that its obsession with pigment and color, line and shape, flatness and the delimitation of flatness, were conditions of possibility for sensuous encounter in a world without experience. But neither modernism itself nor modern aesthetics has always been clear about this; on the contrary, even within modernist art and aesthetics the forces of disintegration have been continuously active. This is what Adorno knew; maybe it is everything and all he knew, which at certain moments and for certain audiences appeared wildly too little, too narrow, too panicky and obsessed. Our present makes Adorno’s maddening bias suddenly appear prescient, a correct envisioning of the stakes and meaning of modernism. The consequent wager I offer is that because modernism was always late, then perhaps yet there is a possibility.

Although designed as a broadly continuous and developing argument, as harbinger of a theory of modernism and polemic about its recent fate, the separate chapters of this book originally appeared, often in different,

and briefer, form than they appear here, as separate essays intended for different audiences. For the sake of texture and readability, and because each chapter attempts to mount a distinct argument, it seemed wise to leave each chapter in something like its original essay (or lecture) format. This means there is some repetition of key ideas, which I hope will be found productive for comprehension rather than an irritant.²⁰