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Writing in Chicago

DENNIS ADRIAN

Writing art criticism without being located in New York City will to some, I am sure, seem like the definition of a classic exercise in futility, but my experience, living in Chicago for the past fourteen years following upon nearly a decade of living (and writing criticism) in the Big Apple, has not borne out this evaluation. To be sure, there are very major differences between operating in one or the other of the two venues and I am sure that these differences are factors which have had an effect on the evolution of my points of view about both art and writing.

Before examining these questions however, I think it is important to consider some of the operational and technical differences that I have felt have affected me. Since there is very little criticism or writing about art *published* in Chicago (two newspapers, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Chicago Sun Times* and the independent art newspaper *The New Art Examiner*),

the critic in Chicago has very limited opportunities to see his writing in immediate relationship to the art scene about him. And it is only in the case of *The New Art Examiner* that the critic will have any contact with editors whose specialty is art criticism; with the two newspapers, one deals with feature or weekend supplement editors whose interests are necessarily dominated by the topical, by competing "features" such as music, drama, and film criticism. The power of this competition is economic, since the three fields mentioned are guaranteed a regular portion of sizeable space due to the quarterly, six-month, or yearly advertising revenues from concert halls and booking agencies, from theater chains and large corporate film distributors. Way up there in the controller's office, a cost accountant for the newspaper can only allot varying and intermittent space for art criticism, since there is not enough regular and predictable advertising revenue connected with it to support the paper, ink and press-time costs of the space for art writing.

The matter of getting illustrations for one's articles is a vexing issue; any picture will take away from one's lineage and, in addition, if one does not arrange to provide the illustrations himself or herself and relies on the paper's staff photographers to go out and shoot something, the result is often fatally compromised by the photographer's natural tendency to make the picture "newsy" by having the artist, dealer or whoever pointing stupidly to some work in the gallery as he grins into the camera and stands in front of the work. There is no effective way to avoid this without providing (or even taking) one's own photographs.

Newspaper feature and supplement editors have a sharp eye to their readership (or their idea of it) and that can be a problem for the art critic, whom the editor often perceives as a "general cultural event" writer. When I was lucky enough to be writing art criticism for the now defunct *Chicago Daily News*, my editor, who was responsible for the weekend "Panorama" supplement, was one of the stars of Chicago journalism, the writer and editor, William M. Newman, a brilliant editor whose literate devotion to writing and wide cultural interests greatly improved the copy I gave him. I learned an enormous amount from Bill and the only mild *contretemps* that ever arose between us was when he gently took me to task for writing criticism which was "too specialized, which required the general reader to look up words in the dictionary." This reaction of Bill Newman's really came out of his own background and temperament. He is in many ways an unreconstructed thirties liberal who believed that "the art column" should be something which the horny steel worker in his bungalow on the far West Side would pick up on the weekend and therein find the

promise of balm, comfort and surcease for a workaday life of noble and unremitting toil in the tempting descriptions of spiritual nourishment to be gained at some gallery or museum. This reader, Bill felt, was the backbone of the paper's circulation and subscription and did not want to puzzle his way through thorny tangles of my critical thought. The issue was resolved when I pointed out to Bill that I didn't even understand the *headlines* on the Sports Page and that I was sure that if the sportswriters wrote in a baby-jock-talk that would make sense to me, the general readership would be up in arms. Art criticism, I claimed, had an audience as specialized in its interests and expectations as the most die-hard cell of Chicago Cub fans and that this audience, while rather small in comparison to the readership of the Sports Section, nevertheless expected writers addressing it to use the appropriate lingo, however arcane. The same, I further maintained, was true of the bridge, chess and soap opera plot summary readers who were, moreover, probably comparable in number to the art fans. I gained my point and was grateful to be able to have the continuing benefit of Bill Newman's really very expert editing until the paper folded three or four years ago.

It is clear that the art critics of *The New York Times* would not run up against the small problem I have described because it is policy there at the highest level of managing editor and ownership to have comparatively extensive art critical coverage. The luxury of this situation is perhaps unique to *The Times*. In Chicago the only editorship concerned exclusively with writing about art is that of *The New Art Examiner*, which, of course, could become easily swamped by the importuning of a single critic; also, its editorship reserved the positions of lead writers for itself with the welcome exceptions of occasional Guest Editors whose issues usually concerned a specific theme or question, thereby imposing another but equally effective kind of limitation. This is far different from the situation of the critic in New York who, since the editorial offices and publishing entities of a number of journals and newspapers concerned with art are there in his own city, can hawk about an article or an idea to quite a number of possibly interested publications and, to boot, get a fairly quick reaction from them. From afar this is difficult to do. Most of the pieces I have done for national magazines since moving to Chicago nearly fifteen years ago have been the result of editorial solicitations. If I want to try and land an idea in one of them I must use the slow and expensive methods of communication by mail or telephone, work with a longer lead time (which means I can rarely count on my copy appearing at the same time as an exhibition in the case of reviews or think-pieces about current shows), and cannot check, correct or proof what I do very easily.

Another peculiarity of working in Chicago as opposed to New York is that the community of art critics, or writers who operate as art critics, is very small and not in good intercommunication. Right now the current art critic for *The Chicago Tribune* is a former music critic, shifted over by his feature editor (also a music critic) to fill the gap left by the departure of the previous holders of the post. Additional art criticism occasionally appears by a very gifted feature writer on cultural happenings who is best known for his drama and film criticism. *The Sun Times'* principal critic moved into the field from being a painter, an activity he still pursues in teaching and the studio a good part of the time; the same is true of *The Sun Times'* secondary art critic, who does rather more precis' of museum and gallery press releases than independent criticism. Perhaps it is having been trained as an art historian, but I find that it is rare and difficult to have professional discussions about art criticism with these colleagues of mine even though I do not feel that my background has provided me with a position of insight and knowledge greater than theirs; far from it. Nonetheless my orientation seems so different from their several outlooks that it is not easy to form close bonds of professional acquaintance-ship. I have felt this to be a drawback personally, since often it is a long time (or never) until I get any feedback from professional peers who operate on the same wavelength. For me, this kind of interaction is much more likely to come from artists or from the much smaller world of museum people and art historians. But even among these groups, the members of which may all write criticism from time to time, there is an essential difference of orientation that makes the fullest and most open kind of discussion, whether in print or verbal, extremely rare.

The *m.o.* I have evolved as a critic in Chicago is certainly determined by the local condition of the art scene here, especially the activities of artists in the area. It has been fortunate for me that the world of working artists in Chicago has been extremely lively and varied for about twenty-five years now, albeit with some slack periods such as the early 60's, when most of the significant artists who emerged in the previous decade had scattered from the city and before the extraordinary emergence of newer artists in the mid-60's had fully taken place. But when I returned to Chicago in 1967 after having written regularly for *Art Forum* (whose editorship then was still in California) in New York for about four years, it seemed to me a rare critical opportunity presented itself. The Chicago scene was beginning to emerge and intensify in a surprisingly active and varied way and while several local critics had begun to assess this phenomenon in the Chicago (newspaper) press and in their more limited regional contributions to the national magazines (by then all published in New York), new figures and directions

of clearly (to me) more than local interest were manifesting themselves in exhibitions and all kinds of artists' activities seemingly every week.

Now this is where I think I took a different tack than would have someone viewing the new Chicago scene from elsewhere; a writer from New York at this period I think would have attempted to evaluate the new activity in Chicago from a holistic point of view formed within what seemed, to everyone in New York at least at that time, as the all embracing universe of artistic and critical directions and possibilities of the metropolis. To me, however, so much appeared to be happening and it was so multifaceted that my thinking and writing went along the lines of attempting to particularize for myself the separate and idiosyncratic character of each artist and direction. Perhaps again it was my art historical background which led me to begin *cataloguing*, so to speak, what I encountered without relating it to broad streams of other current artistic or critical directions except through contradistinction. My synthesizing attempts came later and these too were aimed at synthesis of what I had "catalogued" rather than at a synthesis of what was happening in Chicago with any wider field of concern, save the historical past. Even these "localized" syntheses were rendered difficult by the richness of material. When in 1971 the National Gallery of Canada asked me to organize a travelling exhibition (limited, by cost factors, to painting) of *What They're Up to in Chicago*¹. I had difficulty keeping the number of artists in the show to under twenty, and this with the understanding that I had decided to include only recent artists with some serious exhibition history. Today the number would have to be at least doubled. I was supposed to provide a text to the catalogue and found that I could not; the task was beyond me and I certainly had not evolved any general critical approach to this new work. All I knew was that it hit some very high level of voltage and that it was real.

In 1973 I was able to do better. The chance came to organize a series of four exhibitions, devoted, respectively, to prints, drawings, paintings and sculptures and to do a catalogue essay for each². I was able to produce something this time and attempted to formulate stylistic and formal generalizations about the new Chicago art, relating it to different historical currents and to some degree to the Chicago scene of the 50's as well. From the perspective of the present, nearly a decade later, these general theories assuredly have their limitations but also I think still present some useful ideas, even if in embryonic form.

This criticism and the elaborations of it which have developed in subsequent critical articles, catalogue essays and the like would certainly not have come about had the Chicago scene not appeared so active and stimulating; I had never

wished to write about local events in the art world simply because they were local; that seems to me the real province of the feature writer. Having left New York at a crucial time in artistic developments there (1967) I was not prepared to deal with anything less interesting or any art world activity which appeared to be only derivative manifestations of it; as a matter of fact, I had developed this very point of view *in* New York which, in addition to the productive ferment of the later 60's, was at that time plagued with an unusual volume of shamelessly derivative and cobbled together art forms. I need only remind the reader that it was at this period when one could in New York hear of Chryssa and Howard Kanovitz spoken of as major figures in direct comparison to Mark di Suvero and Philip Pearlstein.

The level of museum and other institutional art activity in Chicago is thankfully full enough that any single writer covering it will find himself addressing a very wide range of material, most of it modern, but some of major historical and artistic significance from the past. Many large museum shows have of course originated elsewhere and travel here which means that to some extent they have been chewed over critically in the national press, both mass publications and art magazines, before the critic in one of the later venues gets a crack at the material. This poses a special critical problem for me in that I often wish to write as much about the catalogue text and other criticism of whatever the subject is as about the primary material itself and naturally there is very seldom space or editorial encouragement to do so. When major and important exhibitions have originated in my own backyard the approach I take to the material might be the more historically oriented the older the works in question are; in regard to a Monet show mounted by the Art Institute of Chicago³, I recall that a good deal of my assessment was not about the contribution of Monet (which the exhibition and catalogue did nothing to re-define or enlarge) but about the form of the exhibition (and its installation) in regard to an ideal Monet exhibition I had constructed in my mind. It is a question as to whether this kind of writing is art criticism at all or whether it is a sort of pedantic evaluation of the failure or success of the curator's obligation to present his subject fully and with the most salient points sufficiently emphasized.

With more recent work the problem can be the same, as in the instance of a Vito Acconci retrospective exhibition held recently here at the Museum of Contemporary Art. I had hardly any interest in assessing Acconci as an artist or to range over the list of what are considered to be his most significant contributions. Instead, as in the case of Monet, it was again the idea of the exhibition which took my interest and, since the available space for the show was really far too limited for it to make its

proper effect, I ended up writing nothing; what I had concluded about the show was obvious to every viewer, and furthermore this conclusion that the work could not be presented properly inhibited me from attempting to make any fresh evaluation of it as art. I suppose that the unavoidably constricted presentation of Acconci's work made me feel that I could not operate as a critic in regard to it at all.

The opposite experience occurred some years ago in relation to a travelling exhibition of Robert Smithson installation pieces which was held at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. This show was so effectively presented that it appeared as completely new to me; despite the considerable Smithson literature which had come into being and with which I was quite familiar, I felt no trepidation about launching into an exigetical analysis of the pieces (these were the mirror and salt works) as if no one had ever treated them before. Perhaps what I wrote (for a newspaper) would have been redundant or even terribly out of date in New York then but at that time not many of Smithson's installation pieces had been seen away from the east coast and so perhaps my tardy enthusiasm was able to fulfill a function that it could not elsewhere.

The instances above to some extent mark out the extremes of the range I find I can operate in critically where I am at present; the case of covering the continuing development of the recent Chicago art is a special one to which I will return below. Besides, the time lag that makes writing about events of national significance perhaps a bit too much after the fact is not really a serious drawback; much more serious is the feeling of writing in a kind of vacuum due to the fact that the few other art critics I know in my area have such very different ideas of their purposes and functions. If it were not for the relatively untouched ground of the newer artists of real significance that have appeared recently in Chicago, I think the effect of this vacuum (real or imagined) would be chilling indeed.

Another somewhat iffy area in which art critics here as well as New York and elsewhere operate is evaluatory writing about the current states of the various museum organizations, their policies, functions and personnel. Chicago has two large museums, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art (established 1967) and more recently, a number of smaller but no less serious institutions such as the David and Alfred Smart Art Gallery which is the museum (collections and exhibitions) at the University of Chicago, the new Block Gallery at Northwestern University in nearby Evanston, and a peculiar newcomer, the Terra Museum of American Art, the creation of a single (living) donor whose exact role is not yet very clear, since it has been open only nine months. Each of these institutions has its vagaries, problems and idiosyncrasies, all moni-

tored closely and with great interest and concern by almost all the art world since each, in its way, exemplifies an aspect of the final level of Establishment power and support. The problems and activities of these institutions, especially those of the Art Institute, which has had more than its share of the former, frequently reach the intensity of issues of national significance and attention. Accordingly, a good part of one's critical position in the world of Chicago art writing is related to one's knowledge of and position about them. It is questionable too, whether this is really an authentic part of art criticism, but, in Chicago, art critics are expected to be adepts at this sort of writing about art institutions (and so inevitably their politics), writing which, in New York for instance, would be the province of specialists such as Grace Glueck or Charlotte Curtis who are not quite considered to be really critics. That critics in Chicago and elsewhere regularly do this kind of writing without feeling any identity crisis is perhaps a function of the small numbers of people in these areas doing any kind of serious writing about art and its milieu at all. One of the amusing, not to say absurd, byproducts of the Chicago critic taking stands in print on museum policies and activities is that the museum may advance or withdraw one's accreditation according to how its administration reads one's museum politics; one season the press cards, catalogues, preview invitations and staff phone calls pour in and then after some piece that contains some carping, these evidences of one's professional (and even private) existence may cease; one starts to receive the cut direct. Mysterious changes in the administrative or curatorial climate may reverse the whole procedure. This kind of thing doubtless happens in every part of the world, but in a place where there are only half-dozen or so such major art institutions these pettinesses are the more apparent.

It is probably fair to say that in any pure or limited sense, what I do in my writing is not very often art criticism at all but a variety of related kinds of writing, historical, interpretative, and analytical. The area which interests me most because I have been nearly alone in it is writing about the art scene peculiar to Chicago and, as well, certain artists whose work I have come to know particularly well, most notably H.C. Westerman, to name but one. In these areas I feel I have an open track that not only can I present interpretations which do not necessarily have to penetrate the accretions of other viewpoints (yet) but also might perform some documentary function in recording the developmental turns of this or that artist, group or movement.

In the case of the Chicago material, I feel that I am working on several stages at once. Often it is the emerging artistic identity of some figure that I am trying to particularize; in other instances it is the formal or contentual structure of some de-

finer artist(s); and in yet other situations, the beginnings of broader (I won't say holistic) assessments appear to be emerging. There is, happily, too much of this material for me to begin to process thoroughly alone but the prospect of continuing to try to define what seems to be major and relatively concentrated systems of direction in American art here is an agreeable pipe dream. I don't feel my experience, education or intelligence has prepared me to undertake art critical theorizing about extremely broad questions of contemporary or older art and I find the things I can re-read later with the least amount of shame and discomfort address an issue or artist or period in some very specific way determined by my temperament. The most effective thinking I feel I have done in a general way about art is connected with the understanding of visual perception and about the function, rather than the nature, of art. But, all my ideas on these subjects have emerged in teaching more than writing and it is probably more than likely that the distillate of what I feel is a whiz-bang seminar or lecture series would expire feebly and then dissipate as so much moonshine in written form.

Having been writing for twenty-five years now, I am increasingly drawn to attempt recollective treatments of exciting and disturbing periods of art, its history and taste of which I was for one reason or another a close observer or at least a witness. The sense of the period 1962-65 in which figure painting re-emerged strongly among American painters in New York would be interesting to reconsider in terms of what it appeared to be then and now, as would be a treatment of Oldenburg in his progress from proprietor of "The Store" to International Grand Pooh-Bah.

What I seem to be anticipating here is a kind of an art critic-historical memoir. A contrasting consideration of the Chicago art world in the 50's and in the past fifteen years might have its possibilities, as would a tighter coverage of what appear to be long term aspects of taste in Chicago collections over many years and in a variety of different fields and periods of art.

These kinds of possibilities might be entertained by critics anywhere and for this reason, together with the fact of having operated to some extent as a critic in both New York and Chicago, I do not feel that point of view about my work is the exclusive and specific product of having worked mostly away from the centers of the publishing organs of this criticism. I have not been able to develop a philosophy of art criticism but I have evolved some ideas, pragmatic ones, about what I feel is its effective practice and function: these notions are perhaps overly colored by an art historical background. But I have noticed that after hovering mid-air for so many years between the two stools of art history and art criticism some, at least, have

been inveigled into thinking I have a perch of my own.

¹"What They're Up to in Chicago/Peintre, Heure, de Chicago." Travelling Exhibition, Extension Services of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1972-73.

²"The Chicago Style: Prints" (also "Painting," "Drawing," "Sculpture"). Four exhibitions for the Arts on the Midway Program at the Center for Continuing Education, Chicago, 1973-74.

³"Paintings by Monet." Art Institute of Chicago, 1975.

A Plea (in Words) on Behalf of (Special) Things: Notes on Art in Relation to Verbal Culture

JOSEPH MASHECK

Writing about art is often enough like writing to a third party what is in effect a love letter *about* the beloved.¹ Our literary and philosophical friends often misunderstand, taking what we write as pretty much the same thing they do, only more oblique. Needless to say, this has its critical and even pedagogical ramifications. We can find ourselves invited into the humanistic fraternity, only to notice that what was really expected was just a little mood music to accompany more serious affairs. Using as a mere starting point, the specific question of whether the various arts have a common critical method, I want to consider this dilemma from the middle of it, contravening the literary presumption by conceding that this irregular bundle of thoughts does at least pretend to assume the form of a (purely verbal) essay, yet one whose very content plays outside it—as with the

operations of those artificial hands attached to real hands which scientists use for handling dangerous materials. For to say these things at all is in some sense to speak against speech, and if there is any literary interest here it is meant to be subversive (or *almost so*), and ought, ideally to self-destruct.

In my view, there might well be a common critical method applicable generally in the arts, so long as it comprehended the specific possibilities of the various arts; but, in practice, there is no such method, mainly because works of plastic art shows us that the world is not a "text" and that transcendence is only possible thanks to materiality. There is a tendency to assume that the real significance of things is confined to whatever in them can be rendered conceptual by application of the universal solvent of words and against this tendency the fine arts stubbornly hold out. Let me say that I run up against this problem all the time, maybe even more urgently in teaching than in writing. In discussing paintings, especially, there is always the possibility of an arrogant disregard of the silent finality of the specific work, a threat of ingratitude toward the work's concreteness as *work*, as though everything would be better all around if the fine arts could, once and for all, be pried loose from the physical world (and their special function in the world of work) and have them submit more readily to dematerialization.

The crux of the issue is the obliviousness of even much well-read literary or philosophical inquiry to the concrete specifics of works of visual art. Paint, brushwork, form and so on, are treated as mundane, if not impertinent concerns, obstacles to be overcome. Worse still, by an inversion of the modern idea that the work of art takes a self-sufficient place beside nature, the object as a whole comes to be treated, rudely enough, as mere raw material for purely verbal thought, without respecting the play of plastic thought already offered by it. Probably this can only happen because art study is considered a dispensable part of education in general, even though general education is indispensable to any sophisticated study of art. So it is much easier for otherwise cultivated people to get along in a state of artistic ignorance than the other way around. Once, I heard Susan Sontag speak on photography, and a member of the audience suggested that she was failing to discriminate between the *interesting* and the *beautiful*, an antithesis that can be seen to govern at least all European art history: she thought that was a good idea. (By the way, there is an interesting discussion of the interesting in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.) Artists, art critics and art historians may not all be so literate in general culture; but, for a sense of our predicament, just imagine that any grasp at all of literature was considered a specialized pursuit.

Certainly the whole literature of painting—its history; the theory and criticism of it—has always depended for an audience as well as practitioners on a peculiarly well-read stratum of the population. At the same time, however, specifically plastic and visual values have all along been driving motives of critical and art-historical thought. It is hard to put our finger on what we mean when we refer to “specifically visual value,” which may sound like an irresponsible *je ne sais quoi*, but which nevertheless points to concretely grounded properties of works of art. Such properties welcome a kind of thought that can, with patience, be verbalized, but that essentially meets the artwork halfway. This kind of thought consists of feelings taken together with our consciousness of those feelings of what provokes them, and any thoughts or feelings on having them—but please do not think that I mean the *concept* of having such feelings and thoughts! That works of art seem to welcome a “plastic” kind of thinking attached to real materials and their actual manipulation in a concrete object is no mystery: they already *embody* it, consist largely of it, which is just how they seem to meet us halfway.

We can and should talk about art—and all art seems intended for sharing, even the most narcissistic—if only to keep alienation and boredom at bay (no small task). But when we do, it has to be, so to speak, in translation and not in the mother tongue; that, in turn, means we do need verbal culture after all and should be grateful for it, especially once we do manage to explain what we see and feel, however “plastically” articulated that may already be before we have to describe it. And yet, and yet . . . we also know that the keystone of the discussion will still probably involve a referral outside it, to something material whose apprehension the discussion may have facilitated, but which can at last be noticed, *beheld*, in its own right. If this makes any sense, it raises the pedagogical question of whether the study of art doesn’t have something to offer that cannot be learned in any other way: I think it does.

Take as a single example of the consequences of disregarding the physicality of an artwork, in pursuit of a finally verbal-conceptual truth, Morse Peckham’s treatment of Karimir Malevich’s great “Suprematist” painting, *White on White*, of 1918 (Museum of Modern Art). Although he gives photographic plates of other, presumably more complex (representational) paintings, Peckham claims that “an exact reproduction” (is a black-and-white Boucher “exactly” reproduced?) of Malevich’s *White on White* is “unnecessary,” basing his discussion on an already schematic line rendering (plus an analytical diagram).² Consequently, the analysis becomes a caricature of a caricature. Peckham also devotes a full-page photograph to 13 bars of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*; the score looks interesting for

showing, along with cleanly drawn or printed staves and notation, certain impulsive, wavering lines that bracket musical phrases together—interesting, that is, until we realize that this is no Bach manuscript at all, just a modern score with the lines added. The best Peckham can do to rescue Malevich's painting as important is to find a place for it as a piece of rather awkwardly physical evidence in the history of mind, where it must accept the approximate status of an exceptionally clever puzzle. What is missing, above all, is any sense of the object as the (beautiful) result of actual work with actual materials—including artistic "ideas," together with, say, linseed oil. For in art study we deal not with textual projections, or, worse, shadows, but with real objects—things that, whatever their other, more or less special properties, and their ideal functions in culture, can be broken and repaired, lost and found, bought and sold; loved, forgotten, rediscovered and loved again.

Of course, Peckham is not guiltier than anybody else. Think of all the writing on Mondrian that fails to come to terms with brushstroke or paint quality, or, more broadly—considering the prevailing sense of inhibition—that overlooks Mondrian's brave intuitions of composition and color placement. The point is that the objectivity of works of art is far from trivial and should hardly be an embarrassment to critical thought. Avoiding art's physicality is like considering the Incarnation as though it were in bad taste to mention the human body. In its physicality, indeed, all our affection for a given work resides. No wonder disregarding the physicality of artworks can produce manifest absurdities. I know of a history of French art illustrated with color reproductions of modern watercolors *after* old master's paintings!³ It is just because the actuality of fine art is so far from being a small matter to which we pay our respects after doing a more literary or philosophical job, that we can always retain some sympathy for the unschooled lover of art who shows discernment but who cannot explain, who must say "*je ne sais quoi*."

In a sense, Peckham's approach to Malevich may share in a certain stylistic way in the rise of a so-called "Conceptual Art" in the later 1960s and earlier 1970s. Likewise, a generation ago, which is to say in the time of a great florescence of abstract painting, an interesting question arose among scholars of Renaissance art, a problem about meaning—this may seem remote, but it fits right in—of a gloss supplied Marsilio by Ficino on a text of Plotinus.⁴ Plotinus discusses the nature of the Egyptian hieroglyph, which would have been fascinating to Ficino and his friends to begin with, what with their arcane, hermetic tastes and their gnostical tendencies. For his part, Ficino is concerned that, when you look at the hieroglyph, you can get so much from one thing that you see in its entirety all at once—

that little Egyptian gestalt—and which conveys an unusual load of, let's say, significance. Let's not say "information," since one thing I am driving at is that the significance is more than what can be reduced to words, even allegorical words, especially as regards the part that just won't dissolve away—the form partaking of, for instance, stone or pigment, since we are considering, not some Xerox, but the real work of a sculptor or engraver or painter. To Ficino the hieroglyph is marvelous because in it secret knowledge is hidden from vulgar eyes even as the literate observer can fully and instantaneously apprehend it. At any rate, the issue was whether the hieroglyph *conceals* meaning or *reveals* it. Some wanted it to be the case that the hieroglyph reveals meaning visually, independently of textual knowledge, affirming the capacity of visual art to give us its full meaning all at once, self-sufficient and non-narratively. It turns out that the hieroglyph did presuppose discursive knowledge, but anybody who was historically wrong about this was in a sense right, whether he knew it or not, about art in his own time. One may have sensed that the alternative, evident in Peckham in the time of Conceptualism, was to reduce the hieroglyph, or by implication the work of visual art in general, to a kind of philosophical souvenir, instead of acknowledging its primary visuality.⁵ Anyway, what is perhaps most interesting here and now is the way the hieroglyph may be said to call up the most *general* knowledge, as works of art do.

Our modern sense of the objective nature of the work of art traces back to around 1890. It affects the special emphasis, which sometimes seems curious to literary people (except regarding the Mallarme tradition), that we place on the *concretely artificial* character of painting, in particular, even more than sculpture; that is, the premium placed on all concrete evidence of the artist's negotiation of the work as something completely *made by him*. By this reckoning, raw materials that are already negligibly gross and highly conventionalized surrender their materiality to a new, practically *ex nihilo* creation, that of the artist. The basic idea goes back to the Enlightenment and beyond, and concerns that secondary creation whereby what the artist does stands in analogy with what God did with the world, and so on. This may, however, in fact, be only one of a whole class of Enlightenment adumbrations of what are often taken as definitive 1890s, or early modern, views.

Perhaps the most famous single dictum of modernism in painting dates precisely from 1890, when Maurice Denis, that interesting second- or third-rate painter, published his essay entitled "Definition of Neo-Traditionism," which opens with that notorious line: "Remember that a painting—before it is a battlehorse, nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."

Now, without getting into the tangled problem, which still pursues criticism, of how stressing this can be like being a positivist and an idealist at the same time, suffice it to say that Denis' formula is basically a restatement of the traditional notion of painting in French academic art theory, as indeed in the *Encyclopedie* itself, where the article on "Painting" begins with the definition, "An art which, through the use of line and color, depicts on a smooth and even surface, all visible objects."⁶ Another example, equally well known and probably still more likely to be misconstrued, is the supposed wisecrack made by Oscar Wilde in the preface to his novel about a painting, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril." This is easily taken as an indication of effete superficiality on Wilde's part. Yet, ironically, the remark may not really be so ironic. It may even amount to a highly literate allusion to a principle of Diderot's. In one of his essays Diderot speaks against an overemphasis on the study of anatomy in art school. He says, in so many words, that you must watch out, you must not think too much about the model's bones, you must pay attention to the skin, observe the surface; the surface is what you are after, and if you think too much about anatomy it will be spoiled.⁷ This is a very interesting position for Diderot to take. For three hundred years, painters had been trying to show that they were on a par with intellectuals and even scientists since painting had not ranked among the seven liberal arts, demonstrating a knowledge of perspective amounted to demonstrating mathematical competence which did qualify. Then Diderot comes along, jumping the gun on Oscar Wilde, and says, in effect, "Don't worry about the underlying structure of the motifs, worry about the skin, the surface."

Now consider, in the same light, two other remarks, one by a great painter and the other by a great scientist. "Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?": this idea (anticipated by one George Turnbull) comes from Constable's fourth lecture on the history of landscape, delivered in 1836.⁸ In contrast, in the preface to the *Principia mathematica* Newton himself, proud to be operating on a lofty plane of abstract speculation, speaks of "our design" as "not respecting art but philosophy; and our subject, not manual but natural power."⁹ Constable, as though with steam engines pumping and hissing all around him, argues that painting is serious after all, much more serious than you ever thought (especially if you are British): it's as serious and profound as *physics*, that's how serious it is! But what does Newton himself think, this Newton who once referred to antique sculp-

ture as “stone dolls”? He apologizes for the taint of the laboratory as though saying, “Please don’t think that what I’m doing is art: it’s not like that; none of those dumb manual things, none of that gross physicality.” Jonathan Swift, who hated the cult of the laboratory, might have had a good time with these two quotations.

Though Newton’s and Constable’s views are clearly opposed, they are opposed symmetrically. Both partake of a standard mode of argument which Renaissance artists liked to engage in, the *paragone*, in which one would advance the superior capabilities and virtues of his particular art, considered as the “paragon,” at the expense of that of others. Sculptors, for instance, would be described by painters as artists who are not so bright, who work noisily in cluttered rooms, who, like crude laborers, use their hands and are probably covered with dust and dirt, and who are, probably except for Michelangelo, not likely to be philosophically inclined (there may be a certain amount of truth in the generalization). The painters, on the other hand, would describe themselves as gentlemen-scholars: they work in a *studio*, that is a “study”; they don’t get so dirty, they can even wear gloves mandarin-style: they use their minds. The form of the artist’s *paragone* has surely conditioned Newton’s and Constable’s remarks, and also, no doubt, an important and far from sympathetic remark on Leonardo da Vinci by the twentieth-century poet Paul Valery.

Valery, who as a Late Symbolist can be seen himself to extend the esthetic of 1890, wrote an essay in 1929 on “Leonardo and the Philosophers.” First of all, this is a hot subject, since Leonardo’s extra-artistic concerns, especially the inventions, are so often used (even by Valery himself, in a gloss on the following passage) as a handle by people who shy away from “plastic values” in art: again, the interesting *instead of* the beautiful. I refer to the sheer fascination value of designs for contraptions of all kinds, which are not always very lovely as drawings anyway. The design for inventions are often enough the Rube Goldberg drawings of circa 1500; and in the twentieth century Marcel Duchamp, an artist of limited plastic, but inexhaustible conceptual, gifts, seems to have picked up on this in Leonardo. But let Valery have his turn: “Here, then, is what seems to me most extraordinary in Leonardo, something that both opposes him and joins him to the philosophers in a much stronger and deeper fashion than anything I have so far asserted of him or of them. Leonardo was a painter: *I mean that painting was his philosophy*. The fact is that he said so himself, and he talked painting as others talk philosophy, which is to say that he made everything depend on it. He formed an excessively high opinion of this art, which seems so specialized in comparison with abstract thought and so far from being able to satisfy the

whole intelligence; he regarded painting as a final goal for the efforts of a universal mind. So it was in our own time with Mallarme, who held the curious notion that the world was made to be expressed, that all things would eventually be expressed, through the medium of poetry."¹⁰ This beautiful and liberating passage takes care of itself but I cannot help noticing the literary, if distinctly *Symboliste*, way the motif of Words as the Universal Solvent seeps in by the end.

History, in St. John's account, begins with the Word and ends in a spectacular *vision*. In a sense, the ultimate gratification of verbal and conceptual experience ought to be an indescribable beholding (whether of the world rectified by justice or of great works of art, here and now). It just wouldn't work the other way around: *things* would simply *disappear*. Which, again, is something like the problem of the hieroglyph, because we who love art may forget for our part that the visual is really, in the end, only apprehended in its fullness thanks to general culture. I am reminded of something about Baudelaire's criticism that has only become clear to me lately. I could never understand why Baudelaire says so much about Delacroix as a man. That seemed very unmodern to me, trained as I was in the "New-" type reading of literature twenty years ago. It seemed irrelevantly belletristic, distractingly "literary," of Baudelaire to give so much about Delacroix as the artist behind the art, and this has some urgency nowadays, thanks to an opposite, reactionary, tendency to indulge in the biographical. But when I reread the writings of Delacroix what struck me again and again was how grateful Baudelaire was to have found in Delacroix a friend of the most profound general culture, one who knew so much about humanity in general and its history, about all the other arts and, notably, about literature and philosophy. How richly his art, or shall we say his life's-work, gained by that experience, even though what still makes it ultimately great is *non-verbal*.

¹This article is adapted from a paper delivered in October 1980 to the Columbia University Committee on General Education.

²Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior and the Arts*, Philadelphia, 1965, pp. 241-44, with figs. 1, 2.

³Louis Gillet, *Histoire des arts*, illus. by R. Piot (*Histoire de la nation française*, vol. XI), Paris, 1922.

⁴Ironically enough, two of the principal discussants are by now well known for their non-comprehension of modern art: E.H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and Their Bearing on Art" (1948), in his *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1978, pp. 123-95, esp. 158-60; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New Haven, 1958, pp. 169f.

⁵To W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Egyptian Decorative Art: A Course of Lectures delivered at the Royal Institution* (1895), 2nd ed., London, 1920, p. 3, hieroglyphics “were not only a writing, they were a decoration in themselves.”

⁶Louis de Jaucourt, “Painting,” in Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d’Alembert et al, *Encyclopedia: Selections*, ed. and trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer, Indianapolis, 1965, p. 278.

⁷Paraphrased in Gerhard Weber, “Diderot: First of the Art Critics,” *The Connoisseur*, August 1965, p. 235-39.

⁸John Constable, “On the History of Landscape Painting,” Lecture IV, June 16, 1836, in C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable: Composed Chiefly of His Letters*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, 2nd ed., London, 1951, p. 323.

⁹Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), trans. Andrew Motte (1803), preface, excerpted in William C. Dampier and Margaret Dampier, *Readings in the Literature of Science*, New York, 1959, p. 32.

¹⁰Paul Valery, “Leonardo and the Philosophers,” in his *Leonardo, Poe, Mallarme* (Collected Works, VIII), trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (Bollingen Series XLV/8), 1972, p. 143.

George L.K. Morris: Critic

ELIZABETH LANGHORNE

The history of abstract art in America is intimately bound up with the history of its criticism. In the 1930's abstract art was being declared dead. Even Alfred Barr in the major exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 judged it to be in decline. The flowering of Abstract Expressionism and Clement Greenberg's criticism in the late 1940's and 1950's has since belied this pessimism. And while today we may still question the vitality of the art produced by members of the American Abstract Artists association in the late thirties and early forties, and deem it an academic extension of European abstract art, we must still acknowledge the importance of art of the A.A.A.'s critical views of abstract art's possibilities.¹ These views are best articulated in the art criticism, and aesthetics upon which this art criticism was based--of the chief critic and aesthetician associated with the A.A.A., George L.K.

Morris, significantly an abstract artist himself.² While the art of the American Abstract Artists and of the Abstract Expressionists seem to have little to do with one another, an unsuspected thread of continuity in the history of abstract art in America is found in aesthetics and criticism. In Morris's writings we have the roots of the formal and abstract aesthetic tradition that Greenberg by "dialectical conversion" (Donald Kuspit's phrase) was to carry on to full blooming. The establishment of this tradition on American soil was largely Morris's doing.

"Fifteen gouaches by Hans Arp provided mild amusement if nothing else" (Devree, *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1934); "*Piet Mondrian's and Moholy-Nagy's assorted compositions... appear to be so many simple commonplace patterns for bathroom tiles,*" (Genauer, *New York World-Telegram*, March 7, 1936); "Non-objective art appears in the main to be a matter of mathematics and geometry." (Jewell, *The New York Times*, July 18, 1937). This sampling from the contemporary press shows the primitive state of abstract art criticism and aesthetics in America in the 1930's. This drew the fire of the A.A.A. in their June 1940 publication "The Art Critics! How do they serve the public? What do they say? How much do they know? Let's look at the record!"³ The pamphlet makes painfully clear the vacuum in aesthetics and formal sensibility that Morris came to fill.

Morris came of a wealthy family--that of Lewis Morris--and received his education at Groton and Yale. Travelling abroad with his mother in 1930 he saw at the Burlington House in London the largest exhibition of Italian art that had ever been assembled. He reviewed this exhibition for *The Miscellany*, a literary magazine that he and his friends, all recently out of Yale, edited.⁴ He was greatly impressed by the consistency of the tactile forms in the exquisitely mastered designs that Italian art exhibited over the span of a thousand years. In his experience of the structural and plastic properties of this art, he discovered not only what he deemed (its) underlying aesthetic principle, but also, as we shall see, hit upon the roots of his own lifelong formal aesthetic. While it may not be surprising that the major critical voice of American abstract art was formed in Europe, it does seem worthy of note that it was formed not as one might expect in response to abstraction, but in response to the art of the Italian Renaissance.

It seems likely that Morris's perception of the pastic and structural tradition in modern art was shaped by the writings of the formalist critic Roger Fry; it is certain that it was heavily influenced by the paintings of Fernand Leger. In an influential book, Fry had stressed the plastic qualities of Cezanne's art. It is these same qualities that Morris emphasizes in his 1931 *Miscellany* article, "Fernand Leger and Others."⁵ He highlights the conflict between the plastic and the literary aspects of art, a

distinction that other critics, notably Bernard Berenson, recognized but which Morris viewed in cyclical relationship. The plastic sensibility that was the base of the Renaissance tradition, Morris believed, was collapsing under the weight of literary accretions and unsophisticated bourgeois patronage. While Cezanne began the renewal of this tradition, the Cubists freed an "unadulterated plastic conception," and Leger's work stood as the full reinstatement of the tradition.⁶ For Leger not only possessed plastic sensibility but also reintroduced elements of architectural structure. Morris even compares Leger's plastic structure with that of a classical Greek bas-relief, the Ludovisi throne, and a Giotto painting. Rather than differences in spatial qualities, he finds in all three the balancing of tensions between three-dimensional presence and two-dimensional surface control of the design. Leger is, however, uniquely modern. The cleanly constructed, tightly composed shapes of his work permit it to compete with the functional, machine-made objects of modern life.⁷

Morris actually studied painting with Leger in the summer of 1931. In the *Miscellany* article written the same year he expresses his youthful admiration for Leger. Nevertheless, these passions are well based and provide an important early foundation for the formal aesthetic for modern art--one emphasizing plastic and structural values and consideration of the canvas as an organic object with an independent existence in the world and not as a mere reflection of nature--that he was later to provide. The fact that Morris forms his aesthetics in response to an artist anticipates his future stance as an artist-critic, where critical and artistic growth often go hand in hand.

By 1936 he had met Arp, Domela, Helion, and due to Delaunay's challenge had taken up total abstraction.⁸ He caught up with the avant-garde of abstract art in France and gained an understanding of their branching out and continuation of Cubist plastic tradition. German abstraction, represented by Kandinsky, seems not to have interested him.

Once aware of total abstraction he sees it as a structural foundation of art. In "On America and a Living Art," written in November 1936, he sees his erstwhile hero Leger as having bogged down in a given position in his search for structure.⁹ Only Miro, Arp, Domela, Helion continue the search for "significant form"--Morris uses Clive Bell's phrase, and his own, "scaffolding," "bed-rock." Thus the architectural metaphor as once applied to Leger is trimmed from form in design to a purer structure. Mondrian is singled out as giving a "sign of structure that will hold, although it will require new blood to push it on to a complete emotion of realization."¹⁰

Soon Morris excitedly views abstraction as the forefront of the historical cycle. By 1937-38 the cycle is not merely the

nineteenth-century disease of plastic structure and its recovery in the twentieth century, but includes the purification and betterment of the tradition by abstraction. In a resounding short article, "A la recherche d'une tradition de l'art abstrait," which appeared in *Plastique* in 1938, a magazine devoted to abstraction, Morris echoes the thinking of his friend Jean Arp when he says artists must "strip art inward to those very bones from which all cultures take their life... the bare expressiveness of shape and position of shape must be pondered anew; the weight of color, the direction of line and angle can be restudied until the roots of primary tactile reaction shall be perceived again."¹¹ Thus, even in speaking of the most recent abstract art, Morris employs the terminology of his most vivid appreciation of Italian Renaissance art. His statement in *Plastique* is simply his old aesthetic advanced to the most recent historical position--an avant-garde. And his new aesthetic of abstract art is no more than an abstraction of the plastic and structural values to be found in the Ludovisi throne, in Giotto, and in Leger.

In his 1937 article for *Plastique* he describes the abstract artist as entering "the realm of pure aesthetics" and himself, along with the other editors of *Plastique*, as an artist-critic "who can look out upon the tradition from within, rather than as critics on the watch for subject and anecdote."¹² His modern abstract aesthetic was however an individual achievement. For as John Elderfield has noted, the abstract art being practiced in Europe during the 1930s, which Morris frequently saw, was, despite its overall geometricist look, not homogeneous. It contained currents of late Synthetic Cubism, the Bauhaus, and abstract Surrealism.¹³ And rather than simply cataloguing the distinguishing qualities of the Cubists' abstraction from nature, or the Bauhaus, de Stijl, and Constructivist preoccupation with pure non-objective composition, or the abstract Surrealists' formal experimentation with biomorphic shapes and floating illusionistic spaces, Morris detects their underlying shared concern for plastic and structural values.

His thinking grew not only in contact with great artists such as Leger and Arp, but was influenced by two other, less-known artists who were also critics, A.E. Gallatin, an old family friend, and Jean Helion. Morris met the latter in 1935 and in 1938, after the death of Morris's father, Gallatin became a close friend. Gallatin had in 1927 started the Gallery of Living Art located in the New York University study hall so that the students and public could view Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Gabo, Leger, Helion, Miro and Arp.¹⁴ Gallatin himself painted in a "purist" mode related to Leger and wrote critical essays on the artists in his collection.¹⁵ However, his chief importance for Morris lay not in these essays but in the fact that he exposed him through

the works in his gallery to modern art, and introduced him to some of the artists who painted them, namely Picasso, Braque, Delaunay and Helion.¹⁶ Gallatin thus played an important role in the development of Morris's taste, something Morris himself was aware of. He writes "that Gallatin said that a certain Cubist Picasso painting was the kind of thing you could put with the very best Chinese porcelain and each would still look beautiful. That meant something to me."¹⁷

Of the artists introduced to him by Gallatin, Morris knew Helion the best.¹⁸ Helion lived in New York between the autumn of 1936 and December 1940, and, as David Hare put it, "represented something that was lacking in this country. The artist as intellectual--an accepted intellectual with a role in society ..."¹⁹ As an artist-intellectual he served as a model for Morris, the artist-critic.²⁰ Indeed Helion's perception of abstraction is echoed in Morris's writings of 1937 and 1938.²¹ However, Helion's aesthetic thinking lacks the historical dimension which we have already seen to be central to Morris's thought, and which by 1939 had become even more elaborate and ambitious: "An exhibition should be planned so as to include the Stone Age, and various phases of abstract art through Egypt, Greece, China, the Arab Periods (when all art was required to be non-representational), through Cubism, into the contemporary European and American movements."²² The tensions between the abstract plastic and structural underpinnings of art and its literary content have produced, he thinks, not only the beginnings of a new art cycle in the twentieth century but have throughout the ages produced art cycles, which have abstract roots and later develop humanistic content: Minoan "abstract" researches led to Myron and Phidias; "the wonderful Chou bronzes" precede the flowering of art under the dynasties of Han and Sung.²³ Given this all-encompassing view of the history of the dialectical tensions between abstract and literary forces in art, it is easy to understand why Morris thought that an abstract aesthetic had an important historical role in the twentieth century, why he believed that this aesthetic had to be firmly rooted before again accommodating literary impulses, and finally, why he was convinced that this aesthetic had to be rooted in America as well as in Europe, if either Europe or America was to find its real cultural voice.

Morris's desire that his abstract formal aesthetic, which, as I have argued, was developed in response to European art and artists, be rooted on American soil was not initially simply a response to the uncertainty of abstraction's future in America. This note is only sounded much later, namely in 1939 when the political, social and cultural situation in Europe was rapidly worsening.²⁴ In 1936 however, one suspects that this desire resulted

from his attempts to show his own abstract paintings. Together with a group that included Gallatin and which called itself "The Concretionists," he did show his work in 1936 at the Museum of Living Art--one of the very few forums for American modern abstract work in the U.S.²⁵

Also in 1936 Helion introduced Morris to another group of American abstract artists who were trying to gain exhibitions and access to the public. This group met at Lassaw's, then Swinden's studio and became the founding nucleus of the American Abstract Artists association.²⁶ While Morris came in as an artist desiring to exhibit, he also came in as an artist-intellectual, and was soon recognized as one of the chief spokesmen for the group.²⁷ John Elderfield describes Morris as the chief spokesman on formal issues.²⁸ He is also, as we shall see, one of the chief spokesmen on issues of abstract art's relationship to society, a new dimension to his stance as artistic-critic.²⁹

It is significant that the first piece Morris writes for the American Abstract Artists (1938) is simply an English translation of the 1938 essay for *Plastique*, "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition." Thus it is his formal abstract aesthetic that he first wishes to announce. In his call for a rebirth of the aesthetic structural sense in the twentieth century, his chief concern is a purified abstraction, not the resolution of whether the original source of abstraction is response to nature or more purely intellectual manipulation of geometric forms, or of whether the spatial dimension was emphatically two-dimensional or admitted three-dimensional illusionism. These formal questions were argued by the members, but Morris never even mentions them at any length until the early 1940's.³⁰

Morris was actually aware of the apparatus of the "professional Fine Arts tradition" (a phrase that the Marxist critic Peter Fuller uses in a somewhat derogatory fashion), and was involved with the setting up of such a tradition for abstraction in America--certainly a healthy and important enterprise in those times.³¹ He and his colleagues sought exhibitions open to the public, the cooperation of museums, and the advocacy of the art critics. He diagnosed the source of the public's attitude to abstraction in an essay that he wrote for the catalog of Gallatin's collection, entitled "On America and Living Art." As the result of its provincial relationship to Europe, America had inherited Europe's nineteenth century bourgeois tastes and aesthetically decaying artistic traditions and consequently, "we [America] suffer from the lack of an authentic starting point."³²

As an historian and spokesman in the A.A.A. yearbooks and as an independent critic in the pages of *Partisan Review*, for which he is the art critic from 1937 to 1943, he addresses himself to the problems of winning over art institutions and critics. In the March 1938 art chronicle in *Partisan Review*, Morris praises

the A.A.A. "as the sole organization in America that is dedicated to the hewing out of an authentic and appropriate cultural expression."³³ To prove the untapped public interest in abstract art, in the 1939 *Yearbook* he cites statistics gathered in a questionnaire handed out to those attending the first A.A.A. exhibition at the Squibb Galleries in 1937. Of those who answered, 97 percent voted that they would be interested in further exhibitions of the group's abstract art.³⁴ To dramatize the nearly scandalous neglect of American abstract art by the major institutions, Morris merely lists their record. The Whitney Museum's 1935 exhibition, "Abstract Painting in America," included no recent American abstraction. The Museum of Modern Art's "Cubism and Abstract Art," organized by Alfred Barr in 1936, showed only European abstract art.³⁵ Even in 1939 MOMA's "Art in Our Time" showed no abstract works! In his 1940 *Partisan Review* article entitled "The Museum of Modern Art (as surveyed from the Avant Garde)," Morris states his amazement. "One may indeed search history for an expressive medium more debased than the picturesque pseudo-realism that fills our museum today.... The continued failure of the Museum of Modern Art to provide any sort of frontier or rallying-ground accounts for the bitterness with which the avant garde artist has come to regard this institution."³⁶ As a member of the Museum of Modern Art's advisory committee from 1933 to 1940, Morris was able to exert influence if not on the policies regarding its exhibitions, then at least on its acquisitions.³⁷ As an editor of the Museum of Modern Art's *Bulletin* in 1935-36, he notes the Museum's purchase of works by artists who continue "the plastic tradition of Cubism into individual channels and whose work has not long been accessible to the American public," e.g., Arp, Miro, Helion, Mondrian.³⁸ As to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's acquisition and exhibition of "modern" art, he only wonders: "Passing from canvas to canvas, one endeavors to puzzle out the esthetic criterion that determined the selection of each individual work."³⁹

Morris on numerous occasions scolds critics. Their "natural function ... should be to lead the public; in America the critics merely confuse and hold the public back."⁴⁰ First, they erroneously give the impression that "abstract art ... (as they persist in calling any art that breaks with the old visual concept) was at one time popular and sensational, and is now outmoded."⁴¹ Thus, for example, he argues that because of its exclusively historical approach, the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of "Cubism and Abstract Art" perpetrates the notion that abstract art is historically over and complete.⁴² Second, the critics, Morris feels, are themselves confused. They "lack . . . real plastic sensibility," and "lack an understanding of the abstract processes."⁴³ As the damning 1940 A.A.A. pamphlet, "The Art

Critics! ..." states, the critics display "a total lack of any conception of the form problem ..." (p. 3). By 1943 Morris admits that appreciation of abstract painting is partly a matter of education. The critic who cannot see abstract art is "like the average Oriental to whom all western music sounds alike (and doesn't sound like much)." ⁴⁴ Even those critics who were well aware of abstraction, such as James Johnson Sweeney and James Thrall Soby, Morris takes to task for overgeneralizations and inaccuracies in aesthetic matters. ⁴⁵

While his essay attempting to redirect art museum and critics demonstrates his understanding of the components of a "professional fine art tradition," his remarks on the charges brought against abstract art in the late 1930's--that it is "imitative," "un-American," and "escapist," especially the last two--clarify his position on art's relationship to society. In answer to the claim that American abstract art is imitative of the European abstraction, Morris simply asks, "Can it be imagined that Raphael was derided for imitating Perugino?" ⁴⁶ "Surely it is on quality that artists get judged in the end, and not on their innovations." ⁴⁷ Much as in his 1930 *Miscellany* essay Morris explained the longevity of the Italian tradition as resulting from the endless sensitivity with which the original pyramidal design was deployed, so he sees the abstract tradition in the twentieth century as still establishing its primary shapes and structures, the "bed-rock," the foundation upon which the long-lived abstract tradition of the future would rest, and within which there would be endless variations. ⁴⁸ Morris's understanding of aesthetic traditions over history makes the charge of "imitation" almost irrelevant.

The claim that abstract art is unpatriotic raises an issue that survives even today--that of abstract form and its meaning or "references." The charge of being "escapist" bears on the unsettled question of Morris's Marxism. Artists and critics who wanted "American" art found it in the subject matter of the American Scene and American Regionalist painters; those who wanted nonescapist, political art could turn to such a Social Realist as William Gropper. Certainly Morris never followed Marxian teaching on the proper subject matter of art, he even disliked the banality of the Regionalists' "local color" and the literary aspects of Surrealist art. ⁴⁹ Indeed his whole aesthetic is grounded on the dual aspect of art: its literary and its plastic, structural qualities. ⁵⁰ In Morris's view reference is not a matter of literary qualities or subject but of expression. Morris insists on the expressive capacity of abstract art. In 1937, in his first article for *Plastique*, "On the Abstract Tradition," he writes, "The conception of abstract forms of painting and sculpture as non-representational, existing solely for the emotional significance of form and its arrangement, is, in a sense, something new to the development of art... It is only in music and architec-

ture that men have handled form articulate through their innate expressiveness without physical relationships to the world outside them.”⁵¹ Later, in 1939 Morris uses the logic that he had formerly applied to Leger’s modernity in asserting that “the tones and color contrasts” of abstract paintings done in America do reflect America. “The cumulative rhythmic organization resounds from an accent which could have originated in America alone.”⁵² And in his interview with Helion, Helion explains “New York, so different in every respect [from the French milieu in which Helion had developed], has shown me how much I had been influenced by the architecture of my own country, its density in the cities, the proportion between free space and built spaces, solid and fluid, curve and straight line, light and dark, hard and soft, and the amount of human motion composed with it.”⁵³

Morris’s 1936 comment that “it is ironical, perhaps, that there should as yet be so slight a *rapport* between the political and cultural rebirth” suggests his Marxist political awareness,⁵⁴ as does his passing remark in 1937 on Delacroix’s lack of appreciation for “the Marxian critique and the effects of the historical environment on the art.”⁵⁵ But his Marxist analysis goes no further than his initial explanation of the revolution against nineteenth-century bourgeois taste that led to the transition to a renewed aesthetic sense in the twentieth. Once in the twentieth century, art is to be guided by aesthetic and cultural imperatives. Neither in defense nor analysis of abstraction does Morris ever make use of “Marxian” arguments.⁵⁶ Thus even when he does write about Miro’s and Picasso’s attempts to express political change, he formulates his discussion simply in terms of form and content. In his article “Miro and the Spanish Civil War” Morris begins, “Last year [1937], for the first time, it appeared that there may be some relation between liberalism in politics and what might be termed ‘radicalism’ in the plastic arts.”⁵⁷ He concludes that both Miro and Picasso ultimately fail on formal aesthetic grounds to master the new content, the emotion-charged political events of their homeland during the Spanish Civil War. Morris is willing to accept the new content, gladly, in a new synthesis with form, but only if the form survives intact. Miro in his works of the mid-thirties “has not yet found the plastic expression to hold the change of [his more tortured and mature] viewpoint.”⁵⁸ In Picasso’s *Guernica* “There are striking passages, and the emotion fits the form completely, but unity of spirit cannot conceal disunity of structure.”⁵⁹

To accommodate the political dimensions of Morris’s social analysis, one must conclude that Morris, while certainly not a Marxist critic, is politically if unofficially a Trotskyite-believing, that is, that aesthetics and propaganda should be kept separate.

Unlike the Stalinist Marxist, who considered the aesthetic significance of art to be an exclusive function of its message as nationalistic and socialistic propaganda, Trotsky viewed art as having a certain independence from its political and economic environment, its own standards of quality. Both the liberal culturati of the late thirties and the editors of the *Partisan Review* in its second 1937 phase shared this stance.⁶⁰ Earlier, between 1934 and 1937, *Partisan Review* had been a literary organ of the Communist party, but in 1937 Fred Dupee and Dwight McDougal, two of Morris's old Yale and *Miscellany* friends, the young writer Mary McCarthy and Morris (who in addition provided most of the magazine's financial support) had taken over as editors.⁶¹ Morris synthesizes its editorial policy as follows: "Revolutionary in point of view, cultural in content, the magazine will offer a critical appraisal of present-day forces in literature and the arts. Its position will be free of the debasements that commercial cynicism on the one hand and political dogmatism on the other impose on American expression."⁶²

As societal and political chaos mounted in the late thirties and early forties, Morris increasingly yearned for "pictorial order." "Rarely has a historical period found greater need for an ordered expression than the present. While the pressure of external events becomes continually more devastating, the individual mind searches more and more for an expressive area (such as only the artist can create) where it may be temporarily held in repose."⁶³ Artists who had been sympathetic with Stalinist Marxism began to retreat, due to the Moscow trials, to a Trotskyite position.⁶⁴ No matter how Morris might long for art's integration with society, in 1941 he had to recognize fascism and nationalism and clearly distinguish the independent existence of art.⁶⁵ His observations on the relationship between art and society now turn to relationships interior to art. In a major article for *Partisan Review* in September-October 1941, "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," he devotes himself to describing the "dialectics" of picture-making. He describes the "series of movements in opposition" that come into his mind at the beginning of a painting, and how these "shapes or forces," which do provoke plastic responses, are pacified, that is tightened, and unified, until the painting "strikes the spectator with a unified impact, like a tightly-clenched fist held in control."⁶⁶ In describing the creative process as one of controlling opposing forces into an harmonizing unity, he echoes both Domela and Mondrian.⁶⁷

Perhaps it was Mondrian's presence in New York that influenced Morris's renewed and much more emphatic insistence in the early 1940s on the distinction between abstract and naturalistic art.⁶⁸ In 1943 he reveals the full excitement of his vision of abstract art: "The decisive innovation that differentiates

modern art from all that preceded is a novel relation to 'life.' Instead of an illustration of life or reflection of life in the world outside we have seen that the non-objective painter creates a living unity,--an object that, through an adjustment of sensibility and tension, can become an organism in its own right. Cubism delivered the first push in this direction, then retraced its steps and re-incorporated it with the external world. The constructionist and abstract artist took up where the Cubists had left off and the break had become firmly established."⁶⁹ This paeon to an abstract painting as an organism with independent existence follows a discussion of Mondrian's art, which for Morris is a clear example.⁷⁰ Of course Mondrian and Domela both believed in the spiritual meaning of the dynamics and unity of their canvases.⁷¹ Morris is skeptical about this kind of meaning.⁷² Yet even here the differences ought not to be overlaid for Morris does speak of the "character" gained through the act of "pacification," which is in effect an equilibrating of opposing forces into a unity. Morris stated that "the basis of a composition seems to be the generation of some conflict that eventually gets held in repose ... The abstract painter's task . . . becomes one of pacification."⁷³ Indeed, "holding in repose" becomes the ultimate function and meaning of abstract art in society. Consequently, the order and unity that abstract painting can, because of its liberation from nature, alone create becomes abstract painting's new meaning.

Morris no longer justified abstraction in relation to society by pointing to the expressive capacity of abstract form or its "American" characteristics nor by pointing to its historical preservation of the aesthetic process by laying the new aesthetic "foundations,"--by 1943, as Morris would later recognize, the battle for institutional and public acceptance of abstract art had effectively been won.⁷⁴ Rather the role of abstract art in society now seems to be its creation of order: "An era of convulsion evidently requires of artists that they restrict their horizons and close in upon a consciously ordered world where every facet is completely understood."⁷⁵

Increasingly, Morris locates the meaning of abstract art in the medium itself and its handling, and his aesthetic analysis becomes more sophisticated. The "dialectic" in picture-making about which he wrote in "The Mechanics of Abstract Painting" (1941) is followed by a discussion of the "dialectic" of media in "Relations of Painting and Sculpture" in 1943. After establishing the unique properties of each medium--that a painting is a two-dimensional flat surface upon which the world of three dimensions is suggested only illusionistically; that sculpture is *de facto* three-dimensional--Morris points out the dialectic relationship of the two media: painting internalizes sculptural qualities and sculpture can be pictorial.⁷⁶ The most

recent example is the high degree of pictorial illusionism in Cubist painting followed by the sculptural quality of Mondrian's object-painting.⁷⁷ In the dialectic of pictorial and sculptural qualities within the realm of painting, Morris sees the possibilities of post-Mondrian object-painting opening up to admit more illusionism--in order to meet society's need for illusion. "It may be that the recent external events have demanded a return of the painter-touch and of a world where the spectator can enter at least a little way."⁷⁸ The evolution of the dialectical relationship of media is thus not solely interior to the media, nor wholly art in response to art, but art in response to society.

While Morris's previous concern for the relationship of art to society is still apparent in this line of thinking, he next states his doubt about the degree to which painting can accommodate the present needs of society. "There is much to be assimilated before we can see to what extent, if at all, the painter can re-open his fabric to shapes of the world outside without disturbing the terrible concentration and organic life of the new conception..."⁷⁹ The "unified impact, like a tightly-clenched fist held in control" of the new totally abstract pictorial fabric might project the "island of order" needed amid societal chaos, but could this fabric itself carry any meaning other than an ideal order? Could it admit and express some portion of society's actual disorder?⁸⁰ Morris certainly does not envision the degree of illusion and disorder that eventually will be admitted into Abstract Expressionist Art.

His doubts about painting's ability to accommodate society's needs ultimately revolve around his understanding of the formal aesthetic at the base of good art: just how much three-dimensional illusionism and looseness is it possible to admit into the spatial dialectic of two and three dimensions in a painting, before "the terrible concentration and organic life of the new conception" is irreparably disturbed? We naturally look to Morris's own paintings for a clue. John Elderfield has pointed out that American abstract artists in general emphasized the flatness of a painting more than the Europeans, but it should be noted that Morris, at least, did make efforts to admit a degree of space: "My interest for many years has been to open space into such a fabric, and at the same time retain control of each symbol of perspective..."⁸¹ Moreover, two artists whose work Morris admired, Leger and Helion, both retained a relatively high degree of illusionism in their canvases.⁸² We may conclude that Morris was willing to tolerate illusion provided it was carefully controlled by formal considerations.

While his description of the art cycles proceeding "toward naturalism, with abstraction coming forward again and again as the herald of a new opposing order whenever the cycle recom-

menced," suggests a new synthesis, we may wonder whether the degree of loosening and illusionism that Morris was willing to tolerate could possibly be its harbinger.⁸³ And we may suspect that Morris's continued insistence on an aesthetic firmly grounded in the plastic sensations and relational structures militates against such a synthesis. The architectural metaphor that Morris uses for aesthetic order dramatizes this. The "bed rock" or "foundations" of his aesthetic order are unchanging. He does argue that abstract art can "renew" itself through variations of sensibility and quality, but he does not believe in innovation.⁸⁴ While Morris admits "renewal," he admits no shift in the foundations, no change in the propositions of the formal dialectic. It is precisely this changing of the terms of the formal problem, what Donald Kuspit calls "dialectical conversion," that characterizes the more supple formal aesthetics of the critic Clement Greenberg and his perception of the new formal orders being created by Abstract Expressionist Art.⁸⁵

Morris did not pursue Greenberg's aesthetic innovations. Instead, he criticized the critic. Much as he had in 1943 criticized Sweeney and Soby for not fully appreciating abstraction, in 1948 he criticizes the trend of Greenberg's writing, in particular his article, "The Decline of Cubism," published in *Partisan Review*, March 1948.⁸⁶ Greenberg had taken over Morris's old job as art reviewer for *Partisan Review* in 1958. To Morris, Greenberg's criticism is nothing more than "an appraisal-sheet built around a thesis"--the thesis being the decline of cubism, and the necessity to look elsewhere for formal vitality for instance, to Matisse.⁸⁷ Greenberg replies that the formal issue of abstraction, which Morris wishes to distinguish from Cubism, has in fact already been raised by Cubism, that Cubism is indeed in decline, and that there is a need to recreate the style.⁸⁸ He implies that Morris adheres to abstraction only because of his *a priori* dogma that it is "historically necessary," that Morris's eye is not acute enough to see a way out of the impasse of Cubism on purely formal grounds, freshly conceived, and that he is, in effect, a prisoner of his own taste.⁸⁹

In fact Morris's near obsession with the plastic and structural in art was the stumbling block to his critical development. As Richard Kostelanetz has put it, "One result of every decisive revolution in art should be a comparable revolution in aesthetic thinking."⁹⁰ Morris's own critical aesthetics grew and changed in the 1930s. At first it caught up with history as his appreciation of the plastic expanded to an appreciation of abstract plastic values when he himself began to do abstract painting around 1936. Then his abstract formal aesthetic helped to root abstract art in America under the auspices of the A.A.A. Finally his aesthetic was taken over by history--the new times, the new art. Morris's terms "plastic," "tactile," and "structural" give way to

Greenberg's new aesthetic terms, "optical" and "field."⁹¹

In the little writing that Morris does after 1943 when he retired from his position as art critic for *Partisan Review*, there is no pursuit of the dialectics of media, which he explored in "The Relation of Painting and Sculpture." The modernist self-criticism of the nature of the artistic medium becomes Greenberg's domain. Rather Morris turns to the broader issues of criticism which had interested him before, the issue of content and form, which he formulates as "the two ingredients of abstract art--the emotional impulse and the structural fabric..."⁹² In his 1946 article, "Aspects of Picture-Making," he reiterates his 1941 formulation of "mechanics," now including in his discussion of the process of pacification a heightened awareness of "'accidental' effects."⁹³ His description of the artists "who depend for their quality on casual 'accidental' effects," anticipates in an uncanny way the action painting of de Kooning and Pollock: "They must have their fingers in an actual painting-fabric to give the imagination full play; then they are free to attack the image which was hastily improvised on the canvas, pacifying the masses and tensions as they go. Often the sense of struggle--even of destruction as pigment becomes scraped--is essential for the paint-quality that compensates for what is lost in cleanness and purity."⁹⁴ Here Morris comes close to developing a sensibility which could accommodate Abstract Expressionism. In the end, however, his old vision of pictorial order and its role in balancing societal chaos trips him up. When in the 1941 Museum of Modern Art symposium, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," Willem de Kooning upholds the freedoms of the new Abstract Expressionist art, Morris takes a stand on his structural principles. He warns against the artist who "'sits on his palette'." "To free one's emotions--that's necessary, but it isn't very much in itself. Anyone can find way for that . . . I have found in the long run that it's a counter-force, the effort of control and pacification, that releases character. It's this *harnessing* of freedom that has endowed great paintings with a poise and distinction to move us still after centuries."⁹⁵ However, it is important to see that in discussing emotion and the creative process itself, topics completely ignored by Greenberg, he has hit upon two seminal notions, even if his ingrained aesthetic principles prevent him from doing them full justice. In a 1957 essay entitled "The Artists and his Society," with provocative generalizations that many critics do not dare to make, Morris analyzes the religious role that the modern artist can play: the nineteenth-century neglect of art's function of giving spiritual nourishment; the recent artist's "terrible emphasis on self"; his tendency to "substitute himself for the forces of religion"; society's general lack of understanding for modern art's religious function.⁹⁶ Morris highlights issues that are still just

being broached in regard to Abstract Expressionist art.

Now that after its often excellent service the limitations of the formal modernist aesthetics are being realized, the fullness of Morris's critical stance, based not only on an aesthetic sensibility, but expanded by historical awareness and concern for art's content and its role in society, offers an encouraging alternative, and a clear example, for the present-day critic. One further trait of Morris the critic deserves mention: he always accepted quality, however uncongenial he found it.⁹⁷ In this too he might with profit be taken as exemplary.

¹In two recent publications the vitality of AAA art has been favorably reassessed:

1) *American Abstract Artists, Language of Abstraction*. New York: American Abstract Artists, 1979. Introduction by Susan Larsen.

2) *American Abstract Artists: The Early Years*, exhibition catalogue for traveling exhibition originating at Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York City, March 1980 - April 1981. Text by Barbara Rose.

²Morris's art is discussed at length by Donelson F. Hoopes, "The Art of George L.K. Morris," in *George L.K. Morris: A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, 1936-64*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., May 1965; and by Ward Jackson, "George L.K. Morris: 40 Years of Abstract Art," *College Art Journal* 32, No. 2 (1972/73).

³*The Art Critics! How do they serve the public? What do they say? How much do they know? Let's look at the record!* New York: American Abstract Artists, June 1940. Text by several members of the A.A.A.

⁴George L.K. Morris, "A Note on the London Exhibition of Italian Art," *The Miscellany*, May 1930. Morris had also been editor of *The Grotonian* and *The Yale Literary Magazine*; see Dorian Hyshka Stross, "George L.K. Morris artist and advocate of abstract art," unpublished Master's Thesis, Wayne State University, 1976, pp. 21, 98; also "Chronology," in *George L.K. Morris*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, May 1965, p. 23.

⁵Morris, "On Fernand Leger and Others," *The Miscellany* 1, No. 6 (1931), 1-17.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁸"Chronology" in *George L.K. Morris* (The Corcoran Gallery, 1965), p. 23; Stross, p. 65.

⁹Morris, "On America and a Living Art" in *The Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection*, New York, Dec. 1936, pp. 5-13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹Morris, "A la Recherche d'une tradition de l'art abstrait," *Plastique*, No. 3 (Spring 1938), p. 2. Five numbers of *Plastique* were published in Paris from 1937 to 1939. The magazine was chiefly the work of S.H. Tæuber-Arp, with the collaboration of H. Arp, C. Domela, A.E. Gallatin and G.L.K. Morris. Morris's review of an exhibition of Art's work at the Museum of Living Art in Nov. 1936 describes Arp's seminal role in discovering the artistic challenges which Morris holds up to all artists in his 1936 *Plastique* article. "For Arp . . . [Dada] was a starting point in a long way backward, and his subsequent career has been a

constant search for ever greater expressiveness through simplification. . . . It has been through his renewed emphasis on form, shape, and (particularly) position of shape, that Arp has cleared an approach for his contemporaries. He has attacked the very roots of that language which the painter must have under complete control if he can ever hope to raise his voice without a strain"; Morris "Art Chronicle: Hans Arp," *Partisan Review*, No. 2 (Jan. 1937), p. 32.

¹²Morris, "On the Abstract Tradition," *Plastique*, No. 1 (Spring 1937), p. 14.

¹³John Elderfield, "American Geometric Abstraction in the late Thirties," *Artforum*, Dec. 1972, p. 40.

¹⁴A.E. Gallatin, "The Plan of the Museum of Living Art," in *The Museum of Living Art*, New York, Dec. 1936.

¹⁵Stross, p. 41.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 40, 65.

¹⁷quoted in Stross, p. 36.

¹⁸Stross, p. 63.

¹⁹quoted in Merle S. Schipper, "Jean Helion: The Abstract Decade," *Art In America*, Sept-October 1979, n. 12.

²⁰I share this opinion with Stross, p. 63.

²¹In his essay "The Evolution of Abstract Art as Shown in the Museum of Living Art," written in 1933 and reprinted in 1936 for *The Museum of Living Art*, the Catalogue for Gallatin's collection, to which Helion was chief adviser for acquisition (see Schipper, p. 1), Helion acknowledges the continuing debate between those who paint abstractly and those who paint from nature. However, he thinks that because of their formal awareness all artists really work somewhat in the abstract role. Abstraction frees the artist from depiction of objects and opens the canvas. He sees work of Mondrian and Arp as condensing the new abstract structures and elements into the basis of a new language of abstraction. However, this condensing is a gesture of closure and Helion sees the greatest challenge to the contemporary artist as the opening up and enriching of this new elemental language; see Schipper, pp. 24, 25. For Morris's early interest in opening up the canvas, see fnnt. 81.

²²Morris, "The American Abstract Artists," in *American Abstract Artists, 1939* (New York, 1939), p. 13.

²³Morris, "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition," in *American Abstract Artists, 1938* (New York; 1938), n.p.

²⁴In "The American Abstract Artists," Morris observes that "even in Paris the political and social instability has decimated the number of artists possessed of sufficient energy for the manipulation of new expressive forms," p. 8.

²⁵Susan Carol Larsen, "Going Abstract in the '30s: an Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky," *Art in America* Sept.-Oct. 1979); p. 73, Thomas C. Tritschler, *The American Abstract Artists 1937-41*, unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1974, p. 13.

²⁶Tritschler, p. 25.

²⁷Lloyd Goodrich and John I.H. Baur, *American Art of our Century* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), p. 110.

²⁸Elderfield, "American Geometric Abstraction . . .," p. 38.

²⁹Elderfield points to Balcomb Greene as a spokesman for the A.A.A. on social issues, *Ibid.*, p. 41. Morris's writing is less political than Greene's, and more broadly concerned with winning over art institutions and critics to abstract art.

- ³⁰For instance, on the issue of abstraction's source Ilya Bolotowsky recalls, "The Hofmann students [who were members of the A.A.A.] felt abstraction must be a feeling that starts in nature and goes through Cubism and finally achieves the essence which is abstraction. And people like Greene and myself and a few others felt that abstraction is something developed independently of nature. The two views were never quite coincided;" Larsen, "Going Abstract in the '30's---," p. 72. For Morris's early 1940's statements, see text pp. 18 and 20.
- ³¹Peter Fuller, "Fine Art after Modernism," *New Left Review*, No. 119 (Jan.-Feb. 1980), pp. 45, 51.
- ³²Morris, "On America and a Living Art," pp. 5-7, 9-10.
- ³³Morris, "Art Chronicle: Some Personal Letters to American Artists Recently Exhibiting in New York," *Partisan Review*, 4, No. 4 (March 1938), p. 38.
- ³⁴Morris, "The American Abstract Artists," Part III.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, Part II.
- ³⁶Morris, "Art Chronicle: The Museum of Modern Art (as surveyed from the avant-garde)," *Partisan Review*, 7, No. 3 (May-June 1940), p. 200.
- ³⁷For a description of the paintings that Morris helped the Museum of Modern Art to buy, see Stross, p. 93.
- ³⁸Morris, "Gifts of the Advisory Committee," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 4 (July 1937), p. 5.
- ³⁹Morris, "Art Chronicle: Metropolitan Storage Warehouse," *Partisan Review*, 7, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1941), p. 55.
- ⁴⁰Morris, "Some Personal Letters---," p. 36.
- ⁴¹Morris, "On America and a Living Art," p. 11.
- ⁴²Morris, "The American Abstract Artists," Part II.
- ⁴³Morris, "Modernism in England," *Partisan Review*, 4, No. 1 (Dec. 1937), p. 70; Morris, "Some Personal Letters---," p. 36.
- ⁴⁴Morris, "Life or Death for Abstract Art? Pro: In Defense of Sensibility," *Magazine of Art*, 36, No. 3 (Mar. 1943), p. 117.
- ⁴⁵Morris, "Art Chronicle: Sweeney, Soby, and Surrealism" *Partisan Review*, 9, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1942), pp. 125-27.
- ⁴⁶Morris, "Some Personal Letters---," p. 37.
- ⁴⁷Morris, "On Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review*, 15, No. 6 (June 1948), p. 684.
- ⁴⁸Morris, "A Note on the London Exhibition of Italian Art," *The Miscellany*, May 1930, p. 23.
- ⁴⁹Morris, "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition," n.p.; Morris, "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," *Partisan Review*, 8, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1941), p. 414.
- ⁵⁰Morris, "On the Abstract Tradition," p. 13.
- ⁵¹*Ibid.*
- ⁵²Morris, "The American Abstract Artists," Part IV.
- ⁵³Morris, "Art Chronicle: Interview with Jean Helion," *Partisan Review*, 4, No. 5 (April 1938), p. 33.
- ⁵⁴Morris, "On America and a Living Art," p. 11.
- ⁵⁵Morris, "Art in the Second Empire: The Journal of Eugene Delaeroix," *Partisan*

Review, 4, No. 2 (Jan. 1937), p. 59.

⁵⁶On Marxian or Marxist influenced arguments in defense or analysis of abstraction, see John R. Lane's discussion of Leger's 1935 lecture "The New Realism" in Lane, *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory*, 1978, p. 40, n. 16; Elderfield's discussion of Balcomb Greene's response to Leger's "The New Realism," in Elderfield, "American Geometric Abstraction. . .," pp. 40-41; Donald Kuspit "Meyer Schapiro's Marxism," *Arts*, Nov. 1978, p. 145, n. 15.

⁵⁷Morris, "Miro and the Spanish Civil War," *Partisan Review*, 4, No. 3 (1938), p. 32.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁹Morris, "Art Chronicle: Picasso 4000 Years of his Art," *Partisan Review*, 7, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1940), p. 53.

⁶⁰Leon Trotsky's "Art and Politics" appeared in *Partisan Review*, 5, No. 3 (Aug.-Sept. 1938). Clement Greenberg was also a Marxist of Trotskyite persuasion; see Hilton Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine*, 37 (Oct. 1962), p. 61.

⁶¹Stross, p. 102.

⁶²"Editorial Statement," *Partisan Review*, 4, No. 1 (Dec. 1937), p. 4; George L.K. Morris papers (D337, frame 0604), Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

⁶³Morris, "Pictorial Order," in *Masters of Abstract Art*, Helena Rubinstein New Art Center, New York, an exhibition for the benefit of the American Red Cross, April-May 1942, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁴Lane, *Stuart Davis*, p. 34.

⁶⁵Morris, "Announcement" in *American Abstract Artists Annual*, The Riverside Museum, New York, Feb. 1941; Morris, "Art in Various Aspects," *Partisan Review* (Sept.-Oct. 1943), p. 453.

⁶⁶Morris, "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," *Partisan Review*, 8, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1941), pp. 406, 407, 410, 413.

⁶⁷Cesar Domela says, "I attempt to hold tensions and empty areas together as closely as possible to find a fusion of opposites"; Domela, "My Conception of Abstract Art," *Leonardo*, 2, No. 1 (1969), p. 29. Morris testifies to Domela's influence on his thinking; see Stross, pp. 69, 75. They worked together in 1937 and 1938 editing *Plastique*. Domela himself is an exponent of Mondrian's de Stijl principle of a dynamic equilibrium of opposites; see H.L.C. Jaffe "Cesar Domela" in *Domela, Paintings, Constructions, Tableaux-Objets 1924-60*, Galerie Chalette, N.Y., 1961, n.p.

Morris met Mondrian c. 1935; see "Chronology," in *George L.K. Morris* (The Corcoran Gallery, 1965), p. 23. In 1937 Morris points to Mondrian's "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art," published in *Circle* (London, 1937), as the most lucid key to the artist's intentions; Morris, "Modernism in England," p. 70. Mondrian was himself in New York from 1940 until his death in 1944, and continued to put forward his principles, for instance, in "Pure Plastic Art," published in the 1942 *Masters of Abstract Art*, the exhibition catalogue for which Morris wrote his "Pictorial Order." In an interview Morris cites as the most refined case of the precision of eye required to achieve unity in a painting the occasion upon which Mondrian had narrowed a vertical line in the middle of one of his paintings by one sixteenth of an inch; see Stross, p. 68.

⁶⁸Similarly, John R. Lane attributes Stuart Davis's increasingly abstract treatment of his subject matter after 1941 to the influence of Mondrian; Lane, *Stuart Davis*, p. 47. In 1941 Morris asserts: "In art schools I have heard students being told that all great paintings present the basic qualities of abstraction. I do not find this to be true. I have never seen a naturalistic picture which could stand

comparison with an abstraction on the latter's ground;" "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," p. 413.

⁶⁹Morris, "Relations of Painting and Sculpture," *Partisan Review*, 10, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1943), p. 71.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷¹On Domela, see Jaffe, *Domela*, n.p. and Stross, p. 70. On Mondrian, see Virginia Pitt Rembert, "Mondrian's Aesthetics, as Interpreted through his Statements," *Arts*, June 1980, p. 175.

⁷²Morris, "Sweeney, Soby and Surrealism," p. 127.

⁷³Morris, "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," p. 408. On "character," see Morris's statement in "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 8, No. 3 (Spring 1951), p. 3; and Morris, "Some Personal Letters. . .," p. 41.

⁷⁴Morris, "The American Abstract Artists: a Chronicle 1936-56," in *The World of Abstract Art*, ed. American Abstract Artists (New York: Wittenborn, 1957), p. 140.

⁷⁵Morris, "The Mechanics of Abstract Painting," p. 414. This sentiment of painting providing order amid disorder was shared by Mondrian; see Charmion von Wiegand, "Mondrian, a Memoir of his New York Period," *Arts Yearbook 4* (New York: The Arts Digest, 1961), p. 65.

⁷⁶Morris, "Relations of Painting and Sculpture," pp. 64, 66.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰Morris's own efforts to accommodate disorder into his ordered pictorial fabric is suggested by his description of *IRT* 1936-53, in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. "IRT takes a Subway Station, to me the most unpleasing, disordered and cacophonous spot I know of, and expends every effort toward making an abstract rendition of it that will be in one way ordered and classical, and in another suggest the harshness of the subject"; quoted in Ralph M. Pearson *The Modern Renaissance in American Art* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 211.

⁸¹Elderfield, "American Geometric Abstraction," p. 41. Morris, "Reflections," George L.K. Morris, a *Retrospective Exhibition*, Hirschl and Adler Galleries, New York, October 5-30, 1971. Morris's interests in opening up the space of the canvas even caused the other A.A.A. leaders to look askance at his art; Tritschler, *The American Abstract Artists*, p. 80.

⁸²Helion's evolution as an artist between 1930 and 1935 was away from the intellectual and geometric strictures of van Doesburg, via the influence of Mondrian's more organic sensibility, towards complexities and rhythms influenced by Leger's illusionistic range and formal contrasts; Schipper, "Jean Helion," p. 89.

⁸³Morris, "The Mechanics of Abstract painting," p. 415.

⁸⁴On sensibility and quality, Morris "Art in Various Aspects," p. 456. On innovation, Morris, "Life or Death for Abstract Art? . . .," p. 111.

⁸⁵Donald B. Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979, pp. 22-27.

⁸⁶Morris, "On Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review*, 15, No. 6 (June 1948), pp. 681-85.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 682.

⁸⁸Greenberg, "Reply," *Partisan Review*, 15, No. 6 (June 1948), pp. 685-90.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 685.

⁹⁰R. Kostelanetz, "Contemporary American Esthetics," in *Esthetics Contemporary*, ed. R. Kostelanetz (New York: Prometheus Books, 1978), p. 21.

⁹¹Greenberg explores the notions of color-space and field in 1955 in "American-Type Painting," and of optical space in 1959 in "Collage," both essays included in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 76-77, 226-27.

⁹²Morris, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," p. 4.

⁹³Morris, "Aspects of Picture Making," in *American Abstract Artists 1946* (New York: The Ram Press, 1946), part III.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵Morris, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," pp. 3-4.

⁹⁶Morris, "The Artist and his Society," *Integrity and Compromise: Problems of Public and Private Conscience*, ed. C.R.M. MacIver (New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1957), pp. 95, 101-103.

⁹⁷For instance, Morris did not reject Abstract Expressionism out of hand. He was one of the jurors for a 1954 exhibition of contemporary art in which first prize was awarded to Conrad Marca-Relli, an Abstract Expressionist painter. See Morris, "The Museum and the drugstore," *Art News*, Dec. 1954, p. 33.

Critic-Identified Artists

GERALD SILK

Recently, I mentioned to an artist friend that I was about to publish an essay in the journal *Art Criticism*. Since she was familiar with the publication and its policy of all words and no accompanying reproductions, she recounted to me her remarks to one of its editors: "I always thought art critics and historians never cared too much about artists, but now you've eliminated us altogether." In response to her complaint, one of my main arguments is that several modern artists whose work had been closely linked to the pronouncements of critics, sensed, consciously or otherwise, that the critic began to play too dominant a role in their interrelation. Thus, to redress this unbalanced situation, these artists began to produce work which seemed to defy its traditional critical support.

Before I address this problem directly, however, a discussion of certain developments in modern art and criticism is in order.

We're all familiar with the term "Formalism," and it has had various applications throughout the history of art. Its most common usage is as one approach to the analysis of a work, in which the forms of the piece--characteristics such as color, space, shape, texture, etc.--are examined. Generally, the art historian or critic employs this method in conjunction with other procedures--for instance, biography, psychology, iconography, history--to interpret or draw conclusions about the meaning of a work of art. Yet, approximately a century ago, certain art critics and historians began to regard the formalist approach as more than simply one tool utilized in the analysis of art, and they elevated it to the sole criterion of criticism. In the visual arts, Heinrich Wofflin was among the first to argue for formalism's exclusiveness: others associated with the practice, to varying degrees, include Walter Pater, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and the Russian critic Nikolai Punin. More recently, Clement Greenberg and a coterie of critics have operated as formalism's foremost advocates.

A few observations about the genesis of modern formalism are appropriate. Its development coincided with the generally positivist and scientific tenor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Broadly stated, positivism held that because of the increasing sophistication of science and even philosophy, laws could be established to solve most problems. Consequently, a notion of progress was formulated, for as rules were fine-tuned, eventually appearing immutable, problems could successively be solved and even eliminated.

This belief that axioms could be determined for the investigation of phenomena infiltrated the arts in several ways. For example, the Impressionists, in their avowed pursuit of recording the purely perceptual, demonstrate a faith in empiricism paralleling positivism. Next, neo-Impressionism invoked theories of color and dynamogeny, in an attempt at transferring the "truthfulness" and "universality" associated with science to the realm of art. Inspired by contemporary revolutions in technology, the Futurists, despite their somewhat subjective and romantic intoxication with the sensations produced by the burgeoning urban and technological worlds, still wished to impart not only the awesome power associated with science to their art, but also its belief in the beneficent inevitability of progress, its faith in the future.

Perhaps the movement which embraced the positivist spirit most wholeheartedly was Russian Constructivism, in which mechanical and scientific principles were guides not only in producing art but also in probing it. It is in Constructivism that the term "Formalism" is actually used to describe such an approach, whether it refers to the execution or to the evaluation of works of art.¹ Chief spokesman for this idea among the Con-

structivists was Nikolai Punin, who, in his *Cycle of Lectures* of 1919, announces his pride in "Formalism," and in what was a popular comparison at the time spoke of the abstractness of music as a model for art, declaring: "None of us is surprised that music is music, but many are surprised that painting is painting, because many of you are accustomed to seeing in painting, literature, philosophy, mysticism, religion, journalism . . . Music is music because it is concerned with a single definite material--sound. One would wish that henceforth painting be only painting ..."²

But, Punin, in his argument for analysis of the visual arts based exclusively on visual matters, makes a crucial connection between this methodology and scientific procedures. He writes, "I say that modern art criticism in general and any modern judgment on art must once and for all finish with those arbitrary, individual, and often capricious impressions that spectators get from a work of art. If modern man wants to assimilate fully all the forces affecting the creation of this or that work of art, he must approach the work by studying and analyzing it by means of *scientific method*. Science is not a symptom but precisely a principle."³ In other words, any analyses not dealing exclusively with form are "arbitrary" and "capricious" (he, at one point, calls them "pernicious"); those which treat form alone are "precise" and "scientific." The formalist critic thus achieves a status akin to the scientist or engineer: he trades in verifiable facts and truths, and possessing these, his advice should be heeded, as Punin somewhat presumptuously suggests that "artists would find it useful to have near them professional art scholars (criticism now becomes a profession) that is, people who approach works of art not by virtue of their literary incentives, but from the point of view of those theoretical data with which modern science has provided them. And that is why modern art criticism must be, and probably will become, first and foremost a *scientific criticism*. This will not consist of those popular little articles with their various attacks and personal impressions with which we are familiar in most of our art journals, but it will consist of very careful, very objective studies of works of art."⁴

As if enlisting science wasn't enough, Punin reinforces his claims for the formalist approach by fusing it with elitism and purity, proclaiming, "For the mob, painting as a pure art form is unintelligible unless it is diluted with literary and various other aspects of artistic creation," and, he goes on to say, therefore, artists must "cleanse themselves of the literary (critics)."⁵ The term "purity" is a very loaded one. It gets exploited a bit too often not just by artists and critics (consider its insidious use racially), and, at least in this case, it implies that art should be devoted only to form; all other elements taint or adulterate art.

The term proved formidable enough to denominate an entire movement, Purism, which shares with Punin, a faith in the scientific and mechanical paragon and a belief in inoculating art against the intrusion of impure elements; in the case of Purism, against the allegedly anarchic and disorderly characteristics of the art of the early and mid-teens. Of course, "Purity" was also a watchword for Piet Mondrian; later on, Ad Reinhardt, whose art aspires, in the extreme, to extirpate all that is ostensibly non-art. However, he retained a witty attitude towards obsession with pureness, proclaiming "A cleaner New York School is up to you."⁶

Considering Punin's arguments, it is not surprising that he actually proposed a formula for evaluating art - $S(P_i + P_{ii} + P_{iii}) Y + T$ - where "S" equals the sum of "Ps," which are the various formal elements of the painting, multiplied by "Y," which stands for intuition, which equals "T," "T" representing artistic creation. Another Constructivist, Liubov Popova, devised a scheme for judging art also modelled on the mathematical equation.⁷ In light of all of Punin's scientific rhetoric, it's a bit surprising that "Intuition" is an element in his equation; Popova remedies this by categorizing the non-formal components as negative elements. They are subtractive or divisive forces which lower one's formal quotient; in other words, they hurt your art score.

I have devoted this time to Russian Constructivism, particularly to Punin's pronouncements, because I want to make it clear that a major strain in the development of modern "Formalism" as a critical method, was much the result of the aspiration to equate art with that dominant force in the contemporary world--the power of mathematics, science, and in part, philosophy. The role of critic or historian becomes comparable to that of scientist or mathematician; the world of verifiable, provable truths and universals associated with the scientific world is now transferred to the artistic one. Moreover, Punin's words reverberate with remarkable familiarity in the present practice of formalist criticism.

The most commanding and influential exponent of "Formalist" criticism today remains Clement Greenberg, and while we might think of Greenberg and Punin as emerging from two somewhat discrete eras, we should keep in mind that Greenberg's most comprehensive early discussion of his attitudes on art and criticism--his *Towards a Newer Laocoon* of 1940--was published just over 20 years after Punin's lectures.⁸ *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, inaugurating leitmotifs that re-appear in succeeding essays, presents several ideas paralleling those of Punin. As a Formalist, Greenberg, of course, declares that "the purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count," and like Punin, he points to music as an

exemplar, stating "that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an 'abstract' art, an art of 'pure form'... Only by accepting the example of music and defining each of the other arts solely in the terms of the sense or faculty which perceived its effects and by excluding from each art whatever is unintelligible in terms of any other sense or faculty would the non-musical arts attain the 'purity' and self-sufficiency they desire."⁹ Thus, "purity" pops up again, and it is invoked over and over in Greenberg's writings (although always in quotation marks), for in purity, art protects itself from "corrupting" influences (that's his word) such as "literature," and as he mentions in a later essay, "history, science, sociology, and psychology."¹⁰ Here I should clarify that the exclusion of science from art applies specifically to the interpretation of a work as illustrative of scientific ideas: A critic should never say, "This piece by so-and-so is about the theory of relativity or whatever." Because Greenberg, unarguably, is enamored with the procedures of the scientist as a model for the art critic, explaining in his *Modernist Painting* essay of 1965, that "Scientific method alone asks that a situation be resolved in exactly the same kind of terms as that in which it is present. . . . Visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience...a notion whose only justification lies, notionally, in scientific consistency."¹¹ Although he feels that the "convergence (of art and criticism) with science appears to be mere accident," he admits that "their convergence does show, however, the same degree to which Modernist art belongs to the same historical and cultural tendency as modern science."¹² Amalgamating ideas on purity and the scientific method, Greenberg develops what is often regarded as his most controversial concept--that only certain art is best for certain times. Emerging first in *Towards a Newer Laocoon* as a justification for abstraction, he contends that "the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived (are) ... simply the most valid ones at this given moment." He goes on to affirm "The imperative comes from history, from the conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art," continuing with a telling remark that "this conjunction holds the artist in a vise from which at the present moment he can escape only by surrendering his ambition."¹³ This concept of the right art at the right time, when coupled with Greenberg's interpretation of Modernism--the notion that from Manet onwards art has been a series of purifications in which inessential elements, for example, literary, illusionistic or symbolic content were jettisoned--seemed to suggest a notion of progress in the arts. Pictorial progress marched toward particular goals, since in Modernist art, Greenberg posited, "Purity meant self-definition," operating with "the limitations that constitute the medium of painting--the flat surface, the shape

of the support, the properties of pigment," of which one element is "fundamental," "unique" and "exclusive"--that being "the ineluctable flatness of the support. Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."¹⁴

It should be pointed out that in the essay *Modernist Painting*, Greenberg asserts that this practice of Modernism is neither theoretical nor programmatic, but based on what I've extracted from his writings, it is easy to understand how his ideas might be perceived as such. The artists he champions and the reasons he supplies to substantiate their "quality" (another modernist codeword as problematic as "purity") too often suggested that they had taken the next logical step on the highway of "self-definition." Moreover, artists whose work appeared unconcerned with these matters were ignored, for the most part, by him and his critical disciples. Consequently, Greenberg and the "formalist" group were attacked by numerous art historians and critics for a variety of reasons; for example, "Formalist-Modernist" criticism was seen as too doctrinaire, exclusive and prescriptive, or simply inaccurate.

Aside from these often legitimate complaints, there remains an intriguing and problematic area within "Formalist-Modernism," a complication which is inherent in its central thesis that painting strives toward specific endemic characteristics. In the 1960s, the latest development in this pursuit was labeled "Post-Painterly Abstraction" by Greenberg, because its primary practitioners, such as Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Walter Darby Bannard and Frank Stella (less Greenberg's favorite than some of the others), rejected the painterly "facture" of Abstract-Expressionism having "recognized that the more closely colour could be identified with its ground, the freer it would be from the interference of tactile associations."¹⁵ Of course, tactility is taboo because it is supposedly part of sculpture's domain.

Herein lies a major problem with "Formalist-Modernist" criticism, that in its desire to approximate philosophy or the scientific method it issues too many "shoulds" and "should nots;" it becomes imperative rather than analytical. In this context, it seems natural that artists, recognizing that the critic was usurping his role, might declare, through their art, their independence of formulaic criticism, or even in some instances effect a role reversal and function as a critic. Dada, an art generally disliked or ignored by formalist critics, developed around the same time Punin was concocting his equations, for among the many things Dada can do is to mock science. Consider Francis Picabia's *Machine Tournez-Vite* of 1917, in which copulating cogs do not simply mimic the potentially mechan-

ical nature of sex, but also remove the "love" from "love-making," suggesting the inadequacy of the mechanical paragon, whether applied to love, or in Punin's case to art and criticism. Or, in Duchamp's "ready-mades" and Picabia's "object-portraits," they return our eyes to the utilitarian objects which ostensibly inspired those who wish to model art and its criticism on mechanics. Also, if art is simply form, any object with good form can be good art. Moreover, the "ready-mades" function like criticism in their commentaries on art; likewise, Duchamp's writings toy with the tools of the critic--words.

It seems more than coincidental, then, that certain developments in the 1960s, generally regarded as uncongenial to "Formalism"--Pop, Happenings, Assemblage, Environments and Conceptualism (sometimes lumped together as "Neo-Dada" at the time)--arose at a time when the esthetic stanglehold of Formalist criticism seemed most strong.¹⁶ Furthermore, Minimalism, in addition to its links to contemporary ideas in literature and philosophy (Robbe-Grillet and Merleau-Ponty), often suggested the potential dead-end in "Formalist-Modernism" by carrying its promulgations to extremes. The sense of esthetic "cul-de-sac" implicit in "Formalist-Modernism," coupled with a related consciousness that avant-gardism in art was exhausted, is attested to by the proliferation of "posts," "antis," and "des" in the late sixties and early seventies, such as "post-modernism," "post-minimalism," "post-movement," "post-puritanism," "anti-formalism," "de-definition," and "de-materialization."¹⁷

Part of this phenomenon involved artists whose main critical support in the sixties came from "Formalist" quarters. As suggested above, the significance of their art was gauged, in part, by the degree to which it addressed "Modernist" issues. But as much as this critical attention aided the careers of these artists, it had the potential of victimizing them. To continue to receive "Modernist" consideration, their art would have to remain concerned with criteria being spelled out by critics. Furthermore, some of these cherished criteria--flatness, openness, opticality, and non-gesturalism, for example--had to seem limiting. Whether intentional, conscious or otherwise, nearly all of the most highly praised "post-painterly" artists of the sixties--Olitski, Noland, Poons, Bannard and Stella--adopted styles in the seventies that appear antithetical to the critical conditions that had once been applied to praise their work. The characteristics of this heterodox style include gesturalism, painterliness, tactility, spatial complexity, mixed-materials, gaudy or muddy colorism, all elements which seem to defy "Formalist-Modernist" purity.

For example, Olitsky's sprays of seductive hue gave way to duller shades, with paint thickly scraped onto and stroked

across the support. Poons' regularized dots on pure color-fields, seem to have opened up, oozing muddy drips of acrylic down the canvas surface. Noland's symmetries, regularities, and bold color geometries turned into idiosyncrasies, uneven shapes, and surfaces variegated in texture. Bannard's hard-edged, centralized forms grew looser eventually becoming clogged with fat, lush areas of paint. Stella, always the most compelling, adventurous and inventive of these artists and the one least associated with this critical consensus, transforms the cleaner look of his sixties work into art of such daring complexity that it could be a "modernist" nightmare; the architectonic protractor is replaced by the sensuous French curve, colors are strident, surfaces are coruscated and highly inflected, space is anfractuious, and the work appears as exotic as the birds after which they are named.

This "new painterliness"--gaudy or muddy in color, tactile, and spatially intricate--not only defies its "post-painterly" past, but it also reestablishes links with the gestural wing of Abstract Expressionism, recalls certain sixties' expressions, particularly Assemblage, Funk and Oldenburg's art, and connects with the work of many seventies' artists including Philip Wofford, Rodney Rips, Stuart Diamond, Katherine Porter, Lynda Benglis, and John Walker, to mention but a few. In much of this art, do we not sense a shift from the efficient to the expressionistic, from the industrial to the individual, from sixties communalism to seventies "me-ness," from even corporate to punk?¹⁸

And, how did the "Formalist" critics react to this change? For one, Greenberg generally stopped writing about the contemporary work of these artists. When he comments on the contemporary scene, he mostly mentions those whose artistic reputes he questions or those critics with whom he disagrees, and both groups are seen as debasing the concept of the "avant-garde." Nearly all the individuals he praises or even discusses thoroughly are from the past. Some of his recent essays also offer a clarification of his critical position. In pieces such as *Problems of Criticism: Complaints of an Art Critic* of 1967 and the *Necessity of "Formalism"* of 1971-72, he denies ever advocating a line or promulgating "purity" and "reduction" as prerequisites for "quality" art. First denouncing the term "Formalism," later accepting it (always again framing it with quotation marks), he feels the label, arrived at by others (just like many art movements which received their titles from hostile critics), was designed to limit his own critical freedom. Whether accurately perceived or not, there was a popular conception (or misconception) of Greenberg's position, and it's against this stance that many artists, critics, and historians reacted. Moreover, the shift in focus of Greenberg's own writings of the seventies is part of that reaction; in the *Necessity of*

"Formalism," he confesses, "Quality, esthetic value originates in inspiration, vision, 'content,' not in form," and much of his recent works develop a complicated notion of "taste" as a key ingredient of both the best art and criticism. "Taste," without replacing "Modernism's" ostensible obsession with "self-definition," begins to occupy a more central position among Greenberg's critical apparatus, a move which in its intention to liberate formalist criticism also can make it appear more arbitrary.¹⁹

Other critics and historians associated with "Formalism" also responded in the seventies to these transformations in contemporary art. Michael Fried wrote less and less about present-day events and more and more about the art of the past. Rosalind Krauss announced her modifications of orthodox "Formalism" in the crucial 10th Anniversary issue of *Artforum* in 1972.²⁰ *Artforum*, while it chronicled a wide variety of developments in art in the Sixties, also was a major mouthpiece for "Formalist-Modernism." Yet, something of a rejection of that critical stance is declared in this decennial issue. Taken as a whole, the main articles of this number attack "Formalist-Modernism," in some cases directly, in others, by dealing with non-formal matters such as politics, patronage and the art "network." These articles signalled an "identity crisis" at *Artforum* paralleling the dissolution of the sixties' consensus in the art world. The history of this magazine in the Seventies documents its many efforts to reestablish an identity, and the situation still appears unsettled.

The sense of crisis within "Formalist-Modernism" seemed at its height between 1972-1974, when several other authors identified with this critical mode tried to deal with the "new look" in Modernist art. John Elderfield, Kenworth Moffett, and E.A. Carmean, jr., in their analysis of these innovations, modify some of the "ground rules" for "quality" set down in the Sixties. For example, Elderfield, in his 1972 article "Painterliness Redefined: Jules Olitski and Recent Abstract Art," writes about the "expressive," "personalized" look of the new painterly style, which is "brushed," "complex," "rich," and full of "gestural sweeps," at the same time that he cautions that "generalism" holds "risks" and painterliness is an art "seeming to have no laws (though, of course, they exist)." Or consider Moffett's assessment of a 1973 piece entitled "Jules Olitski and the State of the Easel Picture," that "now ... that the non-painterly seems exhausted ..." Olitski's work evokes the formerly forbidden "sculptural," and his art succeeds "despite the fact he is working against the logic of stain."²¹ Put another way, art which defies logic or is seemingly lawless (problematic for a criticism modeled on the scientific method) now can succeed. Moreover, a perusal of the language employed by a variety of critics and historians of various persuasions to describe the

mentioned artists in the sixties and then in the seventies is revealing. Whereas early on terms like "rigor," "order," "rationality," "classicism," "deductive structure" dominate, a whole new vocabulary bursts forth later with descriptions like "mannerist," "eccentric," "ambiguous," "opulent," "brash," "forbidden," "heterodox," "indulgent," "self-indulgent," and even "Mephistophelean," a world where one "flaunts confession" or "slides into traps of emotionalism."

This criticism, particularly, suggests the Sixties as a normative period contrasted to the deviancy and aberrance of the Seventies. But, ultimately are there genuine "norms" for art? Perhaps, the true fruits of criticism which seeks to establish "norms" are the refreshing and often aggressive reactions they provoke, alternatives which today constitute the mainstream of abstract art.

¹For a good discussion of "Russian Formalism," see John E. Bowlt, "Russian Formalism and the Visual Arts," *Twentieth-Century Studies*, Dec., 1972, pp. 131-146.

²Nikolai Punin, *Cycle of Lectures*, 1919. Quoted in John Bowlt (ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, 1976, pp. 175-176.

³*Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 173-174.

⁶Quoted in Lucy Lippard, "Ad Reinhardt: One Art," *Art in America*, Sept.-Oct., 1974, p. 72.

⁷Popova's equation:

(+)

Painting

I. Architectonics.

- (a) Painterly space (Cubism)
- (b) Line
- (c) Colour (Suprematism)
- (d) Energetics (Futurism)
- (e) Texture

(-)

Not painting but the depiction of reality

I. Aconstructiveness

- (a) Illusionism
- (b) Literariness
- (c) Emotions
- (d) Recognition

II. The necessity for transformation by means of the omission of parts of form (began in Cubism).

Construction in painting = the sum of the energy of its parts.
Surface is fixed but forms are volumetrical.
Line as colour and as the vestige of a transverse plane participates in, and directs the forces of, construction.
Colour participates in energetics by its weight.
Energetics = direction of volumes + planes and lines or their vestiges + all colours.
Texture is the content of painterly surfaces.

From *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism*, (cat.), Moscow, 1919. Quoted in Bowlt (ed.), pp. 146-148.

⁸It is unlikely Greenberg knew of Punin's lectures in 1940. In an attack on the current usage of Formalism in 1967, however, he mentions Russian Formalism as an antecedent. But he regards it as a term denoting Russian "avant-gardism" in general, suggesting he had little awareness of Punin's more specific utilization. See Greenberg, "Problems of Criticism: Complaints of an Art Critic," *Artforum*, Oct., 1967, p. 39.

⁹Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review*, July/Aug., 1940, pp. 307, 304.

¹⁰Greenberg, "Seminar Seven," *Artsmagazine*, June 1978, p. 97.

¹¹Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature*, Spring, 1965. Quoted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *The New Art*, 1973, p. 74.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon, p. 310.

¹⁴Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," pp. 68-69.

¹⁵Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International*, May, 1960, p. 28. See also Greenberg, *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964.

¹⁶Intriguingly, Pop was sometimes discussed as a movement close to "color-field" or "post-painterly" abstraction because of its qualities of flatness, hard-edged color forms or areas, non-tactility, non-autographicness and non-relationalism. (See especially Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900* [revised and expanded edition], 1975, particularly Chapter 9, "The Single Image: Minimal, Literal, and Object Art," pp. 202-220 and Robert Rosenblum, "Pop Art and Non-Pop," *Art and Literature*, Summer, 1964.) What is curious is why the issue was not seen from the other side; why wasn't "post painterliness" treated as a part of Pop, as part of a sensibility dealing with sign-systems and the transmission of information? The clarity, legibility and boldness of much "post-painterly" work has been associated by Max Kozloff with an air of efficiency appropriate to the corporate world and its exploitation of clean, easily recognizable, abstract symbols to captivate audiences and dispense information. Moreover, Conceptual Art elaborated on Duchamp's co-option of the critic's words, and one artist, following in the footsteps of Johns, Hamilton and Kienholz in works which turn the tables on critics, exhibited a piece consisting of his commentaries on the previously published criticisms of his work.

Greenberg remarked on the "anti-formalism" of Dada and "Neo-Dada" in "Necessity of Formalism," *Art International*, Oct., 1972, pp. 105-106.

¹⁷There was also a resurgence of "News," including "New Image Painting," "New Realism," "New Painterliness," "New Decorativeness."

¹⁸Interestingly, Greenberg's writings provide for and even invite such metas-tases. This idea, labeled the "Modern Baroque," is best described by Donald Kuspit in his book on Greenberg as a "response to an art crisis: it arises at the moment when abstraction seems to have become a convention, a static *fait*

accompli," which Greenberg views as concomitantly "a threat to the essence of art, and . . . as a revitalizing, invigorating factor." See Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg*, 1979, p. 106.

¹⁹See Greenberg's three essays: "Problems of Criticism: Complaints of an Art Critic," *Artforum*, Oct., 1967, pp. 38-39; "Necessity of Formalism," *Art International*, Oct., 1972, pp. 105-106; and "Can Taste Be Objective," *Art News*, Feb., 1973, pp. 22-23+

²⁰Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism," *Artforum*, Sept. 1972, pp. 48-51.

²¹See the following three essays: John Elderfield, "Painterliness Redefined: Jules Olitski and Recent Abstract Art," (Parts I and II), *Art International*, Dec., 1972, pp. 22-26 and April, 1973, pp. 36-41; Kenworth Moffett, "Jules Olitski and the State of the Easel Picture," *Arts magazine*, March, 1973, pp. 42-48; E.A. Carmean, jr., *The Great Decade of American Abstraction. Modernist Art 1960 to 1970*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, 1974. Also, Elderfield and Carmean in their art historical essays address issues of subject matter, biography, society, etc., and discuss movements such as Dada.

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Rufino Tamayo: Indigenous or Cosmopolitan Painter?

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Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo's reputation hinges on his dual identity as an indigenous and cosmopolitan painter. Recent exhibitions of his art—at the Guggenheim Museum and the Center for Inter-American Relations (May-August 1979); and at the Phillips Collection (October-November 1978) and the Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute (January-February 1979)¹—have invariably stressed his international stature as a modernist as well as his Mexican roots. The Guggenheim's "Rufino Tamayo: Myth and Magic"—largest retrospective of the artist's work yet undertaken, with over 100 paintings spanning a 50-year period from 1928 to 1979—displayed Tamayo's art in its "cultural context." By incorporating over 150 ancient Pre-Columbian as well as nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican artifacts (mainly drawn from the artist's voluminous personal collection of Pre-Columbian and folk art), the Mu-

seum sought to identify Tamayo as an Indian inherently embodying an ancient native tradition. At the same time, the catalog of the show² projected a notion of him as an heroic, solitary individualist who overcame his Indian background as well as difficult personal and political circumstances in Mexico in order to finally enter the pantheon of international modernism.³

But the question remains: In this period of heightened awareness of the economic, social, political and cultural polarities between the developed and the developing nations of the world, is it possible for Tamayo to be at once a representative embodiment of indigenous Mexican culture and of the broader international artistic order of contemporary Western culture? Is not his position today as keyed to the specific political, social and economic realities of our time as the Mexican muralists' were to theirs? How, exactly, is he seen by those official cultural agencies that promote his work so vigorously? Could it be that he personifies the primitive colonial artist "civilized" by the aesthetic revolution of the modern Western world, and then reclaimed by the dominant, internationally-minded group in his native land to symbolize the "good" Mexican—in their terms, one who has made a successful transition from regional artist to world figure? Can he thus be seen as a symbol of consensus between two worlds where none really exists? Might not his recent elevation to the international pantheon of modern art convey a subliminal suggestion that there is in fact no real antagonism between developed and developing nations, that it is possible to become internationally fashionable without losing one's essential native innocence? If a Mexican Indian can arrive at art like this, how can there be a real gulf between these two worlds? Some attitude of this sort is surely behind the currently inflated reputation of so comparatively limited and ultimately derivative a painter.

Perhaps the best way to understand how Tamayo ended up is to briefly look first at his beginnings. During his childhood in Oaxaca, where he was born in 1899 into a family of Zapotec Indian ancestry, and adolescence in Mexico City, where he lived with an aunt who owned a wholesale fruit business, Tamayo was surely exposed to ancient and popular Mexican art and craft. Until the Mexican Revolution of 1910-21 however, indigenous art was largely ignored by natives and foreigners alike. Rather, an active participation in the "Mexican Renaissance" immediately following the Revolution taught Tamayo to honor native forms and provided him with an opportunity to study them. Under the new government of Obregon (1921-24), Jose Vasconcelos, Minister of Public Education, introduced an extensive program designed to foster national pride. It sponsored mural projects to decorate public buildings of all kinds—

schools, ministries, hotels, libraries; new open-air schools to instruct youngsters and native craftsmen in art; archaeological projects to excavate, restore and exhibit the material remains of Pre-Columbian civilization; and systematic surveys of popular arts and crafts. Vasconcelos appointed a fellow Oaxacan, the twenty-one year old Tamayo (who had just abandoned his art studies at the conservative Academy of San Carlos after a brief stint in business school) to be head of the Department of Ethnographic Drawing in the National Museum of Archaeology. This position involved Tamayo in the creative ferment of the day and immersed him in prehispanic and popular art. At the museum he was in daily contact with Pre-Columbian artifacts, which he examined and drew. In small village museums he curated exhibits of ancient objects which were meant to serve as design models for local craftsmen. In addition, he taught art in open-air schools and even briefly directed one. Thus, far from impeding his early development, the Revolution fostered it; although, unlike his fellow artists—Rivera, Orozco and Siquieros—Tamayo did not embrace the goals of the Revolution in his work.

Above all Tamayo learned formal lessons—about shape, proportion and surface—from his study of Pre-Columbian art. His early paintings and his personal collection make clear that he was most attracted to three-dimensional sculptures free of religious and symbolical trappings—to West Mexican and Classic Veracruz hollow clay figurines of human beings and animals, to stone masks and figures of the Mezcala and Aztec styles—for their rigorous plastic character, synthetic simplification of natural forms, fidelity to material, and also their iconic quality. He used these forms to fortify the design element of his paintings, to generalize the psychological presence of his figures and generally to heighten the expression of his personal vision.

It is less clear to what extent he had absorbed, at this time, the iconography—the symbolic content and thematic concerns—of ancient Mexican art. There is little or no evidence that he understood or cared about the human aspects and historic dimensions of Pre-Columbian civilization—the developmental processes, social systems, myths and religious beliefs—or, for that matter, even distinguished one ancient culture or region from another. Prehispanic notions of dualism, cyclical time, quadrupartite space, cosmological and astronomical conceptions, myth and legend emerge much later in Tamayo's work, beginning in the 1950s when he was commissioned by Mexican and U.S. government and commercial institutions to paint murals with national themes in public spaces—banks, hotels, museums, restaurants—including the *Birth of Nationality*, *Mexico Today* and the *America*. For these occasions he was required to reach beyond the evocation of his own mood states

towards an intellectual or literary content, but in his easel paintings these concerns are never intrinsic to his conception.

It took at least ten years before Tamayo's study of Pre-Columbian sculpture actually registered in his painting—not until he had fully assimilated the principles of French modernism. *Lovers* of 1926 typifies one vein of his work prior to that time. Painted within the conventions of the open-air schools, the linearly flattened heads of peasants in native dress set against a backdrop of distant mountain shapes in muted earth tones show Tamayo's strong identification with the Mexican people and landscape. During the second half of the decade, he began looking to contemporary European models, particularly the work of Braque. This is reflected in the chunky plastic delineations and elegant tonal and textual subtleties of several still lifes and landscapes such as *Chair with Fruit* (1929). All of the paintings of the twenties are essentially realistic; the stylization of forms is a logical outgrowth of representation.

From this time onward other members of the School of Paris also came under his close scrutiny—always with a time lag. From the Surrealists and their associates he learned how to manipulate familiar motifs and scenes, fragment and scramble them, for purposes of romantic fantasy and the projection of psychological states of mind. Paintings such as *Homage to Zapata* (1935), *Photogenic Venus* (1935) and *Carnival* (1936) recall in their whimsicality and wit as well as formal devices, the work of Chagall of the teens and twenties. Miro's cosmological concerns of the twenties, expressed in terms of flattened bimorphic shapes within a dynamic linear network in infinite space, are recollected in Tamayo's stellar constellations in paintings of the forties and fifties such as *Dancer in the Night* (1946), *Women Reaching for the Moon* (1946) and *Figure* (1957). During the sixties and seventies Tamayo sought to build the structure of his now very abstract canvases through textural effects, for example, in *Torso of a Man* (1969), as mediated by the work of Dubuffet of the previous decade. Like most School of Paris paintings, Tamayo's canvases are sometimes disquieting but never really disturbing, usually expressing traditional themes drawn directly from the artist's daily life—the studio, the street—in subjective, often ironically detached, terms. Like theirs, his art is corporeal—primarily involved with sensation of color, form and touch. Most of the School of Paris artists, however, are more cerebral, analytical and complex than Tamayo, who is always more empirical and intuitive than they are, as Octavio Paz has noted.⁴

The early thirties mark the beginning of Tamayo's long, devoted apprenticeship to the art of Picasso. Here Tamayo found a starting point for his own development as he might find one in nature, as Goldwater pointed out.⁵ Without the example of

Picasso, whom he avows the “genius of the century...an overall creator—a visionary,”⁶ Tamayo would never have been able to transform his lessons in Pre-Columbian form into modernist terms. The recent giant Picasso retrospective at MOMA (May-September 1980) revealed more clearly—and painfully—than possible heretofore the nature and extent of Tamayo’s dependency on Picasso. The chronological sequence of the show and the previously unexhibited paintings and sculptures in it provided an opportunity to trace more specifically the degree to which Tamayo followed and even mimicked Picasso’s development over a period of a quarter of a century from ca. 1906 to 1938—always at a distance of ten to twenty years. There were plenty of opportunities for Tamayo to study Picasso’s work firsthand in New York (where the artist lived from 1926-1928 and from 1936-1954), including several comprehensive exhibitions held at MOMA: in 1930 (when Tamayo visited New York), “Painting in Paris,” featuring 14 works by Picasso; in 1936, “Cubism and Abstract Art,” containing 32 works by Picasso dating from 1907-1929; and in 1939-40, a major retrospective, “Picasso: Forty Years of His Art,” with 344 works.

The importance to Tamayo’s entire production—in both formal and thematic terms—of Picasso’s proto-Cubist work from 1906-1910 cannot be overestimated. This was the period of transition from perceptual to conceptual painting, culminating in the *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, in which Picasso joined primitive and modern art by using, first, aspects of ancient Iberian art from Pre-Christian Spain and then African sculpture to strengthen the abstract structure and the expressive power of his paintings.

A series of pictures of nude women (1906-1908)—many of them arranging their long hair—in the recent MOMA retrospective show Picasso experimenting with the effects of primitive, i.e., non-Christian, forms.⁷ Their masklike faces, with closed or pupilless, geometrically stylized eyes, depersonalize them, causing a psychological shift in the beholder from identification with the personality or psychic state of the women to a heightened awareness of overall design and the fabrication of the pictures. The figures are pushed up front into a tense, shallow space emphasizing the surface of the canvas, while the rest of the space is indeterminate. Their bodies are pared down to basic shapes, limbs distorted antinaturalistically to suggest the stiff resistance and tangible three-dimensionality of carved wooden figures which have been chopped and hewn into shape with crude tools. Striations on the skin of the figures recall the rough texture and surface markings of wooden statues, further abstracting them. The unusual body proportions, e.g., largeness of the heads, awkwardness of posture and forthright display of sexually charged parts—all derived from

aspects of Iberian and African sculpture—are meant to shock and disturb.

Picasso's *Seated Female Nude with Crossed Legs* (1906) set beside Tamayo's *Woman in Gray* (1931) demonstrated how Tamayo has taken Picasso's cue to appropriate non-Western sculpture by substituting Aztec for Iberian and African forms and using them to similar effect. The restricted space of *Women in Gray* as well as the relation of the figure to the ground and to the borders of the canvas echo those in Picasso's picture. The nude woman seated on a box, as in the Picasso, reflects the weighty monumentality and austerity of Aztec stone goddesses (dated ca. A.D. 1350-1520) in its compact volumetric torso, pointed breasts and sharply jutting angular limbs. The harsh gray color of the figure approximates the coarse texture and tonality of the basalt from which most Aztec sculptures were carved. The featureless face, uptilted head of simplified shape and striated flat hair replicate the impersonality and self-containment of Aztec icons and require a psychological adjustment on the part of the viewer which is then transferred to the painting itself, just as in Picasso's painting.

Many other paintings by Tamayo recall the posture, proportions and subject matter of this series of nudes by Picasso, including the figures in *Photogenic Venus* (1936), *Women Arranging their Hair* (1943), *Women Combing their Hair* (1941, 1943) and *Carnival* (1941), which echo the image of a woman dressing her hair that recurs with peculiar intensity and frequency in Picasso's art. The many paintings of women by both artists point up the temperamental affinity between them: both are so often engaged in recording the experience of physical sensation, especially of pain and pleasure involving a relationship to a female companion—a sequence of women in Picasso's life; primarily his wife Olga in Tamayo's case—rather than painting about ideas or conditions in the world around them.

Tamayo picked up on and effectively developed Picasso's audacious use in 1908-1910 of primitive masks to transform his figures into emotionally charged abstract compositional elements—again substituting Pre-Columbian Indian for African negroid forms. Tamayo's facial stylizations derive mainly from hollow clay figurines from Pre-Classic period (ca. 300 B.C. to A.D. 300) Western Mexico—Nayarit and Jalisco—with distinctive, odd elongated heads, lozenge-shaped staring eyes, long sharp noses, thin lips, fileted headbands and jutting ears. During the thirties, these expressionless faces were used as masking devices on figures in a wide variety of vernacular scenes with Surrealist overtones, such as *Sunday in Chapultepec* (1934), *The Family* (1936), and *Nina Bonita* (1937). They also appear in paintings that strongly reflect the decorative concerns of Picasso's synthetic Cubism, such as *Musicians* (1934),

which shares the subject matter and schematic three-figured composition of Picasso's *Three Musicians* of 1921, but is characteristically less tightly organized and devoid of the complex interlocking flat planes of Picasso's work. Several paintings of the late thirties and early forties on the theme of Indian market women, such as *Fruit Vendors* (1938), *Women of Tehuantepec* (1939) and *Women with Pineapple* (1941), combine synthetic Cubist and Surrealist concerns with references not only to the heads but also the bodies of Jalisco clay figures, so that the thick necks, broad shoulders, thin tubular arms, exaggeratedly convex torsos, distinctive proportions, postures and hieratic simplicity of these figures also serve to strengthen the decorative and emotional impact of the works.⁸

The recent Picasso retrospective at MOMA revealed the important influence that his synthetic Cubist still lifes had on Tamayo's similar paintings of the thirties, not only in relation to the shallow space, uptilted flattened forms and their patterned arrangement on the canvas surface but also in terms of characteristic recurrent motifs and devices. Compare, for example, the sculptured heads in Picasso's *Studio with Plaster Head* (1925)—which encompasses the Pygmalion-like theme of the artist contemplating his work in his studio—and Tamayo's *Homage to Juarez* (1932).⁹

Beginning in 1940, Picasso and Pre-Columbian art are recombined for greater expressive effect in Tamayo's work, and different aspects of both sources are evoked. New, sharper stylizations are integrated into the paintings: images are simplified, forms are less decorative, tauter and more essentially keyed to the pictorial structure. The 1939-40 Picasso retrospective at MOMA and the exhibition in the same year of the *Guernica* and related studies at the Valentine gallery (which also represented Tamayo) provided Tamayo with ample opportunity to study the master's latest art. During the middle and late thirties, Picasso was using animals—horses, bulls, cocks and cats—in the series of paintings and drawings executed before and after *Guernica*. In these he exaggerated certain body parts of an animal for expressionistic effect. *Cat and Bird* (1939) clearly pointed the way for Tamayo's application of the stylized body parts of West Mexican Pre-Classic period Colima clay dogs—possible combined with references to Aztec stone coyotes and feathered serpent representations—to his well-known series of animal paintings. Observing Picasso's distortions of the organic structure of the cat—especially the aggressive teeth, ears, tail and claws—Tamayo transformed the characteristic strong curves, schematic features and burnished red-brown surface of these sculptures into hard, clearly defined masses within a tough compositional structure expressing tension and fierce rebellion, by emphasizing the rhythmic parallels

between the dogs' clavicles and rib cages, their sharp upright teeth, ears and tails, their beady eyes and flaring nostrils and the piercing diagonals of the strewn bones, animals' jaws and rock formations.

Other Tamayo paintings of the early forties, such as *Woman Calling* (1941) and the *Flute Player* (1944), show him still referring to the Nayarit and Jalisco figures used in his paintings of the previous decade but with less decorative and more rigorous effect. The static figures seem intrinsically linked with the simple landscape of stylized mountains (similar to those in *Lovers* (1926)). There is a new emphasis on segmental divisions of body, face and hands and broadly shaped patterns of light and shade which strongly recall Picasso in such pictures as *Woman Dressing her Hair* (1940). Everything extraneous has been removed from the paintings, although the evocation of simple sounds is an additional dimension. Just as forms are echoed in various parts of the composition, color gives cohesion to these paintings by being repeated in different sections in carefully measured progressions of uniformly low-keyed tones. Tamayo's colors are related to the bright, hard hues of Mexican popular art—blacks, grays, red browns, rose, pink, yellow ochre, egg shell—rather than to Picasso's palette or to Pre-Columbian art, and are the most distinctively personal feature of his work.

In 1946 Tamayo's work took a radically new turn, but one equally indebted to Picasso. For the first time movement is explicitly incorporated into his compositions, so that his figures lose their earthbound quality and their calm imperturbability. Although still isolated and monumental, they move violently backward and forward, gesturing spastically beneath the firmament filled with networks of constellations. Examples include *Dancers at the Sea* (1945), *Women Reaching for the Moon* (1946), *Cataclysm* (1946) and *Woman in the Night* (1947). The influence of Picasso's running figures of the early twenties, such as *Three Bathers* and *Women Running on the Beach*, in which boldly foreshortened female nudes recede into space, their heads pinpoints, their legs and other parts closer to the viewer greatly enlarged, is clear. This theme—like the woman dressing her hair and the artist in his studio—is one to which Picasso returned many times, especially preoccupying him again in the late twenties and early thirties when he combined the beach motif with his hard, "bone structure" style, as in *Seated Bather* (1930).

It is not easy to account for Tamayo's new interest in dynamic form and cosmic space, which represents a striking departure from his previous paintings. For a start, a new pattern of living took shape in 1946; he began to teach at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School and to winter in New York and summer in

Mexico, with time out for international travel to the various exhibitions of his work now being frequently held across the U.S. and abroad.¹⁰ The first monograph on his work by Robert Goldwater was published in 1947, and he had established many high level social connections among collectors in New York. Whether his arrival as a full-fledged member in good standing of the international art community can alone account for the dramatic shift in his frame of reference is a question worth pondering.

Man Amazed by Aviation, a pencil sketch of 1946 in a style similar to that of *Women in the Night* (perhaps combined with reference to Picasso's 1940 paintings such as *First Steps* in which body distortions serve a more expressionist effect), signals his new interest in space and flight but also his belated recognition of the problems and possibilities, the destructive and constructive potential, presented by technology. His previous paintings are devoid of any reference to technology and even—apart from a few landscapes of a factory and the incorporation of clocks, telephone wires and light bulbs in his pictures—to the modern world. But from 1946 on through the fifties there are several paintings whose titles indicate constellations, astronomers (a 1954 painting of this title was proclaimed by Genauer to be an anticipation of Sputnik), space travel and telephones. It is as if Tamayo had abruptly emerged from a timeless, changeless Indian peasant world of arrested development into the mid-twentieth century urban world of constant change and accelerated development, from colonial backwater to cosmopolitan center.

At first, in pictures such as *Cataclysm* and *Man Amazed by Aviation*, he seems to view technology as an awesome, implacable and threatening force, wreaking havoc and devastation externally—through savage bombing during the war—and internally—through a process of dehumanization and individual loss of identity. Later, however, in *Birth of Nationality* (1952), *Man* (1953), *The Astronomer* (1954) and other similar paintings, he views it as an instrument of liberation to be harnessed so that man can transcend his present needs and live more fully.¹¹ Thus, the *Birth of Nationality*, a mural on the theme of the Spanish Conquest in the Mexican Palacio de Bellas Artes, pictures the conquistador as half-man half-horse (perhaps as much a reference to Picasso's minotaurs and *Guernica* horse as to the legendary bedazzlement of the Aztecs at their first encounter with this animal) equipped with mysterious metallic machine-like parts (propeller? compass? armor? weapons?). With these means the Spaniard located and overpowered the Indian but also gave him new birth and life: the Conquest seen not as destruction of a noble past but as emergence of a better future. The Dallas mural *Man* is a celebration

of a space flight lift-off—the conquest of new worlds through technology. In order to express these dynamic concepts of transformation and supersonic speed, Tamayo dissolves objects into fragmented, interlocking semi-transparent planes, using the vocabulary of Cubism not in analytical but in Futurist terms to illustrate whirling movement and trace the trajectory of light. Picasso's "bone structure" style is also employed here as a means of breaking up figures into skeletal components so that they fuse with the pictorial space.

From the late fifties on, Tamayo's art becomes increasingly abstract; he discards linear and color patterning altogether, dissolves contours in an all-over vaporous haze, and pays less and less attention to outward appearance and more attention to light and motion in abstract terms. Figures, which had lost their ethnic identity after 1946 and had become undifferentiated in the period in-between, now have been reduced to an ideographic arrangement of rectangles and circles nearly indistinguishable from the ground. The iconography of the paintings is impenetrable. As if to compensate for this loss of significant figuration, Tamayo's palette becomes stridently vibrant, with hot pinks, bright orange-reds, electric blues, vivid purples and acid greens replacing the earth colors and slate tones of the previous canvases. It is at this time that textural effects are introduced in full force. There are, of course, no longer any traces of his mentor Picasso nor of Pre-Columbian morphology in the paintings.

In my opinion Tamayo's paintings in the period from 1940 to 1946 are his most successful and compelling efforts. Other critics have characterized them as pretentiously filled with overreaching ideas and as a transitional stage from his early work to the more fully realized abstraction of his late period.¹² In paintings such as *Carnival*, *Animals* and *Flute Player* there is an integration of modernist form and a felt environment; a coherent balance between taut picture structure and observed reality. The figures have distinctive physical characteristics, and thus a historical identity, and harmoniously occupy a specific locale. Moreover, these paintings resonate with a moral conviction; they express ideas about human alienation and resistance to the bestiality of war, as well as a plea—nostalgic to be sure—for a simple, more peaceful planet.

During this period, Tamayo still identifies on some level with the indigenous people of Mexico; the peasant wearing a *rebozo* in *Indian Woman* (1943) recalls paintings of the thirties in which he pictured himself and Olga similarly dressed. On the other hand, he was considered North American enough to be included in the Whitney Annual of 1940, and was not yet committed to living in New York since he was still dividing his time between these two worlds. This, then, was a moment when

Tamayo's own contradictions were sharpest—he was both a “native” Mexican and a cosmopolitan painter. It was also objectively a time when the vast difference between these two worlds had become most apparent. The concept of technology that he introduced into his work in 1946 precisely joins this divide. Where first Tamayo sees science and technology as threatening, he comes, not long afterwards, to see it as redeeming—in fact, as a solution to the problem of underdevelopment.

As he assimilated the values of his adopted culture and abandoned those of his own, beginning in 1946, Tamayo experienced both a loss and a change of identity. Now the tension between the subjective and objective which sustained his previous work diminishes. The paintings attach to no particular history, locale or reality; solitary featureless figures wander purposelessly in vast empty terrains under night skies filled with nebulae. The increasingly abstract paintings culminate in compositions in which one or two static forms, still vaguely suggesting figures, float on a vaporous ground. The fact that Tamayo failed to incorporate the tenets of analytical Cubism probably accounts for the flaccidity, amorphousness, even sloppiness, of these essentially decorative and mannered late paintings. Lacking in structural definition and in any external point of reference, they are incapable of challenging, disturbing or exciting either as pure or figurative abstractions. Their appeal is entirely subjective: the spectator can read into each painting what he/she wants and let the play of his/her own fancy reign.

Tamayo was not the only Mexican artist of international stature to draw from modernist, Pre-Columbian and popular art. Ten years his senior, Diego Rivera painted in a Cubist style in Paris from 1913-17, before joining Vasconcelos' mural program. Other muralists, including Jean Charlot, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco, were also thoroughly versed in the tenets of modernism. Long before Tamayo evinced an interest in technology, Rivera had incorporated industrial forms and ideas into his 1933 Detroit Institute of Fine Arts mural depicting machinery and mass production, at the same time as avant-garde artists in Europe and the U.S. were exploring these concerns. Rivera had also thoroughly studied and applied Pre-Columbian forms to his art. Moreover, both Tamayo and Rivera assiduously collected the same kind of Pre-Columbian art, admiring mainly the aesthetic aspects of West Mexican and Veracruz ceramics and Aztec stone sculptures, and each donated to the nation personal museums with thousands of these artifacts—Rivera's Anahuacalli in Mexico City and Tamayo's Museum of Prehispanic Art in Oaxaca (1974).¹³

Although Tamayo was associated with the muralists intermittently—as a member of Vasconcelos' art education pro-

gram (1921-24), as a government official alongside Rivera at the Academy of San Carlos (1929) and as a delegate, in the company of Orozco and Siquieros, from the League of Revolutionary Artists to the New York Artists' Congress (1936)—his artistic position diverged from theirs as early as 1926. Rejecting their work, he championed easel over mural painting, form over content, abstraction over representation, the psychological over the social, elitist over populist attitudes, and in 1930 became leader of a dissident group of artists. However, he did not completely break with the muralists ideologically until the late thirties, as testified by the overtly political titles of his paintings between 1932 and 1935—*Homage to Jaurez*, *Homage to Zapata*, *Call of the Revolution* and *Worker's Rhythm*—and a mural of 1938—*Soldiers and Workers of the Revolution Attacking Capitalism*. Nevertheless, the opposition usually drawn between their work and position hold. Where Tamayo has seen art as a vehicle for the expression in abstract terms of his subjective responses to daily life addressed to a select audience, Rivera and the muralists, by contrast, saw art as a means of communicating political ideas, arousing moral fervor, and educating a broad public about their cultural heritage and human rights. But the catalogs of the recent Tamayo exhibitions go further. They uniformly represent his work as timeless in its poetic lyricism, symbolic of traditional universal themes and, above all, associated with the realms of mystery and magic, while the works of the muralists are dismissed as devoid of aesthetic value, historically dated, drily didactic and politically bombastic.¹⁴

Nature and the Artists and the Work of Art and the Observer, Tamayo's Smith College library mural of 1943, featured in the Guggenheim retrospective, serves as both a declaration of the artist's credo and an index of his divergence from the path of the muralists. Where Rivera treated the theme of creation twice (1922, 1927) in all-encompassing terms, Tamayo has confined himself to the theme of artistic re-creation, as Goldwater pointed out.¹⁵ He has also probably once again taken his lead from Picasso's theme of the artist in his studio with model, which he reiterated in many paintings and drawings from 1926 through the thirties, such as *The Studio* (1927-28), *Painter and Model* (1928) and *The Sculptor* (1931). The mural is divided into two panels, according to its titles: on one side is Nature, a reclining four-breasted nude female, surrounded by the four elements and canopied by a rainbow; to the right of this group stands the artist interpreting Nature in an abstract painting; at the extreme right, the observer, his back to Nature, contemplates the finished work, now represented as an abstract sculpture. The fact that the observer stands with his back to Nature, transfixed by the work of art and oblivious to his surroundings,¹⁶

the absence of any reference to a recognizable environment and the mural's highly schematic and geometric format all make Tamayo's idealist position perfectly clear and show, in a manner every bit as didactic as Rivera's murals, how completely at odds he was with the latter. The primary message conveyed is that of individualism and privatism: art is created by one ego for contemplation in a vacuum by another. It has been argued that the mural embodied a mythic dimension, referring to the Nahuatl myth of Ometeotl, Lord and Lady of Duality.¹⁷ But this aspect of the mural remains obscure even to an observer initiated into the intricacies of the Aztec cosmogony.

By the time he had painted this mural Tamayo had thoroughly internalized not only the language but also the ideology of abstraction. He was employed as a teacher at Dalton and well-established within the New York gallery and patronage network. Rivera had mastered modernism at an earlier time—his Cubist paintings are among the finest ever produced—but had abandoned it because he felt it to be inappropriate for the expression of the specific historical experience of his concern and for conveying meaning to his audience he wanted to reach. But the contradictions inherent in Rivera's position, as well as the changing Mexican and world situation, confounded his intentions. Not long after the 1932 debacle of the Rockefeller Center murals (in which he allowed his work to be destroyed rather than expunge an offending part), he retreated to a form of privatism himself, painting mainly easel portraits of women companions and cute little Indian children (which now fetch astronomical auction prices). By comparison, Tamayo has been able to sustain his vision within the framework he has chosen. But it would be a mistake to attribute this consistency solely to his personal tenacity and heroic efforts, for it must be understood that external circumstances have favored and encouraged his success.

As I have tried to make clear, Rufino Tamayo has closely followed the model of early European modernists, particularly Picasso, who appropriated non-Western art forms and transformed them into material resources for their own works. It is, in fact, difficult to ascertain in what way, if any, he differs from these artists, except in occupying a retrograde position in this tendency. He selectively borrowed aspects of the morphology of Pre-Columbian sculpture, extracting them from their original context and cultural framework, in order to heighten the plastic design and the emotional impact of his paintings. Essentially, these sources were employed as a means of energizing the abstract expression of his mood states. What then is the difference between Tamayo's and Picasso's appropriation of these primitive forms? Where Picasso used Iberian and African forms, Tamayo employed Pre-Columbian forms for the same

ends. Did Tamayo's reimposition of these forms in a Mexican context make this process any different from artists of the School of Paris who certainly never laid claim to an African or Oceanic heritage or identity?

It is true that in an undefinable way Tamayo's association with Pre-Columbian art seems less foreign, closer, more a reclamation than an appropriation of these ancient forms. But the fact that he has drawn on these forms, that he is linked to the native tradition by virtue of his Mexican birth and remote Indian ancestry, that he personally proclaims his identity with this heritage, or that his art has been projected in these terms by official institutions in Mexico and the U.S., does not really alter his actual relation to these forms. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that there was an enormous disjunction between the native prehispanic tradition and the twentieth century; during the interval Mexico was for nearly four centuries a colony of the West, with a very different cultural framework. Only the lower, peasant level of the population has remained relatively unaffected by changes in the rest of society. And, to the extent that Tamayo's art reflects the vibrant colors and the suggestions of prehispanic form in popular Mexican crafts, it can perhaps lay claim to this heritage.

But it is not simply by his use of Pre-Columbian and popular Mexican forms that Tamayo should be regarded as a truly indigenous artist or not. There are other factors to consider too: what is the audience for his work? How has his use of native materials been construed? What is his perceived role as a Mexican artist?

Tamayo's art speaks to, and is admired and collected by, a highly sophisticated international audience in the developed Western world and its Latin American counterparts. Sometimes his subject matter—the already noted admiration of technology—and always the comfortable, international, decorative abstraction of his later style, conforms to their own view of life and of the (largely decorative) value of art. Tamayo's work certainly does not speak to the majority of Mexicans, on whose ancient culture it draws but to whom the language of modernist abstraction is unintelligible. The dichotomy between Tamayo's actual role as a mainstream internationalist and his aspirations as a nationalist is underscored by the continuing controversy over his wish to donate to the state his large collection of mainstream modern art, which includes over 100 paintings and sculptures by Picasso, Chagall, Klee, Motherwell, Rothko, Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, Pop and Op artists. Some ten years ago he proposed that the Mexican government build a museum in Mexico City for this purpose, but this project—unlike the prehispanic museum that he donated to Oaxaca—has met with extraordinary resistance. Tamayo insists that the

museum be located in Chapultepec Park, near the other major national museums, "so that the people of Mexico would be exposed to the best post-war art of Europe and America."¹⁸ Tamayo is baffled and embittered by this refusal of his valuable gift, because, no doubt, he sincerely wants this art and his own work to be accessible to a popular audience. The Mexican muralists, now derided in comparison to Tamayo, understood that the abstract idiom of modern art was alien to the broad base of Mexican society. Their appropriation of Pre-Columbian forms was meant to serve very different ends from Tamayo's—for use in large-scale, accessible public works to stand for the dispossessed members of the society whose lives had a continuity with the prehistoric past, and perhaps to help such people to become more truly a part of that society. Whether or not they succeeded in their aims (as the revolution they supported certainly did not) is not the point here; but the point is that their aims in the use of ancient forms were very different from Tamayo's.

The controversy that developed recently over whether the State should accept Tamayo's planned donation of his modern art collection suggests that there are in Mexico both supporters and detractors of the artist's work. To those who favor his work he probably represents a positive assertion of Mexico's coming of age in the world cultural arena, while others may judge that in the process of so thoroughly assimilating Western art and values, he may have gained the world at the expense of losing his true cultural history and identity. And, insofar as he is often held up as an embodiment of both indigenous and international modernist art it can only serve to obscure what is the most valuable in his work and to convey the false impression that there is really no essential difference in the ethos and history of the developing and developed worlds—that, artistically, all roads must lead to MOMA.

¹⁸These institutions shared their resources in an unusual coordinated program designed to present "Mexico Today," a nationwide symposium sponsored by grants from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and mounted in cooperation with Meridian House International, the Smithsonian Resident Associates Program and the Center for Inter-American Relations. In addition, the Guggenheim show was supported by substantial grants from the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Secretaria de Educacion Publica, Mexico, and the NEA.

²⁰Octavio Paz, *Rufino Tamayo: Myth and Magic* (The Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1979), p. 10. See also Emily Genauer, *Rufino Tamayo* (Abrams, New York, 1974), p. 20 and *passim*.

³Since the 1950 Venice Biennale devoted a gallery solely to his work, Tamayo has been established internationally as a major artist, garnering many international

awards and honors over the years.

⁴Paz, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

⁵Robert Goldwater, *Rufino Tamayo* (New York, 1947), p. 38.

⁶John Gruen, "Tamayo: There are spirits in my country...I strain to listen to their voices," *ARTnews* (February 1979), p. 67.

⁷MOMA, *Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective* (MOMA, New York, 1980), pp. 70-83.

⁸One of Tamayo's rare excursions into sculptural form, his bronze *Head* of 1940, probably a portrait of his wife Olga, replicates the salient features of the Jalisco heads but was doubtless also inspired by Picasso's remarkable series of sculpted bronze heads of women, which drew so heavily on primitive sculptures, beginning with his portrait of Fernande in 1909 and continuing with the series of heads and busts of Marie Therese of 1931-33 and the *Head of Dora Maar* of 1941.

⁹Sculptured heads also appear in Picasso's *The Red Tablecloth* (1924), *Women with Sculpture* (1925) and *The Lamp* (1931). Other ornamental motifs and structural devices used frequently by Picasso during this period are balcony railings, light bulbs, bird cages, mandolins, guitars and melons, which also appear in such Tamayo still lifes as *Shells* (1929), *Mandolins and Pineapples* (1930) *Woman with Bird Cage* (1941) and *Woman and Bird* (1944).

¹⁰Genauer, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹¹Genauer, *ibid.*, p. 22, quotes Tamayo: "Science and technology need not be dehumanizing at all. The fact is that man is creating all this. I'm praying that a new kind of humanism may emerge, in which man, harnessing the technology he has invented, lives more fully as a man."

¹²James B. Lynch, Jr. *Rufino Tamayo: Fifty Years of his Painting* (The Phillips Collection, Washington, 1978), p. 18.

¹³Curiously, neither artist has indicated any concern for the dislocation of these looted artifacts from their archaeological context—a circumstance which has greatly impeded scientific investigations of ancient prehispanic cultures and the reconstruction of their authentic culture history.

¹⁴Tamayo has characterized Rivera sardonically as a "great revolutionary and a painter whose technique was in every brush stroke an extension of Italian Renaissance tradition." Cited in Genauer, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁵Goldwater, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁶In a letter written at the time, Tamayo explained that this was done in order to emphasize that a work of art must be taken as a new creation, independent of the source from which it sprang. Cited in Goldwater, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁷See James B. Lynch, Jr., "Northampton Revisited: Tamayo's Smith College Mural." *Art of the Americas Bulletin*, IV, 1969.

¹⁸Gruen, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

Pattern Painting: A New Flowering of the Decorative?

MARJORIE WELISH

A celebration of the “beautiful and complicated,”¹ pattern painting has recently emerged as a conspicuous tendency in art’s growing if reluctant acceptance of the decorative. Proponents of this tendency feel that “fine” artists still tend to rationalize the inferiority of the decorative arts, but that this insularity is outmoded. Against the reductiveness of formalist abstraction is the expansiveness and invention of decoration, which they feel needs no artistic justification other than its enduring vitality. These artists take pleasure in the decorative by openly borrowing its motifs, materials and mediums in the belief they are not merely refurbishing abstraction but reclaiming it. As yet their enthusiasm does not constitute a break-through.

A clear announcement of this recent decorative impulse came by way of the exhibition “Pattern Painting at P.S. 1,” in November 1977. Curated by John Perreault, this even-handed

“interim survey”² offered works by 22 artists³ which, while loosely allied through pattern, varied considerably in expression. Among them, for instance were Mario Yrissary’s spray-painted grids,⁴ Tina Griouard’s stencils on paper, Robert Zakanitch’s frosty acrylic arrays of flowers, and Miriam Schapiro’s collaborative fabric collages. Textiles and wall coverings influenced the motifs and structure of the art, as in Cynthia Carlson’s sprightly distribution of acrylic squiggles installed as ad hoc wallpaper. Elsewhere was the humorous piecework of Robert Kushner, wall hangings that could double as costumes for his performances, and thrift store furniture appropriated by Kim MacConnel and slathered with painted patterns. At least as frequently as the proprieties of craft and taste appeared the slapdash theatricality of good taste subverted. For these latter artists especially the way to visual vitality led through the fecund possibilities of juxtaposition, a tactic the late Amy Goldin proposed in their spirited advocacy of “Patterns, Grids and Painting.”⁵ Kaleidoscopic interaction of pattern or its material equivalent, collage, have since become standard procedure for those pattern painters who believe in the virtues of impurity.

Their use of pattern gave these diverse artists the coherence of a group—which is not the case, but also established a legitimate formal unity. As Perreault said in his concurrently published promotional article, these works are bonded by features that render them “two dimensional, non-hierarchical, all-over, a-centric and aniconic.”⁶ So, while pattern branded these works with an identifiable decorative mark, it also indicated their commonly shared visual source. By virtue of extended repetition, pattern referred to its connection with field painting.

The spectre of pattern had clearly visited those critics and historians who have tried to apprehend the phenomenon of the all-over configuration in Pollock. Clement Greenberg had worried over the “factual ambiguity” of an easel painting that “comes very close to decoration—to the kind of wallpaper patterns that can be repeated infinitely...”⁷ Harold Rosenberg had warned against the complacency of design that renders painting “apocalyptic wallpaper.”⁸ And in his undergraduate lectures on Pollock at Columbia University in the late 1960s, Meyer Shapiro, who always gave scrupulous attention to the purely visual characteristics of art, had taken care to distinguish Pollock’s homogeneous fields from the repetition of wallpaper. Subsequently, of course, the implied interdiction against the decorative was ignored.

The emergence of pattern painting may be understood as following in the wake of two converging and disparate developments. Of primary importance was the intermittent hospitality to the decorative from within Abstract Expressionism, a

hospitality that occurred if for no other reason than successive generations of painters expanded but also ameliorated the pictorial resources of Pollock and Rothko. In the late 50s, color-stain painting, diffusely organized by Frankenthaler, was made sequential by Louis and modular by Noland, which helped both to beautify and codify the initial gestural impulse. The methodical tendencies of the early 60s nurtured the development of the geometric emblems of Hard Edge painting as well as their serial organization. For instance, the exhibition "Serial Imagery," curated by John Coplans,⁹ demonstrated that the repetitive emblem can yet generate extensive emblematic orders. Even as systematic painting¹⁰ developed throughout the decade and predetermined methods segregated the creative act into decision-making and its execution, painterly solutions persisted. By the late 60s, in a partial return to Pollock, emblematic imagery had yielded to spatial complexity. To retain the taut continuity of the pictorial field, quick, bright optical orchestration compensated for a countervailing intensity. Whether striped or atomized, hue now bore a distinctly sensuous visual appeal, and spatial fields, now chromatically nourished, became ambiguous in intent. Progressively throughout the decade the structural formats of Stella, Noland, Gene Davis, Olitski and Walter Darby Bannard were confounded by decorative import.

In an article anticipating his monograph on the artist, Kenneth Moffett showed a preference for the asymmetrical disposition of hues in Noland's striped fields to those in regular sequences, which to him were decorative.¹¹ He found the vertical formats that followed the 1971 series, with their criss-cross arrangements of bright hues, somewhat problematic, though apparently not for their plaid format, nor did he confront that inevitable association because to do so would trivialize the notion of abstraction as modernists pursue it.

The illusionist ground Noland introduced in this last series was another indication of the increasingly lyrical tendencies to appear in his work, and typical of the general painterliness of Lyrical Abstraction. In 1971, the Whitney Museum mounted two shows back-to-back that reflected the generational amelioration of field principles: "The Structure of Color" and "Lyrical Abstraction." Especially the first attempted a curatorial statement that showed the reconciliation of linear and painterly tendencies taking place within formalism. Among those displaying "color and a structuring device"¹² were Stella, Noland, Louis, Davis, Olitski, Bannard, and two artists now affiliated with pattern painting, Yrissary and Zakanych (albeit represented by a Minimalist painting).¹³ That Stella's 1970 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art was still an unsettling memory because the legitimacy of sensuous visual appeal was proposed against

all lingering objections is recalled by Joel Bass's statement in "The Structure of Color." "The predetermined internal structure in Stella and especially the arbitrary color raises the question 'To what extent is it decorative and what, then are the implications of this term?' "¹⁴

If the formalists' growing reception to decoration gradually prepared the emergence of pattern painting, so did another major trend: the more erratic and disorienting ascendancy of the vernacular, set off by the Pop sensibility of Johns and Rauschenberg. It was Johns' use of repetitive stripes as both a neutral and clichéd convention that influenced Stella and other artists in the direction of pattern. Gene Davis recalls that:

I thought that maybe stripes would be my way of getting to trite subject matter, because stripes are in dresses, they're in wallpaper, they're in decorative art. They are trite in the same way that the American flag and Campbell's soup cans and comic strips are trite.¹⁵

In other words, abstract sensuous notions such as stripes and concentric circles assumed the same clichéd signifiatory aspect as the mass-produced popular images of Pop art.

Though it is customary to think of Pop Art's implementation of pattern as degraded decoration, it is profitable to remember their use of pattern also reinforced perception of surface. For instance, Artschwager's patterned veneers but also Oldenburg's kitsch fabrics compelled viewers to deal with the surface qualities of their furniture dissociated from the volumetric ones. In retrospect, however, it was Warhol's modular flower paintings, first shown in 1964, and his *Cow Wallpaper* used as an ornamental backdrop for the Whitney's survey of his art in 1970 that fulfilled the most dreaded aspect of the decorative; his ostentatious and shallow visual fields rendered the paintings trivial, making art objects themselves ancillary decorations.

The hegemony of surface brought with it beauty as well as formula. Rosenquist, who fragmented and collaged his billboard images so that they became patterns, soon dropped his resistance towards the slick commercial technique of advertisements and, by 1967, had embraced the delectable visual appeal originally intended for them. The Photorealists further exaggerated the finish and ornamentality of design—what Alloway calls the "complex visual syntax"¹⁶—of Pop art. With their air-brushed copies of dated interior design from "ladies" magazines and their meticulous studies of cars and chrome-covered motorcycles, the tasteless serendipity Warhol had sought out became fashionably beautiful, but also seductive. Certainly the Pop and Photorealist styles flaunted the decorative impurities of Americana and inaugurated the assimilation of these vernac-

ular subjects and attitudes into the purview of fine art.

But the ascendancy of the vernacular meant more than the satisfaction of appetite as it had meant something other than the manipulation of formal signs. Meanwhile, throughout the 60s there appreciated in value an attitude of preservation of the decorative arts. Momentum for this came from ecological and ethnic attitudes of recovery that gave new credibility to art that demonstrated connection to traditions previously neglected or denigrated. The Vietnam War and the American Bi-Centennial provided anti-patriotic and patriotic focal points for artistic activity. While art institutions became increasingly suspect as repositories of elitist art, museum exhibitions provided official sanction and continual exposure of decorative arts and crafts from within and without the European tradition.¹⁷

Pattern painting then derives from a prolonged and elaborate exploration of the decorative implications of formalist and anti-formalist painting, but also from both these tendencies within the decorative arts. Within this over-determined context the celebration of the beautiful and complicated becomes the latest interpolation of the descent of modernism and the ascent of the vernacular and a proliferation of tendencies¹⁸ by which artists pursue their particular decorative inclinations. Meanwhile, the emergence of this most recent phase of decorative art has provoked some discussion of the decorative as the basis for a legitimate style, resulting in the polarization of opinion and the consequential elevation of pattern painting into a *cause celebre*. But it is the varying usage of "decorative" that aggravates partisanship and leads to critical opposition at times more imagined than real.

Central to the exchange is whether decoration vitiates abstraction or vitalizes it. Greenberg, who has continually considered this issue, reiterated some of his views in the piece, "Detached Observations,"¹⁹ published as pattern painting was gaining momentum. Although not all visual elements that adorn a surface are decorative, Greenberg defines "decoration" as ornament, that which is not essential to structure and an ancillary elaboration of it.²⁰ Eighteenth-century Persian carpets are exemplary in their use of decoration, but primarily the contribution of Western art lies in "that insistence on making means accountable to their ends, which has come to mark our civilization as it has no other."²¹ This has become the basis for the "functionalism" of modern art,²² an attitude propounded, incidently by William Morris in his reform of Victorian decorative arts. However, even within the ranks of the purists of design were artists—archetypally Matisse—who challenged this ideal by "incorporating the patterned and the repetitive and the blank flatness that relieved them," that is, all that was the "antithesis" of such a vision.²³ Not all such amal-

gams were successful as abstraction and for Greenberg, what made the tapestry patterns in the Nice paintings ornamental in a trivial sense is their incorporation of “representations of decorated objects.”²⁴ Evidently, Matisse’s reviving the pointillist technique and petite figuration of the Nabis was insufficiently realized. By virtue of their being descriptive passages rather than pictorial transformations of his sources, they fail to accommodate the spatial demands of abstraction.

The appropriation by Braque, Picasso and Leger of the mechanical aspect of decoration further blurred distinctions between decorative and abstract intent.²⁵ “It was left, however, to Tobey and Pollock to make the assimilation of the decorative complete: their all-overness.”²⁶ Thus Greenberg acknowledges the fact of decorative abstraction, though he does not entirely approve it. What he finds objectionable about these developments is the extent to which they abdicate vigilance over imaginative formal solutions. For him, Noland and Poons remain exceptions²⁷ in recent formalist practice, in which “all-overness has become academic and too often is allowed to become a patterned sameness...”²⁸ Softer on his disapproval of decoration’s formal constituents, Greenberg also does not exempt all modernist painting from vitiating tendencies of the decorative when shown to be programmatic application of formalist principles.

It is this programmatic aspect of recent art that Kushner and MacConnel address in a letter written in their own defense in response to “Betraying the Feminist Intention: The Case Against Feminist Decorative Art” by Donald Kuspit three years later.²⁹ Speaking for many of their colleagues, they maintain that “the tenets of formalist painting have brought art to reductive stasis.”³⁰ If the vitality of abstraction lies within the process of realizing the unique pictorial qualities of a work, then formalist art foundered precisely because of the predictability of its solutions, once so narrowly defined. Material changes did not alleviate the sameness, and they protest that “...from today’s viewpoint and criteria, formalist painting looks essentially like large-scale, public decoration of a rather primitive order.”³¹ From this statement one can surmise that it is because formalist paintings have made concessions to the decorative without acknowledging they are doing so, and, thereby confronting the issue directly, that their work is vulnerable to attack. For Kushner, decoration is synonymous with abstraction, but not as practiced in exhaustion or evasion.

The above is in fact their partial answer to Kuspit’s charge that pattern “remains the simplest instrument for the ‘creation’—most facile, naive articulation—of form.”³² They further contend that the vitality of abstraction is proved by “the decorative work of Matisse, Dufy, most tribal art [and] all decorative tradi-

tions in the West..."³³ One point of confusion resides in a pattern that is simply generated and one that is simplistic in pictorial experience. This issue does not disappear, moreover, if the number of terms is increased. To Kuspit's charge that "the complexity of detail is not the generative matrix of pattern but the ornamental elucidation of it,"³⁴ the artists reply: "We suggest the interesting factors of pattern lie precisely in how the fundamental grid is elaborated, not to mention the rich range of association which evolve from the choice of motifs."³⁵ But, whether simple or complex, pictorial conception may be facile and naive in execution or effect, so that complicating the painting through decoration may register as a simplistic tactic for introducing interest or richness into the visual experience. But similarly neither is decoration necessarily devoid of pictorial significance. Islamic designs are sophisticated thought forms whose primary purpose is spiritual, not decorative. Their enduring significance may be suggested by the logo for this journal, which is taken from a design by Durer after Leonardo's studies of Islamic design. That this elaborated knot strikes us as ornamental does not invalidate its strength as a thought form, or symbol, though the aura may be diminished through successive stylizations, not to mention through successive removal from cultural context.

Pattern painters expressed intentions also concern rectifying the "minor" status of the decorative arts. This change would occur as artists are inspired by the commonality of visual forms shared by the arts and sustained through tradition. Zakanitch's sentiment typifies this belief:

My involvement with flatness, overallness and large scale continues. Previously, I had been conditioned to believe that flatness and overallness were formalist in concept and I had forgotten they were also traditional. With the inclusion of new references, the structure and focus of my work has changed and is no longer only about itself, remote and removed from the rest of the world.³⁶

For Zakanitch, popular Americana suffices as tradition, offering flower, fruit and vegetable motifs, all rendered like cake icing in fields that may recall tea trays. Similarly, Carlson's wallpaper is a decoction of cake icing, Ree Morton's celastic decorative elements, and LeWitt's wall drawings. For Jaudon and Kozloff, tradition is rather more global and sacred. Following Stella example, Jaudon reinvents the interlace, with Celtic manuscript illumination to guide her. Kozloff, however, may conflate Islamic and Egyptian patterns into a single painting or work such sources into decorative installations of panels in fabric alternating with tiles. But no matter how complicated the composi-

tion, in all instances the artists maintain their modernist credentials by establishing the dominance of surface—the flat, taut continuum of the visual field. For them it is this confluence of decorative and abstract conventions that make art neither traditional nor vanguard but transformations of a timeless imagination. The implementation of this esthetic sometimes involves extreme claims for the validity of the decorative arts.

Aside from a biological justification of feminist imagery, the argument for a vocational continuity of decoration has also served feminist ideology. The decorative arts, especially those involving fabric, has traditionally defined much female participation in the arts. In the United States, sewing and needlework, while domestic chores, were also precious means of creative expression. Jean Lipman's survey of American decorative crafts quotes a Midwestern grandmother recalling her isolated life and commenting, "I would have lost my mind if I had not my quilts to do."³⁷ Quilting, idiosyncratic to the United States, is, by virtue of its pieced construction, especially rich in the personal fragments of the lives of the women who worked them. Once emblematic of female personal history, quilting, and the modernist form of piecework, collage, have become the pursuits of those who would remind us of woman's collective history.

Then, too, whenever social reform has surfaced influencing aesthetics, decorative arts have come to the fore, and women along with it, as, Linda Nochlin points out.³⁸ Notably, the Constructivist movement elevated women artists who brought textile design into the forefront of the avant-garde.³⁹ It is this legacy of traditional and vanguard involvement with fabric, as well as the fact that the structural basis of textile is the interlace, or grid, that some contemporary women claim gender possession over fabric, and, in effect, over the interlace itself. In this regard, pattern is not the effusive by-product of structure, but a trace of the integral structure, in a sense, an abstraction of its function.

Not in contention is the contiguity of women and the creation of decoration, but objections arise over the exclusivity of that domain. Examples of cultural refutation easily come to mind. Merely the fact that a male-dominated society produced the sacred Islamic designs that inspire some feminists' pattern painting refutes the female prerogative over pattern. Nor is there a consensus within the art community of what constitutes a feminist sensibility. Lucy Lippard has constructed a profile of female forms that some find "narrow" and inconsistent in definition,⁴⁰ while against all such attempts, Nochlin regards any determinations of female sensibility as "futile."⁴¹

For Kuspit, the feminist identification of pattern is an unconvincing attempt to rationalize a social role into an artistic style. Briefly put, his argument is that revivalism is untenable as a

vanguard esthetic when unquestioned.⁴² Imitating past behavior only perpetuates the cultural bondage they want to overhaul, and the preeminence accorded pattern, which inherently involves copying behavior, epitomizes the subservience and self-deprecation by which feminist pattern painters betray their enlightened intentions.⁴³

Doubtless, this is not the last word on how implementing a shift towards decorative arts might reform our attitude of the categorial superiority of abstraction. But this exchange is symptomatic of the difficulty some observers have in accepting the putative newness of the decorative tradition currently on view in pattern painting. If not entirely a lack of examination of its sources, than perhaps it is a limited or confused regard. An observation about Miriam Schapiro's art may further clarify this point. To explain the rationale behind Schapiro's femmage, Norma Broude writes that the donated or found fabric and traditional techniques they involve—sewing, embroidering, applique, quilting—are deliberately left untransformed to “reveal” them as they are.⁴⁴ The autonomy of the artist's femmage, then, is conveyed through the tactic of self-referentiality, which purports neutrality, but as critical response to instances of Pop art and Conceptual art has shown, an ironic valance may be attached to the art object carrying a stance of neutrality. With this in mind it becomes easier to understand that the revelation in Schapiro's work may not disclose an inevitable sanctity of motive.

The work remains equivocal on another level, moreover. The incorporation of genuine artifacts into a self-referential whole suggests the purpose of Schapiro's art is documentary and functions as an archive of collective personal achievement. In actuality, it is quasi-documentary and quasi-imaginative. Her collaged art does not exist as copies of norms as, for instance, the “theorems” of stenciled patterns by which 19th century American women made conventional still lifes, or the duplications of 20th century preference, the readymade or the mass-produced multiple. As skillful as they are, her works are not as ingenious or sensuous as wall hangings, and thereby not as decorative as they; or are they formally challenging, with a conception of collage linked to tradition by principle but visually untried and compelling in its own right. We have more respect for Alexandra Exter or Sonia Delaunay as a result of their leading tradition into the future than if they would be following it. A museological exhibition predominated by beautiful specimens of quilts might suffice as a fulfillment of the documentary mode. But otherwise an artist has to outflank Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, 1955, an androgynous form that is traditional yet revolutionary in its proposed role for a quilt as the decorative mediator between art and life.

The vitality of the decorative is currently being demonstrated not by the vociferous discussion about it that lends an aura of danger to the enterprise, but by the persistent and ever more daring activity taking place in an interdisciplinary fashion. Most pertinent to this review are the recent developments in theatre. Where once the stage sets were the visual accompaniment to drama they now determine it. Lessons from Russian revolutionary theatre and from performance issuing from Black Mountain College are being fruitfully employed by such contemporary theatre groups as Mabou Mines, which in the last decade created *The B-Beaver Animation*, dominated by a contraction to which Tina Girouard contributed decorative fabric. Or *Dressed Like An Egg*, an impressionistic biography of Colette employing costume elements by Ree Morton and flowered canopies that enclosed the actors in what might be properly called a theatre of decor. That Hockney's stage sets and costumes for the Metropolitan Opera's triple bill, *Parade*, became the decorative scaffold from which opera was hung is yet another example of the commitment to the decorative spirit.

Decoration seems too inclusive and fecund in practice or theory to be categorically dismissed as insufficient for artistic pursuit. More specifically, pattern, though by definition repeating, does not necessarily predict repetitious, or tiresome, results; nor in its complex forms does it necessarily precipitate visual busy-work. But for the decorative to be compelling as style, considerably more diligent attention will have to be applied to the assimilation of the principles of beauty and complexity than to the particular configurations they inspire. To the extent to which current decorative art indulges in superficial pictorial expression or simplistic *hommage* linking it to its formal sources, it will be experienced as representations of the notion of the decorative rather than its vital proof.

¹John Perreault, *Persistent Patterns* (New York: Andre Zarre Gallery, 1979).

²John Perreault, "Issues in Pattern Painting," *Artforum*, November 1977, p. 36.

³The artists invited were: Jonathan Andrews, Cynthia Carlson, Ellen Cibula, Jerry Clapsaddle, Jane Couch, Susan Fortang, Tina Girouard, Mary Grigoriadis, Rosalind Hodgkins, Valerie Jaudon, Richard Kalina, Gloria Klein, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Robin Lehrer, Kim MacConnel, Madeline Metz, Susan Michod, Tony Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Kendall Shaw, Arlene Slavin, Arnold Wechsler, Mario Yrissary, Robert Zakanitch.

⁴Yrissary supposedly coined the term pattern painting in 1975. Carrie Rickey, "Decoration, Ornament, Pattern and Utility: Four Tendencies in Search of a Movement," *Flash Art*, June 1979, p. 19.

⁵Amy Goldin, *Artform*, September 1975, p. 50.

⁶Perreault, *Artforum*, p. 33.

⁷Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of Easel Painting," *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 55.

⁸Harold Rosenberg, "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion," *The Anxious Object* (New York: The New American Library, 1969), p. 43.

⁹Pasadena Museum, 1968.

¹⁰Lawrence Alloway, *The Nation* (December 24, 1977), pp. 689-699, traces the lineage of pattern painting as the product of linear and painterly strands of Abstract Expressionism, modified by European geometric abstraction. See also his essay "Systemic Painting," *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968) for a detailed account of pattern painting's forebears.

¹¹Kenworth Moffett, "Noland," *Art International*, Summer 1973, p. 92. See this developed in *Kenneth Noland*, (New York: Abrams, 1977).

¹²Marcia Tucker, *The Structure of Color* (Whitney Museum, 1971), unpaginated introduction.

¹³When he embarked on pattern painting, Zakanitch changed the spelling of his name.

¹⁴*The Structure of Color*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁵Barbara Rose, "A Conversation with Gene Davis," *Artforum*, March 1971, quoted in Donald Wall, "The Striped Paintings of Gene Davis and Morris Louis," *Artforum*, December 1976, p. 112.

¹⁶Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Collier MacMillan, 1974), p. 19.

¹⁷Among the more notable museum exhibitions in New York at this time devoted to decorative artifacts were: "American Naive Painting of the 18th and 19th Centuries," Whitney Museum, 1969; "Art of Oceania, Africa and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art," Metropolitan Museum, 1969; "Nineteenth Century America," Metropolitan Museum, 1970; "African Textiles and the Decorative Arts," The Museum of Modern Art, 1972; and "The Flowering of American Folk Art," Whitney Museum, 1974.

¹⁸Rickey, *loc. cit.*, pp. 19-23.

¹⁹Clement Greenberg, *Arts*, December 1976, pp. 86-89. Extended discussion of Greenberg's view of decoration as it evinces successive phases of enfeebling good taste may be found in *Clement Greenberg*, by Donald B. Kuspit, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 57-86.

²⁰Greenberg, *Arts*, p. 88.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.* That Pollock may have approved of doing architectural decoration is suggested by Barbara Rose, in "Namuth's Photographs and the Pollock Myth, *Pollock Painting* (New York: Agrinde Publications, 1980).

²⁷Clement Greenberg, *Henri Matisse* (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 1973), unpaginated introduction.

²⁸*Arts*, p. 89.

- ²⁹Donald B. Kuspit, *Arts*, November 1979, pp. 124-126.
- ³⁰Robert Kushner and Kim MacConnel, *Arts*, January 1980, p. 28.
- ³¹*Ibid.*
- ³²Kuspit, *Arts*, p. 126.
- ³³Kushner, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁴Kuspit, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁵Kushner, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁶Rickey, *loc. cit.* p. 23.
- ³⁷Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art* (New York: Viking Press 1974), p. 250.
- ³⁸Linda Nochlin, "Women Artists in the 20th Century," *Studio*, May 1977, p. 166. See also Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 59-61.
- ³⁹*Ibid.* p. 167.
- ⁴⁰Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art and the Failure of Art Criticism," *Art Criticism*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1979, p. 61.
- ⁴¹Nochlin, *loc. cit.*, p. 165.
- ⁴²Kuspit, *loc. cit.*, p. 124.
- ⁴³Kuspit, *loc. cit.*
- ⁴⁴Norma Broude, "Miriam Shapiro and 'Femmege': Reflections on the Conflict between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth Century Art," *Arts*, February 1980, p. 85.

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