MORE FACTUAL REINTERPRETATIONS

> "Non-art," "anti-art," "non-art art," and "anti-art art" are useless. If someone says his work is art, it's art.
>
> —*Donald Judd*

There is no doubt that in calling Stella's work "visible art," Judd is uttering a judgment. He is evaluating, even praising the work. The question is: is this judgment aesthetic? To be honest, I don't believe that Judd would have denied that it is, or that it was. But in the context of the times, he could not have acknowledged it. It is a matter of consistency: his Greenbergian anti-Greenbergianism left him no choice other than to opt for modernism against formalism. Indeed, the terms of the alternative are set by the Greenbergian doctrine. Generic art is permissible, either because it is in fact interspecific—it allows for the traditions of both modernist painting and sculpture to put pressure on the artist's and the critic's taste, in which case a judgment of taste is called for, conveyed by the sentence "this is art"; such is the right branch of the alternative—or because anything is permitted and everything that is neither painting nor sculpture is encouraged. Once even a blank canvas can be called a picture, anything visible can be called art, in which case art has lost its aesthetic import and taste is not called for. The sentence "this is art" is a convention. Historical knowledge alone is required to make and judge art, some intellectual curiosity or interest for the "logic" of modernism, some strategic desire or interest to see it further extrapolated and tested on mere institutional grounds. Art fades into "art theory." Such is the left branch of the alternative. It is all too easy to see that minimal art and the movements that were to follow, conceptual art espe-

by the beginning of abstract art with, as an (almost immediate) consequence, of course, flatness and monochromy? I would see the disjunction take place in Delaunay especially, between the *Windows* and *The First Disk,* but the seeds had been planted by Seurat. See chapter 3.

cially, chose the left branch, expressed in a nutshell by Judd's most famous assertion from "Specific Objects": "A work needs only to be interesting."[53]

Donald Judd was too much of an artist to be really convinced of what he said there. And Greenberg was too intelligent not to have seen that the strategic extrapolation of the "logic" of taste pervades taste itself, and that it has played its provocative role with every significant leap in modernism. I believe that Judd and Greenberg could still have argued with each other. Things get more dogmatic with the epigones, Michael Fried and Joseph Kosuth. In view of their further development, it may be a little unfair to pit them against each other as mere epigones of Greenberg and Judd respectively, but it has the advantage of giving the debate additional clarity. In the mid-sixties, Fried was not yet the fine historian and phenomenologist of art he subsequently became. Although he claimed to have departed from Greenberg's essentialism, he was in a way more Greenbergian than Greenberg. His much praised and much attacked 1967 article, "Art and Objecthood" nevertheless still remains by far the best analysis done on minimal art at the time. Better than anyone else, Fried has sensed what threat minimalism posed to formalism, and his counter-attack is right on target.

Fried states the necessary link between formalism and modernism—that is, between the value judgment that puts a given work to the test of being compared to the best work of tradition and the very tendency of this tradition to identify itself with the testing of the conventions of its medium—in terms that are stronger and more doctrinaire, even, than Greenberg's:

> The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.[54]

---

53. Judd, "Specific Objects," p. 184.

54. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art,* p. 142; first published in *Artforum,* June 1967. The same argument can be found in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paint-

Although the generic value judgment expressed by the word "art" (or "art as art" or "art as such" or "good art as such")[55] is of course still possible and indeed required, it simply cannot be convincing outside the individual arts. The objectness (which Fried calls "objecthood") of the minimalist works (which he redubs "literalist") is acknowledged for what Judd claims it to be, neither painting nor sculpture; but for that very reason it is denied both its specificity and its aesthetic validity:

> It is as though objecthood alone can, in the present circumstances, secure something's identity, if not as non-art, at least as neither

---

ings," *Artforum*, November 1966. Commenting on this passage, Fried later added that "the conviction of quality or value is always elicited by putative paintings and sculptures and not by putative works of art as such." Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 223.

55. Let us remember that "art as such" and "good art as such" are not synonymous for Greenberg: formalism requires that the word "art" convey an aesthetic judgment, not that the judgment be positive, which is why, in his views, once the irreducible essence of painting has been revealed by the blank canvas, a shift of question occurs. A few lines after having said, in "After Abstract Expressionism," that "a stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one," Greenberg goes on to say, apropos Newman, Rothko, and Still: "The question now asked through their art is no longer what constitutes art, or the art of painting, as such, but what irreducibly constitutes good art as such." In a footnote from "Art and Objecthood," Fried takes issue with this: "But I would argue that what modernism has meant is that the two questions—What constitutes the art of painting? And what constitutes good painting?—are no longer separable; the first disappears, or increasingly tends to disappear, into the second" (p. 124). So that for Fried, "art as such" and "good art as such" are synonymous, though of course valid only for painting (or for sculpture), i.e., "within the individual arts." My own views on the question of "art" and "good art" are different from both Greenberg's and Fried's. Paraphrasing Fried, I would argue that what modernism has meant (notice the past tense in Fried's text as in mine) is that the two questions "what is painting?" and "what is good painting?" *were* not separable (the past tense is not in Fried).

> painting nor sculpture. . . . Here the question arises: What is it about objecthood as projected and hypostatized by the literalists that makes it, if only from the perspective of recent modernist painting, antithetical to art? The answer I want to propose is this: the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art.[56]

Fried's case against "literalism" is strong on the interpretive level, if not necessarily on the level of judgment. In calling the interspecificity of what falls in between painting and sculpture "theatre," he not only accounts for a number of phenomenological qualities of minimalist works, such as their "presence," their involvement of the beholder and their existence in duration; he also hints at an explanation of the new practices that came about in the wake of minimal art and, most significantly, of the new names such as "Performance art" and "Installation art" that they secured for themselves.[57] Interpretation aside, Fried's judgment, when he dumps minimal art into the limbo of "theatre" or non-art, is in line with most non-art judgments uttered—mostly by academic critics—throughout the history of modernism since Courbet: it is a refusal to judge aesthetically, and it means "literalism doesn't even deserve to be called art." But Fried is not an academic critic like those who a priori refuse to take into account anything that doesn't seem to fit the fixed rules of a genre. Like Greenberg, even more than Greenberg, he is far too aware that modernism has ceaselessly put those "fixed" rules to the test of aesthetic experience, and in so doing, has abandoned or displaced them. And like Greenberg, he feels obliged to show that he is able to select a counterexample which, though situated in the same generic no-man's-land as the rest of literalism, would deserve to be called art.

---

56. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 125.

57. See my essay, "Performance Here and Now: Minimal Art, a Plea for a New Genre of Theatre," *Open Letter* (Toronto), no. 5–6 (Summer–Fall 1983): 234–260.

Among the happy few is Anthony Caro again. Anne Truitt is not mentioned, but a particular work by Jules Olitski receives a great deal of attention. Entitled *Bunga 45,* it is one of the first sculptures ever made by Olitski, in 1967, and consists of a cluster of ten-foot-high aluminum tubes spray-painted in the same not quite monochrome manner as his canvases. It is highly probable that Olitski, if not induced, was at least encouraged by Greenberg to move into sculpture, especially this kind of sculpture, which seems really contrived to be formalism's response to minimalism. At any rate, *Bunga 45* is fairly unique in the production of Olitski, who shortly after went to work in Caro's studio in England and fell strongly under his influence. Here is Fried's comment on *Bunga:*

> It amounts to something far more than an attempt simply to make or "translate" his paintings into sculptures, namely, an attempt to establish surface—the surface, so to speak, of *painting*—as a medium for sculpture. The use of tubes, each of which one sees, incredibly, as *flat*—that is, flat but *rolled*—makes *Bunga's* surface more like that of a painting than like that of an object: like painting, and unlike both ordinary objects and other sculpture, *Bunga* is *all* surface. And of course what declares or establishes that surface is color, Olitski's sprayed color.[58]

The tone, emphasis and argument of this paragraph betray this piece of writing as a paragon—or a cliché—of formalist criticism. As with Greenberg's defense of Truitt, color and subtle polychromy (described at length a little earlier in the text), to which Fried has added the rather farfetched category of "rolled flatness," are invoked to ensure that *Bunga* be saved from the literalist limbo. Not that Fried's description of his aesthetic experience is wrong or unfaithful. But in electing Olitski, he is unfair to what he excludes. After all, Fried could have looked at Chamberlain in very much the same way he looked at Olitski (indeed

58. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 139.

he was tempted to), instead of resting his estimation of Chamberlain's work on a rationale that is neither his own nor the artist's but that of Judd. Fried never challenges the paradoxical claim that Judd had made for the works he advocated as "specific objects." He never underlines that Chamberlain's work, or Judd's for that matter, could be seen as both painting and sculpture rather than as neither. No, they are "theatre" or "non-art." Rather than using his own eyes as formalism recommends, Fried is taking Judd at his own word. In a way, though, he is right, and his reasons have less to do with opting for the exclusive rather than the inclusive status given the indeterminate domain straddling painting and sculpture, than with the invitation, handed out by Judd, not to judge his (or Chamberlain's) work aesthetically. What is allegedly new in the sixties (in fact, it is as old as dadaism) is a situation where the refusal to judge aesthetically—a tactic typical of academic critics since Courbet—is claimed by the artists themselves so that, as Fried says, "what non-art means today, and has meant for several years, is fairly specific."[59] There is thus a specificity of non-art (i.e., of non-painting/non-sculpture) that Fried is forced to recognize yet rejects, not by way of a concrete aesthetic judgment, but in the name of aesthetic judgment at large—and thus in the name of art, generically speaking. Hence his mockery of Judd's assertion, "A work needs only to be interesting":

> Judd himself has as much as acknowledged the problematic character of the literalist enterprise by his claim "A work needs only to be interesting." For Judd, as for the literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) interest. . . . Literalist work is often condemned—when it is condemned—for being boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.[60]

To which, of course, Judd replied:

59. Ibid., p. 123.
60. Ibid., p. 142.

> I was especially irked by Fried's ignorant misinterpretation of my use of the word "interesting." I obviously use it in a particular way but Fried reduces it to the cliché "merely interesting."[61]

Although somewhat unfair to Judd, whose understanding of the works made by Stella, Flavin, or himself clings to "visible art," Fried's charge against the "merely interesting" is certainly valid when directed at the productions of conceptual art, especially at those with an explicit theoretical claim. But it is only valid, the conceptualists argue, within the formalist discourse that the theory of conceptualism precisely claims to invalidate and that its practice seeks as much as possible to render without object. Under Judd's strong influence, Joseph Kosuth issued in 1969 a widely publicized manifesto entitled "Art after Philosophy," in which no effort was spared to prevent, not only the aesthetic judgment in the formalist sense, but also the judgment of "interest" or "interestedness" as sought by Donald Judd. Beyond taste and interest alike, there remains only a circular proposition to define art (as art):

> A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori.[62]

Therefore, specific formal qualities such as the flatness of a painting or the holistic Gestalt and obdurate materials of a "specific object" are superfluous. Ideally, one would have to dispense with the object altogether in order to foreclose the possibility of any judgment other than logical or conceptual:

---

61. Donald Judd, "Complaints: Part I," in *Complete Writings*, p. 198; first published in *Studio International*, April 1969.

62. Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy I and II," in *Idea Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 83; first published in *Studio International*, October and November 1969.

> It comes as no surprise that the art with the least fixed morphology is the example from which we decipher the nature of the general term art.[63]

Consequently, Kosuth claims for art a condition beyond objectness, linguistic in character:

> Works of art are analytic propositions. . . . One begins to realize that art's "art condition" is a conceptual state. . . . In other words, the propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character—that is, they do not describe the behavior of physical or even mental objects; they express definitions of art, or the formal consequences of definitions of art. Accordingly, we can say that art operates on a logic.[64]

Since art is a tautology, there is no specificity to this logic, neither in terms of a medium nor in terms of a new, specific "area of competence" severed from, and added to, those of painting and sculpture. Kosuth's conceptualism allows only for generic art:

> Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. . . . That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art.[65]

This is why the "kind of art" called painting ought to be banished, made illegitimate and obsolete by the new generic conceptual art. But the more radically

63. Ibid., p. 89.
64. Ibid., pp. 83, 84.
65. Ibid., p. 79.

the generic is severed from the specific, the more insidiously the link with modernist painting, especially with Stella's black and aluminum canvases, creeps back into the text, in the shape of a disavowal akin to that of Judd:

> Johns and Reinhardt are probably the last two painters that were legitimate *artists* as well.[66]

To which he adds, in an appending footnote that has the ring of a Freudian slip:

> And Stella too, of course. But Stella's work, which was greatly weakened by being painting, was made obsolete very quickly by Judd and others.

Even more than his "theory," Kosuth's disavowal makes it clear that conceptual art was not a linear development from minimal art but an even more radical reworking of the aporia, born out of the question of the monochrome, that forced many artists who had been brought up on the Greenbergian doctrine and who, with or without reason, felt that they could not possibly go on painting after Stella, to separate modernism and formalism and to bank on the logic of the former the better to refute the latter. In "Art after Philosophy," Kosuth relentlessly attacks Greenberg, whom he accuses of being "the critic of taste," which is true, and rejects his formalism, which he accuses of accepting "a definition of art resting solely on morphological grounds," which is unfair, since Greenberg has no definition of art. Kosuth, in fact, took his own "definition" of art as tautology from yet another painter of quasi-monochromes, Ad Reinhardt, who, with Johns, was the last painter whom he was ready to recognize as being also a legitimate artist. But he took it from Reinhardt's writings and attitude more than from his paintings. And one imagines that Reinhardt's "*art in art*" as "*art as art*" so easily became Kosuth's "*art as idea as idea*" because

66. Ibid., p. 100.

drawing from a text allowed him to bypass the pictures. The denial of the specific is as obvious vis-à-vis Reinhardt as it is vis-à-vis Stella.

Conceptual art is thus another response to the same double bind that every would-be painter must have felt in New York in the early sixties, standing in front of Stella's black paintings with *Art and Culture* in his pocket. With the exception of the members of the English group Art-Language, in the early seventies Kosuth was the only proponent of hard-core conceptual art, the kind he himself called TCA (theoretical conceptual art), as opposed to the more poetic brand he disparagingly called SCA (stylistic conceptual art). Yet even among the representatives of conceptual art who didn't share Kosuth's theoretical inclinations, the number of ex-painters is remarkable. Between 1966 and 1968, in New York and elsewhere, Robert Huot, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Jan Dibbets, Mel Ramsden, Lawrence Weiner, and others produced their "ultimate" monochrome or acted out a variation on the blank canvas before they switched to conceptual art. Their conceptual works are intelligible and can be appraised only in reference to the abandoned craft and medium of painting, which, unfortunately for those artists, is precisely what they sought to escape, since they predicated their works on the "logic" of modernist painting while refusing to let them be aesthetically evaluated with respect to painting. Sometimes, as in Weiner's distinction between his *Specific Statements* and his *General Statements*, explicit reference was made to the problem which overdetermined the art of the sixties: the passage from the specific to the generic. This passage was always interpreted in terms of a shift from formal experimentation to conceptual inquiry. It was never understood for what it actually was. Up to the present, generic art—an appellation mostly suited to the recent trends exemplified by Allan McCollum, Haim Steinbach, or Jeff Koons, all of whom produce "generic objects"—has dragged in its wake an unresolved quarrel with Greenbergian formalism.

Although Kosuth can hardly be taken as a spokesman for all conceptual artists, his 1969 manifesto "Art after Philosophy" is exemplary of the state of this unresolved quarrel. Irksome and self-serving as it is, his reasoning is in some way flawless, carrying Judd's escape from formalism to its logical extreme. "The

intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant," which Greenberg calls modernism, has come full circle in Kosuth's tautology. Of this absurd triumph of modernism over formalism, one might think that Kosuth's ultimate conclusion would be to posit the end of art. Not at all. Instead, it proclaims "the end of philosophy and the beginning of art."[67] This can only mean two things—that there is an absolute "separation between aesthetics and art,"[68] art now being identified with "art theory" while aesthetics is relegated to the realm of taste; and that there is an absolute historical beginning to this separation:

> The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity. . . . With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. . . . All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.[69]

A CRITICAL REINTERPRETATION

> There is a superficial similarity between modernist painting and Dada in one important respect: namely, that just as modernist painting has enabled one to see a blank canvas . . . as a picture, Dada and Neo-Dada have equipped one to treat virtually any object as a work of art—though it is far from clear exactly what this means.
>
> —*Michael Fried*

67. Ibid., p. 73.
68. Ibid., p. 75.
69. Ibid., p. 80.

Here, with the last of Kosuth's statements, we should pause, wonder and meditate. Duchamp's first unassisted readymade is the *Bottle Rack,* dated 1914. Out of what strange, fifty-five year long torpor has Kosuth's "discovery" awakened the artworld? If it is true that all art after Duchamp is conceptual in nature, why did this revelation come to the surface only "in artistic endeavor since Abstract expressionism, after which work began to appeal to the *logic of modernism* for art status rather than appealing to the tradition of Western painting for art status"?[70] Was it not precisely in an article entitled "After Abstract Expressionism" that Greenberg voiced his concern about work that could "appeal to the logic of modernism for art status rather than appealing to the tradition of Western painting for art" *quality*? And is it not the case that the thin line that separates logic and tradition, or status and quality, might be the one that Greenberg, confronted in October 1962 with the hypothetical case of the blank canvas, drew and refused to cross, the line between a picture and a successful one? Finally, is it not clear that this hypothetical case did not fall from the heaven of "art theory" but that its plausibility was prompted by the latest avatars of modernist painting, Stella's black and aluminum canvases in particular? Well, the blank canvas is a readymade. Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted readymade had to wait fifty-five years before it gave Kosuth the "revelation" that all art is conceptual in nature, because it is only after Abstract expressionism, and in the particular context that spawned the controversy between "Modernist Painting" and minimalism, that it reappeared from within the history of modernist painting under the guise of an unpainted canvas. Kosuth's contention that Duchamp's readymade "changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function" is ludicrous, as if a single artist could change the "nature of art." The readymade has of course demonstrated no such thing. But Kosuth's contention is a symptom, and one that is apt to give us a clue to the proper reinterpretation of the specific/generic problem which is overdetermining the art of the last thirty years.

70. Joseph Kosuth, "1975," *The Fox,* no. 2 (1975): 90.

Unlike Duchamp's bottlerack or urinal, the blank canvas is a *specific* ready-made. It is a manufactured product, new and unused, as are all of Duchamp's unassisted readymades, but it is one that you can find at the artists' supply store, not at the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville where Duchamp bought the bottlerack. Even before it is touched by the painter's hand, it already belongs to the tradition of painting, or rather, to a particular tradition—that of Western painting since the Renaissance. While it is prepared to receive the traces of the painter's brush and is thus no more than a support, as part of the artist's materials, it has already incorporated, ready-made, the one convention established during the Renaissance—that one is to paint on a stretched canvas. To call it a picture, "though not necessarily a successful one," means to acknowledge the presence of that historical convention in an otherwise mundane commodity. But to call it a picture also means, of course, to recognize that this convention is the only one left from a five-hundred-year-old tradition. Greenberg, who knew this all too well, deemed this convention to be essential. As if in a mirror image to Kosuth's contention that Duchamp's readymades have changed the nature of art, there was already Greenberg's contention that the blank canvas had revealed the nature of painting. Since Duchamp avoided actualizing the blank canvas, Kosuth doesn't see its ready-made "nature," and Greenberg doesn't see the change in "nature" that the vantage point of the readymade imprints on it. The ready-made canvas is at once their common blind spot and the missing link between them.

But it needs to be reinterpreted. Greenberg sees flatness and its delimitation, as they are incorporated in the ready-made canvas, as an essential convention. While recognized as a mere convention, it is also deemed irreducible, irremovable, something you couldn't abandon without altering the very nature of the medium. Now, that one should paint on a piece of cloth braced to a wooden stretcher is a prescription with no ontological privilege. A convention it is, but it is no more of an essential convention than the one it gradually replaced, which prescribed painting on a wooden board. Not until the Renaissance did easel painting substitute for the retable and open a new category of *specific objects*, "limited in extension and different from a wall," as Greenberg

said. Not until the Renaissance, when a painting began to be seen as an illusionistic window, did it detach itself from the wall, distinguish itself from the mural, gain mobility and autonomy from architecture and become "a plane one or two inches in front of another plane, the wall, and parallel to it," as Judd said. There is nothing essential to this plane's flatness, nothing essential either to its whiteness. The easel painting may share its rigid flatness with the retable and with the wall; it doesn't share it with the baroque cupola, the Greek vase, or the Chinese scroll. And the painter's virgin canvas shares its whiteness with the writer's blank page more than it does with other artifacts belonging to its own tradition, linen fabric included. The Venetians didn't gesso their canvases; they used a red undercoat. Not only are all conventions historical and not ontological, specific in the sense that they are embedded in a tradition rather than in the nature of the medium, but the one convention that modernism has not relinquished, the one that has heightened its purist sensibility for the surface so much, owes more to Mallarmé and the symbolist crossover of painting and poetry than it does to its own history since the Renaissance. After all, despite Lessing's Laocoon and Greenberg's "Newer Laocoon," modernism didn't succeed in doing away with the *ut pictura poesis:* kicked out of the illusionistic window, it crept back into the medium itself when painters began to take it for the subject matter of their practice.

Duchamp didn't actualize the blank canvas. Nor did he actualize the tube of paint, which is, as we have seen, the underground paradigm for all his readymades.[71] He abandoned painting in 1912 and switched to art. He abruptly jumped from the specific to the generic. Or so the story goes, both for all those—artists, critics, and art historians—who have applauded the invention of the readymade and seen in it new avenues and unprecedented freedom for art, and for those who have deplored it and read it as a symptom of a disastrous slackening in the standards of taste. Neither group has seriously asked what it meant to jump from the specific to the generic; neither has considered what

71. See chapter 3.

had made it possible; neither has devoted careful attention to its timing in history and its various repetitions. But the switch from the specific to the generic is not at all self-evident. That one could be an artist without being a painter (or a sculptor or a musician or a poet . . .) is indeed unprecedented and should be startling to everyone, even today. How did Duchamp get away with it? is one question. Why? is another. Did he deserve it? is still another. The fact is that he succeeded, and the presumption is that the conditions were ripe. Another fact is that his success is rooted in a failure, partly personal, partly general, but on both counts extremely significant and made significant by the acute intelligence and irony of his work. It sheds light, for example, on this: the passage from the specific to the generic is never one for which sheer "art theory" can account; it takes an investigation that probes the existential and the historical at the same time. You may become an artist without being a painter, but hardly without having been one. As we have seen, this holds true for all minimal and conceptual artists. Fifty years after the readymade, they had to reenact a certain rite of passage, which Duchamp was the first to accomplish. Similarly, something minimal or conceptual beyond the blank canvas can be art without being a picture, but not without the blank canvas having been one—which is why, ironically, the minimalists and the conceptualists sought their authority to do generic art from Greenberg's 1962 article, where he set out to posit the blank canvas as the embodiment of painting's ultimate specificity, as if warning not to transgress it.

The blank canvas is not a picture; it was one. It was a picture, a viable would-be picture, a potential picture, in the days when modernist painting had its tradition ahead of itself. For the modernist sensibility striving for purism and attuned to the "elements" of painting, the blank canvas's potential to become a painting had an extraordinary aesthetic appeal. From Malevich to Mondrian, there is not one pioneer of abstract painting who didn't respond to the appeal of the bare canvas. They were breaking with the past, relinquishing the strongest of all "expendable conventions," namely figuration; they also thought of themselves as laying down the basic alphabet of a future culture. Although none of them actualized the blank canvas, they sensed its promise. Kandinsky, for example, in 1913, praised "this pure canvas that is itself as beautiful as a picture."

This sensibility accompanied the history of modernist painting all along. When, as early as 1940, Greenberg spoke of "the pristine flatness of the stretched canvas," he was still surrendering to its magnetic appeal.[72] In fact it is the Mallarmean seduction of the virgin canvas that is the secret center of convergence of modernism as "self-critical tendency" with formalism as "tropism towards aesthetic value as such." And of course, it could keep this attractive power only as long as it was itself taboo. With each convention that proved "expendable," modernist painting came closer to actualizing the blank canvas. But the closer its actualization, the thinner its capacity to promise a future. By 1962 this actualization seemed imminent, and so did the end of modernist painting.[73] In

72. Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," p. 36.

73. One wonders in retrospect whether, when writing "American-Type Painting" (1955–1958), Greenberg was not displaying an artificial overconfidence in the supply of "expendable conventions" that modernist painting had at its disposal. Perhaps it is the rather propagandistic overtone of this text, obviously written to sum up the achievements of American Abstract expressionism in the face of the then still dominant French art, that led him to silence the pessimism that is after all at the root of his conception of modernist painting. The "end of modernist painting" which he must have feared in 1962, when facing the imminent actualizing of the blank canvas, seems to me to have more to do with a return of this repressed pessimism than with a linear escalation in the actual history of modernist painting. To remind the reader that the appeal of the blank canvas was from the very outset haunted by the apocalyptic prospect of the end of painting, let me quote Barnettt Newman twice: "The artist must start, like God, with chaos, the void: with blank color, no forms, textures or details" (quoted in Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971], p. 56); and "Painting was dead a quarter of a century before God even realized it existed" (quoted in French by Barbara Rose, "Jackson Pollock et l'art américain," in *Jackson Pollock* [Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982], p. 18). As Yve-Alain Bois said in a very thorough article entitled "Painting: The Task of Mourning": "The pure beginning, the liberation of tradition, the 'zero degree' which was searched for by the first generation of abstract painters could not but function as an omen of the end" (in *Endgame, Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* [Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986], p. 30; this essay is reprinted in *Painting as Model*).

calling the blank canvas a picture, "though not necessarily a successful one," Greenberg anticipated its imminent realization. He didn't actualize it; he legitimized it instead and in so doing made its actualization futile. He would probably have been very surprised to learn that he was joining hands with Duchamp on this issue.

In Greenberg's retrospective account, reinterpreted via Duchamp, the history of modernist painting has, at the same time, both fulfilled and exhausted the promises of the blank canvas. In Kandinsky's eyes, it *was* a picture in 1914. It meant that on this tabula rasa a future abstract language called *Malerei* was going to be erected. In Greenberg's eyes, it *is* a picture in 1962. It means that modernist painting has finally surrendered to its essence, to its *being,* in the present participle. But seen through Duchamp's eyes, the blank canvas *will have been* a picture, for in 1914 it was and in 1962 still is a *readymade,* in the past participle—a picture to be made and yet already made. It will have been the picture that Kandinsky saw, potential and promising, and the one that Greenberg sees, finished even before it gets started. For it was ready-made as early as 1914, the year of the first readymade, and would become a finished picture only in 1962, when Greenberg legitimized it. One can apply to the theme of the virgin canvas (between *Vierge* and *Mariée,* there has to be *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée*) the same, incredibly subtle treatment which Duchamp has applied to the theme of the tube of paint. One would then see in it the same "avant-garde melancholy"[74] with which, in 1914, again, speaking as if in retrospective anticipation of the "possibility of several tubes of paint becoming

74. I used this expression in an unpublished paper on Manet delivered at the 1984 College Art Association convention in Toronto in order to describe the dialectic of retrospective anticipation and anticipated retrospection in avant-garde art. I was speaking of the veil of melancholy in the eyes of Victorine—or Olympia: "It says: when you'll see me from where you are, there in 1984, I'll be dead for a long time. What you'll see in my eyes is the anticipation of my own death and the awareness that I have to look ahead into a future that I'll never inhabit, so that you'll be able to see me stare at you. And it also says: I still see in your eyes, your gaze only has meaning insofar as it is locked in mine and accepts the burden of looking

a Seurat," he posited the "has-been" as a "would-be" painter.[75] Seurat had been dead for more than twenty years and, in that time span, abstract painting had sprung out of his tubes, when Kupka and Delaunay "enlarged his pointilism in planes by color." In the same time span the abstract painters, and Duchamp himself in *Mariée* (his last canvas before the readymades), had raped the virgin canvas. Seurat's potential had been exploited and the blank canvas's promises were exhausted. How could you paint after that? While modernist painting followed its course, still inexorably attracted by the "pristine flatness of the stretched canvas," Duchamp quietly stopped painting, reserving the possibility of picking up his brushes again some day and of painting again, but *on glass*. And it is as though he told himself, in anticipated retrospection: "I shall have been a painter, therefore I am an artist." He did a few readymades and carefully refrained from doing any *specific* ones: neither tubes of paint nor blank canvases. Just as the tubes of paint had to remain sealed so as to retain their potential, just as the white canvas had to stay virgin so as to retain its promise, so the link between the specific and the generic had to be concealed in melancholy and humor, by way of a pun on *Peigne,* for example. Duchamp was simply waiting for 1962 to arrive, when a blank canvas not only could, but had to be called a picture, "though not necessarily a successful one."

Duchamp's extreme intelligence and acute sensitivity in not actualizing the blank canvas is echoed and, if properly interpreted, accounted for, in and by Greenberg's refusal to cross the thin line between a picture and a successful one. In order to call a blank canvas a picture, not an object or a piece of the artist's material, you need to "see" it as art. But only if your eye is trained and acquainted with the whole history of modernist painting down to Stella and Reinhardt to you "see" it as art.[76] This then means that you judge it to be art,

---

back upon the time-span that separates us, so that what you'll see in my eyes is my own future, still promising, yet accomplished. History undefeated, but disillusioned."

75. See chapter 3.

76. Of course there is another possibility. You can be a total philistine and still see the blank canvas as art provided you are informed of the latest trends. This is of course what Greenberg

involuntarily, in accordance with the strictest requirements of formalism. What you do is intuitively apprehend the blank canvas's generic *content,* the one that is, so to speak, perpendicular to its specific *form*. To call a ready-made canvas a picture thus requires, and indeed utters, an aesthetic judgment. It is only liminally a positive judgment, however, because it is virtually impossible to tell whether what you value is the thing you are supposedly beholding or the tradition that has made this thing a plausible candidate for aesthetic judgment. (The question is of course open as to whether this is not always the case with "advanced" modernist art at the very moment when its "advance" verges on the far-out and challenges aesthetic judgment.) To go beyond this liminal judgment and to call the ready-made canvas a successful picture would entail an interpretation in terms that Kandinsky or avant-gardistic art historians such as Herbert Read might have endorsed, but not Greenberg. You would have to sense either its liberating potential or its provocative "anti-art" value, or both. Yet to call it unsuccessful would entail a disavowal of the aesthetic pressure that the series of surrenders constituting the history of modernist painting had built up. It would have a retroactive effect on what appears, but only in retrospect, as the "logic" of modernism. (The confusion between retroactive and retrospective accounts for much of the hasty revisionism going on under the name of postmodernism.) It is thus essential to Greenberg's modernism and formalism that he should walk the thin line between a picture and a successful (or unsuccessful) one, and that he should suspend his judgment on the hypothetical case of the blank canvas, leaving it in its liminal, nominal state. Had the verdict fallen, whether positive or negative, it would have been final, if due only to the fact that when it is possible to aesthetically judge a hypothetical case—and it is perfectly feasible with the blank canvas; you don't need to see it (although, again, you would need to have seen one)—then a norm is set that is inescapable. The critic judging the blank canvas as successful would have been equivalent to an artist actualizing it.

dreaded, and rightly so. But it can hardly apply to his own acknowledgment of the blank canvas.

I find it extremely striking that, to my knowledge at least, there is not one minimal or conceptual artist who actualized the blank canvas per se. As if taking their clue from Stella's hollowed-out canvases, some stripped the wall of its "expendable conventions," either treating the painted canvas as a pointer or removing the canvas in the process: Robert Barry delimited an empty area on the wall with four tiny stretched and painted canvases, while one of Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* proposed "a 36″ × 36″ removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wall board from a wall." Some, perhaps carrying Rodchenko's red, yellow, and blue triptych to the point where color was drained from the monochrome, recorded their abandonment of painting in some object nominally referring to the medium: Jan Dibbets stacked a series of empty canvases and called the resulting assemblage *My Last Painting,* a gesture that Marcel Broodthaers (who had not been a painter but a poet) later parodied and referred to the nostalgia for the Mallarmean ideal. Some went from painting to concept via the painted word: under the title *Secret Painting,* Art & Language did a black square monochrome accompanied by a photostat stating: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist." John Baldessari, in a very Duchampian move, had a sign painter inscribe sentences such as "Everything is purged from this painting but art" on gessoed canvases, while Gene Beery did very similar *Word Paintings* bearing humorous phrases such as "Sorry this painting temporarily out of style." The closest someone ever got to the straight blank canvas was an early piece by Michael Asher, which was actually an unpainted square piece of canvas braced to a stretcher; but the stretcher was beveled, bringing the work closer to a "specific object" than to a painting. Besides, the artist never showed it, considering it as a student's attempt at dealing with the issues which were then very much in the air for those artists trying to move beyond the formalism/minimalism alternative. As far as I know, nobody did the ready-made canvas, and just that. Many of these artists made it a point of leaving painting behind and some of them wanted to show their scorn for formalism. Yet it is as if they dared not transgress this ultimate taboo. They went beyond the blank canvas, into real space or the linguistic realm; they acted out a

variation on the theme of the ready-made canvas; but they avoided tackling the theme head on. They were probably aware that it would have been nothing but a bland repetition of Duchamp's gesture. Perhaps they even feared that such a move would have appeared less radical than Duchamp's. I suspect that the real reason was that they would have proffered an object that would have been vulnerable to a formalist judgment. Whether they wanted to or not, they would have claimed that an unpainted canvas is a successful picture, in other words a viable painting. They would have fulfilled their wish, no doubt, to turn the art of painting into a process of ideation aiming at generic art-status (or at specific art-status in Judd's sense, that is, art qualified as "minimal" or "conceptual"). Yet because the blank canvas remains specific in Greenberg's sense, they would also have invited the quality judgment that would call it art as a successful—or unsuccessful—painting. (In more psychological terms: they would have exposed their impotence as painters.) This is why the blank canvas had to remain hypothetical. These artists sought to pursue modernism—modernist art, not modernist painting—beyond the threshold of the blank canvas, while seeking to halt formalism—the requirement of aesthetic judgment—on that very threshold. They chose the left branch of the alternative set by Greenberg.

Of course, there was a lot of wishful thinking in this. It didn't succeed in intimidating Greenberg and other formalist critics or in preventing them from saying out loud that a lot of minimal and conceptual art is simply bad art. But in so doing the formalist critics, in the course of their everyday practice, have also jumped the threshold of the blank canvas, like the artists. And like the artists, they had very good reasons for doing so, for it is impossible to stay with the kind of judgment that led Greenberg to yield to the blank canvas and to admit that it be called a picture, at least not on the grounds of taste: such a judgment needs to stay poised on the *infra thin* line between a successful and an unsuccessful picture; at the same time it cannot avoid being "shaped" in the form of an inevitable either/or which would make its outcome fall on either side of the line. This might be a very Duchampian definition of aesthetic choice, but one for which formalism is definitely not prepared. Rosalind Krauss, who also contributed a discussion of the blank canvas as part of her interpreta-

tion of Olitski's residual illusionism, stated the problem the way a formalist critic would perceive it very clearly:

> Within the limits of its rectangular field, a blank canvas presents a viewer with two (mutually exclusive) inherent conditions or properties. The first involves its physical presence which the viewer acknowledges when he sees the literal flatness of its surface. The second is a perceptual property—equally a condition or aspect of the canvas—and that is the apparent opening up of an infinitely penetrable depth behind that surface. In looking at a blank canvas, one can *either* see its flatness (by identifying its flatness as the surface of an object, impenetrable and unyielding like the surface of any object), *or* one can see its nascent space. The blank canvas's either/or is like the either/or of a Gestalt puzzle: one sees it now as a rabbit or now as a duck; it is impossible to see it as both at the same time. In this situation the alternate and conflicting claims of apparent depth or literal flatness can neither be adjucated nor unified. The blank canvas cannot make one present through the coherence of the other. The fact that one sees this doubleness is merely a function of perception. These two irrevocable claims are given with eyesight itself.[77]

Krauss, who was still very much struggling with Greenbergian criticism when she wrote this piece, in 1968, failed to see the Duchampian implications of the impossible dilemma raised by the blank canvas. (She might, now.) Its implications for formalism, though, are in her text, if only implicitly: either you see the blank canvas's "nascent space," and then it might be a picture, or you don't, and then it's not art. The either/or is not an aesthetic choice but a mere perceptual mechanism that involves no aesthetic experience, no feeling, no verdict of

77. Krauss, "On Frontality," p. 42.

taste. However, it forces an aesthetic decision: either a picture, or non-art. A judgment has taken place, which I hesitate to call an experience because it is suspended between two experiences, posed on the infra thin line between either and or, and characterized by the impossibility of choosing. (Could it be that the rabbit/duck alternative inherent in the perception of a blank canvas provides us with yet another *allegorical appearance* of *l'impossibilité du fer?*) Anyway, the fact that Krauss discussed the blank canvas, the fact that Greenberg had to surrender to the blank canvas in order to call it a picture, the fact that he was able to write that "art turns out to be inescapable by now for anyone dealing with a flat surface, even if it is mostly bad art," are all obvious symptoms that "something" aesthetic has occurred. Despite Greenberg's conviction that "when no aesthetic value judgment, no verdict of taste, is there, then art isn't there either, it's as simple as that," his own suspended judgment on the blank canvas demonstrates that the matter is not simple at all. Just as actualizing the blank canvas seems to have been taboo for the artists, so drawing the consequences of the blank canvas's plausibility for aesthetics seems to have been taboo for Greenberg (and for Krauss). The modernist and antiformalist artists who went beyond the blank canvas but bypassed it chose the left branch of the alternative set by Greenberg. He himself chose the right branch when he allowed for a nonmodernist hybrid of painting and sculpture in order to save formalism; but he bypassed the blank canvas too. Thus, the consequences of the right branch of the alternative are worth considering, on a doctrinal level, when applied to the case of the blank canvas. These consequences are hypothetical, as is the blank canvas itself: what if formalism were allowed to pass the threshold of the ready-made canvas by calling it successful, while modernism would halt there? In a very interesting remark on Greenberg's paragraph on the bare canvas, Michael Fried has envisaged precisely these consequences, heretical as they may be for formalism:

> It is not quite enough to say that a bare canvas tacked to a wall is not "necessarily" a successful picture; it would, I think, be more accurate to say that it is not *conceivably* one. It may be countered

> that future circumstances might be such as to *make* it a successful painting; but I would argue that, for that to happen, the enterprise of painting would have to change so drastically that nothing more than the name would remain.[78]

Must we be grateful that, until now, no "future circumstance" has occurred that would make a bare canvas a successful painting? Are we so sure that such a circumstance cannot be anticipated at this point? Is it not what the likes of Peter Halley and Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe would like to see established, perhaps in spite of themselves? With an eye on her previous work, can we not extrapolate the "logic" of Sherrie Levine to the point where the unpainted painting is the predictable end of the line?[79] The blank canvas is once again in sight and, inasmuch as blind predictions are not foolish, there is nothing, this time, that upholds an a priori rejection of its putative success. Yes, a successful, even a convincing blank canvas is plausible, as a would-be painting that has come full circle, having recycled modernism, from Kandinsky to Greenberg and back, through Duchamp. Indeed, Fried's "future circumstance" has already

78. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 123 n. 4. I have actually quoted a slightly modified version of this note, as it is taken up again in Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works," p. 223. I believe that the unstated and underlying reason why a successful blank canvas is inconceivable for Fried is that it is not meant to be beheld. It would be the ultimate in "absorption" and "theatricality" at once. If my surmise is correct, then I can anticipate a few strong objections on Fried's part to the last part of my essay, and I agree with him in advance that they would be tough. For Duchamp's readymades are not meant to be beheld either, especially in Fried's sense of "to behold." To engage in a discussion on this, I would have to draw in the issue of reproducibility and of the particular enunciative regime imposed on all works of art by the museum-without-walls. See chapter 7.

79. I am happy to say that I was wrong when I wrote this. Sherrie Levine's subsequent work did not grab for the predictable but, instead, turned toward Duchamp for references that the artist succeeded in making into works of art in their own right.

happened: it was the invention of the readymade. Toward the end of 1912 Duchamp abandoned painting and, in 1914, he put this abandonment on the record and gave it the shape of a ready-made bottlerack. That very same year, he scribbled on a piece of paper: *A kind of pictorial Nominalism (Control).* In 1916 he chose a small iron comb as a readymade. Its name (*Peigne*) put the name of painting, in turn, on the record, by way of a pun on the subjunctive of the verb *peindre,* a verbal mode which, in French, also acts as a weak, hypothetical, and melancholic imperative: *que je peigne!*[80]

Has pictorial nominalism seen to it that the "enterprise of painting" changed "so drastically that nothing more than the name" remains? Apparently, yes: there is nothing pictorial in a comb but the pun in its name. In fact, no: Duchamp did not actualize the blank canvas. It is still poised on the infra thin line between a picture and a successful one, as Greenberg wanted it to be. But there is nothing inconceivable about its being successful, even convincing: not in the sense that it would have potential, much less in that it would incarnate the "last painting," but inasmuch as a successful blank canvas would simulate. It would be a *replica* of a blank canvas, like most readymades, by the way, which have come down to us as replicas. There is much talk about simulation these days, and Baudrillard's writings have been put to frantic ideological use by more than one Neo-Geo painter.[81] Whether their work is hailed or dismissed, it is for the same reasons: they are insincere and rhetorical, they deny originality, they strip Newman of the sublime, Mondrian of his struggle against the tragic, Malevich of Ouspensky. They appropriate modernist painting and regurgitate it ready-made. I have seen too little of this painting to judge it with assurance, and I have yet to see the "ultimate" blank canvas. While I am not enthralled at the prospect, I am not ready, as is Michael Fried, to rule out a priori the eventu-

80. See chapter 3.

81. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations,* trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York; Semiotext(e) 1983), and Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," *Arts Magazine,* Summer 1984.

ality of its being a successful painting, but on terms that are, of course, no longer modernist, that is to say, utopian or apocalyptic.[82] Fried and Greenberg have taught me not to trust the "logic" of extrapolation but to let my eye decide. So I shall let my eye, not Fried, be the judge. In the meantime, and since the blank canvas is not yet a fact, I shall consider what simulation, when it does not foreclose emulation, teaches the retrospective eye of the historian. Was it not there all along in modernist painting? Have I not heard many times, even from Claude Lévi-Strauss, that the abstract painter paints what he would paint if, by any chance, he set out to paint a picture? Was it not Greenberg who said, in 1939, that avant-garde painting was "the imitation of imitating"?[83] Was it not Manet who let the simulation of the photographic simulacrum infect painting from within? Was it not Baudelaire who first understood that authentic aesthetic experience had to be sought in and regained from vicarious experience? Why would simulation, which is definitely not modernist in the Greenbergian sense (but then, was modern painting?) be more threatening for the future of painting now than it was throughout modernity? A successful ready-made canvas is no more—and no less—inconceivable now than impressionism was in David's time, cubism in Manet's time, or abstraction in Cézanne's time. Not only has successful painting always been inconceivable beforehand, but with each successive passage in modernism, the same anxiety about "future circumstances"—the one Fried expresses regarding the bare canvas—was felt, and the same risk was run regarding painting: "that nothing more than the name would remain."

82. Going over my text again, I realize that I have done exactly the same thing that Greenberg did in 1962, but in relation to today's dominant ideology. I just legitimized in writing a blank canvas that no one has actualized yet. I would be lying if I tried to hide that it is in the hope that it will never be.

83. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 7. And this, a propos of Picasso, trapped between *painting* and *object* and "committed to a notion of painting that leaves nothing further to explore": "The picture gets itself finished, in principle, before it gets started; and in its actual finishing, it becomes a replica of itself" ("Picasso at Seventy-five," in *Art and Culture,* p. 67).