

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ CHAPTER SIX

Painting and the Pale of History:  
The Passing of the Pure



THE LIBRARY OF THE ARTIST ARMAN, PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY L. THOMPSON.

THERE ARE few better exercises for those who seek to think philosophically about history—who seek, as I am attempting to do, for objective narrative structures in the way human events unfold—than to attempt to see the way the past saw the future, and hence the way those who saw the future as they did had to see their present as they did. Construing the future in terms of possible chains of events which would intimately depend upon the actions they took or failed to take, the agents sought to organize their present so as to generate chain of events favorable to their perceived interests. And of course it does sometimes happen that the future really, so far as we can tell, happens the way it happens because of what we do or fail to do in the present, and those who successfully give shape to the course of events can congratulate themselves with what philosophers call contrary-to-fact conditionals. They can say, “Had we not done such and such, then so and so would never have happened.” But we actually act in the light of conditionals we *believe* true, and it is probably a presupposition of rational action that our actions have reasonably predictable outcomes and that within limits we are able to guide our actions in the light of those anticipated outcomes. On the other hand, there is a great deal to which we are blind, and one value of seeing the past’s way of seeing the future is that, knowing how their future looks from *our* own vantage point in history, we can see how it differs from how the agents of the past construed it. They, of course, necessarily lacked our perspective: if they could have seen the present as it would appear to the future, they would have acted differently. The great German historian Reinhart Koselleck wrote a book with the marvelous title *Vergangene Zukunft* (The Futures of the Past), arguing that the futures in the light of which people of the past lived their present are an important part of the past.<sup>1</sup> Think of the belief that the world was going to end in A.D. 1000 as a case in point. There would be

little point in doing much except pray: you would not put up pickles for the winter to come, or repair the pig pen, or buy life insurance, if you thought everything was going to be erased in a blast of angelic trumpets!

From this perspective it is instructive to see the way Greenberg viewed the historical present of the early 1960s, given his powerful narrative, which after all defined the shape of the future as well as his own set of critical practices, grounded as they were by that narrative. What in objective historical fact happened, of course, was that the visual arts began to turn toward a kind of art for which an aesthetics-driven critical practice stopped having much applicability—a turn neither Greenberg's narrative nor his critical practice could easily accommodate. Though Greenberg was aware that art was taking that sort of turn, he tended to regard it as a deviation from the orthogonal of history as he projected it. He continued to see abstract expressionism as the main agency of modernist art history, but at the same time, in the early 1960s, he began to see it faltering, slipping the rails of historical destiny. It did so, one might say, by failing to heed the imperatives of modernism to which Greenberg was totally committed. He had defined the subject of painting as painting—as the creation of physical objects consisting of pigment spread across flat surfaces of a certain shape. But, almost dialectically, it seemed that the abstract expressionists also accepted the materialist imperative of modernism altogether too fervently. And in doing so they violated the larger modernist imperative that each art to stay within the limitations of its own medium and not to usurp the prerogatives of any other art or medium: to Greenberg's eye, abstract expressionism spilled over its defining boundary into the domain of sculpture. "To each its own" was the drive of modernist art history, rather in the way in which the division of labor was the basis of justice in Plato's *Republic*, where injustice consisted in the mismatch of person and position.

In his 1962 essay "After abstract expressionism," Greenberg made a surprising claim. It had to do with what one might have supposed inevitable, given his materialist aesthetics. One would have thought that the abstract expressionist treatment of paint as paint—juicy, viscous, dripping, fat—was just what the theory demanded, that paint would become its own subject. This turned out not to be the case:

If the label 'Abstract Expressionism' means anything, it means painterliness: loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken color; uneven saturations or densities of paint, exhibited brush,

knife, or finger marks—in short, a constellation of qualities like those defined by Wölfflin when he extracted his notion of the *Malerische* from Baroque art.<sup>2</sup>

But, ironically, space in abstract expressionism "could not help becoming once again a matter of *trompe l'oeil* illusion. . . . it became more tangible, more a thing of immediate perception and less one of 'reading.'" As near as I can understand this, it means that as paint became three-dimensional, it took on the identity of sculpture, and space became illusory once again. One would have thought that it became *real*—but in any case, "a good deal of Abstract Expressionist painting began fairly to cry out for a more coherent illusion of three-dimensional space, and to the extent that it did this it cried out for representation, since such coherence can be created only through the tangible representation of three-dimensional objects." Hence Willem de Kooning's *Women* pictures of 1952–55. On Greenberg's view, the only way to carry art forward on its historical mission, since abstract expressionism failed, was through what he called "post-painterly abstraction" in a show he organized for the Los Angeles County Museum or Art in 1964. And in his essay for the catalog he spoke of the decline of abstract expressionism into what he termed a "mannerism." Greenberg began to see the champions of art's progress in Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland; and his disciple, Michael Fried, in a crucial monograph, *Three American Painters*, widened this heroic group to include Frank Stella and Jules Olitski, whom Greenberg also came to admire and to identify as the great hope of art. Sculpture played an auxiliary role: David Smith and Anthony Caro carried the narrative of materialist aesthetics forward, and Greenberg did not hesitate to intervene actively in order to assure that this took place.

Greenberg, so far as I know, nowhere asks why abstract expressionism, "having produced art of major importance, . . . turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms. Its leaders attracted imitators, many of them, and then some of these leaders took to imitating themselves." Was there anything internal to abstract expressionism that made it incapable of sustaining further progress? I am no more certain of the answer to this question than I am of how it was possible for abstract expressionism as a style to make the first artists who took it up into masters overnight: Kline, Rothko, Pollock, and even de Kooning were really quite modest painters until they found themselves abstract expressionists. But I think one answer might have to do with the fact that, by contrast with the painting of the tradition, there was nothing for the

abstract expressionist canvas to be but art. It could play no social role in murals, for example, or fit into the workaday artisanry of traditional painting. It really had only its own drives, externally reinforced by the drives of the market, and hence it existed mainly to be collected. It belonged in the collection, and hence, by contrast with the Vasarian painting, was more and more cut off from life, and lived more and more a segregated existence in the world of art. It really did fulfill the Greenbergian requirement that painting have its own autonomous history, and it collapsed from lack of external input. The next generation of artists sought to bring art back into touch with reality, and with life. These were the pop artists, and in my historical perception, it was pop above all which set the new course for the visual arts. But Greenberg, locked into an historical vision and a critical practice that had no space for pop, was unable to accommodate it to his concepts and categories. He of course was not alone in this. It was very difficult for critics, not to speak of artists, whose future was defined by abstract expressionism and its associated ideals, to perceive pop as anything but a transient blip in the unfolding of that future.

It is in no sense to Greenberg's discredit that he did not see pop art as marking a major historical change. "So far," Greenberg wrote, "it amounts to a new episode in the history of taste, but not to an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art." What Greenberg regarded as a "new episode in that evolution" was the work in his show of post-painterly abstractionism, probably because it thematized the flatness of which he made so much and, since staining rather than brushing became its favored mode of "post-painterly" laying of paint onto surfaces, supported his theory that the brushstroke needed to be eliminated to keep painting "pure." For it remained an axiom that the evolution of contemporary art was to be enacted through the evolution of painting. And what Richard Wollheim has called "painting as an art" was in for some very rough times in the following decade and a half. It was the seeming rebirth of painting, spectacularly in the work of Julian Schnabel and David Salle in the early 1980s, which gave so many the sense that art history was back on track—but *that* proved to be an episode of taste rather than of the evolution of contemporary art; and, as the eighties wore on into the nineties, it became clearer and clearer that painting was no longer the Siegfried of art-historical change.

Greenberg was finally unable to take pop art seriously. He relegated it to the category of novelty art, along with op, minimalism ("'novelty' in the old-fashioned sense of novelties sold in stores," he somewhat meanly

clarifies). But he was not able to take any art seriously after post-painterly abstraction, and his own critical output pretty much came to a halt: the last volume of his collected writings, published in 1993, ends at 1968. He had no way, no serious way, of fitting the new art into his marvelous narrative, and his sour remarks are strikingly similar in tone to those made at the advent of modernism to the effect that modernist artists could not draw or paint, or, if they could, that they were engaged in some hoax or other, and that, surely, once this was seen through, the "threat" it posed would vanish and "real" art would once again prevail. He tried to argue that the new art was "rather easy stuff, familiar and reassuring under all the ostensibly challenging novelties of staging," that it was not really avant-garde, that it was "'hard' and 'difficult' only on the outside," but soft on the inside.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile there was a saving remnant, "a handful of painters and sculptors between the ages of thirty-five and fifty still produc[ing] high art." In 1967 he cautiously predicted that novelty art would collapse as a movement "as second generation Abstract Expressionism did so suddenly in 1962." And Greenberg speculated on the possibility "of the production of high art in general coming to an end along with the avant garde."

In the summer of 1992, Greenberg spoke for a small group in New York. He claimed that perhaps never in history had art "moved so slowly." Nothing, he insisted, had happened in the past thirty years. *For thirty years* there had been nothing but pop. He found this incredible, and he was extremely pessimistic when someone in the audience asked what he foresaw. "Decadence!" he answered, I think in anguish. He still thought, that is, that painting would somehow save us and that the history of art could be moved forward only through a revolution of painterly invention. I was, I must admit, thrilled to hear history talked about in such grand and sweeping terms. But I also thought that, just as at some point the explanation that modern artists have forgotten how to draw or have all become hoaxers stopped being acceptable and a new narrative was called for, so the explanation that art in the past thirty years is merely the ceaseless effort to satisfy the appetite for novelty had to be surrendered and the art of our period looked at from the perspective of a master narrative as compelling as Greenberg's narrative of modernism was.

Hence my thesis of the end of art.

Let me somewhat self-consciously and somewhat sheepishly invoke the heavy metaphysical conceit that Painting with a capital P or Art with a capital A exists on a plane with Spirit or Geist in the old Hegelian narratives, and that "what Art wanted" defined the pale of history for a

master narrative of art. I take the notion of “what Art wanted” from an idiom of the American architect Louis Kahn, who, in working out the form of a building, used to ask “what the building wanted,” as if there were an internal drive, or what the later Greeks called an *entelechy*, an end state of fulfillment in which the building found the form through which it fulfilled its being. Employing this conceit, the proposal is that Art identified itself with a certain form of representationalism in the Vasarian era of its biography, and was jolted out of this mistaken identification sometime in the late nineteenth century, and came instead (this is Greenberg’s view) to identify itself with its material vehicle, with paint and canvas, surface, and shape, at least in the case of painting. Other art was being made in these eras which did not exactly fit this scheme, but it fell outside the pale of history, so to speak. In his *Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, Bernard Berenson wrote that the painter Carlo Crivelli “does not belong to a movement of constant progress, and is therefore not within the scope of this work.”<sup>4</sup> In a fascinating discussion of Crivelli, Jonathan Watkins cites writers who found difficulty in fitting Crivelli into their narrative of “constant progress.”<sup>5</sup> Crivelli, according to Roberto Longhi, was incapable of incorporating into his work the “profonda innovazione pittorica e prospettica” of Giovanni Bellini; and according to Martin Davies, he took an “agreeable high-class holiday far away from great pictures and the aesthetic problems they pose.” Watkins undertakes to show that Crivelli was using illusion to destroy illusion, and doing so in order to achieve an altogether profound criticism of Renaissance art. Berenson appreciated something profound in Crivelli, but goes on to say that it would be “distorting our entire view of Italian art in the fifteenth century to do full justice to such a painter . . .” So either you can say Crivelli falls outside the pale of history, or, like Watkins, you can say “so much the worse for history” and “feel free to reconstruct [the past] should the need arise.” “So much the worse for history” means, surely, so much the worse for narratives. But in fact it is only against a defining developmental narrative that the true originality of Crivelli can be made visible. It is heroic to seek to abolish narratives altogether, but that would at the very least press Hans Belting’s question of the end of art history back into the quattrocento. And it would, beyond that, blur what seems to me to be the historical mark of the present—namely, that no master narrative applies.

A similar criticism of the Greenbergian narrative is raised in a powerful critique by Rosalind Krauss, whose book *The Optical Unconscious* discusses with immense sympathy and understanding a number of great

artists whose contributions formalist criticism had, in a nearly psychoanalytical way, consigned by “repression” to a state of critical oblivion.<sup>6</sup> Criticism, especially under the influence of Greenberg, had no way of dealing with Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, or Alberto Giacometti, or even with certain works of Picasso. Greenberg had no use whatever for surrealism, which he regarded as historically retrograde. “The anti-formal, anti-aesthetic nihilism of the Surrealists—inherited from Dada with all the artificial nonsense entailed—has in the end proved a blessing to the restless rich, the expatriates, and the aesthetic flaneurs who were repelled by the asceticisms of modern art.”<sup>7</sup> Because their aim, as Greenberg sees it, was to shock, the surrealists were obliged to cultivate the kind of virtuosity in naturalistic representation that we find in Dali. On the other hand, it is not easy to see how abstract art could shock except by virtue of its contrast to a reigning norm of naturalistic representation. But the moment when abstraction could be shocking was long past, and so surrealism could achieve its aim only through juxtapositions of realistically rendered objects which can have no natural meeting place in the real, but only in the sur-real world. And, greatest sin of all, given Greenberg’s vision of each medium to itself, “it is possible to construct faithful duplicates in wax, papier-mâché, or rubber of most of the recent paintings of Ernst, Dali, and Tanguy. Their ‘content’ is conceivable, and too much so, in other terms than those of paint.”<sup>8</sup> So surrealism had to be explained away as outside the pale of history.

In my own version of the idea of “what art wants,” the end and fulfillment of the history of art is the philosophical understanding of what art is, an understanding that is achieved in the way that understanding in each of our lives is achieved, namely, from the mistakes we make, the false paths we follow, the false images we come to abandon until we learn wherein our limits consist, and then how to live within those limits. The first false path was the close identification of art with picturing. The second false path was the materialist aesthetics of Greenberg, in which art turns away from what makes pictorial content convincing, hence from illusion, to the palpable material properties of art, which differ essentially from medium to medium. Logicians draw a standard distinction between the use and mention of an expression. An expression is used when one wants to talk about what the expression refers to in our language. Thus “New York” is used to refer to the city of New York in the sentence “New York is the home of the United Nations.” But we *mention* an expression when the expression itself is what we talk about. Thus the expression “New York” is mentioned in “New York consists of two syllables.” In a

way, the shift from a Vasarian to a Greenbergian narrative was a shift from artworks in their use-dimension to artworks in their mention capacity. And criticism, accordingly, shifted its approach from interpreting what works were about to describing what they were. It shifted, in other words, from meaning to being, or, loosely speaking, from semantics to syntax.

One can get a fair sense of the implications of this shift if one thinks of the difference in the way works of art outside the pale of history were addressed. During the course of modernism, African art rose in esteem, making a transition from the museum of natural history and the curiosity shop to the museum of art and the art gallery. If art historians had difficulty fitting Carlo Crivelli into the great developmental and progressive narrative of art, what possible case could be made for African fetishes and idols? Riegl supposes himself to be "following the spirit of today's natural science" in "assuming that contemporary primitive cultures are the rudimentary survivors of the human race from earlier cultural periods."<sup>9</sup> This justifies him in thinking that "their geometric ornament must represent an earlier phase of development in the decorative arts and is therefore of great historical interest." But so must their mode of representation, on this assumption—which is essentially the assumption of Victorian anthropology—give us an insight into a stage of mimesis earlier by far than any we might know about in European art, and this makes African art of considerable scientific interest. Hence the status of curios and specimens that was assigned to objects collected from so-called primitive peoples by those who studied and classified them. Primitive cultures were, as it were, living fossils in a phylum whose latest and highest exemplars were our own. Or like natural mummies, preserved by change, giving us access to earlier stages of ourselves.

When these objects became pivotal to the history of modernism, spectacularly in the case of Picasso, whose visit to the anthropological museum at Trocadero proved momentous for his own development and the subsequent development of modernist art, critics and theorists began to look at them in a new way, no longer seeing the need to distinguish between modern and "primitive" art, since they were presumed to be comparable at the level of form. Roger Fry wrote a powerful essay on "Negro Sculpture" in 1920 and emphasized the immense change that had taken place from the assumptions of the Victorian anthropology with which Riegl was so unquestioningly comfortable. "We would like to know what Doctor Johnson would have said to any one who had offered him a negro idol for several hundred pounds," Fry reflects. "It would have seemed then sheer lunacy to listen to what a negro savage had to

tell us of his emotions about the human form." Fry contends that some of the objects on view are "great sculpture—greater, I think, than anything we produced even in the Middle Ages."<sup>10</sup> Another formalist thinker, the American eccentric Albert Barnes, had no difficulty whatever in displaying African sculpture along with the modernist artworks he collected. Even more open than that, since he displayed objects of craftsmanship on the walls of his gallery between paintings, as if there was no longer, as indeed on formalist principles there no longer was, a serious basis for discriminating art from craft. But in fact modernism dissolved a great many boundaries, largely by aestheticizing or formalizing objects from diverse cultures which Riegl's contemporaries—not to mention Doctor Johnson's!—would have found beyond the pale of taste.

I think a fascinating study could be done of the way in which earlier periods—those without, for example, the complacent picture provided by Victorian anthropology—responded to "exotic art." The first evidence we have, for example, of the way in which goldwork from Mexico was perceived is striking. The author of the following remarks is Albrecht Dürer:

I have also seen the things brought to the king from the new golden land: a sun all of gold a whole fathom broad, also a moon all of silver and just as large; also two chambers full of instruments of these people, likewise all kinds of weapons, armor, catapults, wonderful shields, strange garments, bed hangings, and all kind of things for many uses, more beautiful to behold than prodigies. These things were all so precious that they are valued at a hundred thousand gulden. All the days of my life I have not seen anything that gladdened my heart as these things did. For I saw among them wonderful works of art and marvelled at the subtle ingenuity of people in strange lands. I do not know how to express all that I experienced there.<sup>11</sup>

Spanish historian of the New World Petrus Martyr, who saw the objects sent by Moctezume to Charles V in Valladolid the same year Dürer saw them in Brussels, had no difficulty in responding to them aesthetically: "Though I little admire gold and precious stones, I am amazed by the skill and effort making their work exceed the material. . . . I do not recall ever seeing anything so appealing by its beauty to human eyes."<sup>12</sup>

These witnessings took place in 1520. The first edition of Vasari's text was published in 1550, and I suppose it is important to stress the difference in aesthetic response to works of art before the invention of art history, taking Vasari to have founded art history in the sense at least that he saw

art as an unfolding progressive narrative. Neither Dürer nor Petrus Martyr had the task of fitting this work into a narrative, the way Berenson would later have to abandon the hope of dealing art historically with Crivelli, since there was no way of fitting the latter into the story he had to tell. Nor did Fry, Barnes, and Greenberg have to deal with this problem, since modernism enfranchised "exotic art" by liberating its viewers from the obligation to narrativize it. But that is because they could deal with it ahistorically in terms of the transcendental principles—of what Greenberg, following Kant, refers to as taste. But this merits a word or two.

Taste was the central concept in eighteenth-century aesthetics, and the central problem in that era was how to reconcile what appeared to be two undeniable truths about taste: that "de gustibus non est disputandum" (there is no disputing taste), on the one hand, and that there is such a thing as good taste so that taste is not as subjective and relative as the first truth would appear to require. "The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under everyone's observation," Hume wrote. "But those who can enlarge their view to contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are still more surprised at the great inconsistency and contrariety."<sup>13</sup> Speaking preemptively for his contemporary Doctor Johnson, Hume remarks that "we are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension." But then, he notes, common sense would also oppose as absurd a claim that the work of a poet like Ogilby is equal to that of Milton—a claim, Hume contends, as extravagant as that a heap of sand is as high as Mount Teneriffe. And if someone should persist in false aesthetic judgments or preferences, that simply manifests a certain indelicacy of taste, and, more important, a defective education of taste. As the term implies, there is little to distinguish aesthetic taste from a refined palate, and in both cases instruction will demonstrate that certain things are in the end more rewarding—are aesthetically better—than others. And Hume draws attention to the existence of critics who, by distancing themselves from practice and liberating their imagination, can be counted on to give the sorts of judgments the rest of us would arrive at were we to undergo a comparable discipline. It is this premise that underlies Kant's extraordinary thesis that to find something beautiful is tacitly to make a universal judgement—that is, to prescribe that everyone will find it beautiful. And it is this idea, as I have tried to show, which underlay Greenberg's own vision of criticism. Hume offers what could be extrapolated as commandments for the critic in *Of the Standard of Taste*. When the critic "has no delicacy," when "he is not aided by practice," "where no comparison has been employed," "where he lies under the

influence of prejudice," and "where good sense is wanting," the critic "is not qualified to discern the beauties of design and reasoning, which are the highest and most excellent." So the ideal critic is delicate, practiced, open, able to compare, and hence possesses knowledge of a wide range of art and is endowed with good sense: "The joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty."

All works of art are *à s* one, under this view, and in a sense modernism was the art movement that enfranchised the broadening of taste that enables us to place works of Negro sculpture in museums of fine art, conceived as institutional encyclopedias of form. All museums, as I said, are museums of modern art, to the extent that the judgment of what is art is based on an aesthetic of formalism. The aesthete is at home everywhere, and the Baule mask or the Asanti figure hangs beneath the Pollock and the Morandi in the libraries of discriminating collectors the world round. Form is after all form, and once we are liberated from the Johnsonian disposition to stigmatize African art as barbaric, how easily we accept that the art of Africa rubs elbows with that of Paris or Milan. How easily, indeed, given that so much cosmopolitan art has a genealogy that includes at least some African ancestor. This was the thesis the widely criticized exhibition "Primitivism and Modern Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 attempted to demonstrate. But was it for the beauty of its design that Picasso was moved by the art he encountered at the Trocadero in 1907? Not according to the testimony of his own recollection.

When I went to the Trocadero it was disgusting. The flea market. The smell. I was all alone, I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood something very important: something was happening to me, right? The masks weren't like other kinds of sculpture. Not at all. They were magical things. And why weren't the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean? We hadn't realized it: those were primitive [note the voice of Victorian anthropology here], not magical things. The Negro's sculptures were intercessors. I've known the French word ever since. Against everything, against unknown, threatening spirits. I understood; I too am against everything. I too think that everything is unknown, is the enemy. . . . All the fetiches were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits. . . . *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that day.<sup>14</sup>

Modernist art is art defined by taste, and created essentially for persons of taste, specifically for critics. But African art was created for its power over the dark forces of the threatening world. "I went to see the carvings,"

Virginia Woolf wrote her sister in 1920. "I found them dismal and impressive, but heaven knows what real feeling I have about anything after hearing Roger discourse. I dimly see that something in their style might be written, and also that if I had one on the mantelpiece I should be a different sort of character—less adorable, as far as I can make out, but somebody you wouldn't forget in a hurry."<sup>15</sup> I salute Woolf's response. But those African carvings have found their way onto numerous mantelpieces as ambassadors of good taste, without in any way changing the character of those who place them there. A wonderful exhibition of contemporary artists who collect African art shows, in fact, that the pre-existing character of the artist tends to define what African art means to him or her.<sup>16</sup> But the general point remains that feeling and form, to use the conjunction I first heard made by my teacher Susanne K. Langer, have tended overall to rule one another out. Or rather, in African art feeling rather than taste defines form. The end of modernism meant the end of the tyranny of taste, and indeed, opened room precisely for just what Greenberg found so unacceptable in surrealism—its antiformal, anti-aesthetic side. Aesthetics will carry you no great distance with Duchamp, nor will the kind of criticism Duchamp requires obey Hume's tablet of commandments.

Greenberg understood this perfectly, up to a point. In 1969 he wrote, in an essay on the avant-garde, that "things that purport to be art do not function, do not exist, as art until they are experienced through taste." But he felt that a good many artists at the time were working "in the hope, periodically renewed since Marcel Duchamp first acted on it fifty-odd years ago, that by dint of evading the reach of taste while yet remaining in the context of art, certain contrivances will achieve unique existence and value. So far this hope has proved illusory."<sup>17</sup> Of course it has—if Greenberg is right that nothing exists as art unless experienced through taste. The project would be incoherent, like endeavoring to make art by evading the reach of art. But the *ontological* success of Duchamp's work, consisting as it does in art which succeeds in the absence or the abeyance of the considerations of taste, demonstrates that the aesthetic is in fact not an essential or defining property of art. This, as I see it, not merely put an end to the era of modernism, but to the entire historical project that characterized modernism, namely, by seeking to distinguish the essential from the accidental qualities of art, to "purify" it, alchemically so to speak, of the contaminants of representation, illusion, and the like. What Duchamp did was to demonstrate that the project ought rather to have been to discern how art was to be distinguished

from reality. This, after all, was the problem that animated Plato at the very beginning of philosophy, and which I have often argued gave rise to the great Platonic system nearly in its entirety.<sup>18</sup> Plato knew what Picasso was to discover in an artistic tradition that had not been corrupted by philosophy, that art was a tool of power. In raising the question of art and reality as he did, Duchamp reconnected art with its philosophically disenfranchising beginnings. Plato had the right problem—he just gave a disfiguring answer.

To solve the philosophical problem of the relation of art and reality, critics had to begin analyzing art of a kind so like reality that the differences had to survive the test of perceptual indiscernibility. They had to answer a question like mine: "What distinguishes Warhol's *Brillo Box* from the Brillo boxes in which Brillo comes?" The witty deconstructionist Sam Wiener moved the issue back even further historically by exhibiting a box with real Brillo in it on which he pasted the Magritte-inspired label "This is not a Warhol!" But I did not intend to give Warhol all the credit for this breakthrough to philosophy. It was taking place all across the art world, especially in sculpture. It was happening with the minimalist use of industrial materials, with *arte povera*, with the kind of post-minimalist art that Eva Hesse was making. In an interview, sculptor Ron Jones has spoken of what he terms "Pictures aesthetics," by which he means, I believe, the aesthetic that defines the gallery which represents him—Metro Pictures in Soho. "If there was a preceding generation that Metro artists as a whole respond to (this is a very dangerous statement of course), it would be Warhol." In discussing my own work, particularly as it concerns precisely the difference between artworks and real things, he remarks, "I think he could have just as well have been describing Cindy's work [Cindy Sherman] or Sherrie's work [Sherrie Levine] as Warhol's work."<sup>19</sup> And that means, if true, that the borderline between art and reality was the theme and site of American art from the sixties on into the nineties, when this interview was granted.

Of course, a good many artists in the last thirty years have not engaged in this sort of quest at all, and if I were to apply the exclusionary spirit of philosophies of art history, I would say that they lie outside the pale of history. But that is not the way I view things. In my sense, once art itself raised the true form of the philosophical question—that is, the question of the difference between artworks and real things—history was over. The philosophical moment had been attained. The questions can be explored by artists who are interested in them, and by philosophers themselves, who can now begin to do the philosophy of art in a way that will

yield answers. To say that history is over is to say that there is no longer a pale of history for works of art to fall outside of. Everything is possible. Anything can be art. And, because the present situation is essentially unstructured, one can no longer fit a master narrative to it. Greenberg is right: nothing has happened for thirty years. That is perhaps the most important thing to be said about the art of the past thirty years. But the situation is far from bleak, as Greenberg's cry of "Decadence!" implies. Rather, it inaugurates the greatest era of freedom art has ever known.

I would like to suggest that our situation at the end of art history resembles the situation before the beginning of art history—before, that is, a narrative was imposed on art that made painting the hero of the story and cast whatever did not fit the narrative outside the pale of history and hence of art altogether. Vasari ends his narrative with Michelangelo and Leonardo, and of course Raphael. But though they conclude his narrative, they made art before the idea of that narrative had come to define the centrality of painting and its progressive developmental nature. They after all were close in time to Dürer, who was able to appreciate things like the goldwork of the Aztecs without feeling the slightest conceptual twinge, and without feeling it necessary to say that it was greater than anything in Europe, and without condescension. And Leonardo ended his life at the great court of François I, whose other great import was the master jeweler Benvenuto Cellini. Cellini was a sculptor, but his *Perseus* is not a greater work than the salt dish he fabricated for the king's condiment. There was no invidious distinction before the beginning of art history between art and craft, nor was it necessary to insist that the latter be treated as sculpture in order to be taken seriously as art. There was no imperative that an artist must specialize, and we find, in the artists who best exemplify the post-historical moment—Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Rosemarie Trockel, and others for whom all media and all styles are equally legitimate—the same protean creativity we find in Leonardo and Cellini. Somehow, the idea of pure art went with the idea of the pure painter—the painter who paints and does nothing else. Today that is an option, but not an imperative. The pluralism of the present art world defines the ideal artist as a pluralist. Much has changed since the sixteenth century, but we are in many ways closer to it than we are to any succeeding period in art. Painting, as the vehicle of history, has had a long run, and it is not surprising that it has come under attack. That attack provides the subject for a later chapter. I need first to situate pop in its historical present.

## NOTES

1. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
2. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:123.
3. Greenberg, "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:264.
4. Bernard Berenson, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (New York: C. P. Putnam, 1894), x. On the other hand, Berenson beautifully observes that "art is too great and too vital a subject to be crowded into any single formula; and a formula that would, without distorting our entire view of Italian art in the fifteenth century, do full justice to such a painter as Carlo Crivelli does not exist" (*ibid.*).
5. Jonathan Watkins, "Untricking the Eye: The Uncomfortable Legacy of Carlo Crivelli," *Art International* (Winter 1988), 48–58.
6. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
7. Greenberg, "Surrealist Painting," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:225–26.
8. *Ibid.*, 231.
9. Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style*, 16.
10. Fry, "Negro Sculpture," 88.
11. Cited in George Kubler, *Esthetic Recognition of Ancient Amerindian Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 208, n. 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 43.
13. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Political* (London: Ward, Lock, 1898), 134–49. All references are to this edition, but Hume's essay is a classic of aesthetics and easily found in the main anthologies.
14. Cited in Jack Flam, "A Continuing Presence: Western Artists/African Art," in Daniel Shapiro, *Western Artists/African Art* (New York: The Museum of African Art, 1994), 61–62.
15. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautman (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1976), 2:429.
16. I refer to *Western Artists/African Art*, curated by Daniel Shapiro. See note 14.
17. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:293.
18. See especially the title essay in my *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
19. Andras Szanto, "Gallery: Transformations in the New York Art World in the 1980s" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1996). See appendix for interview with Ron Jones.