## Modernisms

In keeping with the synoptic, preliminary nature of this inquiry, I approach the question of modernism by listing several variants, without at first considering how they might be compared. Before I do so, it is relevant to remark that the variety of ways scholars have construed the history and characteristics of modernism is measurably different from the way that other periods in art history, say Baroque or Byzantine, have been understood. If I were to name a Renaissance painting — say Titian's *Diana Discovering the Pregnancy of Callisto in Edinburgh* — and ask about its place in the history of sixteenth-century painting, I might be able to entertain half a dozen different possibilities (see Figure 1.1). In the first place, Titian's painting could be used to exemplify some traits of the Renaissance in general, such as the interest in istoria, or the use of painting as a vehicle for moralizing emblems. More specifically, the painting could be proposed as a characteristic middle period work in Titian's oeuvre. Or it could be seen as evidence of Titian's interest in what has come to be known as Mannerism. It would also be possible to see this painting as a representative of the kind of Northern Italian work that Vasari contrasted with good Central Italian practice, and that would tie it to the discourse of colorito and disegno. At a stretch I might define the painting against one of several senses of transalpine art, as an Italian alternative to the practices described, for example, by Karel Van Mander.

This might seem like a wide range of choices, but in fact they are not so much choices as alternate and compatible models, well discussed in the literature and not in conflict with one another.

I could easily have chosen a Renaissance painting that does not even call up this many different readings. What I mean to point out here is that the historiographic issues for Renaissance painting are settled in a way that those for modernism are not. The working dates for the inception and effective ending of the disegno-colorito debate are well known, and so is the history of the idea that Titian had a Mannerist phase. Most of the interpretations are not the subjects of active discussion, and scholarship has turned to other kinds of questions.

Contrast that situation with a modernist painting, say Manet's *Olympia* (see Figure 1.2). Just mentioning it conjures a whole series of questions whose answers depend on widely different ways of construing modernism and modernist painting. Manet has been seen as a modernist in at least three very different senses, which I will enumerate later, and, just as significant, historians whose sense of modernism depends on yet other models have bypassed his work, and this painting in particular, as crucial moments in modernism. Modernism, I think, is

contested in a way that Renaissance painting is not, and in particular, the alternate theories are not so much aspects of a coherent whole as pieces of different pictures.

It could be urged that new scholarship on Titian has created a set of interests as diverse as the ones that surround the Olympia. In the past twenty years historians have uncovered information about Titian's circle of friends and made connections to the sexual life of Venice, and we now know more about Titian's patrons and their political interests. But I do not think these interpretations amount to the divergence of interpretations that surround Manet. It could even be said that the late Renaissance is at stake in what Titian did around mid-century, simply because Titian is one of the principal artists of the period, but there is not, as far as I am aware, an active interest in formulating what "late Renaissance" might mean in this context. It is not a conceptual category that requires attention in the way that modernism does. In regard to Manet, by contrast, everything is at stake: he is a fulcrum of the modernist sensibility in painting, and that matters because it directly affects, or even determines, what counts as twentieth-century modernism and even what counts as contemporary practice.

Let me illustrate the difference with an example from contemporary academic politics. In the English and Irish university systems, there is a position known as an external assessor, which is a person engaged by a department to comment on the examination questions before they are given, and also to read and help grade the students' answers to those questions. Part of an external assessor's job is to ensure that the examination questions proposed by the department's lecturers are well posed and set at the appropriate levels. Now when I first heard about that system, I was astonished. It seemed amazing that someone in another university could be trusted to understand what might be happening in classes I was teaching. After I learned more about the system, I began to see its strong points — among other things, it reveals inadequately prepared classes — but I also came to think that it fits premodern art history much better than modernism or postmodernism, because the large-scale historiographic issues are widely agreed on in Renaissance and other premodern art. If an instructor chooses to emphasize gender or patronage, it is understood that those issues lie in some measure to one side of the kinds of judgments that give the works their places in the traditions in question. Sexual practices in sixteenth-century Venice could be used as a way to introduce *Diana Discovering the Pregnancy of Callisto*, but questions of gender and sexuality would be understood to be at once independent of, and compatible with, existing narratives about Mannerism and northern Italian painting.

With modernism things are different. It is conceivable that a modernist in one university may wish to teach in accord with

theories of high modernism and that the external assessor might subscribe to differing accounts. In that case, the external assessor would have to find the examination questions to be biased or effectively empty; the assessor would, if he or she decided to push the issue, be compelled to say that the entire content of the course in question requires rethinking. In the case of Manet's *Olympia*, for example, an assessor with an interest in postmodernism might find an account based on Manet's formal innovations to be more than merely incomplete; it might appear misguided because it omits the image's political and gender content. The theories are too strongly at odds to be posed as compatible alternates.

This example is the clearest way I know to introduce a fundamental property of the accounts I will be considering; each constitutes a choice that implies very different objects, artists, and movements, and strongly affects what is taken to be worth saying about a given painting, period, or problem.

It would be possible to employ any number of criteria to order and collate the theories of modernism. Theories of modernism could be distinguished, for example, by writing their histories. Such a strictly historiographic approach would make it possible to locate the genealogies of current ideas; Jürgen Habermas's critique of modernity, for instance, could be traced back to German romanticism. The drawback of a historiographic approach is that the order in which the theories appeared does not correlate with their interest for art history in the twenty-first century. To understand currently viable models of twentieth-century painting, it is not always relevant to know that a given approach began before or after another one. It would also be possible to arrange theories of modernism according to other criteria, for example, their politics, the biographies and institutions of the historians who proposed them, the effect they had on the market, their endorsement by major museums, or their degree of attachment to the disciplines of art history or philosophy. Here I am choosing a simple diagnostic criterion: the works and years that have been taken to be the inception of modernism, in particular in painting. That criterion has the double advantage of being relatively amenable to exposition in a brief format and also applicable to the question at hand — an inventory of the currently viable senses of the past century. Looking at the proposed starting points of modernism results, I think, in five distinct senses of modernist painting.

Before I list them, it is worth noting that I use the terms theories, strategies, and models to describe these accounts, even though few of them were proposed as such. They normally appeared in monographs on particular subjects, not in theoretical tracts about the concept of modernism in painting. Calling them theories posits differences between these texts that are as clear as they would be if the texts had been theories in the philosophic sense.

The distortion, I hope, pays dividends in clarity even though it necessarily misrepresents implicit positions as argued ones.

It is also significant that these theories are rarely listed or even named, even though the differences between them are ingrained in current writing in art history. There are various reasons for that lacuna in the scholarship, which need to be inspected more closely than I can do here. One possible reason is a disciplinary resistance to large-scale theories; there is an understandable reticence, for example, about expanding beyond the limits of the individual works or artists under study. That is not just a matter of custom; it points to the structure of the discipline, which can be inimical to explicit conceptual exchanges outside of historically determined settings. That in turn means that the questions I am setting out here run against the grain of some current work in art history in ways that I will not be able to mend. The lacuna is also due to the common and reasonable conviction on the part of art historians that all true theories must coexist in the end, because they describe perspectives on the same material. That pluralist stance is one that I think needs to be regarded with extreme skepticism. As I will try to make clear, these five theories of the origins of modernism are often mutually contradictory.

1. Modernism Begins in the Renaissance

Proceeding chronologically, the High Renaissance is the first period that has been proposed as the beginning of modernism in painting. (I will be using the expressions modernism in painting and modernist painting interchangeably. Both are distinct from modern painting, which begs the questions I am asking here by proposing that the moment of "the modern" is known.) Several texts could be proposed as *loci classici*. Jakob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance* in Italy would be one, in that it proposes the High Renaissance as the inception of visual culture and individuality — a combination of emphases that resonates with the current interest in popular visual culture or visual studies. A very different text that also could be read in support of the claim that modernist painting began in the Renaissance is E.H. Gombrich's "The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art: Texts and Episodes." Gombrich proposed a formidable array of concepts that could be understood as modernist; first, that "an acceptance of the Renaissance conception of art implied an acceptance of the notion of progress," thus launching the idea that art must change through time, an idea that is at the center of twentieth-century notions of the avant-garde. Then there was the inception of a "critical milieu" and the notion of the *dimostrazione* (show of skill) that together made art criticism possible. Gombrich also mentioned the idea that artistic ideals could be multiple and contemporaneous; a notion that is itself a

distant but indispensable origin of current ideas of artistic pluralism. He emphasized Vasari's ambition to "write history rather than a mere chronicle," thus hinting that art history began in the Renaissance. And he noted that in some circles "the display of virtuosity as such ... gained priority over the subject matter," a key modernist concept in each of the theories I will be considering.

Gombrich did not say that modernism as such began in the Renaissance, and at the close of the essay he mentioned two properties of modern art — not modernism — that the Renaissance lacked: it never formulated ... the crucial experience that for every problem solved, a new one could be created," and it was not sensible of the fact that the inception of new visual practices such as "the mastery of perspective and the nude" had obscured and even "destroyed" parts of the medieval tradition. That sense of loss, together with the feeling that "problems" in art are unending and linked one to the next, are — so Gombrich implied, without quite saying as much — important elements of modernism. If he had been writing directly about modernism, he would have had to say that "sciences" such as "perspective and the nude" were exactly the ones cast in doubt by modernist practices.

Even given those caveats, Gombrich's essay is the most compact inventory of reasons why the Italian Renaissance might be thought of as the moment when modernism began. At its most interesting, the discourse of Renaissance painting, as Gombrich described it, was historically aware, critically engaged, cognizant of pluralism, and invested in self-referential works that were seen to be in dialogue with one another: all common elements of modernism in visual art.

Whether it seems relevant to look back as far as the Renaissance to understand modernist painting is another matter. In general, the discipline of art history has not thought so. Erwin Panofsky entertained the possibility, which he called the "expanded Renaissance." And there have been a few scholars who have written about modernist concepts in Renaissance works, but for the most part, the Renaissance has been understood as a precedent and source for modernism rather than a direct origin of modernism.

I am tempted, again, to recast the idea that the Italian Renaissance is a model or precedent rather than an origin, as a matter of disciplinary customs and preferences. There is some evidence, mostly anecdotal, that art historians who specialize in the Renaissance tend to picture the period as a kind of foundation for later art history and, in a general sense, for the discipline as a whole. From that perspective Renaissance painting can be understood as an origin for modernist painting and not only an antecedent. This is not often said in so many

words, but it becomes visible in several ways. At art history conferences Renaissance sessions tend, on average, to be more serious than sessions on modern or postmodern art. The level of scholarship and the ambition of the papers might be comparable in the different specialties, but it is more common to find that Renaissance sessions are infused with a seriousness of purpose and an interest in cultural immersion in a way that sessions on contemporary art sometimes are not. That, of course, is entirely unverifiable; I offer it as my own experience. A little more verifiable is the fact that Renaissance scholars tend to be involved, to different degrees, in contemporary art, whereas art historians who specialize in modern or contemporary art tend not to follow developments in Renaissance scholarship. It would be possible to quantify that impression by counting the citations of Renaissance scholarship in papers on recent painting and comparing them to mentions of contemporary art in Renaissance scholarship.

I hazard these opinions because they point to a deep structure within art history: a disconnection between Renaissance and modern scholarship. Texts such as Gombrich's that propose connections between modernism and the Renaissance are in a tiny minority. Despite the very cogent arguments in favor of situating at least some elements of modernist painting in the sixteenth century, it is the least accepted of the five theories I am reviewing. The reasons for the lack of acceptance are elusive, because there is not yet a sustained conversation on the subject. One reason might be that the current configuration of the discipline of art history does not provide venues for texts that bridge the two periods. Another answer could be that whatever counts as modernism in painting has more to do with the assault on naturalism than is sometimes countenanced; a third possibility is that modernism requires the rise of the bourgeoisie and the political configurations that followed the French Revolution, thus rendering the Renaissance intermittently irrelevant.

## 2. Modernism Begins at the End of the Eighteenth Century

That last reason for distinguishing Renaissance painting from modernist painting also serves to justify the idea that modernist painting was first practiced toward the end of the eighteenth century — whether the exact starting point is identified with the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution and the emergence of the middle class, the rise of romanticism, the developments in French painting in the generation of Diderot, the school of David, or even the "International Style" around 1800. Here the historiography begins to become quite complicated, and I will confine myself to four arguments that place the origin of modernism toward the end of the eighteenth century.

The most carefully worked out model is Michael Fried's. His account of what he calls the "antitheatrical" tradition in French painting and criticism beginning in the generation of Diderot has been developed during the past twenty-five years in a number of books, preeminently *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Fried has provided several introductions to the thematic in other books, so I do not repeat that material here. The claims in *Absorption and Theatricality* are not intended as markers of pictorial modernism as such, and the book does not present itself as an account of modernism's origins. Even so, *Absorption and Theatricality* is one of the most tightly reasoned accounts of a formative difference — a turn, a twist in the sequence of historical understanding as Fried has said in another context — that put painting on a new course beginning in the 1760s. In the final paragraph of the introduction to *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried posited a link between his own writing on art of the 1960s and his scholarship on French painting of the late eighteenth century and concluded, "This book may be understood to have something to say about the eighteenth-century beginnings of the tradition of making and seeing out of which has come the most ambitious and exalted art of our time." It is therefore not reading against the grain of *Absorption and Theatricalit*y to take it as an account of the conditions that continued to inform important painting for the next 200 years.

If the problematic Fried explored in *Absorption and Theatricality* is understood as constitutive of modernism, then modernism becomes a set of problems posed by painting, among them the limitation of painting that expressly addresses its viewer; the strategies for retrieving a kind of viewing that Fried calls "absorptive"; and the differing balances that have had to be struck, at different times since the 1760s, between painting that fails by giving in too easily to the theatrical staging of viewer and viewed and painting that fails by choosing anachronistic, simplified, or otherwise ineffectual strategies for resisting that theatricality. Painting becomes a contested discursive field whose critical terms are given by the contemporary criticism and by the phenomenology of seeing. It would not be accurate to say that Fried's sense of the late eighteenth century or of the thematic of antitheatricality have become commonly accepted models in art history. They are universally cited, in art history and criticism, but seldom engaged. Taken as a model of modernism in painting, Fried's thematic has the interesting property of being at once significantly different from some others — ones I will mention in a moment — and also potentially an explanation for those same models: a point that has not often been registered in the discipline.

A second model that locates the first modernist painting at the close of the eighteenth century is set out in the first chapter of T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of*

*Modernism*. The argument is that David's *Death of Marat* is the "inaugural" modernist painting because after it, painting was "forced to include the accident and tendentiousness of politics in its picture of the world — not just in the things it shows, but in its conception of what showing now is" (see Figure 1.3). The result was a painting that "enacts the contingency of claims to truth and falsehood at the moment it was made." At first it appears that a necessary part of that enactment would be that painting acknowledge its immanent entanglement with the conditions at hand, and therefore with the impossibility of transcendence. But — in characteristic fashion — as soon as Clark said "modernism turns on the impossibility of transcendence," he qualified it in an exact and tortured fashion. Because "modernism is Art," he wrote, and because "Art ... is exactly the site ... on which the impossibility of transcendence can be denied," it must also be that modernism "is a process that deeply misrecognizes its own nature for much of the time." Modernism's enemies think that its "brokenness and ruthlessness" are "willed, forced, and ultimately futile," so that transcendence can still happen under cover of the supposed ruins of culture. On the other hand, modernism's "false friends" say that its insistence on destruction, impossibility, and "extremity" are just the "surface appearance," which serves to protect wholeness and transcendence. Hence modernist painting has to misrecognize itself, misinterpret its own strategies, and misidentify its own embrace of contingency. That is true throughout modernism, which Clark described as being built on the struggle to come to terms with its own repressions and fictions. At the time of the *Marat*, art was not ready "to understand its place in the disenchantment of the world," but that remained true throughout modernism: in fact "the whole history of modernism could be written in terms of its coming, painfully, to such an understanding."

Clark's account has been faulted for its sometimes peculiar readings: for example, the notion that the empty space above Marat conjures the "endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint" and the signal fact that for modernism, technique "is a kind of shame"; or the allied claim that the partly illegible handwriting on Charlotte Corday's note enacts the limits of painting. I do not think the reviews have properly located the principal point, the one that required those elaborations, in essence that the most successful painting after David is a continuous reimagining of the conditions of painting, impelled by the realization that two apparently disparate things have to be linked: the uselessness of the received rules of painting and the hopelessness of proceeding as if painting could be the place where the world is "reenchanted." The third model that places modernism at the end of the eighteenth century is much simpler than Clark's or Fried's; it is Robert Rosenblum's idea that neoclassicism struck a kind of bedrock in the generation around

1800, forcing a reappraisal of painting. Rosenblum's doctoral dissertation was on that subject, and so were several early books, including *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art*. The dissertation, published in 1976 as *The International Style of 1800: A Study in Linear Abstraction,* makes the claim most clearly: according to Rosenblum, painters in Ingres's studio, especially those around Maurice Quaï who called themselves *Les primitifs*, created a style unlike any previous one. The "dream of the tabula rasa," Rosenblum concluded, "has never ceased to haunt and to nourish the imagination of artists working in the modern world." This is not the same as saying that modernism began in 1800, and *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Ar*t is presented as a revisionary account of neoclassicism and the origins of romanticism and not as a theory of modernism. But it is clear that for Rosenblum the years around 1800 are understood as a fulcrum of Western painting. Rosenblum is one of the authors whose works can be surveyed for references to Renaissance painting; there are few, and that alone is enough to suggest that books such as *Transformations* are, in effect, accounts of the origins of modernism.

Properly speaking, Clement Greenberg also belongs in the list of writers who locate modernism's inaugural moments around the end of the eighteenth century, with the spread of the Industrial Revolution and the appearance of the bourgeoisie. The Enlightenment gave rise to modernist painting, in Greenberg's account, by instituting the concept of self-critique. His idea that Kant is "the first real modernist" is meant to provide a genealogy for the self-awareness of modernist painting, which is able "to criticize the means itself of self-criticism," to "use logic to establish the limits of logic." This self-critique is the motivation for modernist painting's rejection of "realistic, naturalistic art," which had "dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art."

Greenberg's sense of the history of modernism is not specific to the period around 1800, and in "Modernist Painting" he mentions David, Manet, the impressionists, and Cézanne in succession, but the putative origins of modernism are in the political, philosophic, and social conditions of art in the late eighteenth century. It is telling, for example, that David is imagined as reacting against Fragonard; the time frame is clear, even given that the opposition is rhetorical, and that "Fragonard" is an emblem for painting that remained in thrall of naturalism. 18 I will have more to say about Greenberg later, because he associated the crux of modernism — and therefore, in another sense, an origin of modernism — with abstract expressionism.

The four accounts I have chosen to represent the idea that modernism began around 1800 — Fried's, Clark's, Rosenblum's, and Greenberg's — could be augmented by many others. Barbara Stafford, for example, has written about

modernist qualities in what she called "ideographic" art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "It was precisely in the eighteenth century," she wrote, "that the persisting rationalist philosophical attitude toward images hardened into systems," opening the way to the visuality typical of modernism and postmodernism. Horst Bredekamp, another specialist in those centuries, has written about modernist visuality in Leibniz, Hobbes, and early scientific illustration.

This open-ended list provides an occasion to develop the problem of the incompatibility of such theories. On one hand these theories could all be considered as perspectives on the same material, and therefore potentially equally true. In particular these four or six theories about the late-eighteenth-century origins of modernist painting are in rough agreement about modernism's *terminus post quem*, and they depend on many of the same painters. The same could not be said for some of the theories I will discuss next, and so it might seem reasonable to say that these are compatible alternatives and that others I will come to in a moment are different. On the other hand there are good reasons to consider even these four or six theories as rivals whose relations are still undecided.

In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried said that attempts to explain eighteenth-century French painting by appealing to the "social, economic, and political reality of the age" are "misconceived." His own account, he said, "is intended at once to repudiate prevailing social interpretations of the subject and to dissolve various confusions to which those interpretations have given rise." Social art history is one target of Fried's interpretation, and historians — such as Rosenblum — who rely on periods are another. Fried proposed to replace the usual sequence of "Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, etc." with "a single, self-renewing, in important respects dialectical undertaking." These objections are not raised against named scholars, but they show the limits of compatibility between Fried's account and the others I have mentioned. The same has to hold, logically speaking, for their compatibility with Fried's account. I imagine that in a world freed of friendships and academic obligations, talk about the incompatibility of these models would turn on the claim, implicit in each, that it holds interpretive power over the others. The metamodel for these models would then be something like Einstein's encompassing of Newton's theories, or João Magueijo and Andreas Albrecht's encompassing of Einstein's theories. The rivals are not wrong, but their models would be seen as incomplete or restricted. In the current state of the discipline, those discussions have not taken place, and the result can be a misleading sense of perspectivism: that each theory seems to be a partial account, compatible at root with the others.

3. Modernism Begins in the Generation of Manet and Baudelaire

It is again Fried who has made the most elaborate defense of Manet as the inaugural modernist painter (see Figure 1.4). His three-part argument, which I do not summarize here, includes the idea that Manet wanted to establish "the universality of his painting with respect to the major national schools," and that he did so in part by quotations and references to the history of painting. The sense that painting after Manet became newly dependent on references to its own history is a different kind of claim than those I have mentioned so far. It is also different from literary-critical discussions of modernism, which often begin in the generation of Manet and Baudelaire, but then diverge from visual art. Some literary histories of modernism start with Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" and especially his claims for the importance of "the representation of the present," which is a theme that is well developed in the art historical literature. But literary histories then continue on through Zola, symbolism, and Anglo-American literary modernism — Yeats, Woolf, Lewis, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Lawrence. There are other reasons to consider Manet's generation as the starting point of pictorial modernism aside from painting's new subject matter and its new sense of dependence on its own history. I will name several others later; it appears that this point of origin might be the most heterogeneous of all.

4. Modernism Begins with Cézanne or Picasso

The claim that Cézanne and Picasso (or, more broadly, post-impressionism and cubism, respectively) are the foundation of modernism in painting depends on the notion that they worked to dismantle coherent perspectival space (see Figure 1.5). The claim is debatable when it takes its more radical forms — that space was destroyed, overturned, or abandoned, rather than modified. The theory, first disseminated by critics such as Roger Fry, is popular in undergraduate textbooks as a convenient way to introduce twentieth-century painting. Curiously, even though this account is the one most often repeated in first-year college textbooks, it is the least theorized, and the versions I have seen are not in accord with Fry's insistence on the continuity between modern and premodern pictorial composition. Indeed it is not clear to me that Cézanne's or Picasso's alleged destruction of pictorial space, regardless of the truth of the claim, is a concept that organizes much of current thinking about twentieth-century painting or modernism. Even in Greenberg's account, what matters is not the specific strategies that can be deduced from canvases by Picasso or Cézanne but the increases in painting's reflexiveness or self-referentiality, and concomitantly its capacity for self-critique.

The origin of modernism in the destruction of rational perspectival space is an orphaned concept, crucial to

introductory pedagogy but disconnected from the discipline's concerns. (It resurfaces in the theory of modernism as skill, which I will consider later.) The problem, therefore, in accounts of modernism that depend on the destruction of rational fictive space is how the alleged destruction tallies with the many other ways of conceiving modernism.

## 5. Modernism and North American Abstract Expressionism

In contemporary art practice, abstract expressionism and abstraction more generally are common de facto starting places for modernist painting, because they provide the putative opposites of current practices (see Figure 1.6). Greenberg's criticism has been read in this way by emphasizing certain texts and artists. Because this is the position most often associated with Greenberg, I will pause a moment to expand on the dissemination of ideas about his writing.

It is important, first, not to assume Greenberg's influence is evenly distributed throughout the world. In the United States and in England, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, and France, he tends to be considered the most important critic of the second half of the twentieth century, and his influence on the shape of art history is acknowledged if not undisputed. Ph.D. theses are written about him, and he is a recurring subject in seminars and colloquia. At the beginning of the twenty-first century in those countries, painters tend to think of Greenberg as the opposite of whatever sense of painting they are pursuing. Elsewhere in the world — especially, I find, in Spain, Portugal, Italy, central and eastern Europe, Latin America, and China — Greenberg is either marginal or wholly unknown. I have been told that in South Korea he is commonly cited as an example of an art theory that is peculiarly American. In Central and South America there is only one book about Greenberg, edited by the art historian Glória Ferreira; the book also has translations from texts by Fried and Rosalind Krauss. A conference held in Mexico City in fall 2002 was the first colloquium ever held in Mexico on Greenberg; its organizer told me he had trouble convincing people the subject was important, and one critic even expressed doubt that it was worthwhile to convene a conference on any critic. The contributors, who included Laurence Le Bouhellec, Issa Benítez, Yishai Judisman, and David Pagel, had varied opinions about Greenberg's necessity and importance. As far as I can tell, that forum has faded from memory, and so has Ferreira's book. Much of the world has yet to encounter Greenberg, and there is reason to think that in many places his ideas will never be regarded as important ones.

In North America, on the other hand, Greenberg's modernism is easily the most influential model of modernist painting; it is common for graduate art history students interested in painting

after 1945 to study Greenberg, and for painting students to take up and often refute his questions as a way of defining their own practices. Greenberg's choices have also made many painters nearly invisible to Anglo-American scholarship; I do not know any North American critics or historians who have written at length on Jean Fautrier, Simon Hantaï, Philippe Hosiasson, or Pierre Soulages (see Figure 1.7). In my experience American graduate art history students often do not even know about them.

These blindnesses are sustained by a very powerful body of writing, which compels an answer from everyone who encounters it. For the purposes of this argument, I will distinguish four groups of responders to Greenberg's work: those who reject him, those who are interested in his early work, those who follow the later work, and those — the remainder, and therefore the majority of the world — who have never read or heard of him.

I would estimate that the majority of contemporary North American painters take the first option, avoiding Greenberg's work altogether, either by claiming that it is an unhelpful formalism or by taking it as the sign of a reductive practice that disallows other media. In both readings Greenberg is thought to have been interested only in the flatness of the canvas, the shape of the support, and the capacity of abstract paintings to refer to themselves. This misreading bundles three separate misunderstandings together under the name Greenberg: formalism, taken to mean that the painting depends entirely on its materials and not on its context or the artist's intention; self-referentiality, understood as an inflexible criterion of good art; and an antipsychological stress on what is taken to be pure vision and opticality. All three serve as justifications for a range of contemporary practices that are, among other things, opposites of those three positions. This is an "elitist" reading, as Clark put it: it is as if "the monster called 'Greenberg' has to be humbled and ridiculed time after time — as if the culture needed reminding how dreadful the idea of 'art' was, before it gave way to that of 'visual culture.'" This first reading of Greenberg can be easily questioned by recourse to the primary texts, but in my experience that has not stopped art students and art history students from a kind of productive "loathing" of Greenberg.

A second reading emphasizes the early writings, especially "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939). Despite the fact that more than 300 essays on kitsch appeared between 1884 and 1939, "Avant-garde and Kitsch" is easily the most influential text on the subject. It would be possible to reduce its significance by showing Greenberg's dependence on the earlier literature. It might be interesting to try reviving some of the better earlier essays (especially Hermann Broch's provocative text), but those exercises would miss the point of Greenberg's influence. For several generations since its reissue in 1961, "Avant-garde and

Kitsch" has been the definitive statement about the importance and fragility of the avant-garde.

The core argument is easily summarized. In Greenberg's view mass culture is an ongoing threat to fine art, because it appropriates and dilutes the work of the avant-garde. Serious artists and critics have to be vigilant about the real avant-garde. The economy of art sketched in "Avant-garde and Kitsch" is strictly one-way. Art is produced in conditions of some mystery, apart from the normal class structures of society, and then society consumes the result: not only by appreciating, emulating, and studying it as fine art but also by watering it down so it is palatable to less adventurous tastes, and ultimately bowdlerizing and debasing it. Greenberg defined kitsch several times; according to the first two definitions, kitsch "operates by formulas" and produces "vicarious experience and faked sensations."

"Avant-garde and Kitsch" also insists, famously, that "the avant-garde moves"; once it has produced something new, that thing immediately begins to tarnish in the corrupt air of bourgeois appreciation. The avant-garde artist then has to strike camp and move on. A permanent avant-garde is an impossibility, a self-contradiction. An avant-garde artist has to be continuously inventive, unpredictable, elusive, nomadic. The avant-garde needs to be the rule that escapes all rules; otherwise its bourgeois pursuers would be onto its game.

Embracing kitsch is arguably no longer a daring thing to do, because kitschy artwork no longer implies a rejection of the avant-garde. In practice, art that appears as kitsch may be understood as work with a particular kind of avant-garde ambition, the idea being to show radicalism by being insouciant about kitsch. Pop art began the flirtation with kitsch, and now art students paint in DayGlo colors, use spray insulation foam, and make collages with commercial linoleum. Jeff Koons's place in the history of twentieth-century art is assured in part because of his apparently deeply sincere endorsement of kitsch ideas and kitsch media. Works such as Koons's might have been less outrageous and annoying if a generation of artists beginning in the early 1960s had not been reading "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (then newly available in book form).

The third reaction to Greenberg turns on his late work, especially the essay "Post-Painterly Abstraction." What matters here is that a thoughtful reading of Greenberg's later writings requires a commitment specifically to painting. In a Greenbergian view, video, installation art, performance, and other multimedia experiments have to be considered marginal and misguided because painting remains the central Western visual art. (Sculpture, which also interested Greenberg, is a close

second.) In this reading of Greenberg, artists who do not feel the historical pressure of painting are not experiencing the force of a fully historical awareness of twentieth-century art, and those who opt for other media might be doing so to escape the demands of painting. After postpainterly abstraction, it became exceedingly difficult to make a successful painting by the criteria that have been derived from Greenberg's later essays, but the same essays support the idea that painting has not yet run its historical course. In this reading, the questions raised by multimedia art are likely to be ill-formed versions of problems that can best be proposed by painting. An easy way to fail, therefore, is to do something other than paint, or to adulterate painting in facile ways — by bolting a painting to a goat and a tire as Rauschenberg did, or by turning painting into performance as Yves Klein did.

Greenberg's tacit rejection of everything outside some painting and sculpture is irritating for many art students and younger artists. From their perspective Greenberg seems so patently out of touch with what has happened since pop art that he does not deserve to be taken seriously. Here I think it is important to be circumspect. Even though the majority of working artists would not subscribe to the doctrine that painting is the central visual art, and even though the majority of contemporary painters in North America and Europe would not agree with Greenberg's sense of painting's history, his ideas are still very much at work. His account of modernist painting remains the most powerful model, and ideals such as reflexivity and the generative importance of an avant-garde are insinuated in contemporary criticism even when the subject is installation, video, or performance art.

The fourth reading of Greenberg is the most widespread. Readers who do not know who Greenberg is — who would not recognize his name — can still be influenced by him when they read texts that are influenced by his writing. In my experience the moving-target model of the avant-garde is one of the first observable effects of Greenbergian high modernism in places that have not yet discovered Greenberg's texts. In Hangzhou, China, in 1999, I found Chinese art students trying hard to understand *Artforum, Art in America,* and other journals even though they could read only a few words of English, and even though some professed not to care about Western art. That compulsive interest in the new can be assigned to an older tradition of modernism, but the sense that the new work can be appreciated immediately, without words or context, is markedly Greenbergian. The Chinese students were anxious that their work would not appear old-fashioned, and the best insurance against that was that it be aligned with whatever was new. By the standards of North American or European art schools, the Chinese students were also disproportionately attached to painting — another Greenbergian trait. They knew Xu Bing (b.

1955) and other internationally exhibited Chinese artists, but the majority were interested in painting.

In my experience outside North America and Europe, and in general anywhere except major urban centers, painting is likely to be considered the principal visual art. It is easily the most popular visual art worldwide. Part of the reason for that can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when painting was more a universal bourgeois art in the way that piano playing also was; but part of the reason is the invisible dissemination of high modernist ideals, including Greenberg's. This fourth reading of Greenberg usually reveals itself by an anxious interest in the avant-garde, and by an ongoing commitment to painting.

I have discussed Greenberg's writing at greater length than the other theories of modernism because I find it is the most influential. At the same time judging his influence is rarely a question of looking at what he actually wrote beyond the best-known texts, and often enough it is a question not of texts at all but of received ideas.

Greenberg's criticism has come to stand for a trajectory of twentieth-century painting that is widely recognizable. It forms the backbone of most world-art survey texts, and it is a commonplace in introductory pedagogy. (It leads, roughly speaking, from Manet, Cézanne, Picasso, and Braque through North American abstract expressionism and postpainterly abstraction.) What is more problematic is the continuation of modernist painting following abstract expressionism and color field painting. After the mid-1960s, modernist painting retreated under pressure from minimalism, pop, and new media. The remaining modernist painters — those promoted by Fried and Greenberg, for example — tend to be cited as marginal examples, or to find niche markets. Late in his life Greenberg became interested in a group known as the New New Painting, which includes Roy Lerner (b. 1954; see Figure 1.8), Anne Low (b. 1944), Lucy Baker (b. 1955), Steve Brent (b. 1953), Joseph Drapell (b. 1940), and John Gittins (b. 1940).38 Their work descends from color field painting of Jules Olitski (b. 1922), Larry Poons (b. 1937), Kenneth Noland (b. 1924), and Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), but it incorporates "iridescent 'interference' color, glitter paint, fluorescents, cement-like pumice paint, and metallic paint," and it tends to be focused on the mass and viscosity of the paint. In Roy Lerner's work, stutter-step brush marks put some order into work that is otherwise reminiscent of Hans Hoffman (1880–1966). Brent has experimented with ways of using acrylic gel to create sculpturelike masses of paint that are apparently without support. Several of the New New painters have had formative encounters with modernism and color field painting. Brent was inspired by a 1984 visit to Jules Olitski, and Lerner has said he had a good review from Clement Greenberg and a formative

meeting with Kenneth Noland (during which Noland cut his canvases into pieces and made collages out of them).

Because of their modernist genealogy, the New New painters have had publicity problems. The critic David Carrier has noted that even the work of the surviving color field painters was "very hard to properly judge" at the end of the century, and that the "entirely understandable tendency of the New New painters to attach themselves to Greenberg's taste ... tends to mark them as nostalgic." There is some disagreement among the New New painters about Greenberg's attitude to New New Painting.

Graham Peacock remembers Greenberg found it "not to his taste," but Lucy Baker has encouraging letters from Greenberg. As both Carrier and the critic Donald Kuspit have argued, New New Painting can be described as doing something very different from what Greenberg meant to champion, but I wonder how far from abstract expressionism and color field painting the New New Painting can go as a movement. Gittins is one of the older painters associated with the group; in the 1980s he was making narrow vertical paintings, mostly bare canvas, with paint extruded down the middle in large loops. By the late 1990s he was painting over the whole surface in a manner reminiscent of late De Kooning. Baker's paintings are Pollock-like in terms of gesture but use "marbles, fluorescent and holographed glitter."

The critical framework in which such painting can be seen apart from the legacy of abstract expressionism and color field painting does not yet exist.

The most interesting example of work that is "very hard to properly judge" on account of its proximity to modernist standards is radical painting, a loose group of artists that includes Joseph Marioni (b. 1943), whom Fried has acknowledged as a way forward for painting, through minimalism as it were. To my eye, the most important radical painter is the German Günter Umberg (b. 1942). His signature style paintings are on small rectangular pieces of metal (see Figure 1.9). He sprays a mixture of dry pigments onto the surface, and then sprays fixative on top. He does that forty or fifty times for each painting, creating a surface that appears dry, powdery, and perfectly flat. Some paintings (I do not consider them the most successful) are in bright colors, but most are done with a mixture of very dark pigments so that the paintings appear to be black. Umberg stresses the radicalism of his practice, connecting it with minimalism and claiming it reduces painting to the surface. My own reading is different, because I find traces of gesture in the painting that make it decisively but incrementally distinct from minimalist physicality. Seen from just a few inches away, Umberg's dark paintings take on an unsurpassable density; it seems possible to detect layers of gestural marks just at the limit of vision. The resulting pictorial

space appears impacted, as if it has been crushed into a very slight depth — subjectively, about a quarter inch. The color, too, seems constrained; it is not black but a nearly black mixture of indefinable colors. The effect is like looking at a naturalistic painting in a pitch-black room: space and color seem to be present but compressed and charred. The paintings are at once extremely rich in the possibility of gesture, and nearly (but not wholly) perfect in their adherence to the minimalist notion of flat physical surface.

Umberg is a perfect example of the dilemma of modernist painting at the end of the century. On one hand, if the viewer refuses to countenance the gestural traces in his work, Umberg's painting can be interpreted as a practice faithful to minimalism. On the other hand, if the density and near invisibility of the gestural traces keep the work at an incremental distance from the perfect minimalist surface, then the practice carries on high modernist concerns. In the first reading, Umberg is a perhaps unnecessarily refined heir of Robert Morris. In the second reading, he is an attenuated descendent of Ad Reinhardt. (From close up, the density of Umberg's surfaces is a strong answer to the weakly painted washes in Reinhardt's paintings, but the small scale and precious look of Umberg's work means it cannot compete at a distance.) I would argue for the second option, because it seems to me that Umberg is far more interesting as a last opportunity for painting after minimalism. Either way, the only available context for interpretation is modernist, and the only terms are those elaborated by Greenberg and Fried. The philosopher Henry Staten has written a long essay on Marioni in particular, claiming radical painting can be understood in terms set forth in Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood." The same discursive field can be used to argue that Umberg "has something of the character of a new beginning" after minimalism, as Fried says of Marioni. In the present context what matters is that Umberg's painting is underwritten by a critical discourse that was applied to only a small number of paintings by the end of the century. His solution to the problem of continuing painting in the terms set out by modernist criticism is the most ambitious I know. The question that cannot be adjudicated within the language of modernism is whether it is significant that so few painters speak that language or take that sense of twentieth-century painting seriously.

**James Elkins**