

Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam

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# Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam\*

T. J. CLARK

Over the past twelve months or so I found myself thinking about modern art and steam—steam compressed, but also steam dispersing. Partly this was accidental. It so happened that I opened the pages of the *New York Times* in late October 2000 to a photograph of an open-air installation piece by Tony Oursler—a huge, and, by the look of it, frightening, image of a face projected onto a cloud of water vapor. The face, as those of you familiar with Oursler's cast of image-characters will immediately guess, cannot stop talking. It has a lot on its mind. Gradually one begins to gather from its ranting monologue that the face's main problem is the Internet. The face is a ghost, or a soul, or a spirit seeking rest after death—part of a great family of such spirits. And rest has become impossible. For some reason the Internet has invaded the world of these spirits and taken over their wavelengths. So they are coming back to do battle with the digital enemy. Real ghosts want room not to breathe in. How can people die, finally, if their last resting place is continually invaded by fragments of drivel from the chat room?

Oursler calls his installation *The Influence Machine*. I see it as a kind of technological, digitized replay of the scenario played out at the end of W. B. Yeats's poem "The Cold Heaven" (1916):

. . . Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,  
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent  
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken  
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

The question that closes Yeats's poem is a real one, or real to the poet, and meant to occur to the reader as real. Yeats believed in ghosts, and certainly believed in the possibility of endless agony, fueled forever by a life unfulfilled—not stopped

\* What follows is the text of a lecture originally delivered in November 2000 at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona as part of a series entitled "Modernitats," and then at the New School University in April 2001. The essay incorporates some elements from my "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review* 2, March–April 2000. I have made only minimal changes to its first-person, lecture-hall format, and in particular decided not to rewrite my responses to Oursler's ghost dance in the light of recent events.



*Tony Oursler. The Influence Machine.  
2000. Photo: Aaron Diskin. Courtesy the  
artist and Public Art Fund.*

for a minute by mere physical extinction. Yeats was a modernist, in short. He thought life had some horrible, but also ecstatic and beautiful, core; and that the task of art was to plunge the reader or viewer back into that horror and ecstasy, at least for as long as the poem lasted. I take it that Tony Oursler does not share this ambition. His ghosts are not for real. Or, rather, for the space of the art work, we are meant to be in two minds about whether we should take them seriously or not—whether taking the art work seriously involves taking them *unseriously*. Whether, for instance, we should take the faces as a kind of metaphor (and here might be their seriousness) for the wish for a life of the spirit that goes on unappeasedly haunting our present ideology of information. In other words, these might be ghosts that the Internet itself dreams up, as part of the hopeless array of occultism and “spirituality” always dancing attendance on the disenchantment of the world. As Theodor Adorno put it long ago,

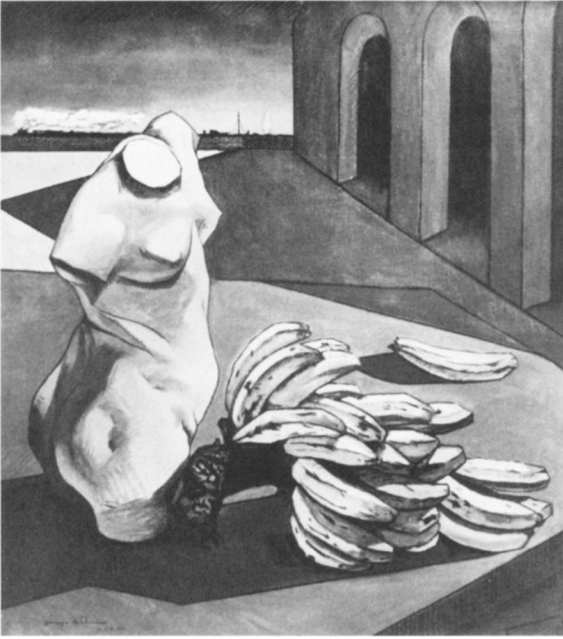
The occultist draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish character of commodities: the menace of objectified labor attacks him on all sides as a set of objects, demonic and grimacing. . . . The bent little fortune tellers terrorizing their clients with crystal balls are toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands.<sup>1</sup>

This seems to speak to the Oursler somehow. The Oursler knows it is *playing* at terrorizing us. It is proud to display its terror apparatus. Steam and video are its media. It is a machine—Oursler’s title insists on the fact. And the machine is meant not to convince us. We shall never wipe the postmodern smile off our faces.

Once I had seen the photograph of *The Influence Machine*, and started to think about the way it spoke to our present utopia of information, I could not stop coming up with points of comparison for it from the art of the last 150 years. I thought of the end of modernism in the late 1960s, and of steam, in Robert Morris, as the figure of that ending. I read Morris’s steam piece as essentially a literalization of the previous century’s pursuit of abstraction, reduction, and dematerialization—its wish to give art over to the moment, the event, to pure contingency. I had my doubts about what Morris’s literalization of these impulses did—whether to literalize them was to banalize them—but at least I understood, or thought I understood, where Morris was coming from. And I knew he knew he was at the end of something, so maybe even the banality of the metaphor was deliberate—it showed us what modernism amounted to by 1968. This still left me with the problem of what Oursler achieved by giving Morris’s steam a face. That is, by projecting onto modernism’s emptying and dispersal enough of an apparition, a suffering subject, a stream of words.

Then, of course, I began to realize that steam, in the art of the last two centuries, was never unequivocally a figure of emptying and evanescence. It was

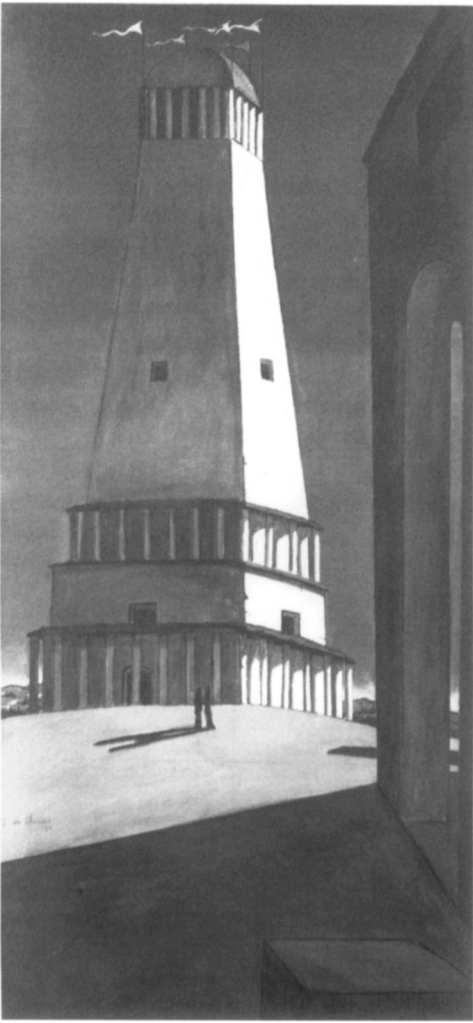
1. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. from the German by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso Editions, 1978), pp. 239–40.



Giorgio de Chirico. *The Uncertainty of the Poet*. 1913. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.

always also an image of power. Steam could be harnessed; steam could be compressed. Steam was what initially made the machine world possible. It was the middle term in mankind's great reconstruction of Nature. *Rain, Steam, and Speed*. The speed that followed from compression turns the world into one great vortex in the Turner, one devouring spectral eye, where rain, sun, cloud, and river are seen, from the compartment window, as they have never been seen before. Steam is power and possibility, then; but also, very soon, it is antiquated—it is a figure of nostalgia, for a future, or a sense of futurity, that the modern age had at the beginning but could never make come to pass. Hence the trails or puffs of steam always on the horizon of de Chirico's dreamscapes. A train races by across the Imperial desert. It looks as though the Banana Republic is producing the requisite goods. Or are we already belated visitors here, tourists, gawping at ruins half-overtaken by the sand? Is modernity spreading and multiplying still to the ends of the earth—setting up its statues and smokestacks, having its great city perspectives march off into the distance as far as the eye can see? Or is this a retrospect, a collection of fragments? A cloud of steam in de Chirico is often glimpsed between the columns of an empty arcade. Once upon a time the arches led to the station, and people hurried to catch the express. Not anymore. Once upon a time people gloried in the vastness of the new perspectives, and built themselves dream-houses devoted to the worship of cog wheels and tensile strength. But modernity was always haunted by the idea that this moment of dreaming, of infinite possibility, was over.

That is what is meant, I think, by de Chirico's great title of 1914, *Nostalgia of the Infinite*. A great title, but one whose tone (as so often in de Chirico, and in modernism as a whole) is impossible to pin down. No doubt an interpretation is



bound to be steered by our knowing that the year in question was fated, and fatal, and sensed to be so at the time—you did not have to be a gloomy Nietzschean to feel, in 1914, that the infinite was about to be put to death. But even here, at this terrible turning point, the nostalgia was strong. It matters, I think, that de Chirico's engineer father was in charge of building the railroad from Athens to Corinth. De Chirico's art is partly a series of attempts to return again to that founding moment, and revel again in Father's victory—modernity's victory—over natural obstacles, his turning of antiquity into decor seen from a speeding carriage.

We could ask of the Tony Oursler, by contrast, whether in it steam and the machine have left in them any suggestion—any memory—of possibility and power. Or is what they produce just so much illusion? *The Influence Machine*, Oursler calls his piece. "Influence" is a dead, dispiriting word. (In America it comes with a price tag.) The men and women in the Galerie des Machines in 1889 were not "influenced" by the mechanics of modernity. They were dwarfed by it, maybe; crushed by it;

but also elated and magnified. The machines were their creations. Adorno is doubtless right that objectified labor is menacing, and in a sense demonic; but in modernity it is also wonderful, heavenly. If Oursler's machine no longer plays out this dialectic, even vestigially, then it may be true that we have left modernity behind.

My key term of comparison with the Oursler, therefore, is Manet's *Le Chemin de fer*. Steam is this painting's great subject, clearly; and how people relate to steam, how they face it or do not face it; how they turn to face us. It does not take much ingenuity to see that steam in the Manet is a metaphor for a general, maybe constitutive, instability—for things in modernity incessantly changing their shape, hurrying forward, dispersing, and growing impalpable. The picture is perfectly conscious of the fact that their doing so is deeply appealing. It is a sight for sore eyes. We all like watching the trains go by. But steam in *Le Chemin de fer* is also a figure for that shifting and impalpability getting into the texture of life. Steam is a

*de Chirico. Nostalgia of the Infinite. 1913–1914.*  
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metaphor for appearance, and appearances here being transitory, and for some reason also thoroughly guarded. Steam is the surface that life as a whole is becoming. The girl and the governess are put in a space that is more like a cage than a *terrain vague*. From railings to picture plane there are no more than two or three feet.

Steam and appearance, then: that is certainly Manet's ruling trope. But not simply appearance canceling depth, and ruling out inwardness altogether. Manet and modernism never go that far. The governess is reading and dreaming. For a moment she may be all outwardness and facingness, but she still has two fingers keeping her place in her book. Maybe steam could also be a metaphor for the freedom of the imagination. But then we look again at those implacable railings, dividing and ruling the rectangle, pressing everything up to the picture surface. Surfaces are too easily *organized*, that is the trouble with modern mobility and anonymity. Always in the new city freedom (evanescence) is the other side of frozenness and constraint.

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As I followed the trail of images opened up by the Oursler—looking in particular at *The Influence Machine* and *Le Chemin de fer* side by side—it dawned on me that what I was thinking about was the difference between modernism and

*Edouard Manet. The Railway. 1873. Photo © 2002  
Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.*

postmodernism. Steam was my way of figuring out the relation between the art of the past thirty years or so and that of the previous long century—let us call it the century of de Chirico and Yeats. I liked the fact that this had crept up on me as a subject, but, once it had, alarm bells rang. I am no expert on contemporary art. I am conscious of living deliberately in a modernist past, and of feeling a depth of identification with certain modernist art works, which has made it hard for me to give much of the art of the last two decades its due. I realize also—this realization has come upon me lately—that even in the period of my life when I did feel a vital connection with the art going on around me I got the art wrong. My militant hostility to Andy Warhol, for example, has not stood the test of time. I wish in retrospect that I had been able to recognize the strangeness and interest of Don Judd's sculpture. And so on. It is not that I fail to remember why I made these mistakes; and part of me persists in seeing them as necessary, or at least productive—for myself and others back then, in the heat of the moment. It was the sixties. The question of art was posed for a while in extreme form, as an all or nothing choice. I know why I opted for the "all." And of course those of us who did so knew full well at the time that opting for the all—the all of the end of art, and art's realization in revolutionary practice—might end up as opting for nothing. We were not fools; we knew the cards of culture were stacked massively against us. I see now that Warhol's pragmatism or Judd's egocentricity were moves in the same bewildering endgame—bewildering because it came on us so fast and unexpectedly—and in a sense more realistic moves, because less convinced the end was arriving, or maybe more willing to adopt a strategy that would result in certain limited gains (aesthetic gains, essentially) whether the end came or not. Again, I have no regrets for not seeing this as it happened. On the contrary: being crucially mistaken about the art of the present, or running the risk of the mistake's being crucial and crippling, may be the basis on which any serious criticism, as opposed to refereeing or promotion, has to go forward—most of all criticism now. I am just saying that whatever else this essay may be, it is not likely to be a reliable guide to current form.

Let me also admit to a level of continuing anger at the caricature of modernism that has so often passed for characterization in the art world over the past twenty years. Obviously, new movements need to take a distance from their forebears. Killing the father is a fact of artistic life. But killing a cardboard replica of the father, which bears as much resemblance to the real one as a wooden hobbyhorse to a horse—this seems to me utterly futile, and a guarantee of bad, self-righteous, simplistic work. I believe we need to understand modernism, in other words, if we are ever genuinely to get out from under its shadow.

Most of this essay, it follows, is devoted to thinking again about what modernism was. But I do want to make a link with the present. I want to talk about the nature of modernism with the following question always in mind: "If this was modernism, then what would escaping from it to another paradigm of artistic production be like?" Are we in the process of such an escape? In particular—and



this I take to be the central challenge presented by the Oursler—if I understand modernism to be a form of art somehow deeply attuned to certain facts and possibilities of modern life (of the form of life called modernity), then do I not think that the life we are living now is sufficiently different from that lived by Manet or Picasso or Jackson Pollock to deserve a new description—even if I may think it has not yet got one? Maybe just putting a “*post-*” on the front of modernism is inadequate, but would I not agree that modernity has been reconfigured in the last thirty or forty years? Reconfigured to the point of becoming something else.

And is not part of that reconfiguration a new form of visibility spreading like a virus through the culture at large—a new machinery of visualization, a tipping of the social balance from a previous regime of the word to a present regime of the image? Surely that circumstance offers visual art a special opportunity? Is it not uniquely placed to enter into a dialogue with what has now emerged as the central means of production of a newly imagined Life? Or will what looks to be a unique opportunity turn out to be exactly the problem? Will the closeness of visual art to the actual present instrumentation of power—the current means of production of subjects—turn out to be not closeness but identity? Is not visual art in the process of becoming simply and irrevocably *part of* the apparatus of image-Life production? Is not this the real sense of the much-noticed fact (a flip through the pages of *Parkett* or *Artforum* confirms the fact relentlessly, monotonously) that the line of demarcation between visual art and the fashion industry, for instance, simply no longer exists? Not only does it not exist, but art glories in its nonexistence. The nonexistence is one of art’s great affirmative themes.

Do not leap to conclusions here. I shall not go on to posit a modernism, in contrast to the present situation, that once stood at a safe critical distance from the image-regimes that truly had power in the culture at large. Modernism always existed in close, dangerous proximity to the realm of appearances it fed on. No doubt the Manet speaks to that. Modernism’s motto was the great phrase from the young Marx’s critique of Hegel: Modernists believed it was necessary for any art, any Realism, to take the forms of the present deeply inside itself, at the risk of mimicry, almost ventriloquism; but that out of that might come the possibility of critique, of true destabilization—they would “teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song.”<sup>2</sup>

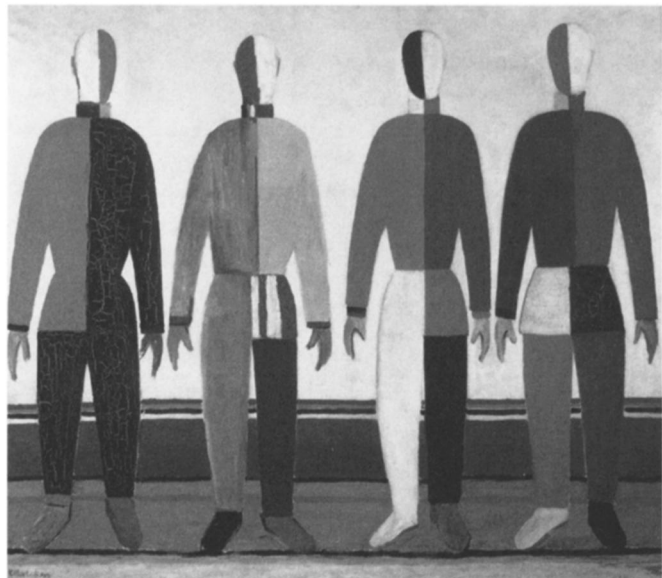
The question of this essay, then, is whether such a possibility is still open to art. You will not get a crisp answer to it in what follows. I do not know enough to give one. Maybe none of us do. But at least I think I have an idea of what is involved in asking the question. If what we want is to know whether the art of the present day might still be able to “teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song,” then surely we need to have ideas about what is truly petrified and petrifying in the current world of image-production and symbol-

2. Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Introduction,” in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books; London: New Left Review, 1975), p. 247, translation modified.

management. “Petrified,” on the face of it, seems a strange word to apply to what we are living through. The image-world seems not to be turning its objects, or even its users and viewers, to stone, but rather into water, or vapor, or pure spatiality, pure virtuality. I promise to come back to this. But it seems to me we need to ask another question first. If we think the task of art is to unlock the utopian potential in our current forms of life—to pull them away from their present freezing and derealizing of potentialities “by singing them their own song”—then we have to know what “singing them their own song” might involve. What is the difference between dead mimicry and live (uncanny) “giving voice”? Here is where modernism is most important to us. For, of course, we cannot ask that question in the abstract. We can only ask it of modernism, which is the example we have of an art setting itself such a task. What did modernism think was involved in “singing [the petrified forms] their own song”? It is *singing* that Marx talks about, not saying, not writing out prosaically. Singing is an aesthetic act. How exactly did the modernists sing? In what key? With what emancipation of the dissonance?

\*

Let me start again from the Manet, and try to make the components of its modernism more vivid by placing alongside it other strong images that stand, I hope, for modernism as a whole. I shall start with the obvious, the indisputable. Modernism, so everyone roughly agrees, was a kind of formalism. Modernists put a peculiar stress on the physical, technical facts of the medium they were working in. They wished a painting to relish—and not just to relish, to reiterate—the fact of the painting’s flatness, the fact of its handmadeness, the fact of its being a jigsaw of flat



*Kasimir Malevich. Sportsmen.  
ca. 1928–32.*

pieces locked into position on the plane. Both the Manet and the Malevich speak to that. Their means of ordering are explicit, almost schematic. The black bars or the splitting of bodies into vertical segments are meant to dramatize the picture's breakup of the world into formal elements or particles. The picture has to look, at least partly, like a compositional machine.

But already, as I begin to describe the particular nature of modernism's formalism, we are face-to-face with the other side of the equation. I said that modernists put a peculiar stress on the facts of the medium. But surely the accent here should fall on "stress" and on the stress being so often deeply "peculiar." Modernism is the form formalism took in conditions of modernity—the form it took as it tried to devise an *answer* to modernity. And that form was stressed and aberrant. Either formal order was foregrounded—one might say fetishized—to the point that it registered as positively an imposition, a prefabrication, a set of machine-made templates. Or form was dispersed—pushed toward the point of emptiness or mere random juxtaposition—discovered always on the verge of incompetence or

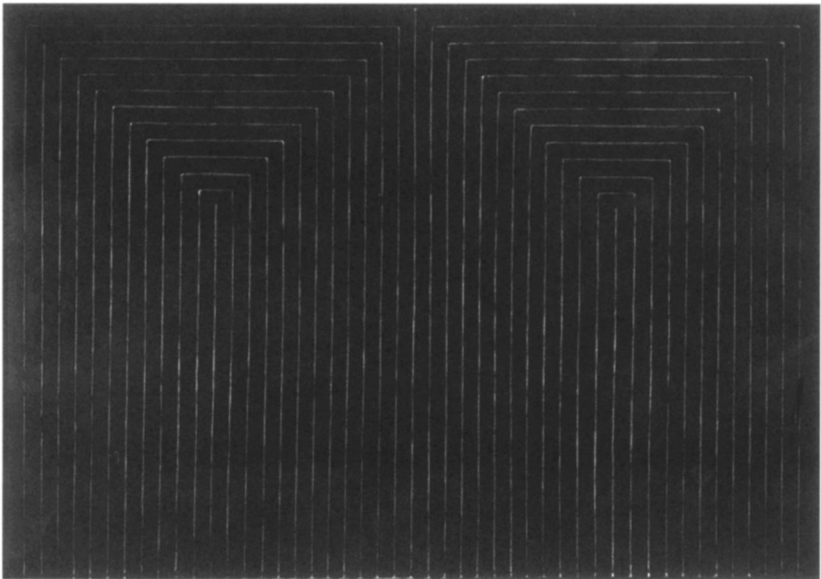


*Henri Matisse. View of Notre Dame. 1914.*  
© Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS)/New York and 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

arbitrariness. Form in modernism seemingly existed at the intersection of pure repetition and pure difference. Form and monotony went together. Or form and undifferentiation. Form and infantilism, form and undisciplined scrawling. Form had somehow to be a figure of the two great principles that gave modernity its character—on the one hand the reality of machine regularity and uniformity, on the other that of a profound social randomness and evacuation. You could say of the purest products of modernism (and, for all their difference of mode, the Manet and the Stella seem to me comparable in this) that in them an excess of order interacts with an excess of contingency. And that this formal principle is thought to speak to something deep in the lived texture of modernity as a whole. *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, as Stella's title has it.

Form in modernism, I am saying, was discovered time and again—typically, seemingly necessarily—in some extreme state or limit condition. Formalism was extremism: that seems to me the fact about modernism that needs explaining. My explanation is as follows.

Modernism was an approach to modernity. It was interested in the images and occasions of modern life, at least part of the time, but also, more deeply, in modernity's means of representation—the deep structure of symbolic production and reproduction within it. Somewhere at the heart of that symbolic order lay two great dreams, or two great offers. The first proposed that the world was becoming modern because it was turning into a space inhabited by free individual subjects, each dwelling in sensuous immediacy. The world was becoming a pattern of privacies—of appetites, possessions, accumulations. And these appetites were enough to make a world. In the realm of economy, they gave rise to markets. In the



*Frank Stella. The Marriage of Reason and Squalor. 1959. © 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

realm of experience, they gave rise to recreation—to life as a series of spectacles and games. Malevich's space-suited sportsmen are only a professionalization, as it were, of Manet's little girl's absence of mind.

This is the first dream of modernity. The second, in practice, was hard to separate from its twin. The world, it said, is more and more a realm of technical rationality, made available and comprehensible to individual subjects by being made mechanized and standardized. The world is on its way to absolute material lucidity. In the end it will become (and if you look hard, it is already becoming) a world of relations rather than entities, exchanges rather than objects, symbol management rather than bodies engaged in physical labor or gross struggle with the realm of necessity.

These were the central imaginings of modernity, as I see it. And of course modern artists shared them—they were not somehow immune to their magic. But in practice—this is the key point—they found themselves putting these dreams, or patterns of imagery, to the test. And the test was form, the test of exemplification in a particular medium.

Modernism was a kind of wind tunnel, in which modernity and its modes were pushed deliberately to breaking point. For “pushing,” in the case of painting, read “flattening.” How do the values and excitements called “modernity” look (this is Manet's question) when they are put down in two dimensions? Painting in modernism was a means of investigation: it was a way of discovering what the dreams of modernity really amounted to, by finding what it took to make a painting of them—what kind of play between flatness and depth, what kind of stress on the picture's shape and limits, what sorts of painterly insistence or abbreviation? And if *these* are the means we need to give such and such an ideal of modernity form, then what does this tell us about the ideal? Does the available imagery of the modern pass the test of representation? If I draw it—if I give it this particular visual existence—does it survive?

Of course, putting the problem in the way I have just done ends up making modernism seem too detached, too reasonable. In practice there seems to have been something about the dreams of modernity that drove modernists mad. The dreams were put to the test by being materialized, by being reduced to a set of actual, technical maneuvers; but time and again they were forced and denatured in the process, as if the artist wanted to see how much of the dream would survive the extremes of dispersal and emptying, flattening and abstraction, estrangement and de-skilling—the procedures that strangely, in modernism, *became what materialization was*. Modernist formalism was *forcing*, in other words; and I can see no explanation for that forcing, that continual extremism, except that it was a response to some extremity in the thing—the life—being tested.

Once upon a time I called this exacerbation of means and push to the limits in modern art its “practices of negation.” But I do not like that formula any longer. I think it wrong to opt for either “negative” or “positive,” or “beautiful” or “ugly,” as descriptions of modernism in characteristic mood. The point is that modernism was always on the lookout for the moment, or practice, to which both descriptions apply.

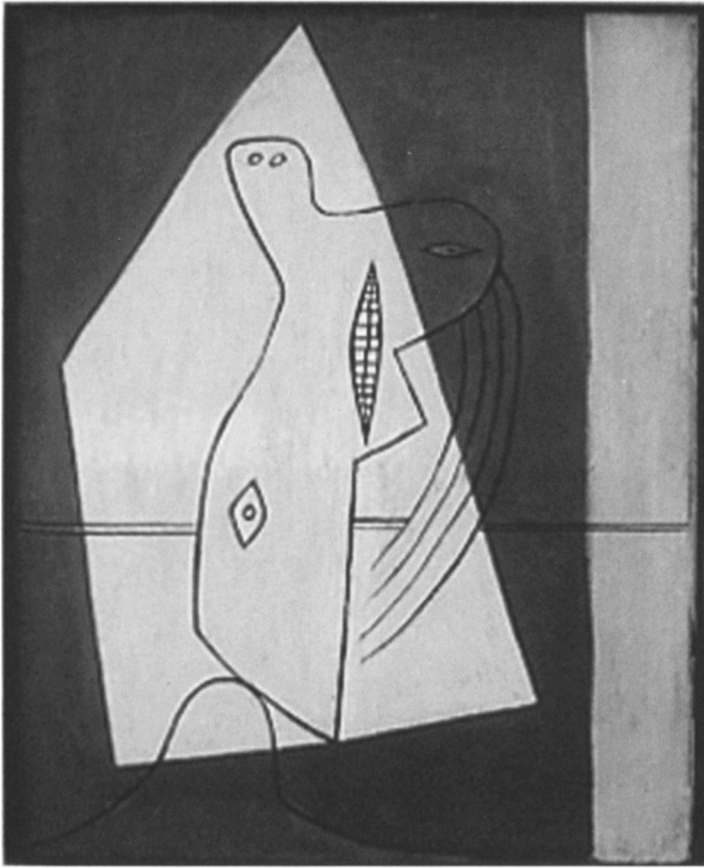


Positive and negative, fullness and emptiness, totalization and fragmentation, sophistication and infantilism, euphoria and desperation, an assertion of infinite power and possibility alongside a mimicry of deep aimlessness and loss of bearings. For this, I think, is modernism's root proposal about its world: that the experience of modernity is precisely the experience of the *two* states, the two tonalities, at the same time. Modernism is the art that continually discovers coherence and intensity in tentativeness and schematism, or blankness lurking on the other side of sensuousness. And not on the other side, really—for blankness is the form that sensuousness and controlled vivacity now actually take.

I think I can make this point, and other main points about modernism, clearer by looking a little more closely at a painting by Picasso. I realize that with it we move away from Manet's territory, which is always public and factual, even when the action takes place indoors, into a space more reminiscent of Oursler's *Influence Machine*. But that is as it should be. Modernism very often turned to the ghastly and ghostly as its subject matter. We know that already from the poem by Yeats. It just had a different view from Oursler's about what the phantasmatic consisted of, and where it might be located—how close to the imagining subject the apparition should be put.

The Picasso hangs now in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and is called *Figure*—meaning “figure” as a whole, but also specifically “face.” The painting is not dated, but it must be from 1927. It measures 39 by 32 inches. The *Face* is mainly monochrome. It is chalky white and invariant steel gray, both colors put on flat and inexorable, with barely a brushmark in sight. Nonetheless there is a small amount of yellow introduced into the strange, and beautiful, upright strip at the right-hand side of Picasso's canvas—the strip is a device, or reality, which is crucial to the picture's overall effect. I guess it mainly serves to spatialize the terrible blank white aperture in the painting's center, out of which the *Face* erupts. That is to say, it puts the white quadrilateral somewhere in what appears to be a sequence of spatial intervals—not, of course, that the sequence ever settles down into one plausible order. Is the quadrilateral to be understood, for instance, as floating forward from the yellowed strip at right, as if it were part of the surface of a window, hit by light, through which the *Face* was visible for an instant? Or is it somewhere back from the picture plane, back from the tangible strip at the side—in an outside of some sort—in the darkness and placelessness signaled so tersely by the gray surrounding the white? I suppose that even to talk, as I just did, about the *Face* coming out of the white aperture is begging the question. Because the aperture *is* also the *Face*. It is one of its possible shapes or identities, and maybe the strongest. And yet the illusion of the *Face* looking through some transparency, from a gray beyond, is also stubborn. The distance from viewer to image keeps changing as we look. Everything shifts and doubles back on itself. The double horizon line, for example, seems sometimes to be running close behind the *Face*—maybe the lines are the top of a balcony rail—and then at others to be far away, tracing the edge of the sea. The *Face* comes in from somewhere. We shall never be sure if it crosses the threshold.





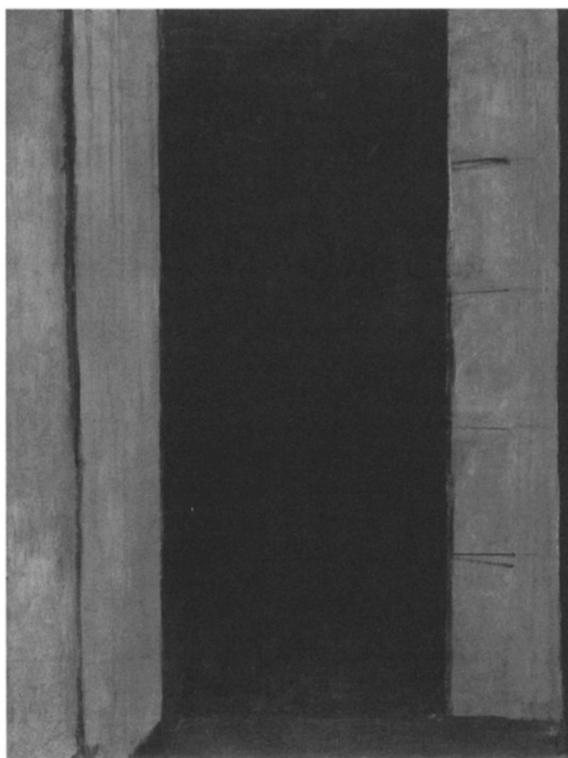
Some of you will have been saying to yourselves, reading the last paragraph, that it tells a story you have been told many times before. And you are right. The kinds of shifting and undecidability I am pointing to are the ABC of modernism. *Face* is giving them a basic grammatical outing. It has a pedagogical tone. Its black and white is that of the blackboard or diagram. It is pedagogical, schematic, and therefore, I believe—this is another typical fact about modernism—deeply intertextual. The painting is obviously haunted by Picasso’s own previous versions of geometry and monochrome, and seems to be asking itself the question, “What, if anything, is left to painting from the series of experiments called Cubism?” Is this what Cubism now comes down to? This set of black-and-white mechanisms, in other words—this chessboard of presences and absences. Nor do I think that Cubism is the only previous pictorial grammar being invoked. I look again at the slightly yellowed vertical at the right-hand side and find myself thinking, irresistibly, of the same vertical in Matisse’s *Porte-Fenêtre à Collioure*. We cannot be sure, by the way, that Picasso would have seen this painting by 1927. But I think that conceptually it is the right pairing. Modernism, as I see it, is always debating whether anything—especially any human thing—can make an appearance again in the void of Matisse’s 1914 window. And certainly Picasso knew enough of

*Pablo Picasso. Face. 1927. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

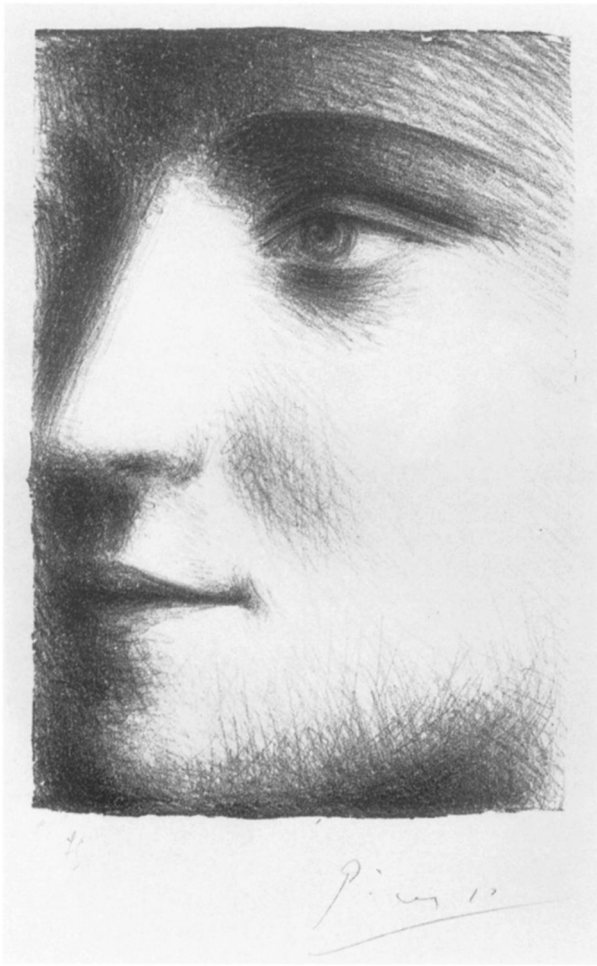
Matisse's version of Cubism to be fascinated by his rival's reduction of Cubist space-making to this kind of system of verticals top to bottom. The great *Leçon de piano* of 1917 had been shown for the first time in public a few months before *Face* was painted, in October 1926, at Paul Guillaume's Gallery. Variants of the vertical strip organization crop up repeatedly in Picasso through the next two years or so. There is even a *Figure and Profile* from the winter of 1928 that has a sardonic Matisse-type window at the left-hand side complete with wrought-iron balcony rail.<sup>3</sup>

The *Face* from the Pompidou is definitive for me—definitive of modernism, that is—partly because its dialogue with Matisse's proposals about picture-making is so relentless, so schematic. And as so often with modernism, it is not clear what the effect, or result, of Picasso's reduction and schematization will end up being. Is it homage to Matisse, or negation of him? We should not opt too quickly for the latter. Black and white is not necessarily the opposite of colored. Matisse himself demonstrates that. And the face at the window in Picasso is not to be placed unequivocally in an anti-Matissean realm of un-pleasure, say, or outright monstrosity. There is a strange dialogue going on in *Face* not only with Matisse's

3. See the discussion in Yve-Alain Bois, *Matisse and Picasso* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), pp. 41, 46.



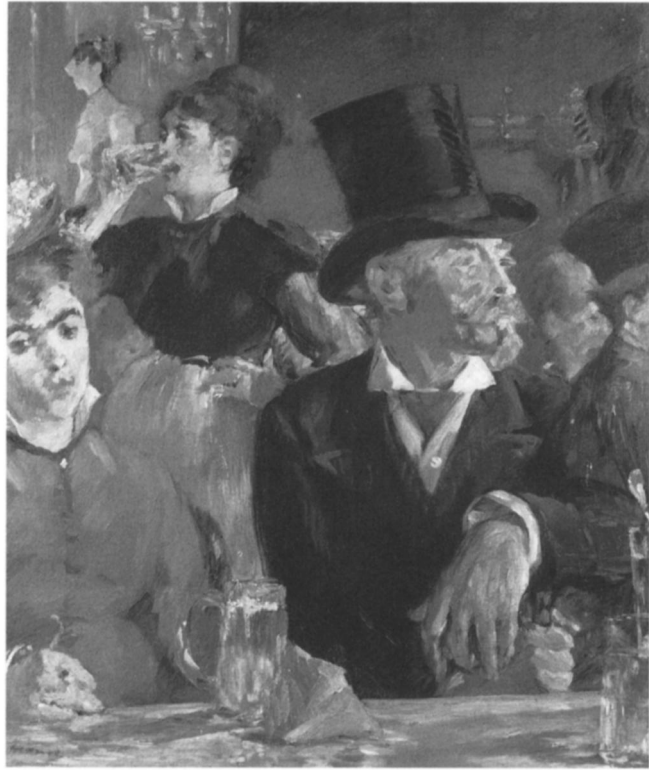
*Matisse, French Window at Collioure. 1914. © Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.*



stock tokens of beauty and availability but also with Picasso's own. I see the extraordinary lithograph Picasso made in 1928 as, in a sense, a reply to the painting of the year before. Not only, obviously, in its allowing back the tokens of charm and individuality; but also in its reflection on how much of curvature and solidity could be reintroduced inside the confining rectangle; and, most of all, in the way the rectangle, floating as it does now in the white void of the paper, still acts as a shape of the head as well as a frame the head peeps through—and a frame that is ultimately confining as well as protective, a Procrustean cutoff as much as a possible ideal contour.

I chose Picasso's *Face* as my second exemplar of modernism, alongside *Le Chemin de fer*, partly because the Picasso so clearly pushes the machinery of visualization to the limits. It is extreme and rebarbative, even by Picasso's standards, and you will know by now that extremity and extremism are basic to my sense of what modernism was about. Modernism, in practice, was most often some form of agony or anomie. Manet too was perfectly capable of bringing that agony up front.

*Picasso. Face of Marie-Thérèse. 1928. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.*



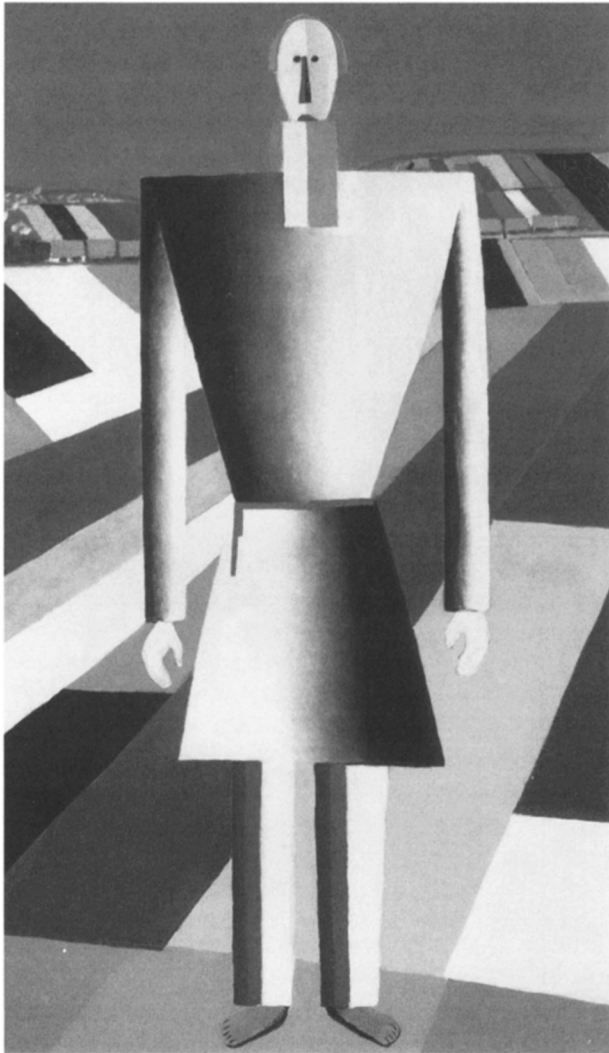
*Manet. At the Café. 1878.*  
*The Walters Art Museum.*

Regularly in a Manet you begin to realize that the first casualness and mobility mask some kind of loss or horror. One's eyes move off left to the woman whose body is cut by the frame; and the lean of her body, and desolation of her look, insinuate themselves as the keys to the picture's whole tone. The face is all the more agonized for being incidental—for being almost absorbed into the meaningless flow of sights.

Modernism was about some form of agony, then; but the point is that the agony, in modernity, is not separable from delight. That is true of the Manet, but also true, I would argue, of the Picasso. This is why Picasso's effort at an imagery of horror is bound up with a pictorial dialogue with Matisse. "I shall show you that horror is beauty, under modern conditions": that seems to me what Picasso is saying. And it was not as if Matisse simply disagreed with him, or failed to see what Picasso's art meant. Certainly horror and agony are never the right words in Matisse's case. He wanted to go on believing in the dream of appetite and sensation. Of course—but in practice he too knew that the machinery of pleasure and possession was just that, a machine; and that time and again what the machine churned out was a vision of plenitude on the verge of stridency and overkill (or smugness and fancy dress).

Picasso's *Face* and Matisse's *Porte-Fenêtre à Collioure* are the proper foils for *The Influence Machine*, in my view; but on their own they are too private and immediate—too refusing of history—to stand for modernism as I conceive it. They are one moment of modernism: the inward-turning one, the retreat to form as ultimately a shelter from modernity; though always, in the art that matters, modernity returns.

Nobody is denying that this impulse is integral to modern art, and responsible for many of its highest achievements. But it is a moment. On the other side of the isolated and phantasmatic in modernism is always the dream of the figure taking its place in space again, and exercising its new powers. Against Picasso's terrible eternal present there is always de Chirico's dream of history. So I go back to *Nostalgia of the Infinite*, and put beside it another Malevich—a painting done sometime during the terrible years of forced collectivization around 1930. I see these two pictures as modernism facing the world—of course, in both cases, facing it in a profoundly strange way.



*Malevich. Peasant in the Fields. ca. 1928–32.*



What do I think was modernism's subject, then? What was it about? No doubt you can guess my starting point. It was about steam—in both the Malevich and the de Chirico a train still rushes across the landscape. It was about change and power and contingency, in other words, but also control, compression, and captivity—an absurd or oppressive orderliness is haunting the bright new fields and the sunlit squares with their eternally flapping flags. Modernism presents us with a world becoming a realm of appearances—fragments, patchwork quilts of color, dream-tableaux made out of disconnected phantasms. But all of this is still *happening* in modernism, and still resisted as it is described. The two paintings remain shot through, it seems to me, with the effort to answer back to the flattening and derealizing—the will to put the fragments back into some sort of order. Modernism is agonized, but its agony is not separable from weird levity or whimsy. Pleasure and horror go together in it. Malevich may be desperate, or euphoric. He may be pouring scorn on the idea of collective man, or spelling the idea out with utter childish optimism. We shall never know his real opinions. His picture entertains both.

Modernism was certainly about the pathos of dream and desire in twentieth-century circumstances, but, again, the desires were unstoppable, ineradicable. The upright man will not let go of the future. The infinite still exists at the top of the tower. Even in the Picasso the monster flashing up outside the window is *my* monster, *my* phantasm, the figure of my unnegotiable desire. The monster is me—the terrible desiring and fearing subject inside me that eludes all form of conditioning, all the barrage of instructions about what it should want and who it should be. This is Picasso's vestigial utopianism. You think that modernity is a realm of appetite and immediacy! I'll show you appetite! I'll show you immediacy! I shall, as a modernist, make the dreams of modernity come true.

Modernism was testing, as I said before. It was a kind of internal exile, a retreat into the territory of form; but form was ultimately a crucible, an act of aggression, an abyss into which all the comfortable "givens" of the culture were sucked and then spat out.

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Suppose we finally put the Oursler opposite the Picasso (which I realize is unfair), and try to confront the question of modernism and postmodernism head on. Let me say again what I said at the start. I do not know the art of the present well enough to be able to ask questions of it with any authority; but I think I know the art of the previous era well enough to know what questions ought to be asked. I have been arguing that modernism wished to understand, and put under real pressure, the deep structure of belief of its own historical moment—those things about itself that modernity most took for granted, or most wished were true. The pressure was formal. The beliefs would survive the test of the medium, or they would disintegrate. Mostly, it seems, they disintegrated. Modernism was modernity's



official opposition. It was the pessimist to modernity's eternal optimism. It cultivated extremism—it seems as an answer to modern life's pragmatism and technicality (which of course most modernists also loved). Technique in modernism was not problem-solving. It made problems worse.

The question to put to the art of the present, then, is what does that art appear to see as the beliefs in the culture of our own moment that are similarly structural, similarly the core of our present ideology; and how does art envisage putting those beliefs to the test? I have talked somewhat generally about "beliefs," but of course for visual artists it is beliefs about vision and visualization that count, or, rather, beliefs that take the form of images—of fresh modes of visibility, or dreams of knowledge arranging itself in specifically visual form. We all know that such beliefs are at present the cutting edge of a new myth of modernization. Oursler is typical here. Any artist with smarts is going to see that the dream life that matters currently is the one promoted by the World Wide Web. But how is that dream life going to be put under real pressure? We are back to the problem implied by Marx's "Teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song." Mimicry is not enough. Nor is hectoring from the outside. It has to be singing. But singing involves hitting the right note, being exactly on key. It involves not an approximate knowledge of what the age of the digital believes about itself, but an intuition (of the kind that Manet and de Chirico managed) of precisely the central knot in the dream life—the founding assumption, the true *structure* of dream-visualization. It is easy to fake modernity's uncanny. Modernity, as Benjamin reminds us, has thrived from the very beginning on a cheap spectacle of the strange, the new, the phantasmagoric. But modernity also truly dreams. The art that survives is the art that lays hold of the primary process, not the surface image-flow.

I see two belief systems that the art of our time may already be grappling with. One is simply the imagery of "information," and the idea of the world being newly robbed of its space-time materiality by a truly global, truly totalizing apparatus of virtualization. The world in the hands of the symbol-managers, if you wish to put a pessimistic spin on it; or the world laid open to the digital multitude, the great global community of hybrids and particulars, if you feel able to buy into the utopia proposed lately by Antonio Negri. This is belief system one. You will see that it is, among other things, a belief about a new form of knowledge—a new means of materialization and dematerialization of labor. And at the center of the belief system is an image of knowledge *visualized*, taking place in screen space, and being altered in its very structure by that new placing and mobilizing, that new system of appearances. This leads straight to belief number two. It is simply the conviction that some kind of threshold is being passed, or maybe has been passed, from a bygone world where the Word was the ultimate structure of knowing to one ruled by the image or the shifting visual array.

This is the belief system, obviously, that visual artists will feel it hardest to disagree with or get a distance from. Just as Manet, with one side of himself, fell

for the notion of capitalism as pure realm of appearance, present-day visual artists can hardly avoid the glamour of the notion that the verbal is over and the visual has replaced it. But just as Manet in practice discovered that the realm of appearances was also one of identities, fixities, constraints, and determinations, I dare to predict that once the present ecstasy of the virtual and nonverbal is put to the test of form, it too will be found wanting. And I shall stop pretending to be neutral and say why. I shall end by offering artists of the present a few antivisual, antidigital slogans. Maybe you should imagine them as coming in a torrent out of the mouth of Tony Oursler's ghost.

Nothing could be further from the truth, says the protagonist of *The Influence Machine*, than the idea that the age of the Word is finished. On the contrary, words are still everywhere. And the image machinery we have created and disseminated is just a means for making those words over into images—that is the trouble with it. The ghost abominates the current means of visualization in the culture not out of nostalgic “logocentricity,” but because it sees our present means of symbolic production as essentially flooding the world *with verbiage*—with the simplest of words (the most banal and transparent of knowledge-motifs) given sufficient visual form. Sufficient, that is, for the motifs to make their hit, name their product, push the right paranoid button. Everything about the actual configuration of image-making in the world around us speaks to that fact. The system's notions of image clarity, of image flow and image density—they are all essentially modeled on the parallel (and unimpeded) movements of the logo, the compressed pseudonarrative of the TV commercial, the product slogan, the sound bite. Images are still everywhere telling stories or issuing orders. Web pages, billboards, and video games are just visualizations—magnifications and speed-ups—of this prior and continuing world of the shouted (or whispered) sentence.

The ghost rants on, I realize. But remember he is suffering—the new “Cold Heaven” has driven him mad. And at least in his bitterness he points to a complex of problems which, for the moment, our culture wishes not to recognize. If there is to be a visual art of postmodernity, in other words, I think it will have to begin from the ghost's anger, the ghost's skepticism. It will have to probe, as Manet and Picasso did, at the concepts that truly organize—that produce—our present fictions of the now. Once upon a time that meant mobility, and the free play of appearances, and the great myth of individuality. Those were Manet's and Picasso's raw materials. Nowadays it is the notions of virtuality and visibility. It is time this imaginary was put to the test of form.