

Painting as Model

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Painting: The Task of Mourning

*[My paintings] are about death in a way:
the uneasy death of modernism.*

—Sherrie Levine

Nothing seems to be more common in our present situation than a millenarianist feeling of closure. Whether celebratory (what I will call manic) or melancholic one hears endless diagnoses of death: death of ideologies (Lyotard); of industrial society (Bell); of the real (Baudrillard); of authorship (Barthes); of man (Foucault); of history (Kojève) and, of course, of modernism (all of us when we use the word postmodern). Yet what does all of this mean? From what point of view are these affirmations of death being proclaimed? Should all of these voices be characterized as the voice of mystagogy, bearing the tone that Kant stigmatized in *About a Recently Raised Pretentiously Noble Tone in Philosophy* (1796)? Derrida writes:

Then each time we intractably ask ourselves where they want to come to, and to what ends, those who declare the end of this or that, of man or the subject, of consciousness, of history, of the West or of literature, and according to the latest news of progress itself, the idea of which has never been in such bad health to the right and the left? What effect do these people, gentile prophets or eloquent visionaries, want to produce? In view of what immediate or adjourned benefit? What do they do, what do we do in saying this? To seduce or subjugate whom, intimidate or make come whom?¹

Each time, which means that there is no generic answer to this question: there is no single paradigm of the apocalyptic, and no ontological inquiry about “its” tone. Because the tone of their writings is so different, it would be particularly misguided,

and perverse, to connect Barthes to Baudrillard; Foucault to Bell, Lyotard to Kojève—but it is done in the theoretical potpourri one reads month after month in the flashy magazines of the art world. Derrida's proviso, *each time*, means that in each instance one must examine the tone of the apocalyptic discourse: its claim to be the pure revelation of truth, and the last word about the end.

I will focus here on a specific claim: that of the death of painting, and more specifically, the death of abstract painting. The meaning of this claim is bounded by two historical circumstances: the first is that the whole history of abstract painting can be read as a longing for its death; and the second is the recent emergence of a group of neoabstract painters who have been marketed as its official mourners (or should I say resurrectors? But we will see that it is the same). The first circumstance leads to the question: when did all of this start? Where can we locate the beginning of the end in modern painting—that is, the feeling of the end, the discourse about the end, and the representation of the end? The existence of a new generation of painters interested in these issues leads to the question: is abstract painting still possible? In turn, this question can be divided into at least two others: is (abstract, but also any other kind of) *painting* still possible? and is *abstract* (painting, but also sculpture, film, modes of thought, etc.) still possible? (A third thread of the question, specifically apocalyptic, would be: is [abstract painting, but also anything, life, desire, etc.] still possible?)

The question about the beginning of the end and the question about the (still) possibility of painting are historically linked: it is the question about the (still) possibility of painting that is at the beginning of the end, and it is this beginning of the end that has been our history, namely what we are accustomed to name *modernism*. Indeed the whole enterprise of modernism, especially of abstract painting, which can be taken as its emblem, could not have functioned without an apocalyptic myth. Freed from all extrinsic conventions, abstract painting was meant to bring forth the pure *parousia* of its own essence, to tell the final truth and thereby terminate its course. The pure beginning, the liberation from tradition, the “zero degree” that was searched for by the first generation of abstract painters could not but function as an omen of the end. One did not have to wait for the “last painting” of Ad Reinhardt to be aware that through its historicism (its linear conception of history) and through its essentialism (its idea that something like the essence of painting existed, veiled somehow, and waiting to be unmasked), the enterprise of abstract painting could not but understand its birth as calling for its end. As Malevich wrote: “There can be no question of painting in Suprematism; painting was done for long ago, and the artist himself is a prejudice of the past.”² And Mondrian endlessly postulated that his paint-

ing was preparing for the end of painting—its dissolution in the all-encompassing sphere of life-as-art or environment-as-art—which would occur once the absolute essence of painting was “determined.” If one can take abstract painting as the emblem of modernism, however, one should not imagine that the feeling of the end is solely a function of its essentialism; rather it is necessary to interpret this essentialism as the effect of a larger historical crisis. This crisis is well known—it can be termed industrialization—and its impact on painting has been analyzed by the best critics, following a line of investigation begun half a century ago by Walter Benjamin.³ This discourse centers around the appearance of photography, and of mass production, both of which were understood as causing the end of painting. Photography was perceived this way by even the least subtle practitioners. (“*From today painting in dead*: it is now nearly a century and a half since Paul Delaroche is said to have pronounced that sentence in the face of the overwhelming evidence of Daguerre’s invention.”)⁴ Mass production seemed to bode the end of painting through its most elaborate *mise-en-scène*, the invention of the readymade. Photography and mass production were also at the base of the essentialist urge of modernist painting. Challenged by the mechanical apparatus of photography, and by the mass-produced, painting had to redefine its status, to reclaim a specific domain (much in the way this was done during the Renaissance, when painting was posited as one of the “liberal arts” as opposed to the “mechanical arts”).

The beginnings of this agonistic struggle have been well described by Meyer Schapiro: the emphasis on the touch, on texture, and on gesture in modern painting is a consequence of the division of labor inherent in industrial production. Industrial capitalism banished the hand from the process of production; the work of art alone, as craft, still implied manual handling and therefore artists were compelled, by reaction, to demonstrate the exceptional nature of their mode of production.⁵ From Courbet to Pollock one witnesses a practice of one-upmanship. In many ways the various “returns to painting” we are witnessing today seem like the farcical repetition of this historical progression. There were, it is true, simple negations: for instance, van Doesburg’s *Art Concret* (the dream of a geometric art that could be entirely programmed) and Moholy-Nagy’s *Telephone-paintings*. But it is only with Robert Ryman that the theoretical demonstration of the historical position of painting as an exceptional realm of manual mastery has been carried to its full extent and, as it were, deconstructed. By his dissection of the gesture, or of the pictorial raw material, and by his (nonstylistic) analysis of the stroke, Ryman produces a kind of dissolution of the relationship between the trace and its organic referent. The body of the artist moves toward the condition of photography: the division of labor is interiorized.

What is at stake for Ryman is no longer affirming the uniqueness of the pictorial mode of production vis-à-vis the general mode of production of commodities, but decomposing it mechanically. Ryman's deconstruction has nothing to do with a negation (contrary to what most of its readers think, what is called deconstruction has very little to do with negation per se. Instead, it elaborates a kind of negativity that is not trapped in the dialectical vector of affirmation, negation, and sublation). Ryman's dissolution is posited, but endlessly restrained, amorously deferred; the process (which identifies the trace with its "subjective" origin) is endlessly stretched: the thread is never cut.

If I insist on Ryman, it is because in his art the feeling of an end is worked through in the most resolved way. Although he is claimed by some as a postmodernist, I would say he is more accurately the guardian of the tomb of modernist painting, at once knowing of the end and also knowing the impossibility of arriving at it without working it through. Asymptotically, his paintings get closer and closer to the condition of the photograph or of the readymade, yet remain at the threshold of simple negation. His position is difficult to maintain, yet it is perhaps, historically, the most cogent one.⁶ To understand this, we must look again at the historical development that preceded him. "If we could describe the art of this, the first half of the twentieth century, in a sentence, it would read as the search for something to paint; just as, were we to do the same for modern art as a whole, it must read as the critical preoccupation of artists with solving the *technical* problems of the painting medium. Here is the dividing line of the history of art," writes Barnett Newman, reminding us of Schapiro's insistence on the importance of touch, texture, and gesture.⁷ But the paradox here, brilliantly enunciated by Thierry de Duve, is that the modernist opposition to both traditional painterly finish and the mechanical (which were fused by academic art of the late nineteenth century) bore within itself the stigmata of the mass-produced:

Although tin or copper tubes were already in use in England at the end of the 18th century for the preservation of watercolor, it was only around 1830–1840 that tubes of oil paints began to be available on the market. . . . For John Constable or the Barbizon painters to leave their studio and paint outside, directly from nature, the availability of tubes of paint was a prerequisite. One cannot imagine them carrying along the bulky equipment that the preparation of paint on the premises would involve. Certainly, pleinairism was one of the first episodes in the long struggle between craftsmanship and industrialization that underlies the history of "Modernist Painting." It was also one of the first instances of an avant-

garde strategy, devised by artists who were aware that they could no longer compete, technically or economically, with industry; they sought to give their craft a reprieve by "internalizing" some of the features and processes of the technology threatening it, and by "mechanizing" their own body at work.⁸

It is this internalization of the mass-produced that led to Duchamp's disgust for paintings and his invention of the readymade. ("Let's say you use a tube of paint; you didn't make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade. Even if you mix two vermillions together, it's still a mixing of two readymades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from readymade things like even his own mother and father."⁹) The historical condition of modern painting as a return of the repressed is also exposed in Seurat's art (Duchamp's favorite), and then deconstructed—not negated—in Ryman's. Industrialization first produced a reaction within modernist painting that led to the emphasis on process—but this reaction had only become possible through the incorporation of the mechanical within the realm of painting itself. Seurat's art marks the moment that this condition is recognized. After him, a long period of analytical decomposition followed—the strongest moment probably being Pollock—which culminated in a conscious incorporation of the mechanical in painting and a reversal of the original reaction to industrialization. Painting had reached the condition of photography. Ryman is the key figure in this historical development, but he has been backed up by a host of related practices in the 1970s.¹⁰

Even at the outset, industrialization meant much more for painting than the invention of photography and the incorporation of the mechanical into the artist's process through the readymade tube of paint. It also meant a threat of the collapse of art's special status into a fetish or a commodity. It is in reaction to this threat that the historicism and essentialism of modernism was developed. There is a tendency in America to believe that Clement Greenberg was the first advocate of the modernist teleology. On the contrary, as I have mentioned, the work of the first abstract painters was guided by the same teleology. It therefore seems more telling here, no matter how eloquent Greenberg's discourse has been, to seek the absolute beginning of such a construct: in other words the "beginning of the end." It seems that the first proponent was Baudelaire who conceived history as a chain along which each individual art gradually approached its essence. Nobody has better perceived the function of the threat of industrialization in Baudelaire's work than Walter Benjamin. The greatness of Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, is to have recognized that the fetishistic nature of the commodity-form (analyzed by Marx at the same time) was the

threat that capitalism posed to the very existence of art. "When things are freed from the bondage of being useful," as in the typically fetishistic transubstantiation accomplished by the art collector, then the distinction between art and artifact becomes extremely tenuous. This tension lies, according to Benjamin, at the core of Baudelaire's poetry.

Except for the Italian essayist Giorgio Agamben, it has been little recognized how much the famous chapter of Marx's *Capital* on the fetishistic nature of the commodity, its "mystical" or "phantasmagoric character," owes to the German philosopher's visit to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 where industrial products were given the kind of auratic presentation previously reserved for works of art:¹¹ "By means of this exhibition the bourgeoisie of the world is erecting in the modern Rome its Pantheon in which to exhibit with proud self-satisfaction the gods it has made to itself. . . . [It] is celebrating its greatest festival."¹² According to Marx, the fetishistic character of the commodity, what he called its "metaphysical subtlety," is grounded in the absolute repression of use value and of any reference to the process of production, or the materiality of the thing. And if Agamben is right in pointing at the connection between Marx's fundamental analysis and his visit to the London fair, then another connection brings us back to Baudelaire: Courbet's one-man show, in the bungalow he had built for this purpose next to the Beaux-Arts section of the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855, which contained among other works his famous *Studio* where Baudelaire is portrayed. As is well known, eleven works by Courbet had been accepted by the exhibition committee—and not minor ones—but he was dissatisfied with the way they were displayed: not exhibited together, but dispersed among an undifferentiated mass of hundreds of paintings exactly as, in the next building, machines and machine-made products were exhibited, competing for the gold medal. "I conquer freedom, I save the independence of art"¹³ are the words Courbet used to explain the motivation of his parasitic show of some forty works, which he managed to install only six weeks after the inauguration of the fair and to maintain until it closed five months later. With these words, Courbet characterized what is for me the first avant-garde act, an act of defiance against the ever-growing realm of the commodity.

The universal commodification under capitalism is what, according to Benjamin, Baudelaire's genius was to perceive as the terrifying and endless return of the same. I cannot go deeply into Benjamin's extraordinarily complex analysis in this essay, but only note that beginning with Baudelaire's startling characterization of the writer as a prostitute, Benjamin sees the poet's successive identifications with the rag-picker, the flaneur, the bohemian, the dandy or the "apache," as the adoption of

heroic roles bearing the stigmata of commodification: roles that were doomed to failure and were superseded by Baudelaire's final phantasmagoria, his conception of the new. Benjamin writes, "This villification that things suffer by their ability to be taxed as commodities is counterbalanced in Baudelaire's conception by the inestimable value of novelty. Novelty represents an absolute that can neither be interpreted [as an allegory] nor compared [as a commodity]. It becomes the ultimate entrenchment of art."¹⁴ The shock of the new, in other words, is an expression that derives from Baudelaire's aesthetics. But there is more to it: Baudelaire sees modernity, the value of novelty, as necessarily doomed by the inevitable process by which the novel becomes antique. The quest for the absolute new in art becomes a moment that can never stop, endangered as it is by its devolution into the realm of interpretation or comparison. "But once modernism has received its due," writes Benjamin, "its time has run out. Then it will be put to the test. After its end, it will become apparent whether it will be able to become antiquity."¹⁵ This is the banal process that was called *recuperation* in the 1960s, but has been better analyzed since then as an effect of the simulacral.

This urge toward the new, which is at the core of the historicist teleology of Baudelaire, is doubly a myth, both because of the immanent perishability of novelty, and because novelty is the very guise that the commodity adopts to fulfill its fetishistic transfiguration. Baudelaire indeed saw the connection between fashion and death, but he did not recognize that the absolute new he searched for all his life was made of the same stuff as the commodity, that it was governed by the same law as the market: the constant return of the same. Benjamin recognized this blind spot of Baudelaire's: "that the last defense of art coincided with the most advanced line of attack of the commodity, this remained hidden to Baudelaire."¹⁶ Needless to say it also remained unseen by the numerous avant-garde movements that followed him. We must recognize, however, that the insistence on the integrity of specific media that occurs in every art of the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a deliberate attempt to free art from its contamination by the forms of exchange produced by capitalism. Art had to be ontologically split not only from the mechanical, but also from the realm of information—it had to be distinguished from the immediate transitivity of information that amounted to a general leveling of every fact of life. Mallarmé is certainly the most articulate on this point, and his awareness formed the basis of his theory against the instrumentalization of language by the press. If he insisted on the materiality of language, if he claimed that the poet must remunerate language, if he spoke of the intransitivity of language, it was because he tried to advocate a mode of exchange that would not be abstract, nor based on a universal interchangeability

through the medium of a single general equivalent, nor reified in a mystifying fetish split off from the process of its production. I would say that although few artists were as consistent as Mallarmé and Baudelaire, one can certainly read the whole history of avant-garde art up to World War I as following in their wake.

There were many reasons for a shift in the situation of the art object to occur around World War I, and I would be a fool to claim one or two events as the origin of a complex set of transformations that were sometimes abrupt, sometimes gradual. But to pursue my thread concerning the market, I would like to consider two pivotal events: the famous sale of the *Peau d'Ours*, which occurred on March 2, 1914; and Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade, already mentioned, which happened at around the same time (I take his *Porte-bouteille* of the same year as more to the point than his *Roue de bicyclette* of 1913, which still involves, although ironically, a compositional procedure). The sale of the *Peau d'Ours* marked the astonishing discovery that far from being laughable, the avant-garde art of the past—novelty as antiquity—was highly profitable as an investment. Not only works by Gauguin, Vuillard, or Redon were sold at very high prices, but also paintings by Matisse and Picasso. It was discovered, in short, that investment in contemporary painting was much more profitable than the typical investments of the time, including gold and real estate. Needless to say, the speculative logic that emerged from this sale (buy today the Van Goghs of tomorrow because the new will become antiquity) was to shape the entire history of the twentieth century art market.

Now Duchamp. His readymades were not only a negation of painting and a demonstration of the always-already mechanical nature of painting. They also demonstrated that within our culture the work of art is a fetish that must abolish all pretense to use value (i.e., the readymade is an art object through its abstraction from the realm of utility). Furthermore, the readymade demonstrated that the so-called autonomy of the art object was produced by a nominalist institution (the museum or art gallery) that constantly buried what Marx called the point of view of production under the point of view of consumption (as the ethnologist Marcel Mauss noted once, "a work of art is that which is recognized as such by a group").¹⁷ Finally, and more importantly, Duchamp's act presented the art object as a *special* kind of commodity—something that Marx had noted when he explained that "works of art properly speaking were not taken into consideration" in his account, "for they are of a special nature."¹⁸ Having no use value, the art object does not have any exchange value per se either—the exchange value being dependent on the quantum of social work necessary for its production (Seurat demonstrated this *ad absurdum* through his desire to be paid *by the hour*). What Duchamp was keen to observe is that works

of art—as much as oyster pearls or great wines (other examples given by Marx)—are not exchanged according to the common law of the market, but according to a monopoly system maintained by the entire art network, whose keystone is the artist himself. This does not mean that the exchange of works of art is beyond competition or any other manifestation of the law of the market, but that their sometimes infinite price is a function of their lack of measurable value. Value in the art world is determined by the “psychological” mechanisms that are at the core of any monopoly system: rarity, authenticity, uniqueness, and the law of supply and demand. In other words, art objects are absolute fetishes without a use value but also without an exchange value, fulfilling absolutely the collector’s fantasy of a purely symbolic or ideal value, a supplement to his soul.

Duchamp’s discovery led him to a range of experiments meant to reveal the mechanisms of the art network: I only need mention his 1917 *Fountain*, his various appearances as a transvestite, and his *Cbèque Tzank* of 1919, all of which pointed to authenticity as the central theoretical construct on which the art network is based. In Duchamp’s wake, artists like Daniel Buren as well as Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine have analyzed the nature of authenticity. This analytical strategy has often been characterized as the “deconstructive tendency” of postmodernism, yet I am not entirely confident with this labeling (which does not diminish at all the interest I have for such practices). In so far as I interpret Duchamp’s art as a negation, I interpret his heirs as explicating and radicalizing his negation. Or rather, if one wants to stay with the term deconstruction, I would say that Duchamp and his heirs are deconstructing one aspect of what they negate (painting): specifically the imaginary aspect of painting, which these artists consistently associate with its fetishistic nature (deconstruction means also the sense of inescapability from closure). But there remain, if I am allowed to borrow *metaphorically* the Lacanian terminology, two other aspects of painting that must be considered: the real and the symbolic.

Both the Peau d’Ours sale and Duchamp’s invention of the readymade had the potential to spawn a kind of cynical conservatism: if the new was doomed to its transformation into gold by the market, and the work of art was by its very nature an absolute fetish, then it might seem that the avant-garde’s ideology of resistance was obsolete. In fact, such a cynical position was undertaken by what is called the *return to order*, which started with Picasso’s *Portrait of Max Jacob* in 1915 but which became a massive phenomenon in the 1920s with Pittura Metafisica in Italy and the Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany. These movements share a lot with the neoconservative brand of postmodernism that has recently emerged (whether it’s called new wild, neo-romantik, trans-avanguardia, or whatever), as Benjamin Buchloh has bril-

liantly demonstrated.¹⁹ The market itself induces this kind of cynicism.²⁰ The cynical attitude, however, was not the only one available. The feeling of the end could also be reclaimed by a revolutionary aesthetics. This is what happened in Russia, where artists immediately responded to the situation created by the events of October 1917. In a revolutionary situation, art cannot but sever its ties with the market and its dependence upon the art institution: it seeks to reestablish its use value and to invent new relationships of production and consumption: it breaks with the linear, cumulative conception of history and emphasizes discontinuity. In other words, in such situations art can open up a new paradigm, something that was eloquently advocated by El Lissitzky in the brilliant lecture he delivered in Berlin, in 1922, about "The New Russian Art."²¹

Of all of these gestures of the Soviet avant-garde, one of the most significant is Rodchenko's exhibition, in 1921, of three monochrome panels, which he later described with these words, "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: It's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation."²² If Rodchenko's gesture is important, it is not because it was the "first" monochrome—it was not the "first" nor the "last"—and not because it was the first "last picture" (not only does Duchamp's readymade better deserve this title, but, as we have seen, in a way all modernist abstract paintings had to claim to be the last picture). If Rodchenko's gesture was so important, as Tarabukin saw when he analyzed it in *From the Easel to the Machine*, it was because it showed that painting could have a real existence only if it claimed its end; Rodchenko's "meaningless, dumb and blind wall . . . convinces us that painting was and remains a representational art and that it cannot escape from these limits of the representational."²³ Rodchenko's painting needed to attain the status of a real (nonimaginary) object, which meant its end as art. Again we are confronted with a negation—not a deconstruction—which accounts, according to me, for what must be called the failure of the productivist program in painting that followed Rodchenko's gesture logically (the dissolution of the artist's activity into industrial production). Or, to use again the terminology I borrowed before, Rodchenko deconstructed only one aspect of painting: its pretense to reach the realm of the real—a deconstruction that was carried out again, and further elaborated, by minimalism in the 1960s.

Rodchenko's was still not the only alternative to Duchamp's negation, nor to cynicism. In August 1924, shortly before he broke with the Dutch movement, Mondrian published his last article in the magazine *De Stijl*. Entitled "Blown with the

Wind," it is a denunciation of the *return to order* that was invading the galleries and had almost led him, three years earlier, to abandon painting altogether. He writes:

If artists now reject the new conception, critics and dealers reject it even more strongly, for they are more directly exposed to the influence of the public. The sole value of abstract art, they openly assert, was to raise the level of naturalistic art: the new was thus a *means*, not a *goal*. [And here I intervene to mention Picasso's remark to a baffled Kahnweiler that his neoclassical works of the *return to order* period were *better* than those of his precubist naturalistic period. Back to Mondrian's text. This is, he writes,] an open denial of the essence of the new, which was to *displace and annihilate* the old. They too swing with the wind and follow the lead of the general public. Though quite understandable, this is temporarily disastrous for the new, for its essential nature is thus *lost from sight*.

I give you this long quotation for its insistence on the momentary nature of the *return to order* phenomenon: the whole article is suffused with a kind of optimism that would sound utterly incomprehensible if the role of the new were not laid down at the end of the article:

Abstract art can evolve only by *consistent development*. In this way it can arrive at the *purely plastic*, which Neo-Plasticism has attained. Consistently carried through, this 'art' expression [the quotation marks are Mondrian's] can lead to nothing other than its *realization in our tangible environment*. For the time will come when, because of life's changed demands, 'painting' will become absorbed in life" (again, the quotation marks are Mondrian's).²⁴

For anyone who is familiar with the voluminous writings of Mondrian, this sounds typical, and indeed, as I already noted, the myth of the future dissolution of art into life is one of his most frequent themes. Far from being a compulsive quest of the absolute new, structurally doomed to failure, as in Baudelaire's formal teleology, Mondrian's affirmation of the new is geared toward a definite *telos*, that of the advent of a classless society, where social relationships would be transparent and not reified, and where there would be no difference between artists and nonartists, art and life. The new art must be, within itself, the model and augury of such a liberation: this future liberation, or socialist state, is envisioned through the principle of neoplasticism, of which neoplastic art can only be a "pale reflection," albeit the most advanced possible at the time. This principle, which Mondrian also called the "gen-

eral principle of plastic equivalence," is a sort of dialectic whose action is to dissolve any particularity, any center, any hierarchy. Any entity that is not split or constituted by an opposition is a mere appearance. Anything that is not determined by its contrary is vague, particular, individual, tragic: it is a cipher of authoritarianism, and it does not take part in the process of emancipation set forth by the "general principle of equivalence." Hence the complicated task that Mondrian assigns the painter is the destruction of all the elements on which the particularity of his art is based: the destruction of colored planes by lines; of lines by repetition; and of the optical illusion of depth by the sculptural weave of the painterly surface. Each destructive act follows the previous one and amounts to the abolition of the figure/ground opposition that is the perceptual limitation at the base of our imprisoned vision, and of the whole enterprise of painting. There is no doubt that Mondrian sets a task of the highest order for art: he prescribes a propaedeutic role. Painting was for him a theoretical model that provided concepts and invented procedures that dealt with reality: it is not merely an interpretation of the world, but the plastic manifestation of a certain logic that he found at the root of all the phenomena of life. In an article he wrote under the shock of the Nazi-Soviet mutual nonaggression pact, Mondrian says: "The function of plastic art is not descriptive. . . . It can reveal the evil of oppression and show the way to combat it. . . . It cannot reveal more than life teaches, but it can evoke in us the conviction of existent truth";²⁵ "the culture of plastic art shows that real freedom requires mutual equivalence."²⁶

Arthur Lehning, an anarchosyndicalist leader of the 1920s, said that his friend Mondrian was a child in politics, and nothing could be more evident.²⁷ However, this naiveté, which appears to have been the only possible alternative to Duchamp's negation and to the cynical strategies of the *return to order* in Western Europe, should not blind us to Mondrian's remarkable position. One is struck by the fact that he never felt any compulsion toward the monochrome, which could easily have provided, so it seems, the kind of absolute flatness he was striving for. But as an iconoclast readymade, the monochrome could not have functioned for him as a tool to deconstruct painting or more specifically to deconstruct the order of the symbolic in painting (of tradition, of the law, of history). Mondrian felt that within the economic abstraction engendered by capitalism, painting could only be deconstructed abstractly, by analyzing, one after the other, one against the other, all of the elements that (historically) ground its symbolic order (form, color, figure/ground opposition, frame, etc.). This painstaking formal analysis was for him the only way painting could reach its own end. Because it was conceived of as an abstract model, painting could resist the abstract commodification that is the fate of every (art) object; it had to post-

pone its own dissolution into the real until the symbolic order on which it is grounded had been "neutralized." Painting was therefore engaged in the necessarily interminable task of this neutralization. It might seem strange to speak of Mondrian, whose system of thought owed so much to Hegel's dialectic, in terms of deconstruction, yet unlike any dialectician he never expected any leap, never paid any tribute to the modern ideology of the *tabula rasa*: he knew that the end of painting had to be gained by hard labor.

But is the end ever to be gained? Duchamp (the imaginary), Rodchenko (the real), and Mondrian (the symbolic), among others, all believed in the end—they all had the final truth, all spoke apocalyptically. Yet has the end come? To say no (painting is still alive, just look at the galleries) is undoubtedly an act of denial, for it has never been more evident that most paintings one sees have abandoned the task that historically belonged to modern painting (that, precisely, of working through the end of painting) and are simply artifacts created for the market and by the market (absolutely interchangeable artifacts created by interchangeable producers). To say yes, however, that the end has come, is to give in to a historicist conception of history as both linear and total (i.e., one cannot paint after Duchamp, Rodchenko, Mondrian; their work has rendered paintings unnecessary, or: one cannot paint anymore in the era of the mass media, computer games, and the simulacrum).

How are we to escape this double bind? Benjamin once noted that the easel painting was born in the Middle Ages, and that nothing guarantees that it should remain forever. But are we left with these alternatives: either a denial of the end, or an affirmation of the end of the end (it's all over, the end is over)? The theory of games, used recently by Hubert Damisch, can help us overcome this paralyzing trap. This theory of strategy dissociates the generic *game* (like chess) from the specific performance of the game (Spassky/Fisher, for example), which I will call the *match*.²⁸ This strategic interpretation is strictly antihistoricist: with it, the question becomes "one of the status that ought to be assigned to the *match* 'painting,' as one *sees* it being played at a given moment in particular circumstances, in its relation to the *game* of the same name."²⁹ Such questioning has the immediate advantage of raising doubt about certain truisms. Is the "alleged convention of depth"—rejected by the pictorial art of this century because, according to Greenberg, it is unnecessary—necessarily of the order of the *match* more than of the *game*? Or rather, should we speak of a modification of this convention within the *game*? Without thereby becoming a theoretical machine encouraging indifference, since one is obliged to take a side, this strategic approach deciphers painting as an agonistic field where nothing is ever terminated, or decided *once and for all*, and leads the analysis back to a type of his-

toricity that it had neglected, that of long duration. In other words, it dismisses all certitudes about the absolute truth upon which the apocalyptic discourse is based. Rather, the fiction of the end of art (or of painting) is understood as a “confusion between the end of the game itself (as if a game could really have an end) and that of such and such a match (or series of matches).”³⁰

One can conclude then that, if the match “modernist painting” is finished, it does not necessarily mean that the game “painting” is finished: many years to come are ahead for this art. But the situation is even more complicated: for the match “modernist painting” was the match of the end of painting; it was both a response to the feeling of the end and a working through of the end. And this match was historically determined—by the fact of industrialization (photography, the commodity, etc.). To claim that the “end of painting” is finished is to claim that this historical situation is no longer ours, and who would be naive enough to make this claim when it appears that reproducibility and fetishization have permeated all aspects of life: have become our “natural” world?

Obviously, this is not the claim of the latest group of “abstract” painters, whose work, as Hal Foster has rightly remarked, has been presented as either a development of appropriation art (which is supported by the presence of Sherrie Levine in the group) or as a swing of the pendulum (the market having tired of neoexpressionism was ripe for a neoclassical and architectonic movement: the “style” after the “shout,” to make use of an old metaphor that art criticism proposed to distinguish between two tendencies within the realm of abstract art: one whose emblem was Mondrian and the other, Pollock).³¹ The work of this recent group of painters wishes to respond to our simulacral era, yet paradoxically in their very reliance upon Jean Baudrillard, emphasized by Peter Halley who frequently writes critically about these issues, they all admit that the end has come, that the end of the end is over (hence that we can start again on another match; that we can paint without the feeling of the end but only with its simulacrum). As Foster writes, “In this new abstract painting, simulation has penetrated the very art form that . . . resisted it most.”³² Starting with a critique of the economy of the sign in late capitalism, Baudrillard was driven, by the very nature of his millenarianist feeling, to a fascination for the age of the simulacrum, a glorification of our own impotence disguised as nihilism. It seems to me that although the young artists in question address the issue of the simulacral—of the abstract simulation produced by capital—they have similarly abandoned themselves to the seduction of what they claim to denounce: either perversely (as in the case of Philip Taaffe who refers to Newman’s sublime while he empties it of its content); or unconsciously (as in the case of Halley who seems to believe that an icon-

ological rendering of simulacra—through his pictorial rhetoric of “cells” and “conduits”—could function as a critique of them). Like Baudrillard, I would call them manic mourners. Their return to painting, as though it were an appropriate medium for what they want to address, as though the age of the simulacral could be represented, comes from the feeling that since the end has come, since it’s all over, we can rejoice at the killing of the dead. That is, we can forget that the end has to be endlessly worked through, and start all over again. But this, of course, is not so, and it is in flagrant contradiction to the very analysis of the simulacral as the latest abstraction produced by capitalism (perhaps this illusion is rooted in the abuse of the term postindustrialism, whose inveterate inadequacy to describe the latest development of capitalism has been exposed by Fredric Jameson).³³ Appropriation art—the “orgy of cannibalism” proper to manic mourning—of which this movement is obviously a part,³⁴ can then be understood as a pathological mourning (it has also its melancholic side, as noted by Hall Foster about Ross Bleckner and Taaffe in their fascination for the “failure” of op art).³⁵ Bleckner writes about Taaffe: “Dead issues are reopened by this changed subjectivity: artists become transvestites and viewers voyeurs watching history become less alien, less authoritarian.”³⁶ I would correct the latter assertion this way: “. . . viewers watching oblivion become more alien, more enslaved.” For “simulation, together with the old regime of disciplinary surveillance, constitutes a principal means of deterrence in our society (for how can one intervene politically in events when they are so often simulated or immediately replaced by pseudo-events?).”³⁷

Yet mourning has been the activity of painting throughout this century. “To be modern is to know *that which is not possible any more*,” Roland Barthes once wrote.³⁸ But the work of mourning does not necessarily become pathological: the feeling of the end, after all, did produce a cogent history of painting, modernist painting, which we have probably been too prompt to bury. Painting might not be dead. Its vitality will only be tested once we are cured of our mania and our melancholy, and we believe again in our ability to act in history: accepting our project of working through the end again, rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defense (this is what mania and melancholy are about) and settling our historical task: the difficult task of mourning. It will not be easier than before, but my bet is that the potential for painting will emerge in the conjunctive deconstruction of the three instances that modernist painting has dissociated (the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic). But predictions are made to be wrong. Let us simply say that the desire for painting remains, and that this desire is not entirely programmed or subsumed by the market: this desire is the sole factor of a future possibility of paint-

ing, that is of a nonpathological mourning. At any rate, as observed by Robert Musil fifty years ago, if some painting is still to come, if painters are still to come, they will not come from where we expect them to.³⁹

“What does it mean for a painter *to think?*”(p. 59)—this is the old question to which Hubert Damisch has returned in connection with the art of this century, and which he alone in France seems to take seriously. Not only what is the role of speculative thought for the painter at work? but above all what is the mode of thought of which painting is the stake? Can one think *in* painting as one can dream in color? and is there such a thing as pictorial thought that would differ from what Klee called “visual thought”? Or again, to use the language current some ten years ago, is painting a theoretical practice? Can one designate the place of the theoretical in painting without doing violence to it, without, that is, disregarding painting’s specificity, without annexing it to an applied discourse whose meshes are too slack to give a suitable account of painting’s irregularities? Nowhere in Damisch’s book are there broad examinations of the idea of “the pictorial.” Instead there is, in each instance, the formulation of a question raised by the work of art within a historically determined framework, and the search for a theoretical model to which one might compare the work’s operations and with which one might engage them. This approach simultaneously presupposes a rejection of established stylistic categories (and indirectly an interest in new groupings or transverse categories), a fresh start of the inquiry in the face of each new work, and a permanent awareness of the operating rule of painting in relation to discourse. For Damisch’s question is also, as we shall see: what does the painter’s pictorial thought mean for one who has undertaken to write?

Damisch’s book stands alone in France, as it is resolutely opposed to: (1) the stamp-collecting approach of traditional art historians, whose veritable terror of the theoretical has gradually turned their texts into the gibberish of documentalists and antiquarians—in the sense that Nietzsche gave this word (with very few exceptions, twentieth-century art has remained untouched in France by this ravenous sort of discourse, empirical at best, and with nothing of history about it except the name); (2)

the ineptitude of art criticism, a form of journalism all the more amnesiac for having constantly to adapt itself to market trends; (3) that typically French genre, inaugurated on the one hand by Baudelaire and on the other probably by Sartre, of the text *about* art by a literary writer or philosopher, each doing his little number, a seemingly obligatory exercise in France if one is to reach the pantheon of letters or of thought.

While Damisch's book exposes the fundamental incompetence of the first two prevailing discourses (demonstrating to the historians their refusal to ask themselves about the type of historicity of their subject; teaching the critics the necessity of discovering what it is that calls into question the certitude of their judgments), it is in relation to the third and absolutely hegemonic kind of text that his lesson seems to me most important. Why? Because Damisch teaches us above all to rid ourselves of the stifling concept of *image* upon which the relation of this kind of text to art is founded—arrogant, ignorant, predatory texts that consider painting a collection of images to be tracked down, illustrations to be captioned.

One example: Jacques Lacan, usually so attentive to the signifier when language is at stake, is reproached for having invoked "abstract models from the start" when faced with François Rouan's braidings (Lacan's everlasting Borromean knots) rather than examining "on the evidence" the detail of the fabric (pp. 280–281). Not that Damisch has anything against abstract models in themselves; he simply says that the work produces them by itself for anyone who takes the trouble to notice, and that in this case neither Rouan's painting nor the theory of knots gains anything by the demonstration in the form of a priori advice from the eminent psychoanalyst.¹ Nor is it that Damisch becomes the prosecutor trying to pin down all the scornful remarks that characterize the discourse of his contemporaries on the subject of art. There is little of polemics in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, which consists of essays written between 1958 and 1984. Or rather there is a *polémique d'envoi*, as one speaks of a *coup d'envoi*, a "kickoff," which governs, if not the whole book, at least the texts of the first and second parts, entitled respectively "L'Image et le tableau" and "Théorèmes."

The Perceptive Model

Although they may seem somewhat foreign to anyone reading them today, the pages Damisch devotes to Sartre are decisive, and I would say today more than ever. These concern Sartre's thesis that there is no such thing as aesthetic perception, the aesthetic object being something "unreal," apprehended by the "imaging conscious-

ness." This thesis, from Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*, states that, in Damisch's words, "a portrait, a landscape, a form only allows itself to be recognized in painting insofar as we cease to view the painting for what it is, materially speaking, and insofar as consciousness steps back in relation to reality to produce as an image the object represented" (p. 67). Such a thesis would at best hold true for a type of illusionistic painting that, assuming it had existed at all, would only have existed at a particular moment in history. That Sartre's aesthetic is an aesthetic of *mimesis*, in the most traditional sense of the word, is neither difficult nor fundamentally useful to demonstrate, although it may have had a considerable stake in its time. What is important about Damisch's text is that he takes this aesthetic to be emblematic in developing his polemic in an essay on an "abstract" painter, one of the most complex of them, namely Mondrian. For is not only that what Sartre calls "the imaging attitude" blinds our literati and philosophers to the rupture constituted by "abstract painting," it is also this "imaging attitude" that still today governs studies by the majority of art historians, for the most part Americans, who take an interest in this kind of painting. If dissertations abound that would make Malevich's *Black Square* a solar eclipse, Rothko's late works stylized versions of the Pietà and Deposition, or Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* an interpretation of the New York subway map, it is because the kind of relation to art denounced by Damisch is not only very much with us but, in the current hostility to theory, stands a good chance of becoming absolutely dominant. Damisch's text shows us, however, that we don't have to search for "une femme là-dessous" (a woman underneath) in order to remain tied to the system of interpretation of which Sartre was the eponym. One has only to be inattentive to the specificity of the object to be led back to this system; hence Damisch's interest in the detail of the signifier, the texture of the painting, everything that, according to Sartre, insofar as it is real, "does not become the object of aesthetic appreciation."²

The case of Mondrian is symptomatic. How many purely geometric readings (indifferent to the medium of expression), how many interpretations resulting from blindness to the paintings' subtle games have given rise to the pregnant image of a grid imposed upon a neutral background? As early as this formidable text of 1958, and from the point of view of his controversy with Sartre, Damisch sees in Mondrian a painter of the perceptive aporia, precisely the opposite of the "geometric abstraction" genre of which he is supposed to be the herald. For the first time, so far as I know, the enterprise of *destruction* carried out by the Dutch painter was understood as a concerted operation governing every detail of his painting. In order to comprehend, for example, the abandonment of all curves, there is no need to get mixed up in the theosophical nonsense with which the artist's mind was momentarily

encumbered. It is because the line has the function of destroying the plane as such that it will have to be straight:

The interdiction of any other line but the straight corresponded to the experiential fact that a line curving inward on a canvas or piece of paper defines "full" or "empty" spaces, which the imaging consciousness is irresistibly led to consider for themselves to the detriment of the line that serves as their pretext. Mondrian's paintings are made to counter such impulses and to hinder the movement whereby an unreal object is constituted from the tangible reality of the painting, the eye being ceaselessly led back to the painting's constituent elements, line, color, design. (p. 69)

Damisch's thesis is rigorously anti-Sartrean: in opposition to the "imaging consciousness," which necessarily has as its purpose the constitution of an image, he sees in Mondrian's canvases, in Pollock's, in Picasso's *Portrait of Volland*, each with its own modality, "an ever-reversed kaleidoscope that offers to *aesthetic perception* a task both novel and without assignable end . . . the 'meaning' of the work consisting precisely in this swarming and ambiguous appeal" (p. 78). Or again: "If the painter has chosen to prohibit the imaging consciousness from giving itself free rein . . . it is for the purpose of awakening in the spectator the uneasiness with which the perception of a painting should be accompanied" (p. 71). Now, this task of the painter is the stake of his art; it is what makes his canvas a specific theoretical model, the development of a thought whose properly pictorial aspect cannot be circumvented:

One cannot give way to reverie in front of a Mondrian painting, nor even to pure contemplation. But it is here that there comes into play, beyond the sensorial pleasure granted us by Sartre, some more secret activity of consciousness, an activity by definition without assignable end, contrary to the imaging activity which exhausts itself in the constitution of its object. Each time perception thinks it can go beyond what is given it to see toward what it would constitute as meaning, it is immediately led back to the first experience, which wants it to falter in constituting that white as background and this black as a form. (*Ibid.*)

I would call this theoretical model introduced by Damisch *perceptive*, but by antiphrasis, because for the painters studied it is a question in each case of "disturbing the permanent structures of perception, and first of all the figure/ground relationship, beyond which one would be unable to speak of a perceptive field" (p. 110, in connection with Dubuffet). With the exception of one or two texts, espe-

cially the one of 1974 on Valerio Adami in which a positive evaluation of the concept of image and of Sartre's aesthetics is hinted at, all the articles in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* insist on this point: "Painting, for the one who produces it as for the one who consumes it, is always a matter of perception" (p. 148). And all the examples chosen (except for Adami and Saul Steinberg) assign to modernity the preliminary task of confusing the figure/ground opposition, without the assurance of which no perception could establish itself in imaging synthesis. It is this "perceptive model" that allows Damisch not only to compare Pollock and Mondrian but also to establish the ambiguity of the figure/ground relationship as the very theme of the American painter's interlacings and to reject as particularly unproductive the divide that some have tried to enforce between Pollock's great abstract period, that of the all-over works of 1947–50, and his so-called figurative canvases of 1951 and the years that followed. Likewise, Dubuffet's great period (the 1950s) is deciphered, by direct appeal to Merleau-Ponty, as an essential moment in this history of perceptive ambiguity:

By treating the figures as so many vaguely silhouetted backgrounds whose texture he strives to decipher and—conversely—by carrying his gaze toward the less differentiated backgrounds to catch their secret figures and mechanics, this painter has restored to the idea of form its original meaning, if it is true that form cannot be reduced to the geometric outline of objects, that it is bound up with the texture of things, and that it draws simultaneously on all our senses. (p. 117)

The phenomenological theme of the original unity of the senses often returns in Damisch's writing, but it would be vain to see in these studies an application of Merleau-Ponty's theory. And this is not only because this recurrent theme is seriously questioned with regard to Fautrier (p. 134) or because the criticism of "pure visibility" is reoriented through psychoanalysis (pp. 262–263), but also because phenomenological apprehension in Damisch opens onto a second model, copresent with the first.

The Technical Model

In opposition to the "optical" interpretation that has been given to Pollock's all-over paintings by leading American formalist critics (Greenberg, Fried), an interpretation that partakes in a certain way, but much more subtly, of Sartrean unreality,³ Damisch proposes from the start a reading that I would call *technical*. It begins (but this also applies to the texts on Klee, Dubuffet, or Mondrian) with an insistence on

the real space set in play by these canvases (of course, it is always a question of countering the Sartrean imaginary or unreality). From this deliberately down-to-earth, ground-level apprehension flows a quite special attention to the process of the work as a place of formation, prior to its effects. Against the deliberately obfuscating attitude of the art historians, always ready to erase ruptures, Damisch establishes a chronology, or rather a technical logic, of invention: it would be wrong to see in the gesturality of *The Flame* (1937), or in the scribbled margins of *Male and Female* (1942) and *She-Wolf* (1943), the preliminary signs of Pollock's great art. In the first case, "the touch enlivens paint, a matter that still remains alien to it," while "Pollock's originality will later consist precisely in connecting so closely the gesture deployed on the canvas with the paint it spreads there that the latter will seem to be its trace, its necessary product" (p. 76). In the second case, we are dealing only with a borrowing, from Max Ernst or Masson, if you like: "The invention takes place, indeed, at the decisive moment when the painter raised this process, dripping—which after all had been only a means of 'padding'—to the dignity of an original principle for the organization of surfaces" (ibid.). For there is technique and technique, or rather there is the epistemological moment of technique, where thought and invention take place, and then there is all the rest, all the procedures that borrow from tradition or contest it without reaching that threshold that it is a question of designating—the reason that one can say of technique "indifferently, that it matters and does not matter for art" (p. 94).

It is by remaining at the elementary level of the gesture, of the trace, that Damisch discovers this threshold in Pollock, first in connection with *Shimmering Substance* (1946), where "each touch seems destined to destroy the effect born of the relation between the preceding touch and the background" (p. 78), then in the great all-over works of 1947–50: "Lines that plow the canvas through and through, in a counterpoint that no longer develops in width but *in thickness*, and each of which has no meaning except in relation to the one that precedes it—each projection of color succeeding another as though to efface it" (p. 80). This reading marks a beginning, first of all because it is the only one that makes it possible to understand the manner in which Pollock was working against surrealism (it is impossible in his case to speak of automatism, despite appearances: cf. p. 85), then because it points to the very place where Pollock's painting abandons, or rather destroys, the order of the image, "which is reduced to a surface effect, without any of the thickness that is the particular quality of painting," as Damisch says later on regarding Francois Rouan (p. 296).

Damisch is rapidly led, in Pollock's work, to make this category of *thickness* in

the order of technique (which has since been reexamined by others alerted by his text)⁴ the equivalent of the figure/ground confusion (to which it is linked) in the order of perception. From then on it becomes one of the essential question marks of Damisch's inquiry, functioning almost as an epistemological test in his discourse. The reemergence of the hidden undersides in Dubuffet (p. 114), the exchanges of position between outer surface and underside in Klee (p. 213), the interweavings of Mondrian and later of Rouan—all of these become theoretical models that *demonstrate* the painting of this century just as perspective demonstrated that of the Renaissance. It is therefore no accident that the book appears under the sign of *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*; the essay devoted to the novel provides the subtitle to the collection: "The Undersides of Painting."

If one is to believe Frenhofer, it looks as though painting should produce its full effect only insofar as it proceeds, in its most intimate texture, from a predetermined exchange of positions that would be the equivalent of a kind of weaving in which the threads would go up and down alternatively, the same strand passing now above and now below, without the possibility of being assigned a univocal sign. (p. 16)

Frenhofer's name is invoked in no less than five texts in this collection in addition to the one devoted to the "philosophical study" of Balzac ("whoever writes proceeds in a way not dissimilar to one who paints, using a quotation that he had first singled out for completely different purposes, to start out on a new *development*, in every sense of the word" [p. 258]). Far removed from recent romanticist interpretations,⁵ the Frenhofer of Damisch has been, from his first texts, the emblem of a conversion, the signal of invention—with Cézanne ("Frenhofer, c'est moi") and, one should add, Seurat—of a new thickness that would no longer borrow from the old academic recipes:

And if one wants modernity in painting to be signaled by the replacement of the superimposition of preparations, of underpainting, glazing, transparencies, and varnish, by another craft based on flatness, the juxtaposition of touches, and simultaneous contrast, how can we not see that the problem of the "undersides" will only have been displaced or transformed, painting having necessarily kept something of its thickness, even if it were aiming only at surface effects? (p. 37)

Here, from the beginning, a metaphor intervenes to help us see that this *technical* model is irreducible to the *perceptive* model as it was earlier described,

although it is its corollary: that of the figure inscribed on the chessboard, “in its full spaces as in its empty ones, but in the superimposition and overlapping of its layers as well” (p. 158), *inaccessible as such to pure vision*. The work on the thickness of the plane is for Damisch a technical model par excellence, because it implies a knowledge and a speculation (p. 279): we are dealing, as close as possible to the paint, with one of the most abstract—in its topological background—inventions of the pictorial thought of this century. “Without recourse to theory or to mathematics, a painter may very well come to formulate, by means all his own, a problematic that may later be translated into other terms and into another register (as happened in its time with perspective)” (p. 288). It is because he acknowledges that painting can provide theoretical models that Damisch will be able to single out in Pollock the moment of thickness and from then on rewrite a portion of the history of modern art.

The Symbolic Model

It is fashion nowadays to ask oneself about the ways and means by which the passage from painting to the discourse that takes it over is supposed to operate—if not about the end of this transference. It is even one of the most frequent commonplaces in our artistic and literary culture, a *topos* from which very few escape who, without claiming to be “art critics” (that is behind us), make it their profession, if not their work, to write about painting or about painters. Without remembering that this question, which one would like to see preceding any commentary, has already been decided by culture, which is at all times responsible for organizing the game, distributing the roles, and regulating the exchanges between the two registers of the visible and the readable, between the painted and the written (or the spoken), the seeing and the hearing, the seen and the heard. If this question today professes to be such, and a question to which culture, our culture, would not furnish a ready-made answer, it is still culture, our culture, that will have wanted it that way, and that always makes us ask it all over again. (p. 186)

If the numerous passages that Damisch devotes in this collection to the relation between painting and discourse avoid as much as possible the cliché that he denounces, it is partly because he demonstrates that his text can only belong to it. Like the Foucault of *This Is Not a Pipe*, whose analyses he anticipates as early as 1960, Damisch likes to draw a historical map of the connections between practices. Here

he stresses the extent to which the mode of relation of painting to discourse has become in this century, thanks to abstraction and structural linguistics, a particularly necessary stumbling block in the analysis. It is because he considers painting a key to the interpretation of the world, a key neither mimetic nor analogical, but, as for science or language, *symbolic* (more in Cassirer's sense than Lacan's), and because he assigns to painting a cultural task equal to and different from the discourse that deals with it, that the archaeological or epistemological reading takes an unexpected turn in Damisch, as though finding in certain pictorial advances theorems of anthropological mutations.

Many pages in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* concern the relations that mathematics and painting maintain at the symbolic level, whether it is a question of the role of mimesis in algebraic invention (p. 51) and notation (p. 196) or the common ground (projective plane) on which geometry and perspective construction work (p. 295). Furthermore, it is probably after having successfully shown how the invention of pictorial perspective in the Renaissance anticipated by two centuries the work of mathematicians on the notion of infinity⁶ that Damisch was tempted to pursue the transserial inquiry into modern times. The long article on Paul Klee's *Equals Infinity* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), which compares the 1932 painting with the discoveries of Cantor and Dedekind on the power of the continuum, sufficiently shows the interest as well as the difficulty of a thought in which,

beyond the accepted division of labor, the inherited separation of the fields of knowledge and significance, the *differences* among the practices known as "art," "science," "mathematics," and "painting" cease to be thought of in terms of exteriority in order to be thought of—whatever one understands thereby—in terms of relations of production, i.e., of *history*. (p. 215)

Partly because this is not my field, I prefer to leave it and insist instead on one of the symbolic models developed by Damisch for the art of this century, a model that moreover has the particular feature, according to Bataille, of ripping the frock coat philosophy gives to what exists, the "mathematical frock coat." One will recognize here the famous definition, given in *Documents* in 1929, of the *informe*, a term, again according to Bataille, *that serves to declassify*. Among the references that return at several points in this book (Frenhofer, Alberti, Ripa, and others), there is one that I consider emblematic of the reading that I am here seeking to circumscribe: it is those pages devoted by Valéry to Degas in which Valéry observed, in Damisch's words,

that the notion of form is changed—if not cast in doubt altogether—by the projection onto the vertical plane of the canvas of the horizontal plane of the floor, which no longer functions as a neutral and indifferent background but as an essential factor in the vision of things, and can—almost—constitute the very subject of the painting. (p. 111)

Already in the essay devoted to Dubuffet in 1962—anticipating by a few years Leo Steinberg's invention of the concept of the *flatbed* picture plane in connection with Rauschenberg as well as more recent studies—the confusion of the vertical and horizontal proposed by one side of modern painting was taken for an essential mutation, participating, if you like, in a critique of optics, whose importance is yet to be measured.⁷ This model includes Dubuffet's twin desires "to force the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground viewed from above, and at the same time to erect the ground into a wall calling for man's intervention by line or imprint" (p. 112); Pollock's *grounds*, "an area, a space of play, attacked by the artist from all sides at once, which he did not hesitate to penetrate in person and which . . . put up a physical resistance to him" (p. 149); Saul Steinberg's *Tables* (p. 231), but I would be tempted to say of these, contrary to Damisch, that they do not come "directly into the inquiry," and are among "those that proliferate in its wake" (p. 130). Even Mondrian's work, as I have tried to show elsewhere,⁸ touches on this symbolic model, this taxonomic collapse, this overturning of oppositions—especially between representation and action—on which our whole Western aesthetic is founded. Damisch probably had an intuition of this, since for him the study of Mondrian's work is "an invitation to *create* under its most concrete aspects" (p. 72). The revelation of this model is one of the most fruitful points of Damisch's book. From cubism to minimalism, from the abstraction of the 1920s to that of the '50s and '60s, I would almost go as far as to point to all the high points of modern art as verifications of this discovery, as demonstrations of its validity.

The Strategic Model

Shortly before his death, "and as though in passing," Barnett Newman confided to Damisch "that everything he had been able to do had meaning only in relation to Pollock's work and *against* it" (p. 154). I like to think that Damisch recalled this remark when he read Lévi-Strauss's *Voie des masques*, and that from long knowledge of this kind of secret, then from its sudden emergence as evidence, a fourth model emerged in Damisch's text, a *strategic* model.⁹ Like chess pieces, like phonemes in language, a work has significance, as Lévi-Strauss shows, first by what it is not and

what it opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value, within a field—itsself living and stratified—which has above all to be circumscribed by defining its rules. Lévi-Strauss's condescending remarks about art historians, unable, in his opinion, to understand the structural or rather the strategic nature of signification, are not strictly deserved, at least if one considers art history in its earlier phases and not for what it has largely become today. As we know, Wölfflin conceived the baroque paradigm as incomprehensible unless measured against the classical; and Riegl demonstrated in a thick volume how the *Kunstwollen* of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch art was at first negatively defined in relation to that of Italian art of the same period. Such readings are, in any case, commonplace in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (see, for example, the comparisons between Pollock and Mondrian) and have the merit of no longer taking seriously the autonomy of what is called style. Likewise, since strategy means power stakes, there are many observations in this book on the history of the artistic institution in its relation to production, whether it has to do with the role of criticism, the museum, the market, the public, or even the relationship (fundamentally changed since Cézanne, p. 123) that the painter maintains with his or her canvas.

But the interest of the strategic model does not reside so much there as in what it allows us to think historically of the concepts revealed by the other models as well as the ties that they maintain among themselves. One will notice, by the way, that this fourth model was not born directly from a confrontation with the works themselves: it does not immediately take account of pictorial invention itself, of the status of the theoretical in painting, but of the conditions of appearance, of what establishes itself between works; it finds itself with respect to the other models in a second, meta-critical position, and this is why it allows us to ask again the question of the pictorial specificity (of invention) and survival of painting, without getting stuck once more in the essentialism to which American formalist criticism had accustomed us. "It is not enough, in order for there to be painting, that the painter take up his brushes again," Damisch tells us: it is still necessary that it be worth the effort, "it is still necessary that [the painter] succeed in demonstrating to us that painting is something we positively cannot do without, that it is indispensable to us, and that it would be madness—worse still, a historical error—to let it lie fallow today" (p. 293).

Let us again take the strategic metaphor par excellence, that of chess: Damisch uses it to clarify his historical point. Let us suppose that Newman and Pollock are opponents. How can we determine in their moves what is of the order of the match, belonging in particular to its new although replayable developments, and what is of

the generic order of the game, with its assigned rules? One can see what is displaced by this kind of question, such as the problem of repetitions that had so worried Wölfflin:

It is certain that through the problematic of abstraction, American painters [of the abstract expressionist generation], just as already in the 1920s the exponents of suprematism, neoplasticism, purism, etc., could nourish the illusion that, far from being engaged merely in a single match that would take its place in the group of matches making up the *game* of “painting,” they were returning to the very foundations of the game, to its immediate, constituent *données*. The American episode would then represent less a new development in the history of abstraction than a new departure, a resumption—but at a deeper level and, theoretically as much as practically, with more powerful means—of the match begun under the title of abstraction thirty or forty years earlier. (p. 167)

The strategic reading is strictly antihistoricist: it does not believe in the exhaustion of things, in the linear genealogy offered by us by art criticism, always ready, unconsciously or not, to follow the demands of the market in search of new products, but neither does it believe in the order of a homogenous time without breaks, such as art history likes to imagine. Its question becomes “one of the status that ought to be assigned to the *match* ‘painting,’ as one *sees* it being played at a given moment in particular circumstances, in its relation to the *game* of the same name” (p. 170)—and the question can be asked about any of the models (perceptive, technical, and symbolic) described above, as well as about the relations they maintain among themselves at a given moment in history.

Such questioning has the immediate advantage of raising doubt about certain truisms. Is the “alleged convention of depth”—rejected by the pictorial art of this century because, according to Greenberg, it is unnecessary—necessarily of the order of the “match” more than of the game (p. 166)? Also, concerning what Damisch observed of the “undersides of painting,” should we not rather consider that a series of displacements will have modified their role (the position on the chessboard)? And is it not the same for the convention of “chiaroscuro” (*ibid.*)? Without thereby becoming a theoretical machine encouraging indifference, since on the contrary one has to take a side, the strategic approach has the advantage of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever terminated, decided once and for all, and of leading the analysis back to a type of historicity that it had neglected, that of long duration (to which the symbolic model par excellence also

goes back). Hence Damisch's supremely ironic attitude toward the apocalyptic tone adopted today concerning the impasse in which art finds itself, an impasse to be taken simply as one of the many interrupted matches to which history holds the secret.¹⁰

The problem, for whoever writes about it, should not be so much to write about painting as to try to do something *with* it, without indeed claiming to understand it better than the painter does, . . . [to try to] see a little more clearly, thanks to painting, into the problems with which [the writer] is concerned, and which are not only, nor even primarily, problems of painting—if they were, all he would have to do would be to devote himself to this art (p. 288).

Because he considers painting a theoretical operator, a producer of models, because he agrees with this statement by Dubuffet given as a quotation—"painting may be a machine to convey philosophy—*but already to elaborate it*" (p. 104), and because he means in his work to receive a lesson from painting, Hubert Damisch offers us one of the most thoughtful readings of the art of this century, but one that also remains as close as possible to its object, deliberately situating itself each time at the very heart of pictorial invention. For what the perceptive, technical, and symbolic models aim primarily at demonstrating are the mechanisms of this invention, and what the strategic model takes account of is its mode of historicity.