

3. Politics

Under this heading I include any writing on the previous century's painting in which one of two concerns guide the writer's sense of the work's importance: either the work's ethics or the social setting in which the work was made. The former has no name, although it could be named moral art criticism. The latter is usually called social art history.

There are other senses of politics, which might be the ones most readily conjured for readers who are invested in postmodernisms; in those perspectives art's politics goes to its root, making every aesthetics a politics and every art practice the enactment of a politics. Those senses of politics have been put into practice since the 1960s in performances, collaborations, and interventions of many kinds. They also have been theorized as institutional critique (by Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Donald Preziosi, among others), as an expanded aesthetics (by Jean-Luc Nancy, Marc Redfield, John Paul Ricco, and others), as Marxist or Marxian critique (for example, by Karl Werckmeister and very differently by Terry Eagleton), and as identity politics and gender theory

(by Judith Butler, Douglas Crimp, Leo Bersani, and others).¹ These are different practices, and it is not fair to present them as a single movement, except that they diverge from shared ideas about the identity of aesthetics and politics. For readers who are sympathetic with one of these perspectives, this section will likely seem inadvisable or unsupportable, for several reasons: because “Modernisms” and “Postmodernisms” (and perhaps especially the latter) already are politics, even though I have not acknowledged that in the discussion; because social art history and moral art criticism have their own politics, which should not be confused with the understanding of aesthetics as politics; and because postmodernisms cannot be understood apart from political critique. I do not argue against any of those objections, or against Nancy’s understanding of aesthetics, which I take it is in many ways fundamental. My reasons for separating “Politics” in this section, and identifying it mainly with social art history and moral art criticism, follow from the general remarks I made about theory at the beginning. I find that studies informed by politics in the more fundamental sense have not yet proposed enough previously neglected artists to affect the balance of the discipline’s customary subjects.

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1. In addition to the following sources, see Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth’s Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Some writing that stresses ethics and social context is produced in universities by art historians who are concerned with political history. But most of it, and especially the kind of writing that might be called moral art criticism, is written outside academic circles; it can be found in the literature of art academies in Soviet Russia and in China, and in different forms, in newspaper journalism, conservative commentary, and the pronouncements of politicians. At the end of the century in the United States, the two most prominent politicians in this category were Senator Jesse Helms and New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Among critics, the most widely read were probably Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball.²

The writers of moral art criticism are diverse in their politics, but they share the formative idea that art should be moral and ethical, instructing people rather than, say, confusing or shocking them. As such, moral criticism is ancient and widespread. Its roots are in the Plato of the Republic, and by extension in orators from Demosthenes and Isocrates to Cicero. I estimate that in the twentieth century, moral criticism was far more common than any of the other kinds of writing I am considering here except the next theory I consider, that painting depends mainly on the painter's talent.

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2. See, for example, Jesse Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976); Hilton Kramer, *The Age of the Avant-Garde: An Art Chronicle of 1956–1972* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973); and Hilton Kramer, ed., *The New Criterion Reader: The First Five Years* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

In South Korea, for example, conservative traditions of art education at the secondary school level continue to produce students who believe that art should have a clear ethical purpose or message, and who are unconvinced by the Western modernist and postmodernist interest in ambiguity and complexity. I cannot quantify this observation, and it does not apply to working artists, but I have observed it for a number of years among Korean art students and intermittently among students who are Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Singaporean, Malaysian, and Laotian. In Korea an ethical attitude to visual art can be attributable to the persistence of a rigid system of art instruction based on French Academy models of naturalism, combined with Soviet socialist models of narrative subject matter.³

Given the heterogeneity of moral art criticism, it is important to notice how moral interpretations differ from judgments made from modernist or postmodernist perspectives. Consider, for example, Diego Rivera's (1886–1957) mural *Man, Controller of the Universe*, originally commissioned by John Rockefeller Jr. for the Rockefeller Plaza in New York City (see Figure 3.1). Rivera was paid and dismissed when Rockefeller could not get him to remove a portrait of Lenin. Rivera then painted the same picture — on a smaller scale, but with more figures on either side — for

3. The conservative students I have encountered are often the educational products of “cram” schools (*misul-hakwon*), which have become an industry in Korea. They teach beaux-arts–inspired skills to students, in preparation for their university exams. Many are located near Hongik University and in DaeChi Dong; see www.milsulsam.com. Still, the universities play the major role in the dissemination of art practices. I thank Joan Lee for this information.



Figure 3.1a

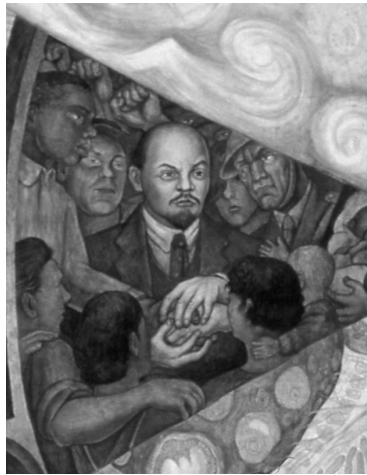


Figure 3.1b

the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and the episode helped make him a household name in the United States. The painting is openly political and revolutionary. A scene of “superficial, frivolous” capitalist “debauchery” with a portrait of Rockefeller (at the middle left) is contrasted against a picture of brave socialist action, which includes portraits of Marx, Engels, and

Trotsky (at the right).⁴ The scandal following the unveiling of the original painting in the spring of 1933 provoked some incisive political criticism. An anonymous writer in *The New Republic* wrote that Rivera's determination not to remove the portrait of Lenin "may appear to prevent all defense of his work on the ground of its art, or because the artist is superior to politics. Certainly it has calmed the enthusiasm of many of his bourgeois partisans."⁵ An anonymous *New York Times* editorial proposed the mural would have made better sense at 26 Broadway, where the Rockefeller family offices had been located, rather than in Rockefeller Center, where the fortunes were being distributed "in manifold benefactions."⁶

Social art historians and moral critics have placed a consistently high value on Mexican muralism, and in particular on Rivera; a valuation that is not at all shared by modernist historians, for example, for whom Rivera is an example of belated figurative art that is out of touch with the central developments of midcentury painting. From a modernist point of view, if *Man, Controller of the Universe* is not a central work in twentieth-century painting, it may be because of Rivera's dependence on what he called "Anáhuac" cubism, on the filmmakers Sergey

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4. "Frivolous" and "superficial" is from Sofia Rosales y Jaime, in *Diego Rivera, Catálogo General de Obra Mural y Fotografía Personal* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1988), 184; "debauchery" is from Cynthia Helms, ed., *Diego Rivera, a Retrospective* (New York: Norton, 1986), 304.
 5. *The New Republic*, May 24, 1933, 49, quoted from Irene Herner de Larrea et al., eds., *Diego Rivera: Paradise Lost at Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1987), 122.
 6. *New York Times*, May 16, 1933, 35, quoted in *Diego Rivera: Paradise Lost*, 108.

Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, and on painters from the School of Paris: all sources that cut him off from modernist developments in painting after World War I.⁷

I cannot see how it is possible to subdivide moral criticism, as I have done with modernisms and postmodernisms, because there is an array of positions from those who work only as scholars to those for whom any study of modernism entails an active politics. For some social art historians, the study of anarchism and socialism can now be carried out only in the academy, so that the interaction of politics and art becomes a field of study that may not involve political activism. Writers such as Mark Antliff, Patricia Leighton, and T.J. Clark have considered anarchism and socialism in art from within academic settings; that implies not a quietism (as the critic Dave Hickey implied when he said he would write a book called *Fabulous Mansions of Marxist Professors*) but a conviction about the state of affairs in the contemporary world.⁸ Other social art historians such as Thomas Crow, Stephen Eisenman, Donald Preziosi, and Hal Foster are interested in more abstract questions of the relation between art and society that would not necessarily lead to a specific intervention in politics — or that would lead to interventions that are political only in the sense that they are aimed at art-world practices, museology, or curatorial practices. For others, including

7. David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1997).

8. Hickey, personal communication, 2001.

Werckmeister and Katy Deepwell, the social setting of modernist art implies that any scholar should be engaged in politics outside the art world. In still other cases a generative theory that does not involve political action, such as Buchloh's, has given rise to artists and scholars who find such action necessary (e.g., the artists Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser, who were influenced by Buchloh).

Superimposed on that array of possibilities is the conventional political spectrum from anarchists (perhaps including Antliff) and pyrrhonists (McEvilley), through various left- and right-wing academics, all the way to antiacademic Republican neoconservatives such as Kramer and Kimball. The middle portion of the spectrum is especially complicated. Clark's politics are strong but also enfolded in what readers have felt is a kind of melancholy (it is at least a disappointment over the paltry successes of modernism, and modernism's sometimes unhelpful optimism).⁹ My sense is that most of social art history takes place in a turbid middle ground where particularly academic if not conservative choices of artworks mingle with liberal politics, and where the philosophies of modern art can work subtly against political will. It is a difficult enterprise to disentangle the discipline into legible politics. It is easier, and more appropriate to my current purpose, to look at the extreme positions.

9. For an activist perspective on the political valence of that apparent melancholy, see Werckmeister's review of *Farewell to an Idea*, "A Critique of T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002): 855–67.

(A note on the consistency of my exposition. The disarray of the accounts I want to talk about under the heading “Politics” also makes it impossible to arrange them according to where their authors place the inception of modernism. That arrangement, I think, captures much of the range of ideas about modernism, and it is still pertinent when it comes to postmodernisms. The different exposition I am attempting in this section reflects the fact that these are not theories in the strong sense but accounts, models, narratives, and other kinds of writing. To some degree they require an opportunistic and even inconsistent approach: sometimes it helps to look at the times that movements were thought to have originated; in cases like the journal *October* it can be more fruitful to explore leading concepts. Now, considering politics, it seems best to examine a few test cases and exemplary writers. If writers on twentieth-century art were guided by theories, then the entire subject I am assaying would be intrinsically easier.)

Here is how Hilton Kramer summed up his obituary notice for the gallerist Leo Castelli (the piece is titled “The Man Who Turned Kitsch into Art”): “Pop art certainly had the effect of lowering the level of taste in every quarter of the art world. ... Minimalist art had the parallel effect of introducing a vein of nihilism into the art scene that continues to prosper to the present day.” “The most celebrated nihilist,” Kramer said, is Duchamp. He was elevated “to a kind of sainthood,” an event that was “one of the greatest disasters to befall our art and our art institutions.” At the end Kramer allowed that his “has been

a dissenting opinion in an art world that is now a sillier, more venal and more dispiriting place than it was in the days before Leo Castelli.”¹⁰ Here Kramer sounds like a high modernist writing against art that is dependent on politics, but his criticism is wholly moralizing in tone and purpose. He wants inspiring, ethically responsible art and not kitsch, identity politics, and other “sillier” forms of personal expression.

At the other end of the political universe is writer Thomas Crow, who has very reflective things to say about the relation between some postwar art and its surrounding culture. His approach does not involve advocating any particular politics, but his interest in the most challenging minimalist and conceptual art means he is uninterested in much of the art of the same decades, art that other postmodern criticism finds most promising. (He is unimpressed, for example, by much of what happens under the aegis of visual studies.)¹¹ Crow has written about Sherrie Levine’s (b. 1947) plywood paintings, Peter Halley (b. 1953), Christopher Wool (b. 1955), and even Ross Bleckner (b. 1949) but not, for example, about intentionally kitschy or unserious postpop and neoexpressionist painting such as David Wojnarowicz (b. 1954), Julian Schnabel (b. 1951), or Kenny Scharf (b. 1958).¹² For Crow “the most powerful moments of modernist negation have occurred when the two aesthetic orders, the high-cultural and subcultural,

10. Kramer, “The Man Who Turned Kitsch into Art,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1999, A16.

11. For further discussion, see my *Visual Culture: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 19, 47–48, 59–60.

12. Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

have been forced into scandalous identity, each being continuously dislocated by the other”: the scandals in question are philosophic challenges, not popular culture entertainments or superficially political controversies as in Chris Ofili’s (b. 1968) painting in the New York showing of the Sensation exhibition.¹³ For Crow, successful work is able to “dislocate the apparently fixed terms” of the hierarchy between high and low culture, making it into “new and persuasive configurations.”¹⁴ Neoexpressionist painters such as Ofili have no place in the historically and philosophically committed encounter of avant-garde and popular culture because they do not alter the configuration of what is taken to be high and low. For that reason Crow has not been engaged by political art such as the Guerrilla Girls: that kind of collage of political message and artistic context is, in context of Crow’s critique, too easy. It is more difficult than that to put art and politics in productive conjunction.

Among the accounts of affinities of modernism and its political contexts, Crow’s is the most conceptually precise and unremittingly skeptical. For him it is not enough for the artwork to reflect or express its society (this, it can be argued, is the default model for social art history) or for the society to reflect the art. Both possibilities affect one side of the relation and leave the other untheorized. And it is not adequate to picture the avant-garde as an essentially independent force that gathers its materials mysteriously (this model could be associated, for example, with

13. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

14. *Ibid.*, 33.

Adorno) or to construe social art history as the study of culture in its entirety, including whatever artworks, political events, and other ingredients appear relevant. That last option is a common one among social art historians and new historicists, but from Crow's perspective it can be said that accounts that juxtapose culture, politics, art, gender, and many other things, without proposing how, in any given case, the artworks in question possess their meaning or efficacy, are undertheorizing their task.

It can seem that Crow's unprescriptive, politically open-ended but philosophically narrow and demanding analysis is broadly consonant with less politically engaged academic writing, and that is generally the case. To some observers, however, his approach appears strongly distinct from what I have been calling postmodernism. David Carrier found Crow's assumptions "absolutely implausible"; Carrier said he suffers an "absolute inability to explain or understand why [Crow] makes this obviously futile attempt to divide artworks ... into those that are good because they are politically critical" and those others that fail because they do not engage politics.¹⁵

Rather than try to subdivide kinds of moral criticism, I want to describe some case studies that seem to triangulate the field reasonably well. The painter Leon Golub (b. 1922) has long defended the realism of his political painting against

15. Carrier, "Methodologies and Theory; Old and New," *Art Journal* 56, no. 2 (1997): 93–95, especially p. 94.

“modernist/postmodernist dilemmas of appearance, representation, ‘appropriation’ and ‘false consciousness,’ ” all of which make people anxious about “what is real as against what is ‘real.’ ” His subjects, he said, are “as real to what’s going on as any late model automobile, postmodernist architecture, or any arch fracturing of self by which an artist claims to gain autonomy.”¹⁶ Golub has been defended by several critics who are otherwise postmodern in orientation (they are interested in the things Golub disparages in this passage), but Golub’s own sense of the painting of the past half century does not include much of the video and performance art that those critics also praise.¹⁷ Golub likes to talk about his political subjects without speaking of them as representations. In one interview, he said that an object in one of his paintings is a brank: a European torture device, also called a “scold’s bridle,” that was used to silence women and also to break the mouth and other orifices. He spoke as if the painting contained a brank, rather than representing one. Soon after, he fielded the inevitable question about his reputation: “I’m elevated and frustrated at the same time. The paintings are very dominant in their appearance and it may be that for much of art world taste, I am too much.”¹⁸ Golub’s success, in the art world, is due partly to viewers who

16. Golub, “American Myths” (1986), reprinted in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Leon Golub: Do Paintings Bite? Selected Texts 1948–1996* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1997), 67.

17. For example, Jon Bird, *Leon Golub: Fragments of Public Vision* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1982), with an interview conducted by Michael Newman.

18. “The Sledgehammer and the Dagger — A Conversation between Leon Golub and Avery Gordon” (1999), in *Leon Golub: While the Crime Is Blazing, Paintings and Drawings 1994–1999* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Art Gallery, 1999), 14–22, quotation on p. 19.

want immediate political and real-world content, and partly to postmodernist critics who are intrigued by his openness about representation. Some of his frustration is due to the viewers who are concerned about his lack of attention to modernist issues of painting or to postmodern “dilemmas of appearance, representation, ‘appropriation’ and ‘false consciousness.’”

Work that is openly political is most likely to cut itself off from the approaches I am characterizing as modernist and postmodernist. Some historians argue that it is no longer possible to create work that fuses political and other sources of meaning. The argument is well put by Stephen Eisenman at the end of a book on nineteenth-century art:

“As eminently constructed and produced objects,” Adorno writes, “[autonomous artworks] point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life.” To combine perception and apperception, the sensual and the cognitive, the intellectual and the emotional within a single work of art — so Adorno argues — is to betoken a totality that is absent in a world scarred and fragmented by modernization and an exclusive reliance upon reason. Cézanne strove to achieve totality in his art, and in so doing insinuated his criticism of society in the very form of the artwork itself. That formal insinuation — the achievement both of a single artist and of the generations that labored before — may be judged, however, a failure as well as a success. During Cézanne’s last years, and especially in the decades that followed, the embedding of criticism in form came more and more to resemble a

hibernation of criticism. Indeed, by the time Cézanne was rediscovered by a public familiar with Cubism and abstraction, art and cultural criticism inhabited wholly separate spheres. The story of that fateful segregation cannot be told here; the effort of the present book has been only to show that in the nineteenth century things were different, and that the best art was critical.¹⁹

If the split between the “intellectual and the emotional” — in this context, it is better to say the political and the aesthetic — was last patched by Cézanne, then it never has been possible to believe in Childe Hassam’s (1859–1935) patriotic flag paintings, made ten years after Cézanne died, not to mention Golub’s leftist paintings from nearly a century later. Hassam’s flag paintings are postimpressionist urban panoramas in the tradition of Pissarro but with the streets filled with American flags (see Figure 3.2). Even if it were possible to agree that Hassam “transformed” the Red Cross flag “into a symbol of great majesty and presence” in *Red Cross Drive, May 1918* or to join in the exuberant internationalism of paintings such as *Avenue of the Allies: France, 1918* (*The Czecho-Slovak Flag in the Foreground, Greece Beyond*), the paintings would still have to be taken more as illustrations of politics than as political paintings.²⁰

In popular art there is no sign of doubt regarding the compatibility of political messages and art. I have in my files a

19. Eisenman, “The Failure and Success of Cézanne,” in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 351.

20. Ilene Fort, *The Flag Paintings of Childe Hassam* (New York: Abrams, 1988), 17.

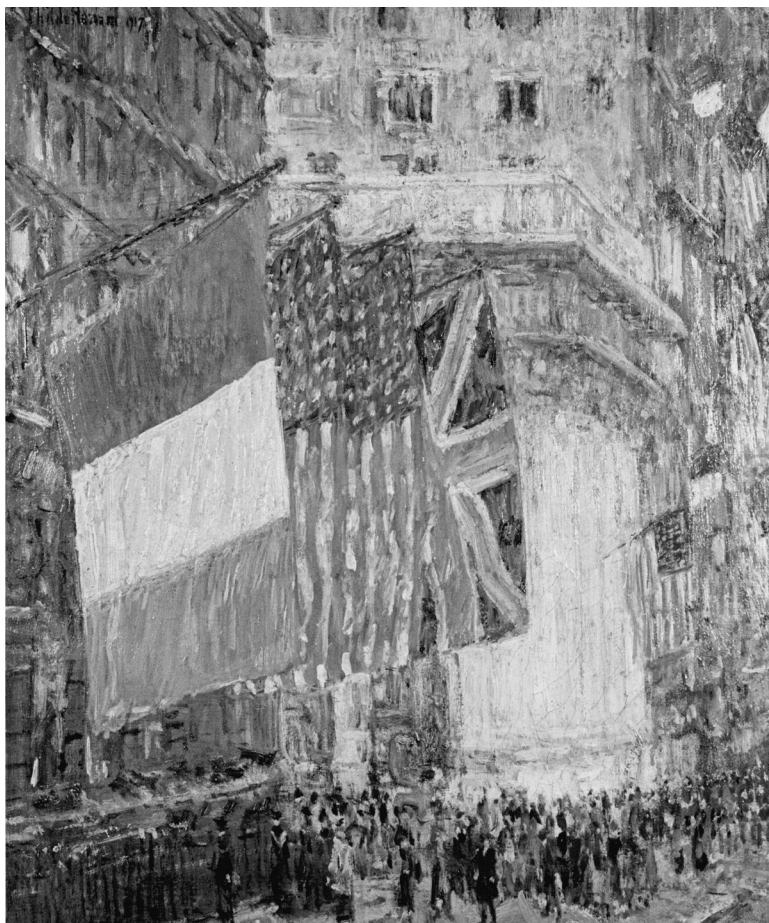


Figure 3.2

number of examples. Dean Mitchell is a commercially successful African American watercolorist; he won the 1998 grand prize in the Adirondacks National Exhibition of American Watercolor for a painting called *The Citizen* (see Figure 3.3). It shows an elderly African American man slumped in a metal folding chair in an empty room, American flag to one side. Mitchell



Figure 3.3

won over hundreds of other contestants whose pictures are not about race or ethnicity. In 1999 I visited a state auction in Romania, one of several that had been set up to dispense with Ceaușescu's belongings. I toured rooms full of gifts that had been given to the Ceaușescu family: gloves, caps, socks, vases, masks, wardrobes, kimonos, bronze pigeons, chandeliers, bowls, pajamas, photo albums, sleds, trunks, thrones, Persian rugs, elephant tusks, lamps and lampposts, and things the catalog just called "gewgaws" and "knink-knacks." There were many paintings with flattering depictions of the Ceaușescu family; one was described as "Sewn picture 'N.C. Family,' " another as an "Ivory picture framed by two teeth" from Somalia. Most astonishing was a painting described as "An 'Anniversary' Canvas (N. Ceaușescu and E. Ceaușescu proposing a toast with Stephen the Great from



Figure 3.4

the painting)²¹: in the picture, Stephen reaches out of his frame to clink glasses with Ceaușescu (see Figure 3.4).²¹ Afterward I was told that many of the painters who had worked for Ceaușescu had been compelled to change professions, but there is no sign that the political art of that era is about to disappear. That auction and the ones that had preceded it sold out: mainly, it seems, to Romanians.

Golub, Eisenman's reading of Cézanne, Hassam, Mitchell, the anniversary canvas for Ceaușescu: my examples are meant to indicate the enormous differences of opinion about the

21. Administration of State Patrimony and Protocol A.R., *Auction of the Goods Previously Belonging to Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu* (Bucharest: Sala Palatului, 1999). The whereabouts of the painting are unknown.

relation between twentieth-century painting and politics. The disagreements are so wide and deep that it can almost be argued — as Eisenman has implied — that modernism is constituted by the disagreement.

If I persist in assembling writers as diverse as Kramer and Clark under the heading of social criticism, it is not because I want to demonstrate some unsuspected affinity between writers who are, I think, really at opposite ends of the artistic universe. It is because the emphasis on the politics of art, broadly construed, is a decisive one, and it can distinguish such interpretations from modernist and postmodernist ones. Fried put this well, and carefully, in the introduction to *Manet's Modernism*, in which he quoted a page of Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" and then, a page later, two long passages from Clark's *Painting of Modern Life*.²² Greenberg's theory draws on a notion of the Enlightenment "critique of institutions," but Fried finds it fundamentally an account of how modernist painting was "conducted in a void" outside of social developments. Fried contrasted Greenberg's "relative indifference" to subject matter to "the social historians of art," who "understand the emergence of modernist painting in Paris in the 1860s and 1870s as responding to a distinctive experience of modernity." Here Fried is somewhere between Greenberg and Clark: Fried remarked on the "void" in Greenberg's account and

22. Fried, *Manet's Modernism: Or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13–16.

said it is “open to serious objection,” but on the other hand he implied there is some distance between himself and “the social historians of art.”

The first passage of Clark's *Painting of Modern Life* that Fried quoted stressed Manet's interest in “those markers in the picture of where the illusion almost ended.” Modernist painters, Clark said, were impressed not by the way earlier painters showed evidence of the “gaps and perplexities inherent in their own procedures” but by “the evidence of palpable and frank inconsistency.” In other words modernist painters were drawn to the “material means by which illusion and likeness were made.”²³ Fried posed Clark's text against Greenberg's by commenting, “Whereas Greenberg portrays the modernist artist as seeking a narrow certainty, Clark goes so far as to imagine a taste for uncertainty becoming almost an esthetic in its own right. But as Clark is aware, his conception of modernism is not simply or wholly opposed to Greenberg's.”²⁴ This is an interesting way of putting the difference between these two passages, because Fried declined to identify his own position on the matter and because a reader might want to say that Clark is quite close to Greenberg here, except that Clark prefers to see the value accorded to the places where illusion is rescued against pictorial “chaos” in a less optimistic light.

23. Quoted in *ibid.*, 15, from Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 10.

24. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 15.

Next Fried changed tack; the crucial difference, he said, is that although Clark recognizes the importance of flatness for Manet and his generation, Clark “refuses to hypostatize flatness” — instead he asks why flatness was a compelling subject at the time. According to Clark, flatness always “stood for something”: “the Popular,” “modernity,” “the evenness of seeing itself” (as in Cézanne), or even “the simple fact of Art, from which other meanings were excluded.” That last possibility makes for a wonderful comparison with Greenberg, because it almost is Greenberg’s position, but with a tiny obdurate difference: “flatness in its heyday was these various meanings and valuations.”²⁵ It is a fascinating and difficult difference, as close to identity as a concerted disagreement can be. It clearly names the conceptual gap between Greenbergian modernism (in which flatness exists as a property of the medium, aside from social developments) and social art history (in which flatness is its contextual meanings).

Fried’s comment on this passage just makes the distinction between Greenberg’s modernism and social art history that much more subtle. “This is superb in its way,” he wrote, “and I have no argument with it. Or rather I have no argument with it as it applies to modernist painters after Manet.” Flatness, Fried said, was not a leading term in the criticism until impressionism in the mid-1870s. I call this subtle because it does not address the other disagreement between Greenberg and Clark, over the

25. Quoted in *ibid.*, 16, from Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 12, 13.

use of flatness as an ultimate term of explanation. In the end — when each text is read with full attention to the kinds of questions it asks and the answers it makes possible — these are not compatible versions of history or criticism. The society that surrounds the artwork exists in three forms in the three texts. In the passage from Greenberg's "Modernist Painting," the politics and philosophy of the Enlightenment are just the backdrop for a theory that ends up being "conducted in a void." In the first passage from Clark's book, social art history is a matter of rearranging Greenberg's terms, but in the second passage social art history poses a serious rejoinder to Greenberg's void. In Fried's interpolated comments, social contexts are at first things other historians pay attention to ("in contrast, the social historians of art understand the emergence of modernist painting") and then facts that require only small adjustments ("I have no argument" with Clark's position "as it applies to modernist painters after Manet"). This is not, if it needs to be said, a contradiction in Fried's account. It is a way of not introducing an unnecessary problem — the problem of the void — into a discussion of Manet, but in doing so Fried deliberately does not solve the disjunction between the approaches he cites.

Senses of twentieth-century painting that depend on politics do not add to a sequence of crucial and marginal movements, in the way that *October*-style postmodernism privileges surrealism and postminimalism. Kramer's century of painting began on a promising note with late Cézanne and continued through

abstract expressionism, but then it petered out.²⁶ Little was left of the second half of the century but odds and ends, mainly of contemporary figurative painting. I have mentioned some of the painters Crow has written about: generally speaking they have contributed to the lineages of conceptual and postminimal art. It remains an open question whether the writers associated with the third sense of politics (that it infuses and enables all art practice) have contributed to a distinctive sense of the century's most important moments. Foster and Buchloh, for example, tend to focus on work in a variety of media since the 1960s, and so their contribution to a picture of the twentieth century as a whole remains unfocused.

It is not possible to do any justice to Clark's choices in this format, but it is notable that *Farewell to an Idea* lingers on El Lissitzky (1890–1941), Malevich (1878–1935), and war communism in Vitebsk in 1920. It was a rare moment when the esotericism of modernism seemed “really to duplicate that of the people in power” — a brief moment when painting stood its best chance of working in the world.²⁷ It failed spectacularly. My moral is just that social art history and moral criticism do not lead to any unified sense of the peaks and abysses of twentieth-century painting but set themselves apart, by increments but decisively, from modernist and postmodernist conclusions.

26. Kramer, “Does Abstract Art Have a Future?” *The New Criterion* 21, no. 4 (2002).

27. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 237.

