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Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression

Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

*The crisis consists precisely in the fact
that the old is dying and the new cannot
be born; in this interregnum a great
variety of morbid symptoms appears.*

—Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and the Black Square, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import? And how did this shift come to be understood as an autonomous achievement of the masters, who were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability, for the reinstatement of figuration? If the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation—the visual and spatial ordering systems that had defined pictorial production since the Renaissance and had in turn been systematically broken down since the middle of the nineteenth century—were reestablished, if the credibility of iconic referentiality was reaffirmed, and if the hierarchy of figure-ground relationships on the picture plane was again presented as an “ontological” condition, what other ordering systems outside of aesthetic discourse had to have already been put in place in order to imbue the new visual configurations with historical authenticity? In what order do these chains of restorative phenomena really occur and how are they linked? Is there a simple causal connection, a mechanical reaction, by which growing

* I wish to thank Jo-Anna Isaak for reading the manuscript of this essay. I have limited my investigations here to European phenomena, even though I am aware that a comparable movement is presently emerging in North America. The reasons for such a limitation are best described by Georg Lukács: “We will restrict our observations to Germany, even though we know that expressionism was an international phenomenon. As much as we understand that its roots are to be found everywhere in imperialism, we know as well that the uneven development in the various countries had to generate various manifestations. Only after a concrete study of the development of expressionism has been made can we come to an overview without remaining in the abstract” (“Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus” [1934], in *Probleme des Realismus*, vol. I, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IV, Berlin, 1971, p. 111).

political oppression necessarily and irreversibly generates traditional representation? Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socio-economic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that we witness, for example, in European painting of the mid-1920s and early 1930s?

It would certainly appear that the attitudes of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and *Pittura Metafisica* cleared the way for a final takeover by such outright authoritarian styles of representation as Fascist painting in Germany and Italy and socialist realism in Stalinist Russia. When Georg Lukács discussed the rise and fall of expressionism in his "Problems of Realism," he seemed to be aware of the relationship of these phenomena, without, however, clarifying the actual system of interaction between protofascism and reactionary art practices: "The realism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* is so obviously apologetic and leads so clearly away from any poetic reproduction of reality that it can easily merge with the Fascist legacy."¹ Paradoxically, however, both traditional Marxism and standard liberalism exempt artists from their responsibilities as sociopolitical individuals: Marxism through its reflection model, with its historical determinism; liberalism through its notion of the artist's unlimited and uninhibited freedom to produce and express. Thus both political views extend to artists the privilege of assuming their determinate necessity to produce unconscious representations of the ideological world.

But would it not be more appropriate to conceive of these radical shifts of the period between the wars, with such decisive selections of production procedures, iconographic references, and perceptual conventions, as calculated? Should we not assume that every artist making these decisions would be aware of their ramifications and consequences, of the sides they would be taking in the process of aesthetic identification and ideological representation?

The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation in present-day European painting reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism; or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice; or, worse yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come.

In order to analyze the contemporary phenomenon, it may be useful to realize that the collapse of the modernist idiom is not without precedent. The bankruptcy of capitalist economics and politics in the twentieth century has been consistently anticipated and accompanied by a certain rhythm of aesthetic manifestations. First there is the construction of artistic movements with great potential for the critical dismantling of the dominant ideology. This is then negated by those movements' own artists, who act to internalize oppression, at

1. Lukács, p. 147.

first in haunting visions of incapacitating and infantilizing melancholy and then, at a later stage, in the outright adulation of manifestations of reactionary power. In the present excitement over "postmodernism" and the "end of the avant-garde," it should not be forgotten that the collapse of the modernist paradigm is as much a cyclical phenomenon in the history of twentieth-century art as is the crisis of capitalist economics in twentieth-century political history: overproduction, managed unemployment, the need for expanding markets and profits and the resultant war-mongering as the secret promise of a final solution for late capitalism's problems. It seems necessary to insist upon seeing present developments in the larger context of these historical repetitions, in their nature as response and reaction to particular conditions that exist outside the confines of aesthetic discourse.

If the current debate does not place these phenomena in historical context, if it does not see through the eagerness with which we are assured from all sides that the avant-garde has completed its mission and has been accorded a position of comfort within a pluralism of meanings and aesthetic masquerades, then it will become complicit in the creation of a climate of desperation and passivity. The ideology of postmodernism seems to forget the subtle and manifest political oppression which is necessary to save the existing power structure. Only in such a climate are the symbolic modes of concrete anticipation transformed into allegorical modes of internalized retrospection. If one realizes that melancholy is at the origin of the allegorical mode, one should also realize that this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression. What is taken as one of the key works for postmodernist aesthetics and the central reference for any contemporary theory of the return to allegory in aesthetic production and reception, Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was written during the dawn of rising fascism in Germany. Its author was well aware of the work's allusion to contemporary artistic and political events, as is confirmed by Benjamin's friend Asja Lacis:

He said that he did not consider this thesis simply as an academic investigation but that it had very direct interrelationships with acute problems of contemporary literature. He insisted explicitly on the fact that in his thesis he defined the dramaturgy of the baroque as an analogy to expressionism in its quest for a formal language. Therefore I have, so he said, dealt so extensively with the artistic problems of allegory, emblems, and rituals.²

Or, as George Steiner describes it in his introduction to the English edition of Benjamin's study:

2. Asja Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf*, ed. Hildegard Brenner, Munich, 1971, p. 44.

As during the crises of the Thirty Years' War and its aftermath, so in Weimar Germany the extremities of political tension and economic misery are reflected in art and critical discussion. Having drawn the analogy, Benjamin closes with hints towards a recursive theory of culture: eras of decline resemble each other not only in their vices but also in their strange climate of rhetorical and aesthetic vehemence. . . . Thus a study of the baroque is no mere antiquarian archival hobby: it mirrors, it anticipates and helps grasp the dark present.³

Repression and Representation

It is generally agreed that the first major breakdown of the modernist idiom in twentieth-century painting occurs at the beginning of the First World War, signaled by the end of cubism and futurism and the abandonment of critical ideals by the very artists who had initiated those movements. Facing the deadlock of their own academicization and the actual exhaustion of the historical significance of their work, Picasso, Derain, Carrà, and Severini—to name but a few of the most prominent figures—were among the first to call for a return to the traditional values of high art. Creating the myth of a new classicism to disguise their condition, they insisted upon the continuation of easel painting, a mode of production that they had shortly before pushed to its very limits, but which now proved to be a valuable commodity which was therefore to be revalidated. From this situation there originated their incapacity or stubborn refusal to face the epistemological consequences of their own work. Already by 1913 their ideas had been developed further by younger artists working in cultural contexts which offered broader historical, social, and political options to dismantle the cultural tenets of the European bourgeoisie. This is particularly the case with Duchamp in America and Malevich and the constructivists in Russia. But, even in Paris, such artists as Francis Picabia recognized the imminent demise of cubism. Upon his return from his first journey to New York in 1913, he wrote, "But, as you know, I have surpassed this stage of development and I do not define myself at all as a cubist anymore. I have come to realize that one cannot always make cubes express the thoughts of the brain and the feelings of the psyche."⁴ And in his "Manifeste de l'Ecole Amorphiste," published in a special issue of *Camera Work* in 1913 he was even more explicit: "One has said of Picasso that he studies objects in the way a surgeon dissects a cadaver. We do not want these bothersome cadavers anymore which are called objects."⁵

3. George Steiner, "Introduction," in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, 1977, p. 24.

4. Francis Picabia, "Comment je vois New York," in *Francis Picabia*, Paris, *Musée National d'Art Moderne*, 1976, p. 66.

5. Francis Picabia, "Manifeste de l'Ecole Amorphiste," *ibid.*, p. 68.

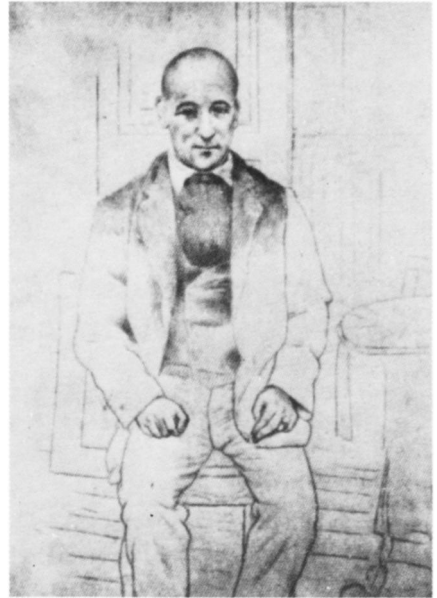
Even in 1923 these polemics continued among various factions of the Parisian avant-garde. On the occasion of the first performance of Tristan Tzara's "Cœur à Gaz" at the Soirée du Cœur à Barbe, a fistfight broke out in the audience when one of the artists present jumped onto the stage and shouted, "Picasso is dead on the field of battle."⁶ But even artists who had been allied with the cubist movement realized by the end of the second decade that it was exhausted, without, however, necessarily advocating a return to the past. Blaise Cendrars, for example, in his text "Pourquoi le cube s'effrite?" published in 1919, announced the end of the relevance of the cubist language of form. On the other hand, in the very same year a number of ideological justifications appeared for the regression that had begun around 1914-15. Among the many documents of the new attitude of authoritarian classicism are a pamphlet by the cubist dealer Léonce Rosenberg, *Cubisme et Tradition*, published in 1920, and Maurice Raynal's "Quelques intentions du cubisme," written in 1919 and published in 1924, which stated, "I continue to believe that knowledge of the Masters, right understanding of their works, and respect for tradition might provide strong support."⁷ If properly read, this statement, in its attempt to legitimize the academicization of an aging and ailing cubist culture, already reveals the inherent authoritarian tendency of the myth of a new classicism. Then as now, the key terms of this ideological backlash are the idealization of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters, the attempt to establish a new aesthetic orthodoxy, and the demand for respect for the cultural tradition. It is endemic to the syndrome of authoritarianism that it appeal to and affirm the "eternal" or ancient systems of order (the law of the tribe, the authority of history, the paternal principle of the master, etc.). This unfathomable past history then serves as a screen upon which the configurations of a failed historical presence can be projected. In 1915, when Picasso signals his return to a representational language by portraying the cubist poet Max Jacob, recently converted to Catholicism, in the guise of a Breton peasant, drawn in the manner of Ingres, we get a first impression of the degree of eclecticism that is necessary to create the stylistic and historical pose of classical simplicity and equilibrium, with its claim to provide access to the origins and essentials of universal human experience. Subsequently this historicist eclecticism becomes an artistic principle, and then, as in Jean Cocteau's "Rappel à l'Ordre" of 1926, it is declared the new avant-garde program.

In Picasso's work the number and heterogeneity of stylistic modes quoted and appropriated from the fund of art history increases in 1917: not only Ingres's classical portraits but, as a result of Picasso's journey to Italy in the company of

6. See William Rubin, *Picasso*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p. 224. The awareness of Picasso's decline eventually developed even among art historians who had been previously committed to his work: "Picasso belongs to the past. . . . His downfall is one of the most upsetting problems of our era" (Germain Bazin, quoted in Rubin, p. 277).

7. Maurice Raynal, "Quelques intentions du cubisme," *Bulletin de l'effort moderne*, no. 4 (1924), 4.

Pablo Picasso. Portrait of Max Jacob. 1915.



Cocteau, the iconography of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the frescoes of Herculaneum (not to mention the sculpture of the Parthenon frieze and the white figure vases at the Louvre, the peasant drawings of Millet, the late nudes of Renoir, the pointillism of Seurat, as Blunt, Green, and other Picasso scholars have pointed out). And, of course, there is the self-quotation of synthetic cubist elements, which lend themselves so easily to the high sensuousness of Picasso's decorative style of the early twenties.

Again it is Maurice Raynal who naively provides the clue to an analysis of these works when he describes Picasso's 1921 *Three Musicians* as "rather like magnificent shop windows of cubist inventions and discoveries."⁸ The free-floating availability of these cubist elements and their interchangeability indicate how the new language of painting—now wrenched from its original symbolic function—has become reified as "style" and thus no longer fulfills any purpose but to refer to itself as an aesthetic commodity within a dysfunctional discourse. It therefore enters those categories of artistic production that by their very nature either work against the impulse to dissolve reification or are oblivious to that impulse: the categories of decoration, fashion, and objets d'art.

This transformation of art from the practice of the material and dialectical transgression of ideology to the static affirmation of the conditions of reification and their psychosexual origins in repression have been described as the source of a shift towards the allegorical mode by Leo Bersani:

8. *Ibid.*

It is the extension of the concrete into memory and fantasy. But with the negation of desire, we have an immobile and immobilizing type of abstraction. Instead of imitating a process of endless substitutions (desire's ceaseless "travelling" among different images), abstraction is now a transcendence of the desiring process itself. And we move toward an art of allegory.⁹

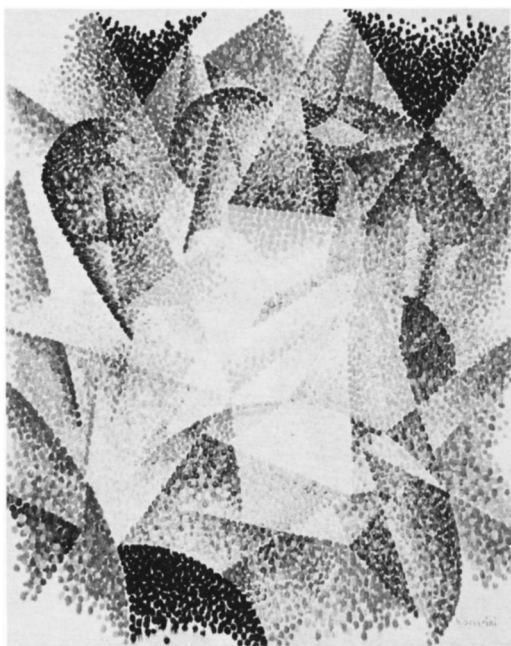
This becomes even more evident in the iconography of *Pittura Metafisica*, which de Chirico and the former futurist Carrà initiated around 1913. The conversion of the futurists, parallel to that of the cubists, involved not only a renewed veneration of the cultural tradition of the past—as opposed to their original fervent antipathy to the past—but also a new iconography of haunting, pointlessly assembled quotidian objects painted with meticulous devotion to representational conventions. De Chirico describes his paintings as stages decorated for imminent but unknown and threatening acts, and insists on the demons that are inherent in the objects of representation: "The metaphysical work of art seems to be joyous. Yet one has the impression that something is going to happen in this joyous world."¹⁰ De Chirico speaks of the tragedy of joy, which is nothing other than the calm before the storm, and the canvas now becomes the stage upon which the future disaster can be enacted. As the Italian historian Umberto Silva pointed out, "De Chirico is the personification of Croce's Italian disease: not quite fascism yet, but the fear of its dawn."¹¹

As was the case in Picasso's conversion, the futurists now fully repudiated their earlier nonrepresentational modes and procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization. They further rejected the collage techniques by which they had forced the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous materials and procedures within the painted surface, and through which they had underlined the interaction of aesthetic phenomena with their social and political context. It is surely no accident that one of Severini's first paintings to manifest his return to history is a work called *Maternity*, which represents a mother suckling an infant in the traditional pose of the Madonna. Even more conspicuous perhaps is the case of Carrà, who had been one of the most important futurists due to his development of nonmimetic pictorial signs, his systematic transgression of verbal and visual codes through the insertion of verbal fragments within painting, and his mechanization of pictorial production processes and their juxtaposition with pictorialized remnants of mechanical production processes. Carrà turned at that time to representational depictions of biblical scenes in the manner of Tuscan painting.

9. Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud*, Berkeley, 1977, p. 98.

10. Giorgio de Chirico, "Über die metaphysische Kunst," in *Wir Metaphysiker*, Berlin, n.d., p. 45.

11. Umberto Silva, *Kunst und Ideologie des Faschismus*, Frankfurt, 1975, p. 18.



Gino Severini. *Spherical Expansion of Light* (Centrifugal), 1914. (Left.) *Maternity*. 1916. (Right.)

Art, Past and Master

To the very same extent that the rediscovery of history serves the authoritarian purpose of justifying the failure of modernism, the atavistic notion of the master artist is reintroduced to continue a culture oriented to an esoteric elite, thus guaranteeing that elite's right to continued cultural and political leadership. The language of the artists themselves (or rather these particular artists, for there is an opposite definition of artistic production and culture simultaneously developing in the Soviet Union) blatantly reveals the intricate connection between aesthetic mastery and authoritarian domination. Three examples from three different decades may serve to illustrate this aesthetic stance:

Hysteria and dilettantism are damned to the burial urns. I believe that everybody is fed up now with dilettantism: whether it be in politics, literature, or painting.—Giorgio de Chirico, 1919.¹²

12. Giorgio de Chirico, *Valori Plastici*, Nos. 3–4, Rome, 1919. This phenomenon finds its earliest explicit manifestation in de Chirico's declaration "Pictor sum classicus," with which he concludes emphatically his call for a return to the law of history and classic order, a manifesto called "The Return to the Craft" published in *Valori Plastici* in 1919. Like Carlo Carrà in his "Pittura Metafisica," also published in 1919, de Chirico not only requests the return to the "classic" tradition and the "masters" of that tradition (Uccello, Giotto, Piero della Francesca), but to the specific *nationality* of that tradition. This is the most obvious of the three historical fictions in that authoritarian construct of



Carlo Carrà. Patriotic Celebration. 1914. (Left.) The Daughters of Loth. 1919. (Right.)

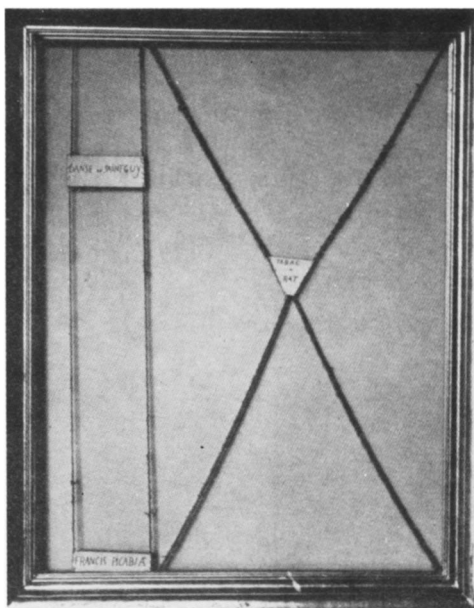
Socialism has only been invented for the mediocre and the weak. Can you imagine socialism or communism in Love or in Art? One would

a return to the past, since the nation-state as a socio-economic and political ordering system did not exist at the time of these masters' production.

It is only logical to find Carrà's name subsequently among the artists who signed the "Manifesto of Fascist Painting" in 1933 which reads as follows: "Fascist Art rejects research and experiments. . . . The style of Fascist art has to orient itself towards antiquity."

It seems that with increasing authoritarianism in the present the projection into the past has to be removed further and further away—from Renaissance to antiquity in this case. More explicitly we find this substitution of present history by mnemosync fictions of past history in an essay by Alberto Savinio, published in *Valori Plastici* in 1921: "Memory generates our thoughts and our hopes . . . we are forever the devoted and faithful sons of Memory. Memory is our past; it is also the past of all other men, of all men who have preceded us. And since memory is the ordered recollection of our thoughts and those of the others, memory is our religion: *religio*."

When the French art historian Jean Clair tries to understand these phenomena outside of their historical and political context, his terminology, which is supposed to explain these contradictions and save them for a new reactionary anti-modernist art history writing, has to employ the same clichés of authoritarianism, the fatherland, and the paternal heritage: "[These painters] come to collect their paternal heritage, they do not even dream of rejecting it. . . . Neoclassicism is lived as a meditation on the exile, far from the lost fatherland which is also that of painting, the lost fatherland of paintings" (Jean Clair, "Metafisica et Unheimlichkeit," in *Les Realismes 1919–1939*, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1981, p. 32).



Francis Picabia. *Tabac-Rat or Dance of Saint Guy*. 1919-21. (Left.) *Printemps*. 1942. (Right.)

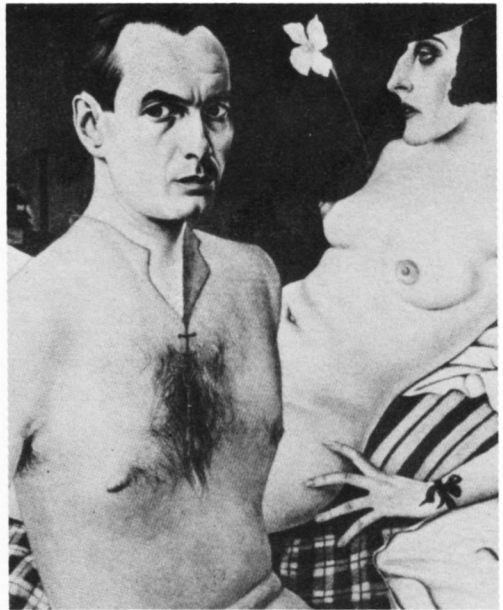
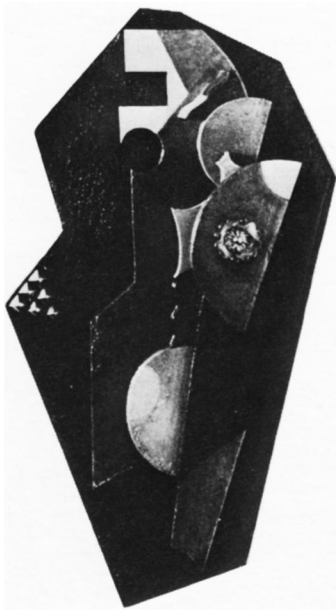
burst into laughter—if one were not threatened by the consequences.—
Francis Picabia, 1927.¹³

and finally, Picasso's notorious statement from 1935:

There ought to be an absolute dictatorship . . . a dictatorship of painters . . . a dictatorship of one painter . . . to suppress all those who have betrayed us, to suppress the cheaters, to suppress the tricks, to suppress mannerisms, to suppress charms, to suppress history, to suppress a heap of other things.¹⁴

13. "Francis Picabia contre Dada ou le Retour à la Raison," in *Comoedia*, March 14, 1927. p. 1. "The Return to Reason" and "The Return to Order" not only espoused almost identical programs of authoritarian neoclassicism, but also shared the same supposed enemies and targets of attack. Dada was, of course, one of them, so it seems useful in this context to recall the attitudes of the literary neoclassicist T. S. Eliot towards dada: "Mr. Aldington treated Mr. Joyce as a prophet of chaos and wailed at the flood of Dadaism which his prescient eye saw bursting forth at the tap of the magician's rod. . . . A very great book may have a very bad influence indeed. . . . A man of genius is responsible to his peers, not to a studio full of uneducated and undisciplined coxcombs" (T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial*, vol. LXXV [1923], pp. 480-483).

14. Pablo Picasso, in conversation with Christian Zervos, in *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. X, no. 1 (1935), 173.

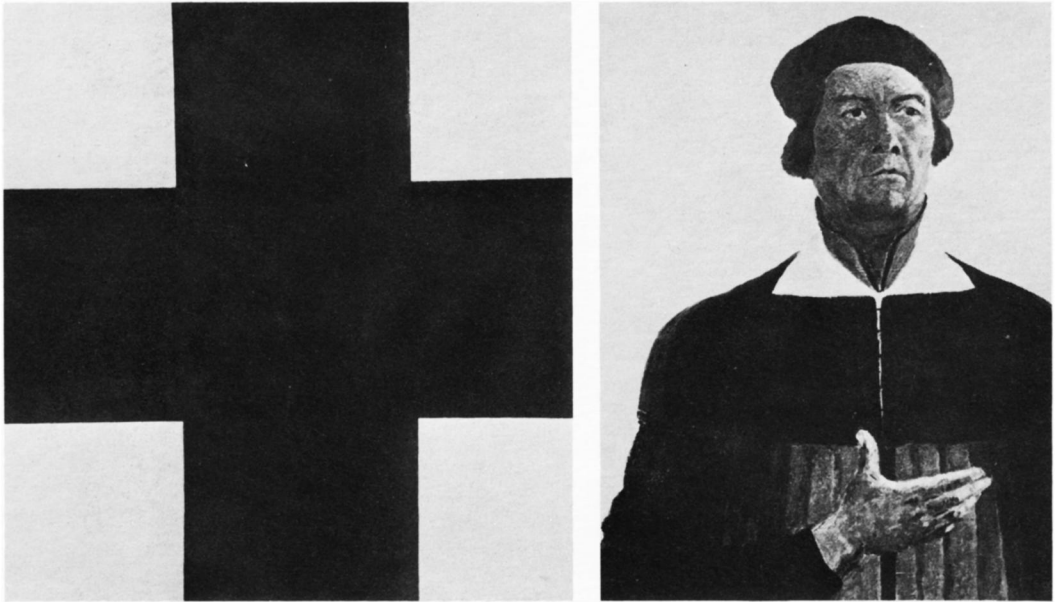


Christian Schad. Portrait of a Woman. 1920. (Left.)
Self-Portrait. 1927. (Right.)

Like senile old rulers who refuse to step down, the stubbornness and spite of the old painters increase in direct proportion to the innate sense of the invalidity of their claims to save a cultural practice that had lost its viability. When, in the early twenties, the former German dadaist Christian Schad attempts a definition of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* by portraying members of the Weimar *hautemonde* and *demimonde* in the manner of Renaissance portraits; when, in 1933, Kasimir Malevich portrays himself and his wife in Renaissance costumes; then obviously the same mechanism of authoritarian alienation is at work. In a text from 1926 Schad delivers a complete account of the syndrome's most conspicuous features:

Oh, it is so easy to turn one's back on Raphael. Because it is so difficult to be a good painter. And only a good painter is able to paint well. Nobody will ever be a good painter if he is only capable of painting well. One has to be born a good painter. . . . Italy opened my eyes about my artistic volition and capacity. . . . In Italy the art is ancient and ancient art is often newer than the new art.¹⁵

15. Christian Schad, statement in exhibition catalogue, Galerie Würthle, Vienna, 1927. See also a nearly identical statement by the former expressionist Otto Dix: "The new element of painting for me

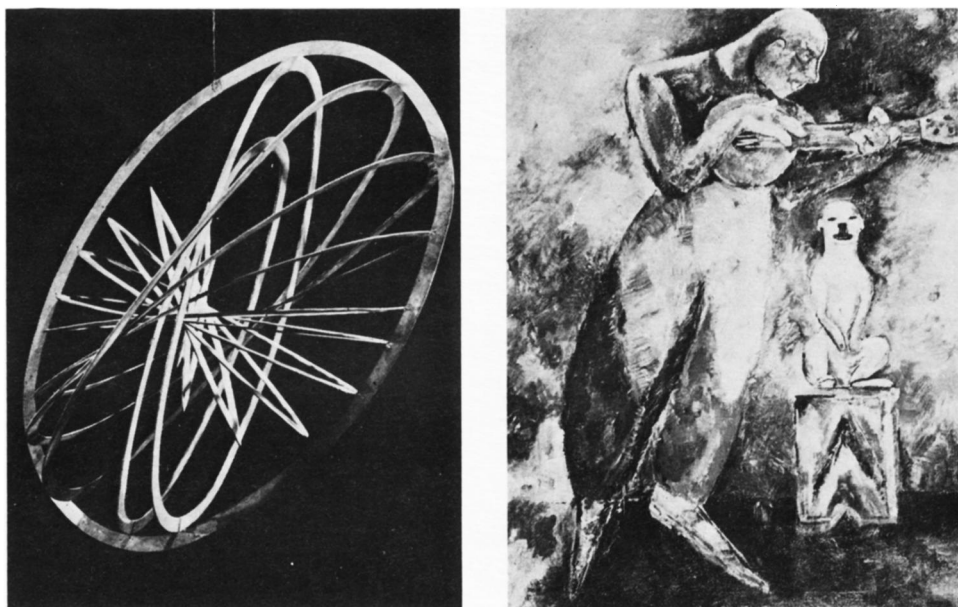


Kasimir Malevich. Black Cross. 1915. (Left.) Self-Portrait. 1933. (Right.)

The idealization of the painter's craft, the hypostasis of a past culture that serves as a fictitious realm of successful solutions and achievements that have become unattainable in the present, the glorification of the Other culture—in this case Italy—all of these features—currently discussed and put into practice once again—recur through the first three decades of twentieth-century modernism. They seek to halt that modernism and to deny its historical necessity as well as to deny the dynamic flux of social life and history through an extreme form of authoritarian alienation from these processes. It is important to see how these symptoms are rationalized by the artists at the time of their appearance, how they are later legitimized by art historians, and how they are finally integrated into an ideology of culture.

The concepts of "aesthetic paradox" and "novelty," essential features of avant-garde practice, serve as explanations for these contradictions. Here, for

resides in the intensification of forms of expression which *in nuce* exist already as givens in the work of *old masters*" (in *Das Objekt ist das Primäre*, Berlin, 1927). Compare this with the statement by George Grosz, a peer of Schad and Dix: "The return to French classicist painting, to Poussin, Ingres, and Corot, is an insidious fashion of *Biedermeier*. It seems that the political reaction is therefore followed by an intellectual reaction" (in *Das Kunstblatt*, 1922, as a reply to Paul Westheim's inquiry "Towards a New Naturalism?").



Alexander Rodchenko. Oval Hanging Construction. 1920. (Left.) Romance (Circus Scene). 1935. (Right.)

example, is Christopher Green's justification for Cocteau's and Picasso's neo-classicism:

For Cocteau a return to narrative clarity and to form in the novel did not mean a denial of paradox, and in the same way neither did a return to representation in painting. Indeed it seems possible that it was at least partially out of a sense of paradox that Picasso turned against the antirepresentational dogma associated with Cubism to revive Ingres in 1915. . . . Cocteau suggests that where audacity had become convention—as in the Parisian avant-garde—the resurrection of the old modes could create a special kind of novelty: that looking backwards the artist could even more dramatically look forward. There is no direct evidence that Picasso consciously aimed to create such a paradox, but the fact remains . . . that by turning back he did achieve novelty and that his perverse development of Synthetic Cubism and representational styles alongside one another between 1917 and 1921 was calculated to throw the paradox implicit in his progressive move backwards into the highest possible relief.¹⁶

16. Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avantgarde*, London, 1976, p. 218.

The Carnival of Style

The degree of congruity between Cocteau's antimodernist stance (or should we say cliché of ahistorical thought?) and the arguments against avant-garde practice in the art press's current discussion of postmodernism is striking. The stereotype of the avant-garde's audacity having become convention is, of course, used primarily by those who want to disguise their new conservatism as its own kind of audacity (Cocteau at the time of "Rappel à l'Ordre" had just turned to Catholicism). They deny the fact that conventionalization itself is a maneuver to silence any form of critical negation, and they wish to share in the benefits that bourgeois culture bestows on those who support false consciousness as it is embodied in cultural conventions. With regard to historical eclecticism, the congruity between the neoclassicists of the 1920s and the contemporary figuration is even more astounding. Intellectual acrobatics are needed to make the ideological stance look like an organic historical necessity, as opposed to a construct determined by extreme social and political factors. Whatever we are to understand by a "progressive move backwards" or a "paradox as novelty," and however Green's observation of Picasso's "perverse development" indicates his limited awareness of the contradictions resulting from the art historian's need to accommodate a cultural notion of the master who necessarily moves from achievement to achievement, it becomes even more evident that the art historian's maneuvers cannot explain the contradictions when we read:

His [Picasso's] work between 1917 and 1921, ranging as it did from a gay Synthetic Cubism to a sober Classicism repeatedly confirmed the irrelevance for him of having a style and the relevance for him of Cocteau's idea of "style." The bright color planes of Cubism are right for the carnival brilliance of the 1918 *Arlequin*, the sheer figurative weight of Roman fresco painting and of Ingres' *Madame Moitessier* were right for the monumental stability of *La Femme assise lisant*; the implication was that any style, old or new, could be adapted to Picasso's needs, could be made subject to his will.¹⁷

Style, the very gem of reified art-historical thinking, the fiction that there could be a pictorial mode or a discursive practice that might function autonomously—traditionally rejected by artists—is now applied by the artists to imbue these exhausted modes with historical meaning. "All the wasms have become isms," is a vulgar contemporary variation on the theme of historicism put forward by the self-styled spokesman of postmodernist architecture, Charles Jencks.

Style then becomes the ideological equivalent of the commodity: its universal exchangeability, its freefloating availability indicating a historical moment

17. *Ibid.*

of closure and stasis. When the only option left to aesthetic discourse is the maintenance of its own distribution system and the circulation of its commodity forms, it is not surprising that all "audacities have become convention" and that paintings start looking like shop windows decorated with fragments and quotations of history.

None of the manifold features of this eclecticism should be seen as random; they confirm one another in an intricate network of historical meaning, which may, however, be read differently from the intentions of the authors or the interests of their audience and the art historians who constitute their cultural reception. This transformation of the subversive function of aesthetic production to plain affirmation necessarily manifests itself in every detail of production. The discovery of "history" as a treasure trove into which one might dip for the appropriation of abandoned elements of style is but one obvious step. The secret attraction of the iconography of Italian theater for Picasso and others at that time becomes more comprehensible in such a perspective. The Harlequins, Pierrots, Bajazzos, and Pulcinelles invading the work of Picasso, Beckmann, Severini, Derain, and others in the early twenties (and, in the mid-thirties, even the work of the former constructivist/productivist Rodchenko in Russia) can be identified as ciphers of an enforced regression. They serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the avant-garde artist who has come to realize his historical failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on utopian thought.¹⁸

18. When Max Beckmann in the twenties referred to himself as the "alienated clown and the mysterious king" he expressed precisely the unconscious dilemma of the artist's fluctuation between authoritarian rule and melancholy, as George Steiner puts it in his introduction to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "Prince and Puppet are impelled by the same frozen violence" (p. 18). Renato Poggioli described this dilemma without coming to an adequate understanding: "Aware that bourgeois society looks at him only as a charlatan the artist deliberately and ostentatiously assumes the role of the comic actor. From this stems the myth of the artist as *pagliaccio* and mountebank. Between the alternating extremes of self-criticism and self-pity, the artist comes to see himself as a comic victim and sometimes as a tragic victim, although the latter seems to be predominant" (Renato Poggioli, "The Artist in the Modern World," in *The Spirit of the Letter*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 327).

This new icon of the clown is only matched in frequency in the paintings of that period by the representation of the *manichino*, the wooden puppet, the reified body, originating from both shop-window decoration and from the props of the classical artist's studio. If the first icon appears in the context of the carnival and the circus as the masquerades of alienation from present history, the second appears on the stage set of reification. With due historical transformation we can observe parallel phenomena in the iconography of the "New Painting." As described in the following example: "The comic and the self-effacing aspects . . . loom very large (and very small in the work of many recent artists). Miniaturization, stick figures, dimpled dollies, micro freaks and the humanoid progeny of Krazy Kat are all part of an ever increasing Lilliputian population; the doll house syndrome is very much with us" (Klaus Kertess, "Figuring It Out," *Artforum*, November 1980, p. 30). Or, a more adequate critical understanding of these phenomena: "In another of a long string of ironic (?) refusals of virtuosity and 'sensitivity,' painters have recently adopted a reduced brutish figuration (seemingly chosen from a lexicon of the drastically damaged mentally) whose nihilism strikes not at any society in particular but at 'civilization'—a familiar desperate move" (Martha Rosler, unpublished notes on quotation).

This carnival of eclecticism, this theatrical spectacle, this window dressing of self-quotation becomes transparent as a masquerade of alienation from history, a return of the repressed in cultural costume. It is essential to the functioning of historicism and its static view of history that it assemble the various fragments of historical recollection and incantation according to the degree of projection and identification that these images of the past will provide for the needs of the present. Quite unlike the modernist collage, in which various fragments and materials of experience are laid bare, revealed as fissures, voids, unresolvable contradictions, irreconcilable particularizations, pure heterogeneity, the historicist image pursues the opposite aim: that of synthesis, of the illusory creation of a unity and totality which *conceals* its historical determination and conditioned particularity.¹⁹ This appearance of a unified pictorial representation, homogeneous in mode, material, and style, is treacherous, supplying as it does aesthetic pleasure as false consciousness, or vice versa. If the modernist work provides the viewer with perceptual clues to all its material, procedural, formal, and ideological qualities as part of its modernist program, which therefore gives the viewer an experience of increased *presence* and autonomy of the self, then the historicist work pretends to a successful resolution of the modernist dilemma of aesthetic self-negation, particularization, and restriction to detail, through *absence*, leading to the seductive domination of the viewer by the Other, as Julia Kristeva has described the experience of alienation and perversion that ideology imposes on the subject.

19. These "concealed collages" in painting represent a false unification. Fredric Jameson describes this analogous attempt at unification in literature: "... the mirage of the continuity of personal identity, the organizing unity of the psyche or the personality, the concept of society itself, and not least, the notion of the organic unity of the work of art" (*Fables of Aggression*, Berkeley, 1980, p. 8). The term "painted collages" was used by Max Ernst in his "Au-delà de la Peinture" in 1936 to describe the painting of Magritte and Dali. Of course Ernst was not able to provide a historical differentiation between the original collage techniques and their implications and the attempt of renewed painterly unification of fragmentation, fissures, and discontinuity of the plastic language. Since then several authors have described the phenomenon of the "painted collage" in the neoclassicist paintings and their peculiar unreal spatiality, a surface and pictorial space that seem to be made of glass or ice. See, for example, Wieland Schmied, "Pittura Metafisica et Nouvelle Objectivité," in *Les Realismes 1919-1939*, p. 22. This is of course the spatial configuration of the static melancholic experience which is fixated on the authoritarian images of the alien and the ancient and that recognizes itself in the shimmering surface of classicist painting that seems to contain life in a shrine. The most haunting image of this idealized classical beauty is given in Baudelaire's poem "La Beauté":

Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.
Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
J'unis un coeur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

The Returns of the New

The meaning structure of art seems to have been undergoing reorganization while the market merely faltered briefly and then regained its stride. The '70s may turn out to have been a revanchist period in which controlling influences within audience and market elites regrouped to reestablish the stratification of the audience and its objects, thereby reasserting, for example, the preeminence of painting as artifactual meaning bearer and as tangible investment.

—Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, Makers: Thoughts on Audience"

Perceptual and cognitive models and their modes of artistic production function in a manner similar to the libidinal apparatus that generates, employs, and receives them. Historically, they lead a life independent of their original contexts and develop specific dynamics: they can be easily reinvested with different meanings and adapted to ideological purposes. Once exhausted and made obsolete by subsequent models, these production modes can generate the same nostalgia as does iconic representation for an obsolete code. Emptied of their historical function and meaning, they do not disappear but rather drift in history as empty vessels waiting to be filled with reactionary interests in need of cultural legitimation. Like other objects of cultural history, aesthetic production modes can be wrenched from their contexts and functions, to be used to display the wealth and power of the social group that has appropriated them.

To invest these obsolete modes with meaning and historical impact requires, however, that they be presented as *radical* and *new*. The secret awareness of their obsolescence is belied by the obsession with which these regressive phenomena are announced as innovation. "The New Spirit of Painting," "The New Fauves," "Naïve Nouveau," "Il Nuove Nuove," "The Italian New Wave" are some of the labels attached to recent exhibitions of retrograde contemporary art (as though the prefix *neo* did not indicate the restoration of preexisting forms). It is significant in this regard that the German neoexpressionists who have recently received such wide recognition in Europe (presumably to be followed by a similar acclaim in North America) have been operating on the fringes of the German art world for almost twenty years. Their "newness" consists precisely in their current historical availability, not in any actual innovation of artistic practice.

The historical specificity of iconographic codes is generally more apparent than that of production procedures and materials. It had seemed until recently, for

example, that the representation of saints and clowns, of female nudes and landscapes, was entirely proscribed as an authentic expression of individual or collective experience. This proscription did not extend, though, to less conspicuous aspects of pictorial and sculptural production. Excited brushwork and heavy impasto paint application, high contrast colors and dark contours are still perceived as “painterly” and “expressive” twenty years after Stella’s, Ryman’s, and Richter’s works demonstrated that the painted sign is not transparent, but is a coded structure which cannot be an unmediated “expression.” Through its repetition the physiognomy of this painterly gesture so “full of spontaneity” becomes, in any case, an empty mechanics. There is only pure desperation in the recently reiterated claim of “energism,” which betrays a secret foreboding of the instant reification that awaits such a naive notion of the liberating potential of apolitical and undialectical aesthetic practices.

But the intentions of the artists and their apologists remain to be understood, because contrary to their claim to psychic universality they in fact “express” only the needs of a very circumscribed social group. If “expressivity” and “sensuousness” have again become criteria of aesthetic evaluation, if we are once again confronted with depictions of the sublime and the grotesque—complementary experiential states of modernism’s high culture products—then that notion of sublimation which defines the individual’s work as determined by alienation, deprivation, and loss is reaffirmed. This process is simply described by Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel:

Suffering is portrayed as a personal struggle, experienced by the individual in isolation. Alienation becomes a heroic disease for which there is no social remedy. Irony masks resignation to a situation one cannot alter or control. The human situation is seen as static, with certain external forms varying but the eternal anguish remaining. Every political system is perceived to set some small group into power, so that changing the group will not affect our “real” (that is private) lives. . . . Thus simply expressed, the elements of bourgeois ideology have a clear role in maintaining the status quo. Arising out of a system that functions through corporate competition for profits, the ideas of the bourgeoisie imply the ultimate powerlessness of the individual, the futility of public action and the necessity of despair.²⁰

Modernist high culture canonized aesthetic constructs with the appellation “sublime” when the artists in question had proven their capacity to maintain utopian thought in spite of the conditions of reification, and when, instead of actively attempting to change those conditions, they simply shifted subversive

20. Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel, “Modernism and History,” *New Literary History*, vol. III, no. 1, p. 196.

intentions into the aesthetic domain. The attitude of individual powerlessness and despair is already reaffirmed in the resignation implicit in a return to the traditional tools of the craft of painting and in the cynical acceptance of its historical limitations and its materially, perceptually, and cognitively primitivist forms of signification.

Such paintings, experienced by a certain audience as sensuous, expressive, and energetic, perform and glorify the ritual of instant excitation and perpetually postponed gratification that is the bourgeois mode of experience. This bourgeois model of sublimation—which has, of course, been countered by an avant-garde tradition of negation, a radical denial of that model's perpetrations of the extreme division of labor and specialization of sexual role behavior—finds its appropriate manifestation in the repeated revitalization of obsolete representational and expressive pictorial practices. It is not accidental that Balthus—champion of the bourgeois taste for high titillation with his scopophilic pictures of sleeping or otherwise unaware adolescent female nudes—has recently received renewed acclaim and is regarded as one of the patriarchal figures of the “new” figuration. Nor is it accidental that not *one* of the German neoexpressionists or the Italian Arte Ciphra painters is female. At a time when cultural production in every field is becoming increasingly aware of, if not actively countering, the oppression of traditional role distinctions based on the construction of sexual difference, contemporary art (or at least that segment of it that is currently receiving prominent museum and market exposure) returns to concepts of psychosexual organization that date from the origins of bourgeois character formation. The bourgeois concept of the avant-garde as the domain of heroic male sublimation functions as the ideological complement and cultural legitimization of social repression. Laura Mulvey has analyzed this phenomenon in the context of the “visual pleasure” of cinematic experience:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.²¹

and Max Kozloff puts it explicitly in the context of the visual arts:

Further scouting might produce more evidence that virility is often equated with the probing of space or the masterful brushing of a surface. The metaphor of sculptural extension or battling with the canvas is easily sexualized because it conflates two desirable goals associated with the energy of creation. With Expressionist theory, German and American, we are never far removed from its special

21. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, vol. XVI, no. 3 (1975), 7.

aura. . . . The imagery of modern art, of course, is rich with overtones of masculine aggression and depersonalization of woman.²²

The abandonment of painting as sexual metaphor that occurred around 1915 implied not only formal and aesthetic changes but also a critique of traditional models of sublimation. This is most evident in Duchamp's interest in androgyny and in the constructivists' wish to abolish the production mode of the individual master in favor of one oriented to collective and utilitarian practice. In contradistinction, those painting practices which operate under the naive assumption that gestural delineation, high contrast color, and heavy impasto are immediate (unmediated, noncoded) representations of the artist's desire propagate the traditional role model; and they do so far more effectively than the painting practices which systematically investigate their own procedures. The former's attraction and success, its role and impact with regard to notions of high culture and the hierarchy of the visual arts, are governed by its complicity with these models of psychosexual organization. Carol Duncan has described how psychosexual and ideological concepts interrelate, how they are concealed and mediated in early twentieth-century expressionist painting:

According to their paintings, the liberation of the artist means the domination of others; his freedom requires their unfreedom. Far from contesting the established social order, the male-female relationship that these paintings imply—the drastic reduction of women to objects of specialized male interests—embodies on a sexual level the basic class relationship of capitalist society. In fact such images are splendid metaphors for what the wealthy collectors who eventually acquired them did to those beneath them in the social as well as the sexual hierarchy. However, if the artist is willing to regard women as merely a means to his own ends, if he exploits them to achieve his boast of virility, he, in his turn, must merchandise and sell himself—an illusion of himself and his intimate life—on the open, competitive avant-garde market. He must promote (or get dealers and critic friends to promote) the value of his special credo, the authenticity of his special vision, and—most importantly—the genuineness of his antibourgeois antagonism. Ultimately, he must be dependent on and serve the pleasure of this very bourgeois world or enlightened segments of it that his art and life seem to contest.²³

Inasmuch as this sexual and artistic role is itself reified, *peinture*—the

22. Max Kozloff, "The Authoritarian Personality in Modern Art," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 8 (May 1974), 40.

23. Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Painting," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 9 (June 1974), 38.

fetishized mode of artistic production—can assume the function of an aesthetic equivalent and provide a corresponding cultural identification for the viewer. Not surprisingly, then, both German neoexpressionists and Italian Arte Ciphra painters draw heavily upon the stock of painterly styles that predate the two major shifts in twentieth-century art history: fauvism, expressionism, and Pittura Metafisica before Duchamp and constructivism; surrealist automatism and abstract expressionism before Rauschenberg and Manzoni—the two essential instances in modern art when the production process of painting was radically questioned for its claim to organic unity, aura, and presence, and replaced by heterogeneity, mechanical procedures, and seriality.

The contemporary regressions of “postmodernist” painting and architecture are similar in their iconic eclecticism to the neoclassicism of Picasso, Carrà, and others. A variety of production procedures and aesthetic categories, as well as the perceptual conventions that generated them, are now wrested from their original historical contexts and reassembled into a spectacle of availability. They postulate an experience of history as private property; their function is that of *decorum*. The gaudy frivolity with which these works underscore their awareness of the ephemeral function they perform cannot conceal the material and ideological interests they serve; nor can their aggressivity and bravura disguise the exhaustion of the cultural practices they try to maintain.

The works of the contemporary Italians explicitly revive, through quotation, historical production processes, iconographic references, and aesthetic categories. Their techniques range from fresco painting (Clemente) to casting sculpture in bronze (Chia), from highly stylized primitivist drawing to gestural abstraction. Iconographic references range from representations of saints (Salvo) to modish quotations from Russian constructivism (Chia). With equal versatility they orchestrate a program of dysfunctional plastic categories, often integrated into a scenario of aesthetic surplus: freestanding figurative sculpture combined with an installation of aquatint etchings, architectural murals with small-scale easel paintings, relief constructions with iconic objects.

The German neoexpressionists are equally protean in their unearthing of atavistic production modes, including even primitivist hewn wood polychrome sculpture, paraphrasing the expressionist paraphrase of “primitive” art (Immen-dorff). The rediscovery of ancient teutonic graphic techniques such as woodcuts and linocuts flourishes (Baselitz, Kiefer), as does their iconography: the nude, the still life, the landscape, and what these artists conceive of as allegory.

Concomitant with the fetishization of painting in the cult of *peinture* is a fetishization of the perceptual experience of the work as *auratic*. The contrivance of aura is crucial for these works in order that they fulfill their function as the luxury products of a fictitious high culture. In the tangibility of the auratic, figured through crafted surface textures, aura and commodity coalesce. Only such synthetic uniqueness can satisfy the contempt that bourgeois character holds for the “vulgarity” of social existence; and only this “aura” can generate “aesthetic

pleasure" in the narcissistic character disorder that results from this contempt. Meyer Schapiro saw this symbiotic relationship between certain artists and their patrons in 1935: "The artist's frequently asserted antagonism to organized society does not bring him into conflict with his patrons, since they share his contempt for the public and are indifferent to practical social life."²⁴

The aesthetic attraction of these eclectic painting practices originates in a nostalgia for that moment in the past when the painting modes to which they refer had historical authenticity. But the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production. This is not so much because they actually derive from particular precedents, but because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness. That is the price of instant acclaim achieved by affirming the status quo under the guise of innovation. The primary function of such cultural re-presentations is the confirmation of the hieratics of ideological domination.

24. Meyer Schapiro, quoted in Kozloff.



Gino Severini. The Two Clowns. 1922.

National Identity and Product Protection

... but the European has been unhoused for a long time, he is a *déraciné*, and as he could in no way face up to it and did not have the courage to admit it, he became a *parvenu*. To be a *parvenu* means to maintain the pretense of being at home in the world . . .

—Otto Freundlich, *Bulletin D*, 1919

If the *raison d'être* of historicist work is that of private property, and fashion the discourse in which it manifests and maintains itself, then it is only natural that the work itself has the characteristics of the cliché: compulsively repeated gestures emptied of meaning and congealed into grotesques. Beyond the obsolete and stereotyped conception of the artist's role and character; beyond the fetishized conventions, procedures, and materials which we have analyzed; these clichés are most easily recognized in the artists' call for a return to national culture with its "roots and laws."

Carrà's demand for *italianità* in the 1920s now recurs in both Italian and German painting as the claim of national cultural identity. But such a claim cannot hide its economic function as product protection in the increasingly competitive international art market. Its ideological function has been defined by Fredric Jameson in another context:

National allegory should be understood as a formal attempt to bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday life within a given nation state and the structural tendency of monopoly capital to develop on a worldwide, essentially transnational scale. . . .²⁵

Just as history has been rediscovered as an inexhaustible source for fictions of identity and subjectivity in commercial culture (fashion, advertising, etc.), so the regressive practices of "high" cultural production provide luxury goods directed at the identity and subjectivity of the managerial class. When Lenin said that "Nationality and Fatherland are essential forms of the bourgeois system," he could hardly have anticipated that "history" would subsequently assume the same function. The nostalgia of artistic production for its own past conventions corresponds to this class's nostalgia for its past processes of individuation at the time of its historical ascendancy.

The very same call for a return to the fictions of national and cultural identity as we observed in the regressive art of the twenties is now taking place in

25. Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, p. 94.

Arte Ciphra and neoexpressionism. Frequent references to the late de Chirico and the painterly manner of Sironi's work of the twenties occur in contemporary Italian painting, while the current German painters refer to the pictorial characteristics and production techniques of German expressionism.

The reference to expressionism in contemporary West-German art is the natural move to make at a time when the myth of cultural identity is to be established specifically against the dominance of American art during the entire period of reconstruction. Since the Second World War, expressionism, the "German intuition" of early twentieth-century modern painting, has received increasing esteem. It had of course lacked just this esteem in the post-World War I period, prior to its eventual suppression under fascism. But during the early sixties skyrocketing prices indicated that expressionism had achieved the status of a national treasure, the best of the pre-Fascist heritage of German culture. As opposed to the political radicalism of Berlin dada, expressionism presented an avant-garde position acceptable to the newly reconstituted upper middle class, and it thus became the key object for historical study, collection, and speculation. The apolitical humanitarian stance of the expressionist artists, their devotion to spiritual regeneration, their critique of technology, and their romanticization of exotic and primal experience perfectly accorded with the desire for an art that would provide spiritual salvation from the daily experience of alienation resulting from the dynamic reconstruction of postwar capitalism.

The generation of contemporary neoexpressionists—now in their forties—received their education during this period from artists who had themselves only recently learned the lessons of post-surrealist automatism as represented by *art informel* and abstract expressionism. The first "scandals" of individual achievement of the present generation occurred in the early sixties, when they "dared" to reintroduce figurative subject matter and highly expressive gestural and chromatic qualities into their art. Their "courage" consisted, then, precisely in committing themselves to the emerging myth of Germany's cultural heritage and national identity through the adoption of the artist's traditional role and the willful ignorance or rejection of all the aesthetic, epistemological, and philosophical developments of the first two decades of the century.

Originally—that is, in the early to mid-sixties—some of these artists had produced work of considerable interest. (The early activities of Immendorff at the Düsseldorf Academy and his subsequent LIDL happening, and the early work of the East German "primitivist" painter Penck are cases in point.) But subsequent to their discovery by the market and museums, these painters underwent a stylistic streamlining that resulted in the "movement" of neoexpressionism. The first step was the return to large-scale easel painting. For that purpose individual eccentricities of aesthetic activity had to be sacrificed, as did all references to twentieth-century developments contesting the practice of painting. The second step was the conversion of the various idiosyncratic activities of the artists into a homogeneous neoexpressionist style.

The neoexpressionists and their apologists understandably reject an exclusive alignment with the German expressionist patrimony, since their painterly erudition and ambition extends to an assimilation of the pictorial standards of the New York School and the economic value set by it. Any art that wants to supplant the dominance of American art through the programmatic return to a national idiom can only be successful on the market if it acknowledges the dominant “foreign” style. After all it had been the major problem of postwar European painting that it never achieved the “qualitative” level of the New York School (just as, according to Greenberg, the major problem facing American painting before the war was attaining the level of “quality” of the School of Paris). This is particularly evident in the work of the neoexpressionist Georg Baselitz, whose canvases’ size and scale, drawing, and painterly gesture owe as much to abstract expressionism as to German expressionism.

The successful institutionalization of neoexpressionism has required a complex and subtle set of maneuvers by the market and museums. For example, historical continuity had to be established in order to legitimize the neoexpressionists as heirs to the German cultural heritage. A recent example of how this authentication may be achieved is a spectacular case of *Geschichtsklitterung* (eclectic historicist construct), the *First Study for a Sculpture* by Baselitz. The large scale seated figure, hewn out of a wood block, raising its right arm in such a way that hostile critics have called it a Fascist gesture, was recently shown at the



Max Beckmann. *Perseus Triptych*. 1941.

Whitechapel Gallery in London. For this exhibition, it was surrounded by the late triptychs of Max Beckmann, thus establishing the historical pedigree, the continuity of specifically German art. Thus accredited with authenticity, local products can succeed on the international market.

A second strategy, complementing this contrived national continuity, is that of carefully placing the work in the context of the contemporary international avant-garde. For example, a reproduction of a painting by the neoprimitivist Penck appears on the frontispiece of a catalogue for a recent exhibition of the Italian artists Fabro, Kounellis, Merz, and Paolini at the Kunsthalle, Bern—one of the strongholds of German neoexpressionism. And more overtly, the catalogue introduction states the museum director's proposal to combine work by this group of truly significant Italian artists with that of the neoexpressionists who are described as their "nordic" counterparts. Thus the intellectual subtlety and analytic clarity of these Italian artists is conferred upon the reactionary German artists, when the proper German peers of these Italians are, of course, Darboven, Palermo, and Richter.

Critical Clichés, Manufactured Visions

Social reasons for this impotence [of historicism]: the fantasy of the bourgeois class ceases to focus on the future of the forces of productivity which it released. The specific Gemütlichkeit of the middle of the century results from this conditioned fading away of social fantasy. The desire to have children is only a weaker stimulation of potency in comparison to the images of the future that this social fantasy once engendered.

—Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark"

When art emphasizing national identity attempts to enter the international distribution system, the most worn-out historical and geo-political clichés have to be employed. And thus we now see the resurrection of such notions as the nordic versus the Mediterranean, the teutonic versus the Latin. A typical formulation of the clichéd idea of German character appears in an art historian's comment on a neoexpressionist painter's work: "The tendency of German art to literature, to profound allegories, and ideological symbolism, [and] to the mysticism and ecstasy of an exuberant imagination has found expression here."²⁶

Just as the art itself resorts to cliché as the reliable strategy for operating

26. Siegfried Gohr, "Remarks on the Paintings of Markus Lüpertz," in *Markus Lüpertz-Stil Paintings*, London, Whitechapel Gallery, 1979, n.p.

within an obsolete context, so the critics and curators who have become the spokesmen of the "new art" resurrect a critical language of false naïveté and bloated trivialities which forms the terminology of the new subjectivity. The lack of historical specificity and reflection upon methodology, the willful ignorance of radical changes in other fields of research bearing upon aesthetic practice (semiology, psychoanalysis, criticism of ideology) are particularly revealing. Take for example the British art historian and curator Nicholas Serota discussing the manner in which one of the neoexpressionist painters

has adopted the seemingly more traditional ground of the painter of still life. He has created for himself a kind of theatre in which the absurd object, emblems, allegory and metaphor are used to reinterpret universals such as the creation and awakening of life, the interaction of natural forces, human emotions and ideologies and the experience of death. For a comparison one has to look back to the tryptichs of Beckmann, though Beckmann's use of narrative structure is quite different.²⁷

Or, more hyperbolically, Rudi Fuchs, Dutch art historian and director of one of Europe's most active museums in exhibiting contemporary art, claims that

Painting is salvation. It presents freedom of thought of which it is the triumphant expression. . . . The painter is a guardian angel carrying the palette in blessing over the world. Maybe the painter is the darling of the Gods.²⁸

And the German art historian Siegfried Gohr, in a text published by London's Whitechapel Gallery, writes

The relationship between beauty and terror, eros and death, those time honored themes of art, are presented again by the painting. Negativity, death is introduced as a theme.²⁹

The lack of formal and historical complexity in the painters' works and the attendant avoidance of genuine critical analysis of their contrived "visions" results inevitably in a stereotypical critical language. Here for example, are two virtually identical statements by two critics writing about different painters:

The motifs which Georg Baselitz time and again employs in his paintings are insignificant as content. They are only meaningful within his pictorial method: as formal points of departure.³⁰

27. Nicholas Serota, *Markus Lüpertz-Stil Paintings*.

28. R. H. Fuchs, *Anselm Kiefer*, exhibition catalogue, Venice Biennale, 1980, p. 62.

29. Gohr, "Remarks."

30. R. H. Fuchs, *Georg Baselitz—Bilder 1977–1978*, Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 1979, n.p.

The value of the motif in these paintings of Lüpertz's lay only in the way in which he used it as a starting point for the development of a meaningful activity.³¹

As was the case in the call to order by regressive artists of the twenties, a growing aggressivity is now becoming apparent in the manner that these clichés of vision and language are propagated. With the demise of liberalism, its underside—authoritarianism—no longer feels inhibited. And it thus comes to the fore in the guise of irrationality and the ideology of individual expression. In reaction against social consciousness and political awareness, proto-Fascist libertarianism prepares the way for the seizure of state power. Without questioning the reasons for the failure of enlightenment, the end of modernism and the enforced silencing of its critical potential are taken as excuses for indulging in defeat.

The following programmatic statements, couched in a pastiche of Deleuze and Guattari, Stirner, and Spengler, fervently advocate the received ideas of petit bourgeois anarchism in relation to Arte Ciphra:

Arte Ciphra exposes itself as an art of the most extreme subjectivism. . . . The disillusionment is the strongest with those who even at the beginning of the seventies still believed in an immediately imminent collapse of capitalism—generated by criticism and revelation. . . . Now it is much more important to develop new forms which relate to pure intensity, to the indivisibility of desire and to the unconscious fixations of desire. Desire therefore assumes a revolutionary position. But as desire itself is always a part of infinitely complicated and ambivalent interdependences, its particular fixations must come to bear in their totality, even if they are partially “regressive,” “bourgeois,” or “nonrevolutionary”. . . . The failure of bourgeois enlightenment—well understood long ago in political and ideological thought—was not acknowledged by this art of the seventies. . . . Arte Ciphra attempts a formation of the “here and now”. . . . Its aim is the opposite of utopia—it's *atopia*, the discovery of the other in the immediacy of the present.³²

And here, in the explicitly proto-Fascist language of an Italian critic:

The new force of art is born from this very tension, turning a relationship of quantity into a relationship of intensity. The work is taken from a socially underprivileged position back to an individual centrality, reestablishing the creative need by means of an image in opposition to the shapeless foggy of social needs.³³

31. Gohr, “Remarks.”

32. Wolfgang Max Faust, *Arte Ciphra*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1979, p. 14.

33. Achille Bonito Oliva, “The Bewildered Image,” *Flash Art*, nos. 96–97 (April 1980), 35.

Rather than face up to its own bankruptcy and the necessity of political change, this frankly elitist notion of subjectivity ultimately opts for the destruction of the very historical and cultural reality that it claims to possess. The secret longing for destruction as a solution to contradictions that can only be met in political, not cultural, terms, manifests itself in fantasies of catastrophe. This climate of finality—when the end of a class is mistaken for the end of the world—generates apocalyptic and necrophilic visions, first in high art, then spread throughout the culture. Eventually self-destruction can be seen as an act of heroism. These tendencies are again to be found in the painting of neoexpressionism and its accompanying criticism:

It represents one of the great tyrannical gestures in aesthetics: an emperor burning down a city to make way for a new and grander one. As a theme it belongs of course to a larger topological framework which dates back to the beginning of time: renewal and purification through fire. . . . Fire destroys but it also cleanses.³⁴

and:

Last year . . . I accompanied Lüpertz to the Ruhleben crematorium on the outskirts of the city. As we walked slowly down a wide path to the modern crematorium . . . a pale of black smoke began to rise slowly from the chimneys. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sharp report of rifles firing on the British artillery range hidden behind the crematorium. The conjunction was typical of Berlin. Inside the building was the pair of paintings by Lüpertz. . . . They have a quality of universal truth.³⁵

The historical “authenticity” of these works is contained, then, in the very retardation and regression which they enact: the continuing domination of the obsolete. In the pathetic farce of their repetition-compulsion, we can still recognize the tragic failure of the original forms of the protest of expressionism. In the mockery and mimicry of contemporary neoexpressionism we see the afterimage of that anarchic and subversive, but ultimately apolitical radicalism that was doomed to failure, to be appropriated by the very forces that it had set out to oppose. It is Lukács, once again, who has described this mechanism:

Mythologizing the problems allows one to avoid looking at the phenomena which are criticized as being part of capitalism, or to render capitalism in such a spurious, distorted, and mystified form that the critique does not generate a confrontation of the problems but a parasitic complacency with the system; by inversion, even an affirma-

34. Fuchs, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 57.

35. Serota, *Markus Lüpertz*.

tion coming from the "soul" can be derived from this critique. . . . Without doubt, expressionism is only one of the many bourgeois ideological currents eventually leading to fascism, and its role as ideological preparation is not any more or less important than currents of the imperialist epoch, inasmuch as they express decadent parasitic features, including all the fake revolutionary and oppositional forces. . . . This schism is deeply inherent in the character of anti-bourgeois expressionism and this abstracting impoverishment of content not only indicates the tendency of expressionism; it is from the very beginning its central, insurmountable stylistic problem, because its extraordinary poverty of content marks a blatant contradiction of the pretense of its performance, of the hybrid subjective pathos of its representation.³⁶

The mock avant-garde of contemporary European painters now benefits from the ignorance and arrogance of a racket of cultural parvenus who perceive it as their mission to reaffirm the politics of a rigid conservatism through cultural legitimization.

36. Lukács, "Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus," p. 116.