

PART II

THE LEGACY OF GREENBERGIAN THEORY

Introduction to Part II

In Part I, I set out the internal structure of Greenberg's theory before taking issue with his formalism and modernism in turn. More than anything, it was the tight correlation between the two, intersecting in the role conventions play in conditioning both the creation and reception of art, that has determined subsequent attitudes to aesthetics in art theory. Seen in retrospect, the absence of serious aesthetic theories of art after modernism, taken together with art theorists' willingness to appeal to a variety of theoretical paradigms of varying degrees of externality to art, suggests that the majority of art theorists must believe the historical and conceptual limits of aesthetic theory have been breached by the internal development of art after modernism.¹ If so, they would share this view with various philosophers of art, if for somewhat different reasons.

But why do art theorists believe this if, indeed, they do? In my view this is largely a product of Greenberg's success in co-opting the discourse of aesthetics—particularly Kant's aesthetics—for modernist theory. The strength of the internal connection between modernism and formalism on Greenberg's theory, in particular the force of his *identification* of medium-specificity with the pursuit of aesthetic value in art, has significantly overdetermined attitudes towards the aesthetic, both positive and negative, in subsequent art theory. This can be gauged from the fact that the succeeding generation of theorist-critics seem to have taken it for granted that, while one might wish either to defend or contest modernism and aesthetics, one could only do so together: one could be some kind of modernist aesthete, or join the growing ranks of their opponents, the anti-aesthetic postmodernists, but

the conceptual space largely precluded being a postmodern aesthete or an anti-aesthetic modernist.²

That being so, this chapter and the next consider the theoretical trajectories and critical fates of Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, initially two of Greenberg's leading followers. In both cases I draw out some implications of their early responses to Greenberg for their later criticism. While Fried's criticism in particular came to be seen as emblematic of everything later theorists found restrictive about modernism (the stress on artistic autonomy, evaluative judgement, medium-specificity, and the like) Krauss's critical stock rose in inverse proportion, arguably as a result of the extent to which she was prepared to take issue with the fundamental commitments of Greenbergian modernism. With the benefit of hindsight, however, early Fried and late Krauss seem to have more in common than either would probably care to admit. As I shall present them here, Fried and Krauss serve as exemplary instances of broadly positive and negative responses to Greenberg's modernism, respectively; in the following two chapters I turn to Thierry de Duve and Arthur Danto as equally opposed reactions to Greenberg's formalism.

Notes

1. De Duve, whose work is the focus of Chapter 5, is the obvious outlier here. There was also the brief vogue for a so-called return to 'beauty', but—unlike de Duve—most of this literature failed to engage seriously with contemporary art. On the significance or otherwise of the predicate 'beauty' for debates about recent art, see my exchange with Danto, and Alexander Nehamas's commentary on this in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2006), 51–89 and 145–55.
2. I say 'largely' as there were advocates of what Hal Foster called a 'postmodernism of reaction', (neo-expressionism and *Transavanguardia* in painting, eclecticism and pastiche in architecture, and so on), for whom it represented a cathartic rejection of modernism. Hard to take seriously, even at the time, this has not aged well. See 'Postmodernism: A Preface' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), ix–xvi.

3

The Afterlife of Medium-Specificity I

Fried on ‘Theatre’ and ‘Theatricality’

The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only *within* the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is theatre.

Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (1967)

i. Michael Fried, early and late

In his early criticism, Michael Fried maintained the broadly Greenbergian line that medium-specificity—correctly understood and, where necessary, suitably reformulated—remains a necessary condition of artistic value. For this reason he is typically regarded, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, as Greenberg’s leading inheritor. As a consequence, the advent of Minimalism and the subsequent ascendancy of various forms of non-medium-specific art left him in an increasingly embattled position by the late 1960s. Those more sympathetic to the kinds of art that Fried rejected as aesthetically meretricious generally regard his criticism as dogmatic and narrowly prescriptive. Against this widespread perception, I shall argue for an unorthodox perspective on the early criticism here. By retrieving its conceptual underpinnings, as initially formulated in dialogue with Cavell’s philosophy of art, I try to show that the conception of an artistic medium mobilized in Fried and Cavell’s early criticism and philosophy of art is at greater risk of being too accommodating than it is of being too restrictive.

To bring this out, I shall read Fried’s early criticism through the optic provided by his more recent work on photography. This marked Fried’s return to the fray of contemporary art criticism for the first time in thirty-five years, making his criticism of photography highly instructive. As was

quickly noticed, Fried reads photography through several terms he had originally applied to painting. Thus James Elkins, writing about ‘Barthes’s *Punctum*’ on its first publication in 2005, notes that ‘in Barthes’s *Punctum*, Fried applies several of the same criteria to photography as he has applied to painting, apparently breaching the medium-specificity that has been central to modernist criticism since Greenberg.’¹ In support of this claim, Elkins cites Fried’s contention that ‘[the frontal pose has come to play a crucial role as] ambitious photography increasingly has claimed for itself the scale and so to speak the address of abstract painting.’² That said, the mode of address Fried associates with high modernist painting (taking *Alpha Pi* from Morris Louis’s ‘Unfurleds’ as an example) is not exclusively tied to the frontal pose in Fried’s mind; he also points out that the notable increase in the size of recent art photography enabled the work of Thomas Ruff and Jeff Wall to ‘address more than a single beholder at the same time’ and thereby function, in this respect at least, analogously to painting.³ For Fried this escalation in size is ‘intimately related to . . . the display of those photographs on gallery and museum walls or, rather, the fact that photographs like Wall’s and Ruff’s *were made in order be so displayed*’ (my italics).⁴ I stress this point because it makes clear that Fried takes the intentions of these artists to be crucial, not only to their individual achievement, but to determining the tradition, art form or medium to which they should be understood as contributing. As to whether approaching photography in this spirit should be considered a problem, given Fried’s prior commitments, it is not immediately clear where Elkins stands:

If this appears as a betrayal of modernist faith in media-specificity, I wonder if that isn’t because modernist criticism has a structural inability to determine what constitutes the specificity of a medium. Medium specificity is either presented as a given—an inherent set of properties comprising ‘all that [is] unique in the nature’ of each medium—or else as an historical fable, now jettisoned in the ‘age of the post-medium condition.’⁵

The references here are to Greenberg and Krauss, rather than Fried, whose position is distinct from both. Elkins claims that ‘“Barthes’s *Punctum*” steps around this inbuilt and unproductive choice [between Greenberg and Krauss] by paying attention to the pressure exerted on the present by the historically specific forms media have taken, while acknowledging the possibility that media co-opt properties from one another, thereby re-arranging,

blurring, or simply switching roles.’⁶ But putting it this way effectively glosses over the gulf—if Elkins is right—between Fried’s early criticism and the more relaxed view he has allegedly come to take: from the perspective of the early Fried, I take it, the idea that artistic media might ‘co-opt properties from one another, thereby re-arranging, blurring, or simply switching roles’ would have been anathema.⁷ That Elkins glosses over this is strange, given that it is the reason he is doubtless right to expect others to see this as something of a volte-face. And against that, I want to argue that there is no problem here at all, although it certainly looks as though there is. This might seem to be a boon for Fried; his recent work only seems to conflict with his earlier work. But I want to suggest the contrary: if addressing contemporary photography through the terms he previously applied to modernist painting really creates no difficulties for medium-specificity as Fried understands this, this constitutes a problem for the very idea of a ‘specific’ medium, and the weight it was asked to carry in his earlier criticism.

Let me make this clear: where Elkins glosses over what would generally be regarded as fundamental differences between early and later Fried, I part company with Elkins in stressing the *apparent* differences between them. But I also part company with anyone who believes such differences constitute a genuine problem for Fried: appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I argue that Fried’s ‘photographic turn’ can be extrapolated from the theoretical position he maps out in ‘Shape as Form’ and ‘Art and Objecthood’ in 1966–1967.⁸ The upshot of this, if I am right, is to open up an unorthodox perspective on Fried’s early criticism. Against the common perception that this is narrowly restrictive, I suggest that the idea of an artistic medium deployed in Fried’s early criticism and Stanley Cavell’s early philosophy of art is actually so accommodating as to undercut the idea that artistic media put *any* substantive constraints on artistic practice that may be specified in advance.

That Fried’s more recent work on photography can be justified from within the theoretical framework of his art criticism from the 1960s draws attention to a fault line *internal* to ‘Art and Objecthood’ itself—rather than *between* ‘Art and Objecthood’ and his more recent work. This resides in a typically overlooked disconnect between the notions of ‘theatre’ and ‘theatricality’, on which the former’s critique of Minimalism turns. In so far as Fried defines *theatre* as ‘what lies between the arts’, and understands any art that presents itself as ‘incomplete’ without its beholder as *theatrical*, there is no necessary connection between them. Regardless of whether Fried is

right that Minimalism took the non-medium-specific form that it did as a result of the meretricious relation it sought to its beholders, this remains a contingent, merely historical fact about such art. Even if the invidious relation Minimalism sought with its beholders did, as a matter of fact, take the form of falling between artistic media it *need not* have done; it might have taken any number of other forms. So, while there may have been a contingent historical overlap between the ‘theatrical’ and ‘theatre’ when Fried brought these terms together, their conceptual identification was a mistake. There is no necessary correlation between medium-specificity (or lack thereof) and ‘theatrical’, in Fried’s sense: it is eminently possible to be theatrical within an artistic medium, just as it is possible to eschew the theatrical between or across artistic media.

This suggests we would do well to separate out questions of medium-specificity from questions of artistic address. For it is arguably the entanglement of these two issues in the terms ‘theatre’ and ‘theatrical’, which Fried’s detractors have tended uncritically to take over, that is responsible for much of the hostility towards Fried and modernist theory, and the dispiriting fate of aesthetics in subsequent art theory. Fried’s critics may champion works that Fried denigrates, and denigrate works that he champions, but they continue to do so through the optic provided by his own theory. Against this, I shall argue that while Minimalism may well have been ‘theatrical’ in Fried’s sense, it was not ‘theatre’ as Fried understands this, because ‘theatre’, like the idea of medium-specificity it is meant to oppose, remains indeterminable on the Friedian view. If this is correct, the upshot will be that Fried’s critique of Minimalism—the argument from theatre, as opposed to the argument from theatricality—unravels, and it does so on Friedian grounds. It may have taken Fried’s ‘photographic turn’ to make this fact apparent, but it was always true.

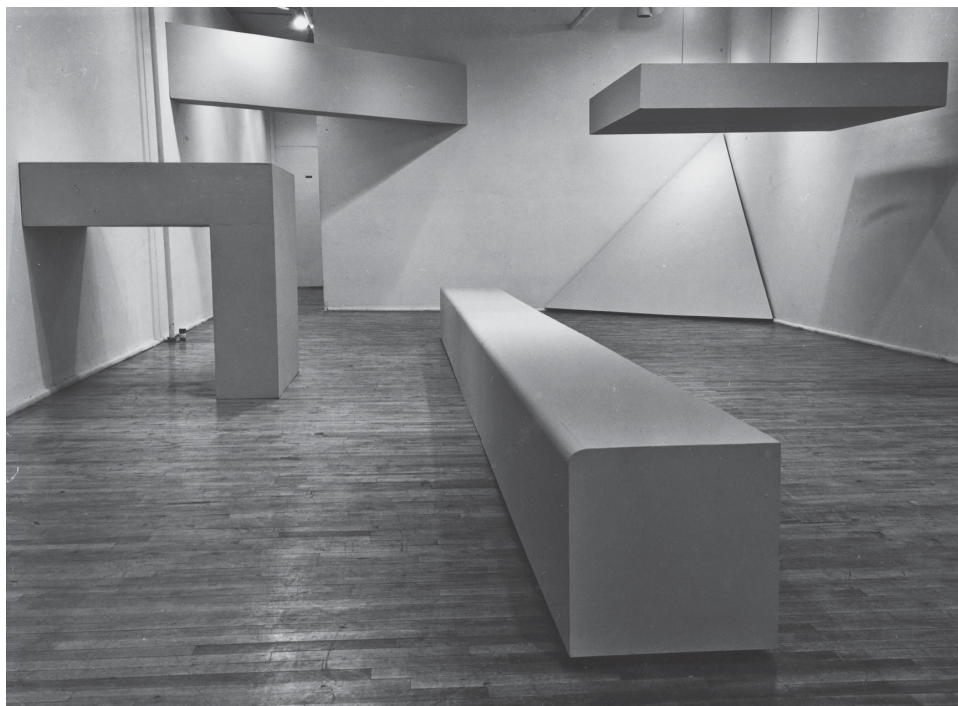
ii. Fried on ‘theatre’ and ‘theatricality’

Notoriously, both ‘theatre’ and ‘theatrical’ function as wholly pejorative terms in Fried’s lexicon, conveying his total rejection of both the staging and the effect typical of minimalist installations. Fried described Minimalism as ‘theatrical’ in virtue of its relation to the space in which it was set, a relation he saw as a self-consciously theatrical *mis-en-scène* projected towards the beholder required for its completion. Soliciting a viewer in such a manner

constitutes an ever-present risk for authentic art on Fried's account. Fried argued that artists such as Carl Andre and Robert Morris incorporated the work's viewer into the work itself, by installing it in such a way as to draw attention to the time it took its viewer to navigate the physical space of its installation.⁹ This whole *situation*—consisting of the work, its placement within a given architectural container, and the viewer—was responsible for the literal presence of such works, a presence that was 'theatrical' on at least four counts for Fried. First, because it set up an experience that was elaborately staged and to that extent 'sure-fire'. Second, because it persisted—in principle endlessly—in time, rather than gathering itself into the punctual plenitude, or 'presentness', characteristic of the best modernist works.¹⁰ Third, and most importantly, because it required a beholder for its completion, the viewer being an anticipated component of the work towards whom its installation was projected, in contrast to the self-subsistence of autonomous modernist works. And fourth, because it alienated and estranged its viewers, both physically and psychologically, as a result of its hollowness and public, non-personal, mode of address. All four, it should be clear, are characterizations of what Fried took, and still takes, to be wrong with the relation such work sought to impose upon their projected beholders.

In doing so, Minimalism transformed the idea of a work of art from a discrete, internally complex, entity on the wall or floor, to that of a simple object plus its spectator plus the spatio-temporal location in which it was installed, hence from a one-term to a three-term relation. That is, from a complex, internally rich work understood to be independent of its context to a simple, internally empty, object embedded in a complex installation taken to be internal to its meaning as art. Fried maintained that both in its practice and its theoretical apologia this expansion served to blur the boundaries between media—hence the inference from theatricality to theatre. The result for Fried is an art that collapses back into mere objecthood, and so is not properly to be thought of as art at all. Far from offering the satisfactions proper to art, such works confront their viewers with obdurate and unresponsive objects from which all internal richness has been drained. From this Fried concludes that the concepts of value and quality only apply to works not so expanded: 'Theatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such.'¹¹ From this, now notorious, statement Fried goes on to draw a sequence of even more infamous conclusions:

(a)



(b)



Figure 3.1 Robert Morris, two views of polyhedrons installed at Green Gallery, New York, December 1964–January 1965 (2 × 4 inch batons and grey-painted plywood). Image courtesy of Castelli Gallery, NYC. © The Estate of Robert Morris / DACS, London 2023.

- 1) *The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre....*
- 2) *Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre....*
- 3) *The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.*¹²

Consider the final formulation; it implies not only that this work is bad art, but that no work that fails to respect the boundaries between artistic media *could* be good art, now or in the future. But given the openness of art to transformation over time, and the resultant obligation to judge each new work on its merits, this is a conclusion that cannot be upheld, irrespective of whether Fried is right in his critical estimation of Minimalism.¹³ What Fried's argument might show, assuming one shares his estimation of Minimalism, is that the concepts of quality and value cannot gain a purchase on these works, insofar as *these* works conflate art with objecthood, if indeed they do. But it does not—indeed cannot—show that blurring the boundaries between artistic media *need* result in art that collapses back into brute facticity.

Whether or not Fried is right in his estimation of Minimalism, I hope it is clear, is not at stake here; disputes about the value of Minimalism are a matter for criticism, and my interest is conceptual rather than critical. That said, it bears remarking how odd a conclusion this would be for Fried to arrive at, if we interpret his remarks in this way, given his insistence on the openness (within limits) of artistic media to transformation over time. This should give us pause before unhitching his claims from their historical moment: 'Theatre and theatricality are at war *today* . . . with art as such.' On a charitable reading of Fried, the fact that 'Art and Objecthood' was intended as a polemical intervention in an ongoing debate must be kept in mind. Taking this on board, Fried's identification of medium-specificity with the possibility of good art might be read, in a more minimal spirit, as claiming only that contemporaneous work (Minimalism, c. 1967) that blurs the boundaries between artistic media is not (good) art.¹⁴ Reading Fried's claims in this more minimal spirit is to retrieve their *critical*—normative rather than prescriptive—force, while bracketing the more contentious *theoretical* claims he goes on to raise off the back of them.

That said, the more 'minimal' reading of Fried just proposed does not capture the force of the claims Fried makes in 'Art and Objecthood', or explain

the artworld furore they unleashed. In sum, it is hard to ignore the more programmatic dimensions of the essay entirely, not least because these are undeniably part of its force. Perhaps it is more plausible to say that the idea of medium-specificity functioned for the young Fried, in this respect much as it did for Greenberg, as a necessary though not sufficient condition of a work possessing aesthetic value. This thicker reading retains the more substantive implication, like Greenberg's view of 'unformalized art', that art that falls between established media will lack value as art. Not surprisingly, reading it in this more substantive spirit led many theorists and critics aligned with later, non-medium-specific practices to reject his theory outright. Indeed, this response was so pervasive as to harden into a countervailing anti-aesthetic orthodoxy insisting on the merits of what modernist conceptions of artistic value exclude.¹⁵ The most obvious problem with responses of this kind is that they invert the *normative* dimension of Fried's criticism, while leaving its underlying *conceptual* structure in place: that is, they devalue what Fried values and value what he devalues, but they understand both the through the optic of his theory. As a result, they remain trapped within the theoretical framework they mean to contest: though they champion art that Fried can be expected to dismiss, they continue to understand it through the optic of his own theory.¹⁶ But nothing that Fried need regard as a serious challenge to modernist theory follows from the fact that his detractors rate various practices more highly than he does; from *his* perspective it could all be just so much more theatre.¹⁷

Given this, I suggest that the only way to challenge Fried's modernism seriously is to examine the framework underwriting the evaluation, rather than the resultant valuation. This entails revisiting the foundational move in Fried's theory of modernism, the amendments he proposed in 1966–1967 to Greenberg's conception of medium-specificity. Here Fried develops a distinctive philosophical foundation for his own theory, one that owes more to Stanley Cavell's interpretation of the later Wittgenstein on convention than it does to Greenberg's recourse to Kant to underwrite a teleological conception of artistic self-criticism. Of course, Fried does not reject Greenberg's idea of a self-reflexive medium-specificity outright; he reformulates it. The question I pose here is whether these revisions leave room, conceptually, for his denigration of Minimalism as 'theatre'. This is to ask whether the more programmatic claims of Fried's essay, to the effect that what lies 'between' artistic media cannot be an object of aesthetic judgement or a vehicle of aesthetic value, are even compatible with his critique of Greenberg's essentialism. I shall argue

that what is wrong with Fried's response to Minimalism can be gleaned from his own reformulations of Greenberg. Hence, rather than taking issue with early Fried for his restrictive view of what could count as (good) art—this being what I would call an *external* rejection of modernism—I endeavour to bring out a fault-line *internal* to Fried's conception of modernism itself.

iii. Fried and Cavell contra Greenberg on medium-specificity

By the time he wrote 'Modernist Painting' (1960) and 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962), Greenberg believed modernism works by gradually sloughing off all 'norms and conventions' that prove inessential to a work's existence as an instance of a given art in practice. On this account, modernism is a process of immanent self-criticism through which each art sets its house in order by shedding everything it shares with any other art.¹⁸ Only by laying claim in this way to an 'area of competence' that is neither shared with any other art, nor capable of being abandoned without abandoning the activity itself, Greenberg believed, would each art show that it offered its own, intrinsically valuable, form of experience and thereby guarantee its continued existence. Greenberg identified this 'unique and irreducible' source of value with the intrinsic properties of each art's medium: in the case of painting this comprised, notoriously, the flatness of the support, and the delimitation of that flatness by the support's framing edges:

Under the testing conditions of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture.¹⁹

There are several assumptions built into this account. The two most obvious are that each art *has* an irreducible essence, and that modernism may be understood, retrospectively, as a teleological process through which each art seeks it out—irrespective of whether this was apparent to artists themselves. It is on these points that Fried, originally Greenberg's leading follower,

takes issue with his theory. But before turning to Fried's criticisms, I want to point up a deeper assumption that he does not question, and that returns to haunt his own account in turn: it is that the process of self-criticism operates *within*, but not *across*, the arts. This is premised on an assumption, shared by both Greenberg and Fried, that the individual arts are individual in principle, and not merely in practice, and hence that they can be parsed on non-question-begging grounds. This would explain why Fried takes issue with Greenberg on the question of whether the arts have *timeless* essences while endorsing his view that they have *distinct* essences.²⁰ This commitment was to prove a hostage to fortune once Minimalism had forced the question: what reason is there to believe the arts are distinct in principle just because to date they have been distinct in practice? This is to understand Minimalism as a practical counterexample, forged in a spirit of critical self-interrogation typical of modernism, to this very assumption.²¹

Fried, by contrast, viewed Minimalism as a result of drawing the wrong conclusion from Greenberg's reductive conception of modernism: the conclusion that to foreground the essence of painting, say, understood in terms of the literal properties of its support, is to stop short of foregrounding art's literal nature *per se*, its existence as an object.²² On this understanding of Minimalism it is an *extension* of modernism's reductive logic, albeit pushed beyond the point at which Greenberg would have wanted to see it halted, such that it tips over from the specific into the generic, or from art into objecthood. In Fried's terms, this amounts to mistaking modernism's 'acknowledgement' of the properties of the support as simultaneously both enabling and limiting conditions on the creation of paintings as vehicles of pictorial meaning, for their hypostatization as brute facts about paintings as empirical objects.²³ If an art such as Minimalism could arise as an unexpected consequence of Greenberg's own understanding of modernism, then Greenberg's conception of modernism had to be amended.

Hence, while Fried has always acknowledged his debt to Greenberg's criticism, by 1966 he was already taking issue with Greenberg's theory of modernism.²⁴ It is important to be clear that Fried does not contest Greenberg's basic claim that modernism *is* each art's attempt to locate the essence of its medium through a process of immanent self-criticism; instead he argues, drawing support from Cavell's interpretation of the later Wittgenstein, that the perceived 'essence' of an artistic medium is itself a product or projection of convention, hence open to revision over time. Reviewing his early

criticism, Fried cites Wittgenstein directly in support of this understanding of essence:

I say . . . : if you talk about *essence*—you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference than that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about—a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the *depth* that we see in essence there corresponds the *deep* need for the convention.²⁵

On this account, essence is a reflection of our underlying need for conventions on which to ground human practices. This way of conceiving convention, and of thinking about the relation between what is ‘conventional’ and what is ‘natural’—the depth of the former ultimately grounded on the tyranny of the latter, that is, on the ‘very general facts’ of human nature—pervades Cavell’s interpretation of the later Wittgenstein.²⁶ Fried tends to present this way of thinking about convention as a clear departure from Greenberg, but something quite similar is often implicit in Greenberg’s thought—albeit in less philosophically fortified form than Fried’s and in tension with those more reductive aspects of his thought that Fried rejects.²⁷ Be that as it may, Cavell’s early work, particularly his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks on convention, was crucial to the formation of Fried’s theory of modernism.²⁸

According to Cavell, ‘Wittgenstein’s discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but . . . on the conventionality of human nature itself.’²⁹ This includes what might be thought of as our ‘natural reactions’ to various kinds of event or situation, and our ‘natural understanding’ of certain sorts of interaction or instruction. All of which, as Cavell reads Wittgenstein, is indexed to the development or ‘natural history’ of various human practices over time. Being indexed to the development of human societies, such practices are, in principle, open to revision—though not through mere agreement or fiat. Once again, it bears noting how close Cavell’s idea that conventions cannot be changed by mere fiat—as if they were contracts mutually consented to, rather than practices that have gradually evolved in response to human needs and capacities—is to Greenberg’s view that only an artist who is thoroughly immersed in, and so possessed of, existing conventions can transform them from the inside.³⁰

Building on the idea that the conventions on which human practices are based evolve over time, Fried argues that the essence of a practice such as painting will be open to transformation through the ongoing practice of the discipline itself. On Fried and Cavell's way of thinking, this does not make the essence of an artistic medium somehow arbitrary or insubstantial, as would be implied by calling it 'merely conventional', since that implies there is something deeper than convention to which the latter might be unfavourably contrasted. On the contrary, conventions—to echo the *Investigations* on the conventionality of following a rule—constitute 'bedrock'.³¹ Rooted in 'forms of life', deep and pervasive patterns of underlying agreement or attunement in the absence of which we could neither understand one another nor share a world, and constrained in the last analysis by the natural capacities and limits of human beings (the 'very general facts of human nature') conventions are all we have. This is the sense of convention at stake in Fried's well known, and seemingly paradoxical, formulation that the anti-theatrical tradition in French painting sought to 'neutralize the primordial convention that paintings are meant to be beheld'.³² Suggesting that the fact that paintings are made to be beheld is a *convention*, albeit a 'primordial' one, is a claim about our natural history. As Cavell reads Wittgenstein, such conventions rest on nothing more, but also nothing less, than our agreement in 'forms of life'—a fundamental level of attunement grounded in the natural history of human beings.

For Wittgenstein, 'forms of life' must be taken as given: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*'.³³ What does this mean? Cavell tends to gloss the idea of 'forms of life' by invoking Wittgenstein's cognate notion of 'agreement in judgements'.³⁴ This does not pick out individual instances of agreement so much as what must be presupposed by the fact that we are able to take ourselves to be in agreement (or otherwise) about anything at all. This is not to say, as Cavell's reads Wittgenstein, that 'agreement in judgement' operates mysteriously somewhere below or behind actual cases of agreement in a relation of condition to conditioned; it is to draw attention to the pervasiveness of agreement in judgement manifested in and through patterns of shared understanding in everyday life. So the sense of agreement at stake is not that of coming to agreement on a particular occasion so much as already being, in a much more fundamental sense, in agreement or attunement throughout. Cavell invokes just this sense in one of his first published essays while discussing what must be presupposed for us to be able to project words into contexts other than those in which we learn them. It is, Cavell, writes,

a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.³⁵

What Cavell and Wittgenstein are gesturing towards here is our very capacity to make sense of one another at all, without which we could not inhabit a shared world. One might be tempted to call such ‘agreement in judgement’ or ‘forms of life’ *a priori*—or even transcendental—though one would need to be careful to qualify this in terms of their rootedness in the natural history of the species.³⁶

On the notion of conventionality that, I am suggesting, flows from this way of conceiving ‘agreement in judgement’ or shared ‘forms of life’, to say that ‘essence is conventional’ is to say that while it is not immutable—not a fixed feature of the furniture of the world—it is nonetheless not arbitrary. Rather, as a product of human needs, and a reflection of human practices, as our practices change over time, so too will the perceived essence of those practices. This, it should be clear, amounts to an *historicization* of essence, construed as product or projection of the deep conventions on which human practices are based, rather than its rejection. Applying this way of thinking to art, Fried retains the idea that the arts have distinct essences, together with the belief that modernism is an attempt to isolate them, while rejecting the idea that the essence of any art endures independently of its ongoing practice. To conceive the essence of any art as timeless—to understand modernist painting, say, as an attempt to uncover the ‘irreducible essence’ of painting once and for all—is to misconstrue the nature of modernist painting as a historical enterprise. In Fried’s words:

Flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of as the ‘irreducible essence of pictorial art’, but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something’s being seen as a painting*; . . . the crucial question is not what those minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting. This is not to say that painting *has no* essence; it *is* to claim that essence—i.e., that which compels conviction—is

largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment *alone* are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting.³⁷

In Cavell's words:

[Modernist art] is trying to find the limits or essence of its own procedures. And this means that it is not clear *a priori* what counts, or will count, as a painting, or sculpture or musical composition . . . we haven't got clear criteria for determining whether a given object is or is not a painting, a sculpture . . . The task of the modernist artist, as of the contemporary critic, is to find what it is his art finally depends upon; it doesn't matter that we haven't a prior criteria for defining a painting, what matters is that we realize that the criteria are something we must discover in the continuity of painting itself.³⁸

If there are no *a priori* criteria to guarantee that something will count as a painting, then modernism cannot be understood as an attempt to locate the 'unique and irreducible' properties of artistic media; instead, modernist artists are best understood as seeking those criteria capable of securing their work's identity as painting or sculpture at a given historical moment. What is at stake in modernist painting is not a quest to reveal the timeless essence of painting as a medium, but making works in the present capable of withstanding comparison to the highest achievements from the history of the discipline, the quality and identity of which is no longer in doubt: 'Unless something compels conviction as to its quality', Fried writes prior to the remarks cited above, 'it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting.'³⁹ There are no hard and fast rules as to what might compel conviction in this way that may be given in advance; it is rather a function of the ongoing development of art to bring these out. In Cavell's words: 'It is the task of the modernist artist to show that we do not know *a priori* what will count for us as an instance of his art.'⁴⁰ This leaves open in principle, if not entirely in practice, what might count in this way and thereby bear comparison to the greatest achievements within a given discipline, the quality of which is beyond doubt.

The point is to purge Greenberg's understanding of medium-specificity of its ahistorical essentialism (the belief that there is some timeless essence

to painting that it is the function of modernist painting to uncover once and for all); it is not to dispute the idea of medium-specificity (the idea that the arts have distinct essences) *per se*. On the contrary, Fried and Cavell remain committed to that idea in their early writings. Neither takes issue with Greenberg's view that self-criticism operates within, but not across, artistic media. For all their differences then, all three concur at a deeper level that the arts are distinct in principle and not merely in practice, and hence that they can be parsed on non-question-begging grounds.

iv. Jeff Wall as a 'painter'; Gerhard Richter as a 'photographer'

But consider the following possibility: if a photograph should succeed in rivaling the highest achievements of past painting, would that make it a great painting on Fried's account? Conversely, were a painter to rival the highest achievements of photography, would that make them a great photographer, again on Fried's account? Recall that what counts as an exemplary work in a given medium, according to Fried, is one that 'compels conviction' that it can stand comparison to the past achievements of that medium. *Prima facie*, this might seem to preclude a painting, say, being compared to past photography, since they are allegedly in distinct media. But Fried and Cavell also maintain that we are unable to say *a priori* what could count as an instance of a given medium, it being a function of the ongoing development of artistic media to bring this out. Hence it is not open to Fried to respond that a given work *cannot* be a painting because it is not made of paint, since that would be to fall back into just the sort of essentialism about artistic media that his own theory is intended to outflank. Given this, if it turns out that a photograph can in the relevant sense be made to stand comparison to past painting or vice versa what happens to the very idea of 'medium-specificity' in Fried's account? If a photographer can make paintings with the technical means of photography, or a painter make photographs by painting—thereby blurring the boundaries between media in practice—is it still plausible to suppose that artistic media are distinct in principle?

To see that this is more than an abstruse hypothetical possibility on Fried and Cavell's conception of an artistic medium, consider the respective practices of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter. I shall suggest that if one pushes hard on Fried's critique of Greenberg, the photographer Jeff Wall



Figure 3.2 Jeff Wall, *Overpass*, 2001 (transparency in lightbox, 214.2 × 273.3cm). Image courtesy of the artist.

emerges—with important qualifications—as a ‘painter’, who paints photographically, and the painter Gerhard Richter emerges as a ‘photographer’, who makes photographs with the artisanal means of painting. If this is a plausible extrapolation of Fried’s early conception of an artistic medium, then his critique of Minimalism would seem to fall foul of his own objections to Greenberg. For once artistic media are shown to be this porous there can only ever be provisional boundaries between them: what constitutes a given medium today need no longer do so tomorrow, indeed what counts as a work in one medium today need no longer count as a work in the same medium tomorrow. As a corollary, what counts as a work ‘in’, ‘between’, or ‘across’ an artistic medium or media will be continually up for grabs.

At this point it might be objected that it is anachronistic to take issue with Fried’s early criticism on the basis of later art. But my claim is that Wall and Richter bring out an intrinsic conceptual possibility of Fried and Cavell’s early conception of an artistic medium, even if it took subsequent artistic developments to make this apparent. Indeed, I take this claim to be



Figure 3.3 Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965 (oil on canvas, 87 × 50 cm).
Lidice Collection, Lidice, Czech Republic. Image courtesy of the artist.
© Gerhard Richter 2023 (0237)

isomorphic to Fried's own: that Minimalism brought out an intrinsic feature of Greenberg's conception of an artistic medium, even if it took later developments to make that apparent. This is why I suggested at the outset that Fried's 'photographic turn', notably his tendency to read photography through the optic of modernist painting, may not be the *volte-face* it initially seems. Or, to put the point more forcefully: that it is nothing if not an *extension* of his early criticism. Given that Fried understands artistic media as intentional rather than material structures, that is, 'structures of intention' on the part of artists to elicit a conviction in their audience vis-à-vis their work's standing in relation to the past achievements of their discipline, it follows that if a given artist seeks to rival the achievements of one medium through the means of another their work will count as an example, and if great an exemplar, of the former. So the problem is not one of consistency between early and later Fried, as Elkins was no doubt right to suppose many will believe; it is whether this threatens to dissolve the very idea of an artistic medium as something that imposes any substantive empirical constraints from within.

There is a second objection to my account that can only be met by coming to examples: namely, that it is counterintuitive at best, and willful at worst, to describe Wall as a painter and Richter as a photographer, even on such an avowedly anti-essentialist and historicized a conception of an artistic medium as Fried's: to suggest that his conception of medium-specificity contains the seeds of its own dissolution by adverting to the examples of Richter and Wall is implausible. But consider the evidence. Wall repeatedly described his ambition early on as being to revive the project—marginalized by modernist painting's stress on autonomy—of the 'painting of modern life'.⁴¹ Here is Wall describing his interest in this idea to T. J. Clark:

Some of the problems set in motion in culture not only in the 1920s, but in the 1820s and even in the 1750s, are still being played out, are still unresolved . . . that's why I felt that a return to the idea of *la peinture de la vie moderne* was legitimate. Between the moment of Baudelaire's positioning this as a programme and now, there is a continuity which is that of capitalism itself.⁴²

And again, from the same interview:

When the concept of a painting of modern life emerged with particular clarity in the nineteenth century, it changed the way the history of art

could be seen . . . Manet's art could be seen as the last of the long tradition of Western figuration, and of course at the same time, as the beginning of avant-gardism . . . So it seems to me that the general programme of the painting of modern life (*which doesn't have to be painting, but could be*) is somehow the most significant evolutionary development in Western modern art [my italics].⁴³

Wall, a photographic artist trained in art history, and steeped in the history of post-Renaissance painting in particular, has taken on one genre of painting after another in his work, the scale of which is typically keyed to that of painting, rather than that of the photographic plate, album or print—Wall's recent protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.⁴⁴ But above all he has sought to rival the ambition, scale and mode of address of history painting, painting's highest canonical genre or form, often deriving the compositional strategies of his most ambitious works (such as *Dead Troops Talk [A Vision after an Ambush by a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986]*, 1992) from this tradition. That said, it would not be quite right to describe Wall as a contemporary history painter: it would be more accurate to say that he has brought the scale, mode of address and compositional resources of history painting into dialogue with Baudelaire's call for a 'painting of modern life' to produce a 'painting' of everyday contemporary scenes and events, and hence modern life, *as* historical—that is, historically freighted, significant, worthy of the closest inspection. I put painting in scare quotes to indicate that I am not claiming that Wall *is* a painter; the claim is rather that there may be no reason *not* to regard him as such on Fried and Cavell's understanding of how artistic media develop over time, by seeking to rival the past achievements of a given art form, in Wall's case painting. In fact, it may be more accurate to call this a 'picturing' than a 'painting', something consonant both with Wall's own self-presentation, and with what Fried might want to say of Wall's practice—namely, that it is essentially *pictorial*.

For all the differences in Wall's oeuvre, not least its basic oscillation between the rhetoric, or mode of address, of the documentary and the staged, the straight and the manipulated (which has clearly tilted towards the former over the course of his career) what his images share is a commitment to the depiction of everyday life. More specifically, they share a conception of what it is to depict everyday life keyed, if not exclusively to painting, then certainly more to painting, photography and cinema understood as a pictorial continuum than to photography conceived as a discrete medium. Wall

himself makes this clear in an autobiographical text selected for inclusion in his *Catalogue Raisonné*: ‘Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms. The only additional or new element is movement in the cinema.’⁴⁵ On Fried’s understanding of an artistic medium, an understanding grounded not in any literal properties of its support, but on a work’s participation in what I have called ‘structures of artistic intention’—as embodied by its mode of address to a particular artistic tradition, and the kind of conviction it seeks to elicit in its viewers as to its standing in relation to past work in that tradition—this would make Wall as much, if not more, a painter, cinematographer, or perhaps ‘pictographer’, as it would a photographer proper; since it is not solely the achievements of past painting, but of a more inclusive, non-medium-specific conception of the *pictorial*, rather than photography per se, that Wall aspires to rival in a contemporary idiom.

Conversely, consider the case of Gerhard Richter. Richter, who worked as an assistant in a photographic laboratory before training as a social-realist painter in former East Germany, describes his practice of painting from photographs as ‘photo-painting’. By this Richter has in mind something much stronger than painting pictures *of* photographs, or painting pictures *from* photographs, something better thought of as putting painting in the service of photography—to the extent of *making photographs by painting*:

[Photography] has no style, no composition, no judgement. It freed me from personal experience. For the first time, there was nothing to it: it was pure picture. That’s why I wanted to have it, to show it—not use it as a means to painting but use painting as a means to photography.

When the interviewer then asks: ‘How do you stand in relation to illusion? Is imitating photographs a distancing device, or does it create the appearance of reality?’ Richter replies:

I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means: *I’m not producing paintings of a photograph but producing photographs.* And, seen in this way,

those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs [my italics].⁴⁶

So Richter understands his practice as an attempt to make photographs—or what he calls ‘pure pictures’—by hand. If we take Richter at his word, this would turn him into an ‘automatic,’ or perhaps ‘quasi-automatic,’ recording device or transcription machine mimicking the mechanical apparatus—strictly speaking that of the enlarger rather than the camera, in so far as Richter’s practice is one of enlarging existing images with the laborious work of the hand—in an attempt to escape the strictures of subjectivity and personal experience. ‘Automatism’ is Cavell’s term for what has been glossed by numerous theorists down the years as photography’s ‘mechanical’ or ‘causal’ nature. It speaks to the widespread intuition that in photography something, indeed perhaps the most important thing—*the formation of the image itself*—takes place automatically, without the creative intervention of a human agent, simply in virtue of triggering a mechanical apparatus.⁴⁷ This is not—to put it weakly—a conception of photography to which I subscribe, but my own view of photography is not at issue here. What matters here is Fried and Cavell’s understanding of photography, and they concur in endorsing what I have called ‘Orthodoxy’ in theory of photography.⁴⁸ In Cavell’s terms, Richter’s practice mimics both the ‘automatism’ and the ‘sterility’ of the photographic apparatus, by virtue of bracketing his own subjectivity (or at least attempting to do so) and in terms of its inhuman, mechanical nature, at least once an image to be transcribed has been chosen.

But Richter also partakes of what Cavell calls photography’s ‘automatism’ in a deeper sense. In *The World Viewed* Cavell often alludes to the necessity of getting to the ‘right depth’ of the question concerning photography’s automatism: ‘It is essential to get to the right depth of this fact of automatism. . . . So far as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied a wish not confined to painters, but the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another.’⁴⁹ The ‘right depth’ of the ‘fact of automatism,’ in other words, is photography’s relation to scepticism. On Cavell’s understanding of the latter, Richter’s attempt to circumvent his own subjectivity by mimicking the camera’s automatism, in order to produce a ‘pure,’ subjectively uninflected, picture would be of a piece with the sceptic’s desire to arrive at an indubitable knowledge of the world unconstrained by the limits of

human finitude. Richter's bid to outwit the limits of subjective experience, by turning himself into a transcription machine—'no style, no composition, no judgement. [Photography] freed me from personal experience'—would be a species of scepticism viewed in this light.⁵⁰ As such it partakes of scepticism's fundamental paradox: namely, that by removing the constraints of subjectivity from the reproduction of reality, photography facilitates its perfection, but the price to be paid for such perfection is a world from which subjectivity is mechanically cut adrift, and so unable to acknowledge as its own.⁵¹ To the extent that Fried shares Cavell's philosophical outlook in this regard—to the extent, for example, that Minimalism could be taken to reflect an analogous denial of authorial subjectivity and intention—Richter's scepticism, *if* that is what it is, may bear on Fried's apparent aversion to his work to date.⁵²

Now what I, or Richter (or both) have just claimed may sound ludicrous, taken literally, and taking these remarks metaphorically would not only be a dodge, but deprive the proposal of all interest. For how could something that is so obviously a painting 'count as' a photograph? This is pronounced in the case of Richter's many abstract paintings, but the point generalizes. For the claim is not that we might *mistake* Richter's paintings for photographs: I take it that we will not, and this remains true of the photographically derived ones. Similarly, the claim about Wall was not that we might *mistake* 12-foot-long glossy cibachrome transparencies mounted in fluorescent light-boxes for oil on canvas. The claim is that Richter's paintings *are* photographs—at least on Fried and Cavell's understanding of an artistic medium.

To make good this claim it is necessary to remove some of the *prima facie* impediments to endorsing Richter's perception of what he does as 'photography', at least on Fried and Cavell's understanding of the latter. The first is that aspect of photography he specifically and, one might think, egregiously elides, namely its indexicality: 'If I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means.' But can one justifiably disregard this 'assumption?' That straight, documentary photographs (whether press or vernacular) of the kind that Richter typically works from, considered in purely causal terms, are the result of reflected light, focused by a lens and captured by a shutter, impacting a light sensitive surface, is generally thought to be a distinguishing feature of photography. This seems to rule out Richter's claims *a priori*: if photographs do have a direct casual dependence on what they depict, this cannot be photography. But taking indexicality as an essential feature of photography is not an option for Fried or Cavell—and it is their account that

I am interested in—given that in the last analysis artistic media are not defined materially, causally or ontologically on their own theory, but in terms of compelling conviction, first in the artist and subsequently in their audience, that a given work stands up as an exemplar of its kind.

Indeed, *were* one to define photography in terms of indexicality, that would immediately rule out Wall, many of whose images are manipulated to such an extent that the final image, as opposed to its constituent parts, no longer functions as an indexical guarantor of the past existence of its referent in any straightforward sense. Of what one sees in Wall's pictures one can never say with certainty 'that has been.'⁵³ One cannot tell simply by looking at them: even the most naturalistic looking images may consist of numerous fragments, shot in different times or places, and stitched together in the computer.⁵⁴ In sum, recourse to C. S. Peirce's by now rather shop-worn distinction between icons and indexes, that staple of recent photo-theory, no longer serves to underwrite categorical distinctions between photography and other media with the advent of digital technology, if indeed it ever did.⁵⁵ Taking this route would exclude the 'photographer' Wall, rather than just the 'painter' Richter, which is too severe; whereas conceiving photography more broadly, in terms of what Cavell calls its 'automatism', rules in much of Richter, given the quasi-mechanical nature of his process, while ruling out much of Wall, most of whose works are anything but automatic, and so presumably would not count as photographs on Cavell's account.

This brings me to the second obstacle to accepting Richter's claims for his own practice. Richter may (arguably) 'bracket' his own subjectivity, or at least attempt to do so, but that is a feat the camera itself manifestly need never accomplish. But this is no obstacle to regarding Richter as a photographer on Fried's conception of an artistic medium. Given that Richter consistently aims to achieve just this, and Fried understands artistic media to be constituted by just such 'structures of artistic intention', this would seem to count in favour, rather than against, the thought that Richter aspires to record what he pictures automatically—that is, *like a camera*. While the full significance of Richter's attempt to do this may only come into view as a negation of the previous conventions of painting (that is, as 'not-painting'), Richter undertakes this project of making photographs by painting with the same degree of seriousness as Wall's early attempts to update the tradition of history painting with the means of photography.⁵⁶ This is precisely how 'structures of artistic intention' should be understood according to Fried. The equally obvious fact that Richter has to choose his source material is also

no obstacle to regarding what he does as photography, understood in the relatively thin sense at stake here; for even the most orthodox views of photography grant that photographers must decide where to point their cameras, a fact that Cavell's account of 'automatism' has no need to deny.

Not only do these artists invert their apparent medium's standing with respect to foundational issues like automatism or mechanicity, they also do so with respect to several more general aesthetic values and functions standardly attributed to them. Thus, if one sees Richter *as a painter*, the banality and absence of affect of his images is at odds with standard intuitions about painting as an expressive art—however one understands expression. Contrary to such expectations, Richter positively embraces the anomie of the photographic document. Conversely, if one sees Wall *as a photographer*, the way in which his pictures often put photography's documentary function in question, by constructing images in a manner more reminiscent of painting, confounds standard intuitions about photography as an art of recording rather than constructing—however one understands the idea of a document.⁵⁷ Where Richter undercuts painting's status as an expressive medium, by producing pictures so devoid of personality (so 'automatic') as to be unsettling as paintings, Wall undercuts photography's documentary function, by constructing images in such a way as to sow doubt that they can be taken for documents, no matter how straight they may appear. All this being granted, it seems hard not to conclude that—at least on Fried and Cavell's conception of an artistic medium—Richter counts as a photographer and Wall as a painter or, perhaps, 'pictographer' in the sense outlined above.

v. The very idea of a 'specific' medium

Consider one final, more fundamental, objection to my account. It is that, on Fried and Cavell's account, a work in a given medium needs to bear a perspicuous relation to past work in that medium. Cavell has been particularly explicit on this point, rejecting Pop art *in toto* for failing to demonstrate a commitment to painting as an art, and thereby failing to count as a transformation of painting:

This is not painting; and it is not painting not because paintings *couldn't* look like that, but because serious painting doesn't; and it doesn't, not because serious painting is not forced to change, to explore its own

foundations, even its own look; but because the *way it changes—what will count as a relevant change—is determined by the commitment to painting as an art*, in struggle with the history which makes it an art, continuing and countering the conventions and intentions and responses which comprise that history. [my italics]⁵⁸

Like Cavell, Fried builds in a prior commitment to the medium of a given art form, in the claim that for something to stand comparison to past work in a discipline it must respond to work in that discipline. At bottom then, for both Fried and Cavell, change only counts, is only worth taking seriously, if it is *internal* to a given medium. And if that is correct, the objection runs, the extrapolation of their theory I have proposed here does not even get off the ground. But given Fried and Cavell's conception of the conventionality of artistic media, the idea of development 'internal' to a medium must be understood accordingly. Hence it cannot stipulate any means or materials in advance; it cannot, for example, require that paintings be made from paint any more than that they be made with a brush. Similarly, it cannot stipulate that for something to count as a photograph it must be made with the mechanical and chemical means of photography. If it means anything, the notion of change 'internal to medium' must mean internal to a structure of intention operating within and against the constraints laid down by exemplary past work in a particular tradition, whatever it may be, to which a given artist wants their work to withstand comparison. If Fried and Cavell sometimes seem to want their idea of an artistic medium to lock in more substantial empirical constraints than this, this amounts to implicitly trading off what their own theory explicitly rules out, namely, an essentialist conception of an artistic medium. For once artistic media are understood according to their own model of an 'historical a priori', then what counts as 'internal to a medium' will be a function of the structures of intention underwriting a given practice, rather than how (or from what) its exemplary past instances were realized. And this requirement, I suggest, is fully met in the case of Richter as a photographer, and Wall as a painter or pictographer, neither of whose attachments to the disciplines I have attributed to them comes lightly.

Were Fried to grant this point, he would also have to grant that his own revisions of Greenberg show why the more programmatic aspects of his critique of Minimalism cannot be correct according to his own theory. Once the consequences of his reformulations of Greenberg are cashed out, it is apparent that a principled demarcation between artistic media is no longer

possible. What lies between artistic media today may no longer do so tomorrow; indeed what counts a work in one medium today may no longer count as a work in the same medium tomorrow. It follows that nothing may be said to 'fall between' artistic media once and for all, and thereby rule itself out as art of high aesthetic ambition. On his own theory, there are neither historically nor ontologically fixed media *between which* to fall. With this the idea of medium-specificity as a necessary condition of artistic value, and with it the 'argument from theatre' unravels, and it does so on Friedian grounds.

Notes

1. James Elkins, 'What Do We Want Photography To Be? A Response to Michael Fried', *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 941–42. Fried's essays on photography subsequently appeared as *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
2. Michael Fried, 'Barthes's *Punctum*', *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 570–71.
3. Fried, 'Barthes's *Punctum*', 562. See also Fried, 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday', *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 495–596 and 'World Mergers', *Artforum* 44 (March 2006): 63–64: Fried's stress on the 'sheer openness' and 'total accessibility to vision' of Luc Delahaye's panoramas in the latter recalls Cavell's description of modernist painting as 'wholly open' in 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting', in *The World Viewed*, 109.
4. Fried, 'Barthes's *Punctum*': 562–63. Fried is following Jean-François Chevrier here. See Chevrier, 'The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography', in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 116.
5. Elkins, 'What Do We Want Photography To Be?', 942.
6. Elkins, 'What Do We Want Photography To Be?', 942.
7. For my own part, I do not find Fried's attitude is any more relaxed today than it has ever been.
8. The relation of his work on photography to his earlier art criticism is something Fried himself raises as an open-ended question in his interviews and art criticism from this period. Gregor Stemmrach makes a related point about the interview that appears in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, ed. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney: Power Publications, 2000) and 'Between Exaltation and Musing Contemplation: Jeff Wall's Restitution of the Program of *Peinture de la Vie Moderne*', *Jeff Wall: Photographs* (Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2003).
9. The essay focuses on Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith, but Fried has since claimed he had the installations of Carl Andre and Morris in mind. See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 40.
10. Fried claims it is a concern for *endless* duration, rather than time per se, that makes such work literalist. See 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, 166–67.
11. Fried 'Art and Objecthood', 163. For a deconstructive reading of whether Fried can really regard minimalist theatricality as *non-art* rather than *bad art*, see Stephen Melville, 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism', *October* 19 (1981): 55–92 and 'On Modernism' in Melville, *Philosophy Besides Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 8–16.
12. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 163–64.
13. De Duve presents Fried's response to Minimalism as exemplifying an academic refusal to judge aesthetically that has dogged the criticism of modern art. See 'The Monochrome and the Blank

Canvas', 241. Melville, by contrast, reads 'Art and Objecthood' as itself the elaboration of Fried's aesthetic judgement. See 'Michael Fried', in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (Oxford: Berg, 2007). To my mind, Melville and de Duve are both right and both wrong. Melville is right about the *argument from theatricality*: claiming that Minimalist works set up an invidious relation to their spectators is nothing if not an aesthetic judgement. De Duve is right about the *argument from theatre*: Fried's more programmatic claims express the a priori view that the concepts of quality and value cannot obtain between or across artistic media. But each is wrong about what the other is right about, because neither disentangles Fried's arguments from theatre and theatricality.

14. This way of putting it equivocates as to whether Minimalism fails *as* painting or sculpture (is merely bad *as* art) or, more damningly, fails to even *be* art. On this question, Fried ultimately wanted to distance himself from Greenberg, commenting on the latter's infamous claim (in 'After Abstract Expressionism') that 'a stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one' that 'it is not quite enough to say that a bare canvas tacked to a wall is not "necessarily" a successful picture; it would, I think, be more accurate to say that it is not *conceivably* one'. See 'Art and Objecthood', reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, fn. 6, 168–69: this collapses description into evaluation: any work that fails to 'compel conviction' as painting, sculpture (etc.) courts the charge of fraudulence *tout court*, that is, of not even qualifying as art. Compare Cavell's 'Music Discomposed' and 'A Matter of Meaning It', *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
15. For two representative collections, see Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* and *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).
16. This is true, for example, of Douglas Crimp's 'Pictures', *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88. Crimp valorizes what Fried denigrates, but fails to take issue with the theory underpinning these valuations. James Meyer makes a similar point about Annette Michelson and Krauss's relation to Fried's view of Robert Morris in 'The Writing of "Art and Objecthood"', in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, 81ff. Fried remarks on this himself in 'An Introduction to my Art Criticism', 52. For a similar view of Krauss's relation to Greenberg, see Stephen Bann, 'Greenberg's Team' in *Raritan* 13, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 146–59. More generally, see 'Postmodernism's Greenberg', in Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 347–86.
17. Danto recalls Greenberg making an analogous claim in 1992: for thirty years art history had been 'nothing but Pop'. See *After the End of Art*, 105.
18. Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', 86.
19. Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', 131.
20. On 'ahistorical' versus a 'transhistorical' conceptions of essence, see Jonathan Vickery, 'Art and the Ethical: Modernism and the Problem of Minimalism', in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 124–25. Fried and Cavell are only committed to the latter.
21. For de Duve this explains the inverted Greenbergianism of Judd's idea of a 'specific object'. See 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', 230–37.
22. See Fried, 'An Introduction to my Art Criticism', 33–40.
23. On the difference between 'acknowledging' and 'hypostatizing' the properties of the support, see 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings', *Artforum* 5 (November 1966), reprinted as 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons' in *Art and Objecthood*, notably 88 and 92–95. On the concept of 'acknowledgement', see Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledgement', in *Must We Mean What We Say?*
24. This is where I draw the line between my own criticisms of Fried and those of Caroline Jones (among others). Jones maintains that by 1966, when Fried was a graduate student in his mid-late twenties, it was already 'manifestly too late' (495) to mark his differences from Greenberg or further develop his own view of modernism. Regardless of whether Jones's reading of early Fried is correct—and to my mind it conflates Fried's notion of 'perpetual revolution' with Greenberg's idea of 'reduction to essence'—its motivating assumption is bizarre. Suppose Jones were correct, and Fried had indeed changed his mind: on what plausible conception of intellectual development should that be considered damning? See Caroline Jones, 'The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn' in *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 488–528; Fried's

- 'Response to Caroline A Jones' in *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 703–705; and Jones's reply 'Anxiety and Elation: Response to Michael Fried' in the same issue (706–15).
25. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), pt. 1, § 74; 23e. Fried uses this remark, from a discussion of the conviction elicited by geometrical proofs, to underwrite his claim that Anthony Caro's *Deep Body Blue* (1966) captures the 'essence' of a door. See *Art and Objecthood*, 30–31. The previous remark from Wittgenstein reads 'it is not the property of an object that is ever 'essential', but the mark of a concept'. Compare *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953): 'Essence is expressed by grammar' (§371) and 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (§373).
 26. See, for example, 'Natural and Conventional' in Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 86–125.
 27. Compare Greenberg's 'the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions' ('Modernist Painting', 92); with Cavell's 'Underlying the tyranny of convention is the tyranny of nature', by which he means human nature (*The Claim of Reason*, 123).
 28. That this was not a one-way process may be gleaned from the contrasting treatments of Anthony Caro and Pop Art in 'A Matter of Meaning It' (222), and the philosophical endorsement of Fried's canon in 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting'.
 29. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 111.
 30. See Greenberg 'Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro' (1965), 208 and 'Convention and Innovation', 53. Compare Greenberg's discussion of Cézanne as a 'reluctant' rather than 'premature' innovator here with Cavell's contention that: 'Only masters of a game, perfect slaves to that project, are in a position to establish conventions which better serve its essence. This is why deep revolutionary changes can result from attempts to conserve a project, to take it back to its idea, keep it in touch with its history'. See *The Claim of Reason*, 120–21.
 31. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217. For Cavell's understanding of this remark in the context of the conventionality of language, see 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 50.
 32. This is the central topic of Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); see especially 93, 103, 131, 153, and 157–58. For an overview see 'An Introduction to my Art Criticism', 47–54. Melville discusses the contradictions this provokes in 'On Modernism' and 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory'.
 33. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 226.
 34. Wittgenstein: 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements', *Philosophical Investigations*, §242. For a discussion in relation to 'forms of life', see Stephen Affeldt, 'The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria, Judgement, and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell' (1–31) and Mulhall's 'The Givenness of Grammar: A Reply to Steven Affeldt' (32–44), both in the *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2000); see also Mulhall's 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria and Rules' in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 79–106.
 35. See Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', 52. See also 'The Argument from the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke' in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 80ff. On 'agreement in judgement' and 'forms of life' more generally, see Cavell's 'Criteria and Judgement' in *The Claim of Reason*, especially 29–36, and 'Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture' in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 40–52.
 36. For a reading of forms of life as transcendental *despite* being part of our natural history, see Newton Garver, 'Naturalism and Transcendentality: The Case of "Forms of Life"', in *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Souren Teyhrarian (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 41–70.
 37. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' fn. 6, 168–69. Fried arguably overstates the differences between himself and Greenberg here, as elsewhere. Compare for example the claim (presented as a criticism of Greenberg) that 'flatness and the delimitation of flatness should be considered as something like the *minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting*' with Greenberg's claim that 'the essential norms of a discipline are at the same time the limiting conditions with which a picture must comply *in order to be experienced as a picture*' ('Modernist Painting', 89).

- On Fried's account of his relation to Greenberg more generally see de Duve, 'Silences in the Doctrine', 70–71 and Fried's reply in 'An Introduction to my Art Criticism', 65–66, fn. 51.
38. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It' in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 219.
 39. Fried first made this point in 'Shape as Form', 99, fn. 11.
 40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 123.
 41. This aspect of Wall's self-presentation, which early on saw him aligned him with T. J. Clark and the social history of art, has since receded, as he has stressed the 'near documentary' goals of his later work. This is a development Fried has emphasized in claiming his later work for the anti-theatrical tradition.
 42. Jeff Wall in 'Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency: Interview with T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner', in *Jeff Wall*, 2nd ed., ed. Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, and Boris Groys (London: Phaidon Contemporary Artists, 2002), 112.
 43. Wall, *Jeff Wall*, 124.
 44. I have in mind Wall's autobiographical piece 'Frames of Reference', in which he claims: 'People who write about art often think my work always derives in some direct way from nineteenth century painting. That's partly true, but it has been isolated and exaggerated in much of the critical response to what I'm doing. *I'm totally uninterested in making reference to the genres of earlier pictorial art*' (my italics). This claim is just as exaggerated as what it seeks to head off. See Wall, 'Frames of Reference', *Artforum* 42, no. 1 (September 2003): 191, reprinted in *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004* (London: Steidl, 2005).
 45. Wall, 'Frames of Reference', 190. This is one of only four of Wall's essays selected for inclusion in the first volume of his *Catalogue Raisonné*.
 46. Gerhard Richter, 'Interview with Rolf Shön', in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993* (London: Thames & Hudson), 73. This interview dates from 1972, but the sentiment is as common to Richter's early interviews and notes as Wall's early claims on the painting modern life.
 47. Theorists who have held a version of this view include André Bazin, Roland Barthes, Rudolf Arnheim, Roger Scruton, Gregory Currie, and Kendall Walton, among others. Joel Snyder is a notable exception. See, for example, Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, 'Photography, Vision and Representation', *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (1975): 143–69; 'Photography and Ontology', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19, no. 1 (1983): 21–34; and 'What Happens by Itself in Photography', in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honour of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 361–73.
 48. For my own worries about 'Orthodoxy', see Costello, 'The Question Concerning Photography', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 101–13; 'What's So New about the "New" Theory of Photography?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 439–52; 'Foundational Intuitions and Folk Theory', in Costello, *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2018), 9–51; and 'Photography as a Category of Art', in *Art, Representation and Make-Believe: Essays on the Philosophy of Kendall L. Walton*, ed. Sonia Sedivy (New York: Routledge, 2021), 177–95. I argue that Fried remains committed to this conception of photography despite his concern with photographic art in 'On the (So-Called) Problem of Detail: Michael Fried, Roger Scruton and Roland Barthes on Photography and Intentionality', in *Michael Fried and Philosophy: Modernism, Intention and Theatricality*, ed. Matthew Abbott (London: Routledge, 2018), 151–70.
 49. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 21.
 50. 'Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether; by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction'. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23.
 51. I owe this understanding of the relation between photography and scepticism to Stephen Mulhall. See Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 228–30, and Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 20–23.
 52. I say 'if' because—for all the allure of the 'automatic' reading of Richter—I remain reluctant to assert that Richter is indeed a sceptic, given his well-documented hopes for painting.
 53. Barthes famously dubbed the conviction that 'that has been' the noema of photography, a thoroughly orthodox sentiment. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Fontana, 1981), 76–77.
 54. See, for example, Wall's discussion of *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, in 'Wall Pieces', *Art Monthly* (September 1994): <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/september-1994>; the production stills of *Flooded Grave* (1998–2000) that accompany Jan Tumlir's 'The

- Hole Truth', *Artforum* 39, no. 7 (March 2001): 112–17; or Wall's account of *Morning Cleaning*, as reported by Fried in 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday'.
55. For arguments that this distinction never really did this work see James Elkins, 'What Does Peirce's Sign System Have to Say to Art History?', *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 44, no. 1 (2003): 5–22, and Joel Snyder 'Pointless', in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 369–85 and 399–400. In Peirce see, for example, 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs', in *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (London: Routledge, 2000), 98–119, and 'The Icon, Index and Symbol', in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Volume II: Elements of Logic), ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 274–308.
 56. On the relation between painting and photography in Richter, see Rosemary Hawker, 'The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 541–54, and 'Idiom Post Medium: Richter Painting Photography', *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (June 2009): 263–80. For an Adornian account of Richter's practice in terms of the negation or double-negation of painting see Peter Osborne, 'Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives', *October* 62 (Autumn 1992): 102–113.
 57. On Wall's use of 'near documentary' to describe this aspect of his work since 2002, see Fried 'Being There', 53 and his discussion of *Adrian Walker* in 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday'. For Wall's take on a 'classical aesthetic of photography as rooted in the idea of fact', see his fascinating 1988 interview with Borys Groys: here Wall maintains that he tried to put this claim in suspension 'by emphasizing the relations between photography and the other picture-making arts, mainly painting and the cinema. In those the factual claim has always been played out in a subtle and more sophisticated way. This was what I thought of as a mimesis of the other arts'. See *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: MoMA, 2007), 151–54. See also 'Three Thoughts on Photography', in *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné*, 441–42.
 58. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', 222.

4

The Afterlife of Medium-Specificity II

Krauss on the ‘Post-Medium Condition’

The very idea of the artist’s invention of a medium and thus his or her authoring a set of rules, will undoubtedly make us nervous. A medium is, after all, a shared language developed over centuries of practice so that no individual initiative, we would think, can either organize new sources of its meaning or change established ones. It is as though we were imagining the artist as playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally.

Rosalind Krauss, ‘“Specific” Objects’ (2004)

The trenchant terms in which Fried castigated Minimalism for ‘falling between the arts’ has come to be widely regarded, at least in retrospect, as modernism’s last stand, and it presaged Fried’s withdrawal from front line criticism for more than three decades.¹ During this same period, Krauss’s critical stock rose in inverse proportion, in part as a result of co-founding the journal *October* with Annette Michelson in 1976, mediating the artworld reception of various continental (notably French) theoretical paradigms, and in part as a consequence of the extent to which she took issue with the fundamental tenets of Greenbergian modernism while continuing, unlike Fried, to write influential criticism on a broad range of modern and contemporary art.²

Krauss and Fried started out as near contemporaries in the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard in mid-sixties, where Cavell had recently joined the Philosophy faculty. Initially two of Greenberg’s leading followers—Judd derided both as ‘Greenbergers’³—their subsequent art criticism and history took them in opposite directions. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the extent to which Krauss and Fried’s theoretical commitments and critical trajectories form an inverted mirror image of one another bears remarking. Where early Fried was committed to medium-specificity—albeit not in its

canonical Greenbergian formulation—more recent Fried has sometimes seemed to go out of his way to avoid medium talk altogether. It is notable, for example, that Fried declines to discuss photography *as a medium*, specific or otherwise, in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, preferring to thematize recent photographic art in terms of its achievement qua ‘picture’—a more generic category, comprising not only photography, but painting, drawing and film—following the lead of Jean-François Chevrier and Jeff Wall. Conversely, where much of Krauss’s early work can be read as a kind of deconstruction, if not quite outright rejection of medium talk, late Krauss seems to be going out of her way to revive medium-specificity, if not in its canonical Greenbergian formulation. By ‘early Krauss’ I am thinking of the way in which ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ grounds the specificity of sculpture not in any ‘inner positivity’ (or set of necessary and sufficient conditions) that any candidate work must fulfill, but on its network of relations and differences to cognate terms.⁴ By contrast, Late Krauss insists—in the teeth of our supposedly generic ‘post-medium condition’—on the necessity of medium-specificity for any art that claims to be aesthetically serious, a claim that Greenberg would have found no difficulty accepting, if not her particular examples thereof. Seen from the perspective of her late work, Krauss has begun to look much more like early Fried than her intervening work would have led anyone to expect.

i. From modernism’s ‘foundational myths’ to ‘differential specificity’

Krauss’s most influential work typically comprises a double movement. On the one hand, she sets out to retrieve aspects of modern art, such as Dada and Surrealism, written out of modernist art history by Greenberg. This much was already clear from her early ‘A View of Modernism’ (1972). In it Krauss distances herself from both Greenberg’s teleology, and the absolutism of the verdicts that rode off the back of it. One can see the influence that this side of Krauss’s project has had simply by noting the amount of attention these movements have subsequently received. On the other, she champions later movements, such as Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, and Land art (or what she has called ‘sculpture in the expanded field’) that first transgressed the strictures of modernist medium-specificity as understood by Greenberg. This double-barreled strategy is sometimes accompanied by anti-modernist

readings of canonical modern masters, Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock being notable examples.

Such an approach does suffer from one obvious weakness, however: it bottoms out in term-by-term negations of the privileged terms of Greenbergian theory. This can already be seen in *The Optical Unconscious*, but it is raised to the status of a methodological principle in *Informé*, the exhibition Krauss co-curated with Yve-Alain Bois at the Pompidou Centre in 1996.⁵ In the theoretical lexicon that serves as the show's catalogue, Krauss and Bois counterpose a number of 'operations' performed to the detriment of good visual form ('horizontal'ity', 'base materialism', 'pulse' and 'entropy') to what they call the corresponding 'foundational myths' of Greenbergian modernism (verticality, opticality, instantaneity, and unity).⁶ In doing so their aim is to bring out an impulse towards what they call the 'formless', theorized by appeal to the writings of Georges Bataille.⁷ Proceeding in this way, however, only serves to ensure that rather than producing a genuine alternative to Greenbergian modernism, by 'grasping modernism against the grain', the agenda they set out remains trapped within the terms of Greenbergian theory. The best such an approach could hope to achieve is an 'abstract negation', or inversion, of the position on which it is conceptually dependent.⁸ This is because, like other 'apostates' of Greenbergian modernism, Krauss and Bois derive their own understanding of notions like artistic value, good visual form, and the aesthetic entirely from the theory they mean to contest. Indeed it is largely because they do so that they are obliged to reject them.

Thus in *The Optical Unconscious*, a text aimed squarely at the modernist aesthetic of Greenberg and Fried, Krauss is compelled to contest opticality, medium-specificity, and aesthetic autonomy precisely because these are the terms valorized by modernist theory. Against what she presents as Greenberg and Fried's 'transcendent' optical interpretation of Pollock, for example, Krauss counterposes her own 'base' materialist reading, a reading that sets out to retrieve the 'low' condition of Pollock's paintings, or what she calls their *bassesse*.⁹ Krauss takes this to be apparent in the way his paintings' material density registers their horizontal mode of production, with its associations of gravity, nature, animality, and the unconscious. Krauss contrasts these 'low' characteristics of Pollock's art to the act of critical sublimation and, ultimately, recuperation she takes Greenberg's countervailing stress on their vertical mode of presentation and reception to represent, given the latter's correlation with the uprightness of the human figure, with its associations to humanity, consciousness, and culture in general. By

refusing to dwell on the implications of the work's processes of production, all the while foregrounding their optical effects for a disembodied perceiving subject, Krauss claims that Greenberg's reading of Pollock strives to recuperate his paintings for precisely those categories of 'good visual form'—and, by extension, consciousness itself—that his way of making paintings actually works to explode.

To be clear: my concern here is not with the critical merits (or otherwise) of Krauss's revisionist interpretation of Pollock. That is, I am not concerned with whether the preferred term in each of her antitheses is more or less faithful to Pollock's art than its Greenbergian alternative. I am interested in the conceptual relation of Krauss's reading to that against which it is pitched, and the limitations that such a relation entails. That Krauss is obliged to resort to such inversions (the tactile for the optical, base materialism for the virtual or ideal, the horizontal for the vertical, production for reception, and so on) brilliant as her reading is, is in large part because, like other theorists who understand their own projects primarily in *anti*-Greenbergian terms, she remains trapped within the terms of the very theory she wishes to contest. Because she fails to take issue with the theory's conceptual foundations, Krauss has no alternative but to demonstrate the truth of its opposite, by reversing its normative implications for particular works, movements, or types of practice. But because that opposite is conceived, as opposites must be, in the terms of what it opposes, *L'Informé* fails to go beyond the conceptual limitations of Greenbergian theory in any substantive sense.

Thus, far from 'exploding' the 'foundational myths' of modernist theory, as they intend, Krauss and Bois succeed only in reinstating their negative after-image. In particular, by failing to contest Greenberg's identification of medium-specificity with aesthetic value, Krauss and Bois effectively defer to Greenberg's understanding of the aesthetic. While Krauss may oppose the aesthetics of good visual form in the name of anti-, non-, or post-medium-specific art, in doing so she remains as committed as Fried (who opposes post-, anti-, or non-medium-specific art in the name of superior aesthetic standards) to the view that non-modernist modern art and art after modernism exceed the reach of traditional aesthetic categories. But this only follows if one has implicitly acquiesced to the modernist conception of aesthetics that Greenberg bequeathed to subsequent art history and theory.

But what might otherwise look like a straightforward case of killing the father, if one takes *The Optical Unconscious* and *L'Informé* as one's touchstones, takes a surprising turn in Krauss's writings from the late 1990s onwards.

Collected in *Perpetual Inventory* (2010) and *Under Blue Cap* (2011), Krauss sets out from the remarkably Greenbergian claim that ‘the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art’, and goes on to suggest that ‘wrestl[ing] new mediums to the mat of specificity’ has been her central critical preoccupation since co-founding *October*. Whether this really does capture Krauss’s critical stance in the works discussed above is debatable, but in the essays collected here Krauss appeals to Cavell’s notion of ‘automatism’ to argue, against the supposedly ‘post-medium condition’ of contemporary art, that serious artists now have to ‘invent their own medium.’ Doing so not only furnishes criteria against which to judge success or failure, but insulates their art from the vacuous generalization of the aesthetic in a media-saturated culture at large.¹⁰ Much in the spirit of Greenberg’s ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, giving proper consideration to the medium is once more the serious artist’s best line of defense against the encroachments of new media, culture industry and spectacle.¹¹

That Krauss should appeal to Cavell at all, let alone in such a Greenbergian spirit, will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the fraught history of debates about specificity and artistic media in art theory since Greenberg. Cavell’s work in this area has always been closely associated with Fried’s, and the mutual estrangement of Fried and Krauss is legendary. In what follows I seek to clarify both the grounds of this appeal and its upshot: Does Krauss’s account shed new light on Cavell’s, or is she attempting to press his understanding of an artistic medium into a service for which it is ill-suited? Both could turn out to be true, of course, the former as a result of the latter perhaps. Conversely, do the art theorist’s and the philosopher’s uses of ‘automatism’ simply pass one another by?

Krauss’s stated goal is to come up with a *non-reductive* account of artistic media, framed in terms what she calls their ‘differential specificity’.¹² This is the thought that artistic media are necessarily complex or internally composite, consisting minimally of a technical support and the conventions through which that technical support is articulated, and thereby made meaningful.¹³ It is not entirely clear, on Krauss’s account, precisely what may count as part of a work’s ‘technical support’ and what may not: Is it solely the physical elements and technical processes that support a given practice, or can various capacities, competencies, or skills, when employed in certain characteristic ways, constitute part of a work’s ‘support?’ That said, the basic idea that artistic media are *irreducibly complex* is clear, as is the fact that Krauss takes this thought to be both attributable to Cavell

and incompatible with Greenberg's literalism regarding artistic media. The preface to her essay on Marcel Broodthaers, for example, presents the account that follows as an attempt to 'detoxify' medium-talk, given the latter's strong associations with Greenberg's reductive characterization of artistic media in terms of the 'unique and irreducible'—which is to say, literal—properties of their respective material supports.¹⁴ Against this, she counterposes Cavell's understanding of artistic media as not simply physical materials, but physical-materials-in-certain-characteristic-applications. For late Krauss the problem is not medium-specificity per se, but rather a reductive or literalist understanding of the latter. Once again, the similarities with early Fried are striking.

In examining the conception of the medium underwriting Krauss's late work, it is necessary to get clear about the relation between its two components. Given that Krauss understands 'inventing a medium' to involve discovering an appropriate set of conventions with which to articulate a particular technical support, and in so doing recruit that support for artistic expression, this goes to the heart of her account. One question this raises is whether a compelling set of conventions or rules—Krauss tends to use these terms interchangeably, whereas I shall distinguish them—need arise organically, from self-reflexively exploring the internal nature of a given technical support, or may simply be superimposed upon it from without. Another is whether Cavell's own understanding of 'automatism' and the 'automatic' provides what Krauss needs to underwrite her account. Coming to a view on the latter requires clarifying what Cavell means when he says that once tried and tested forms no longer suffice to ensure the communication of shared meanings, modernist artists are forced to invent 'new media' or 'automatisms' *within* their respective media to secure their work's standing as art. Doing so requires disentangling the confusing iteration of Cavell's terminology: this applies to both his general account of artistic media (talk about 'media of the medium') and his specific account of the photographic substrate of film as 'a succession of automatic world projections' (talk about 'automatisms of the automatic').

To focus my account, I shall limit my remarks to Krauss's late essays on artists such as James Coleman, William Kentridge, and Ed Ruscha working in what I call 'photographically dependent' art forms, though nothing I say will hang on this designation. As such, the worries I raise should generalize to Krauss's articles on other artists involved in analogous projects in non-photographically dependent forms.

**ii. Krauss on ‘inventing a medium’:
James Coleman and William Kentridge as models**

Taken together, Krauss’s essays on Coleman, Kentridge, and Ruscha, and her little book on Broodthaers, provide a good overview of what she means by the ‘post-medium condition’ and those artists who aspire to buck it.¹⁵ According to Krauss, artists such as Coleman and Kentridge give the lie to the ‘monstrous myth’ that contemporary art in its entirety now inhabits some kind of generic, ‘post-medium’ condition. For rather than abandoning their commitment to ‘specific’ media altogether, in light of the widespread belief that established artistic media are now exhausted, such artists only dispense with traditional artisanal media (oil paint, carved or cast sculpture, print-making, and so on) and turn instead to various commercial industries for the succession of near obsolete supports that rapid technological turn over increasingly makes available to artists.

If sufficiently persistent in mining such non-traditional vehicles for their expressive potential—Krauss has in mind technologies such as the commercial light-box, tape-slide advertising displays, stop-frame animation, the video Portapak, synchronized sound, and, in Ruscha’s case, even the car—artists may thereby ‘invent’ their own medium. To invent a new medium in this sense is to create a new resource for artistic expressiveness with means that, prior to this demonstration, would not have been thought possible. Artists such as Coleman, Kentridge and Ruscha achieve this when they alight upon a suitable set of conventions with which to articulate and thereby transform these outmoded and otherwise aesthetically inert technologies into technical supports for artistic practice. That is, vehicles that enable artists to say whatever it is they have to say, by engaging with the distinctive possibilities and constraints of a given means of expression. Despite the pervasive, and by now rather threadbare, antipathy for talk about intention and expression among those art theorists whose outlook was significantly shaped by post-structuralism—and for whose work Krauss’s own often served as a model—this is what Krauss’s late work commits her to. If ‘the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art’, the stakes of reinvigorating the idea of an artistic medium for Krauss could hardly be higher.¹⁶

The question, given the significance Krauss attaches to ‘specific’ media so construed, is how these outmoded technological forms come to function as media for artists: If anything could in principle serve as a medium for artists,

what it is required to actualize this general possibility in particular cases? In Krauss's writings on individual artists this turns on the conventions or rules through which a given artist articulates their preferred technical support, thereby transforming what would otherwise remain an inert commercial application into something capable of carrying artistic meaning. But here one would like to know: What kind of *relation*, if any, is required between these new supports and the conventions through which an artist animates them? Must the latter arise organically, as it were, from interacting with the distinctive qualities, possibilities and constraints afforded by the former? Or can a set of conventions or rules be externally 'grafted on' to a technical support with which they would otherwise have no relation, thereby raising the possibility of different artists inventing entirely differently media, simply by grafting different sets of rules onto the same support. Or does this vary on a case-by-case basis?

Take the case of artists working in photographically dependent art forms. By 'photographically dependent' arts, I mean those among the contemporary

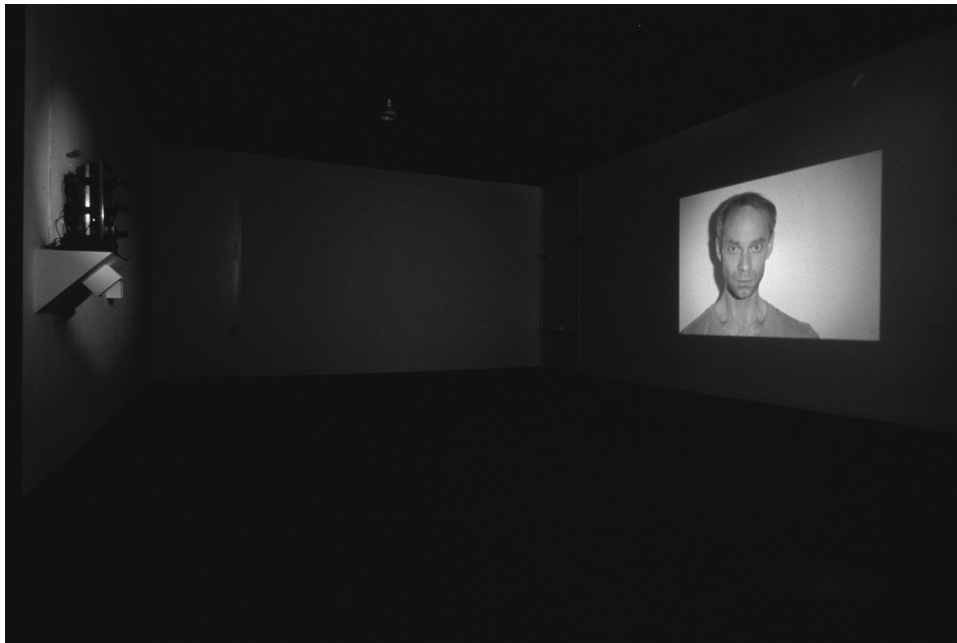


Figure 4.1 James Coleman, *Charon (MIT Project)*, 1989 as installed at MIT List Visual Arts Centre, Cambridge, MA (April–May 1989). Projected slide image installation with synchronized audio narration, 21 mins (115 slides, 3 projections, colour). © MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA and the artist.

visual art forms that necessarily depend on photographic mediation, without being photography (or necessarily even photographic) themselves. An art such as animation, for example, is not intrinsically photographic: in its canonical forms, animation is a quintessentially ‘manugraphic’ art. But animated shorts, as distinct from the individual cells they comprise, are photographically dependent in my sense. To see this, imagine an animated short and an old-fashioned flick-book comprising an identical set of cells: only the former will be ‘photographically dependent’ in my sense: the images of the latter, by contrast, may be given the appearance of movement without the mediation of any photographic apparatus. This would remain true, even in the event that the circumstances of viewing were such as to make the experience of watching them indiscernible. Then one would be confronted by two works that cannot be visually discriminated, but only one of which is photographically dependent. Traditional analogue film, by contrast, is not merely photographically *dependent*, it is also at least partially *photographic* (though not *photography*) on this division of the artistic terrain, since it consists in

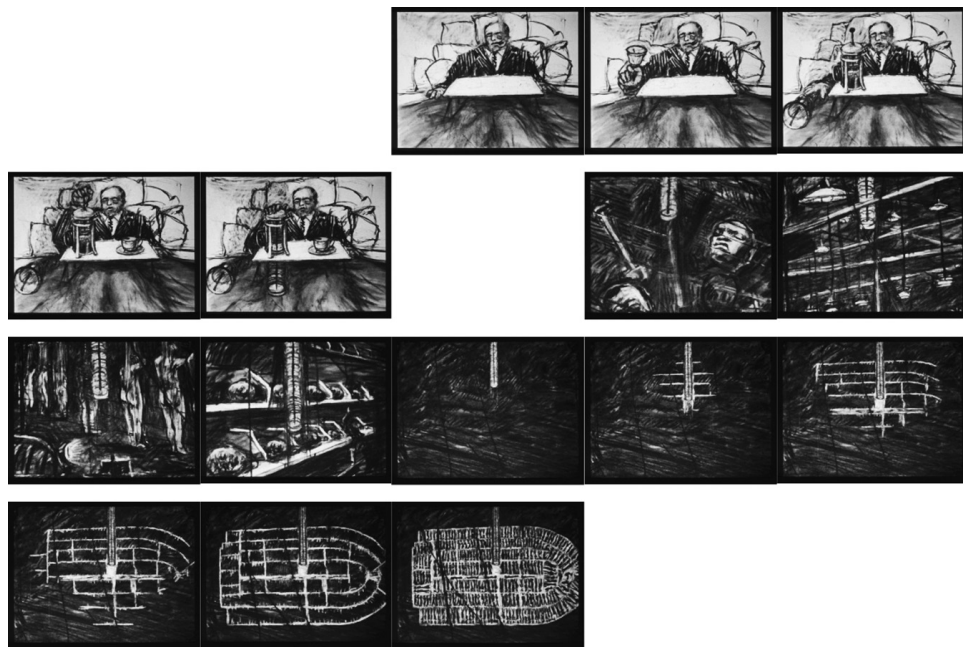


Figure 4.2 William Kentridge, sequence of non-consecutive stills from *Mine*, 1991 (from the series ‘Drawings for Projection’). 35mm Film, shown as black and white video projection with sound, 5min 50 seconds. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery and the artist.

part of the projection of a series of incrementally different photographs rather than drawings.

Among artists Krauss takes to be doing battle with the 'monstrous myth' of contemporary art's supposed post-medium condition, the photographically dependent includes Coleman's mimesis of the photo-roman in his 'projected images' utilizing tape slide, and Kentridge's use of stop-frame animation techniques in his 'drawings for projection.' Both involve repurposing more or less antiquated photographic technologies. The medium of the former is at least partially photographic, given that it centrally involves the projection of photographic slides, though it is neither reducible to photography nor even exclusively photographic: the multi-image dissolves, narrative horizon and voice-overs, not to mention the fact of projection itself, situate the work between or across photography and film, with both of which it shares certain features.¹⁷ By contrast, the medium of the latter is not even photographic: what one sees when viewing the work is moving images drawn by hand. But one could not see what one does see, the apparent animation of those images, without an intervening series of still photographs captured by a stop-frame animation camera that records fine-grained amendments to a series of drawings over time. Because Kentridge's 'drawings for projection' depend on photographic mediation at the level of their technical support, they still count as 'photographically dependent' in my sense, despite being neither photography nor, unlike Coleman, at least in part photographic.

What, then, is the relation between Coleman and Kentridge's technical supports and the conventions through which they are animated, such that the latter are capable of transforming the former from mere mechanisms into artistic vehicles? Take them in turn. Coleman's self-proclaimed *medium* is 'projected images'; his *technical support*, according to Krauss, is slide-tape. This is an automated arrangement of carousel slide projectors (in Coleman's case, typically three) projecting a series of overlapping slides that this arrangement of multiple, auto-focusing projectors allows to dissolve into one another in more or less complicated sequences. The technology itself is imported from commercial applications in business and advertising. In Coleman's work it typically takes the form of a vertical 'stack' of projectors housed in a clear Perspex unit prominently displayed in the darkened rooms in which his images are projected. The hum of the projectors' cooling fans is clearly audible, as are the motors for advancing the carousels and the satisfying analogue 'clunk' of now obsolete analogue film slides as they drop into

the projectors' viewing gates. Typically, though not always, it is accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of a voice-over or narration of some kind.

Coleman animates this technical support with the conventional devices of the photo-roman (picture-books for adults in which stock photographs take the place of illustrations in comics) in conjunction with various tropes lifted from other popular narrative forms, such as TV hospital soaps and crime fiction. So described, the conventions that Coleman employs might seem wholly external to his technical support, to which they are, as it were, externally 'grafted on.' But by focusing on Coleman's use of the photo-roman, Krauss brings out the ways in which Coleman's choice of a still rather than moving support necessitates recourse to various, highly artificial, conventions for representing encounters between characters, notably what she calls (citing *Seeing for Oneself* [1987–1990] and *INITIALS* [1994]) the 'double face-out.' This is Krauss's term for the way in which Coleman's stills, like those of the photo-romans he draws upon, are obliged to compress action and reaction shot within a single frame. Lacking the real-time editing that enables 'reverse shots' to represent encounters between two or more characters in film by cutting rapidly back and forth between their respective points of view, various means for telescoping the narrative need to be employed. As a result, one often finds more than one moment represented in a single frame, as though they were occurring simultaneously: the instigator of some exchange depicted in shallow relief facing the camera, his or her respondent(s) in the foreground, also facing the camera, rather than their interlocutor—the gestures of each frozen at their moment of greatest drama. The resulting images are intentionally mannered, theatrical, and wooden.

For all their artificialness, the conventions Coleman alights upon to animate his support nonetheless thematize the nature of the resulting medium, by working with the constraints that projecting a succession of still images places on a narrative art form. In effect, Coleman probes the fuzzy border between still and moving images by working with the rudiments of narrative film—still images projected in succession to generate a narrative—but slowed to the point at which any illusion of actual movement breaks down.¹⁸ This is thematized in a variety of ways in his work, most notably in *La Tache Aveugle* (1979–1980), which comprises a glacial eight hour dissolve involving nine frames from a short sequence of the original *The Invisible Man* (1933) during which the eponymous character loses his invisibility. This self-reflexivity regarding his work's medium reaches its high point in the reflexive relation between subject matter and means of presentation in *Charon* (MIT

Project) (1989). Here the relation between events in the life and work of a commercial catalogue photographer is explored through a series of studiously banal photo-essays, accompanied by richly intoned third person narrative, culminating in a final sequence (titled 'Dream Homes') in which we seem to see the images of overstuffed rooms that the accompanying narration describes the photographer taking.

Krauss has a good deal more to say about all this that I am setting to one side here: not only about the relation between the images, narrated voice-overs, and the sound of the projectors, all of which supports her case that Coleman's medium is composite or internally complex, but about his work's relation to a variety of theoretical sources. The latter include Roland Barthes's account of 'the third meaning' (the meaning of the film still in opposition to that of the diegetic horizon of which it is a part, and to which its status as still refers) and Walter Benjamin claims concerning the utopian promise encoded in the origins of a new technology (in Coleman's case, the memory of the magic lantern show) and supposedly released once impending obsolescence frees its technological successors from 'the grip of utility'. But I am bracketing these more substantive dimensions of Krauss's account here, the better to isolate her treatment of Coleman's 'invented' medium itself.

Kentridge's *medium*, by his own account, is 'drawings for projection': his *technical support*, according to Krauss, is stop-frame animation. Krauss focuses on a series of nine animated films, lasting less than ten minutes each, about the life, marriage and industrial empire of Soho Eckstein, a fictional mine-owner in Apartheid South Africa. Once again, her primary concern is not the films' subject-matter, just as her primary interest in Coleman's work is not its relation to Irish history, but the relation between Kentridge's method and his medium. Specifically, she sets out to characterize the 'two kinds of automatism' that she claims are implicated by his working method, and to clarify their respective contributions to his finished work. Kentridge's films are created from a small number of charcoal drawings, perhaps 20 or so over the course of a 7- to 8-minute film. Each of these drawings is responsible for a particular sequence within a given film, which is created by making a series of incremental modifications to the drawing and recording those modifications by a stop-frame animation camera as the narrative unfolds a few marks at a time. Rather than being planned out in advance, each film emerges slowly from Kentridge's intuitive responses to these drawings as he works on them in his studio.¹⁹

Like Coleman, on Krauss's account, Kentridge's medium is an obsolete commercial application transformed by the conventions through which he animates it. Also like Coleman—whose 'projected images' are grounded in a self-conscious attitude towards a certain kind of staged photography, and the conventions developed to facilitate it—Kentridge's 'drawings for projections' are grounded in a highly self-reflexive drawing practice that thematizes the density and opacity of charcoal as a medium on the one hand, and its ease of erasure and overworking on the other. Again like Coleman, whose wooden protagonists foreground the theatrical staging required by his chosen medium, Kentridge's drawings thematize their own processes of production through building up and erasing a surface. The structural parallels run deeper than the occasional appearance of a draughtsman clearly resembling Kentridge himself within his work, which is not dissimilar to, if not quite the same as, Coleman taking a photographer's life as his subject-matter in *Charon (MIT Project)*. Examples include those passages in *Mine* [1991] in which a pneumatic drill blasts away at a rock face, each impact and resulting removal of rock created by a single incision of Kentridge's eraser into his drawing's dense charcoal ground, which successive hammer blows of the depicted drill figure; or the windscreen wiper of Soho's car, in *The History of the Main Complaint* [1996], repeatedly 'rubbing out' the scene visible through the windshield with each swipe of the depicted blade. Such sequences clearly thematize the processes by which Kentridge's drawings are made, thereby alluding to the mechanics of depiction within what is depicted.

The work's technical support makes this possible by creating a permanent record of each drawing's gradual transformation over time, which would not otherwise survive its ongoing modification, and Kentridge's medium, drawings for projection, fully exploits this capacity of his technical support. Krauss is at her most persuasive when arguing that Kentridge's primary interest is drawing, and that this governs his use of animation as a technical support, and not vice versa: animation is essentially a means to record his drawings' gradual transformation over time. In fact, the relation between Kentridge's camera and the drawings it records is foundational for the resulting practice on Krauss's account. At the heart of his medium is a structuring tension between the ebb and flow of Kentridge's line, an autographic mark in the autographic art par excellence, and the automatic recording of that mark by the impassive eye of the stop-frame animation camera. This interplay between Kentridge's agency as a draughtsman and the automatism of the camera, regulated by the rhythm of his trips back and forth

between drawing and camera to record each modification of the drawing, is central to his art. According to Krauss, it is the repetitive nature of this process that frees Kentridge up to improvise while working on the drawings. Krauss is no doubt right to insist on the importance of this repetitive process to Kentridge's art. Not only is it something that Kentridge himself thematizes in interviews and talks, but were this time-consuming process not integral to his art, one would wonder why he subjects himself to it; he could easily rig up a longer cable release or similar device to allow him to photograph his drawings remotely without the need for such constant self-interruption.

That said, my own and Krauss's interpretations of what is at stake diverge at this point. Krauss's preferred terminology for what I have just called the 'autographic' and 'automatic' elements of Kentridge's process is a distinction between 'two kinds of automatism': the 'quasi-automatic' aspects of Kentridge's working method (his repetitive trips back and forth across the studio to trip the camera's shutter after each modification of the drawing) and the 'automatisms' of the unconscious (the unexpected associations and solutions) that such a process allows to rise to the surface. This already shows how different Krauss's use of the vocabulary of automatism is from Cavell's: the brute *automatism of the camera* itself, the fact that cameras are (supposedly) capable of producing images without the creative intervention of man—which Cavell takes over from André Bazin and is the primary sense of 'automatism' for Cavell in this domain—does not even figure.²⁰ This is because, although she appeals to Cavell, and even makes use of his terminology, Krauss actually derives her distinction between 'two kinds of automatism' from Kentridge's description of his working process in 'Fortuna: Neither Programme Nor Chance in the Making of Images'. In it Kentridge maintains that although the images in his work are not pre-planned (and so might seem rationally inexplicable) they nonetheless arise from carefully crafted ways of prompting himself to invention. As such they are *neither* a product of planning everything out advance *nor* the result of mere fortuitous happenstance.²¹ Kentridge's term for this neither-nor between programme and chance is 'fortuna', which he glosses as 'a range of agencies, something other than cold statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control'.²² Krauss's two kinds of automatism, the 'quasi-automatism' of Kentridge's working method granting access 'automatisms' of the unconscious, is at bottom a gloss on Kentridge's own understanding of how his

images emerge through a process of controlled improvisation, rather than an application of Cavell's philosophy.

I shall address the implications of this divergence for Krauss's attempt to recruit Cavell's understanding of automatism to the cause of reinventing the medium shortly; Kentridge's reference to a 'range of agencies', when characterizing 'fortuna', points to a more immediate worry one might have about Krauss's interpretation of his working method. Krauss interprets Kentridge's account of what is at bottom arguably a kind of practical *know-how*—an intuitive sense born of long experience of when to push and when to wait while working on a drawing—in such a way that it emerges as form of 'psychic automatism'. On the resulting account, it is Kentridge's *unconscious*, rather than simply Kentridge, that is ultimately responsible for what appears in his drawings. This, it seems to me, is to misconstrue the idea of 'fortuna'. What is at stake here may be something much more prosaic that this way of describing it sublimates; a form of practical judgement that has its counterparts, also born of hard-won experience, across any domain of human activity one cares to think of. Interpreting it as a form of 'psychic automatism' in this domain has implausible implications for how we should understand analogous forms of know-how in other domains: Is knowing how tightly to tune an engine, when to wait out a seminar silence, or when to refrain from disciplining a child, an 'automatism' in Krauss's sense of the term? If not, then why interpret Kentridge's artistic know-how this way? Doing so also fails to do justice to the subtlety of Kentridge's own description of the 'range of agencies' at work: in particular, it misconstrues Kentridge's agency in *setting out to harness*, among other things—such as the cultivated clutter of the studio—his own free associations as an 'automatism'. But not merely remaining open to, but setting things up in such a way as to encourage such promptings is anything but automatic; it is clearly sought out.²³ Construing these ways in which Kentridge sets things up as an automatism is like construing the *activity* of the psychoanalyst, or the canonical ways of staging the psychoanalytic encounter (the couch, the pregnant silences, the lack of eye contact) as opposed to the *material* that emerges from such promptings, and which the analyst then sets to work on, as automatic. It is a category mistake of sorts.²⁴

This is the only evidence of embarrassment in the face of artistic agency in Krauss's account, and it sits awkwardly with simultaneously attributing to artists sufficient agency to invent their own artistic medium *ex nihilo*. The questions I now want to address are whether the latter is plausible, taken in

its own right, and whether Krauss can derive the authority for this idea from Cavell, as she claims. I shall take the latter, exegetical question first, as it naturally opens onto the more substantive issues about the nature of artistic media in general.

iii. Krauss's appeal to Cavell on 'reinventing convention'

Krauss ties Kentridge's idea of 'fortuna' and with it her account of artists inventing or re-inventing their own medium back to Cavell's account of the way in which, until relatively recently in the history of music, a thorough mastery of its conventional forms would have sufficed to facilitate improvising in response to a felt need or lacunae in a work's score. That is, the thought that prior to modernism what was required at any point in a work's structure would have been apparent simply in virtue of having mastered the conventions of that form and the expectations that come with it. But once those conventional forms are themselves no longer felt to be compelling, the challenge composers then face is to *reinvent convention* itself: that is, to improvise new conventional forms rather than, more minimally, the renewed application of old ones. This is the response of modernist composers in the face of either total organization on the one hand or the institutionalization of chance on the other, neither of which, to Cavell's way of thinking, amounts to a way of achieving a composed (organized, intended, and resolved) work of art, so much as a way of avoiding the burdens of trying.²⁵

The similarities between this account of what is required of artists under conditions of artistic uncertainty and Kentridge's idea of fortuna are indeed striking. Note, however, that Cavell's account operates at the level of genre, or what he calls the 'media of the medium' of music, such as aria or sonata form, and not at the level of whatever psychological mechanisms or empirical processes enable a given artist to reconfigure the conventional forms they inherit, if indeed they do. The latter is a matter of empirical psychology and artistic technique, the former a matter of how, given their conventional nature, artistic media are in principle capable of being transformed over time. The fact that Cavell sometimes refers to such conventional forms of artistic media as 'automatisms' that artists once had to master in mastering their art should not disguise the fact that, where he is outlining something like the defeasible

criteria of competence in a given field, Krauss is describing a *various ways of establishing such competence* in the absence of standing automatism. In this sense her essays on artists 'inventing' or 'reinventing' the medium are accounts of what it might look like to fulfill the kind of conditions Cavell has in mind. The difference here is analogous to that between Kantian disinterest and Greenbergian distance: in each case the critic runs together the empirical mechanism that would fulfil some condition laid down by a philosopher with that condition itself.

This difference is important. Krauss and Cavell are both concerned with what is required of artists once the breakdown of established genres and forms deprives them of secure automatisms that may be simply taken over from past tradition. Under these conditions, what might be capable of functioning as such is what must be discovered or improvised anew by each artist in pursuit of their art. As Cavell remarks, in a formulation that Krauss likes to cite, although it is questionable whether she fully appreciates its import: 'There are no longer known structures which must be followed if one is to speak and be understood. *The medium is to be discovered, or invented out of itself.*'²⁶ This, I take it, is what Krauss's accounts of artists inventing their own media (and in so doing 'reinventing the medium') are meant to demonstrate: namely, what it might look like for artists to 'reinvent convention' today. The difference between these accounts pertain to the level at which they operate: whereas Cavell is clarifying the *conditions that must be met* for a work to count as instantiating a medium under such circumstances, Krauss is describing various *ways of meeting these conditions*.²⁷

But is there any reason to assume that the two accounts may not be compatible in this respect? That is, what prevents us from taking Krauss's reconstruction of Kentridge's working method as one way of empirically 'filling out', so to speak, Cavell's requirements on how art forms develop, once their established forms can no longer be taken for granted? So construed, Krauss's accounts of various artists' reinvention of the medium would be practical demonstrations of what Cavell claims is in principle required by the breakdown of standing artistic conventions. Certainly, Krauss presents it in this way. In her essay on Kentridge, for example, Krauss cites the 'Automatism' chapter of *The World Viewed* to the effect that the specific challenge faced by the modern artist is not to create a new instance of their art as this would previously have been understood but, rather, to discover or invent a new medium or automatism within it. Here a 'new medium or automatism within an artistic medium' is to be understood as a new way of securing value within

its ongoing practice, in something like the way in which the aria and sonata forms, landscape and still life, once functioned to secure value in the histories of music and painting respectively.²⁸ As the authority of such forms begins to wane, artists have to invent their own automatisms within their respective media; those they inherit from tradition can no longer be relied on to secure their works' identity as art, or its community with its audience. This has to be established anew by forging new conventions capable of securing this. To take examples with which Cavell would have been familiar: think of the drip, the pour, the sprayed or stained or cropped canvas in late modernist abstraction.²⁹ The way that Jackson Pollock's painting, for example, achieves its mature form by dispensing with part-by-part composition and traditional means of paint application can be seen as establishing a new set of automatisms *within* the medium of painting—as opposed to further instances of painting as previously understood—in just this sense.

This account clearly inspires Krauss's account of artists inventing new media. But it is important to recognize the respect in which all claims to 'reinventing the medium' are qualified in Cavell. It is not the medium *per se* that he must invent: Pollock does not invent the medium of painting; rather, he 'reinvents' or reinvigorates the possibilities afforded by it. That is, he finds a means of making compelling paintings that, in advance of his doing so, no one could have anticipated. Frank Stella similarly 'reinvents' the possibilities afforded by painting in his early 'Black Paintings', by showing just how much can be removed from an object still capable of holding as painting. He does so again—albeit in different ways—in his series of variously shaped paintings, as analyzed by Fried.³⁰ This, and not what Krauss takes him to mean, is what Cavell has in mind when he claims that 'the medium is to be invented, or discovered, out of itself'.³¹ That painting as a medium *already* exists, that it has a history of possibilities that one cannot know in advance of pursuing them will still be effective, that it generates a certain set of expectations and norms that have to be worked within or against, are all essential to what Pollock and Stella can be said to have achieved on Cavell's account, and to what those achievements reveal about previously unrealized possibilities afforded by painting as a medium. Neither could achieve this unless a rich tradition of utilizing painting as a medium for art already existed.

Krauss even seems to grant this in her own terms when she claims, contra Marshal McLuhan, that the 'medium is the memory', an idea she glosses as insisting 'on the power of the medium to hold the efforts of the forbears of

a specific genre in reserve for the present.³² The obvious problem with this thought, given how Krauss conceives ‘inventing the medium’, is that there are no forbears for artistic media of the kind Krauss has in mind. For just this reason it is doubtful that Krauss could get what she needs, which is a way of conceiving how artists might invent entirely new media *ex nihilo* by alighting on conventions or rules with which to articulate hitherto non-artistic technologies, from Cavell. Like Greenberg and Fried, Cavell is committed to the thought that serious artists extend the life of *existing* media, transforming them from within by dint of the tenacity with which they explore the possibilities they still afford.³³ So what? The fact that Cavell only defends the weaker claim that artists can transform existing media over time hardly demonstrates that his account is incompatible with the stronger claim that artists can sometimes also invent new ones. Given that Cavell does not broach the latter question, such a response might run, should we not take his account to be neutral on this point, at least in the absence of good reason to do otherwise? Moreover, even were Krauss’s account shown to be incompatible with Cavell’s, this would do nothing to invalidate her account on its own terms: at most it would show its claim to derive its authority from Cavell’s work to be unearned. In sum, all this would reduce to an exegetical rather than a substantive issue.

The question, however, is whether any of this can be right, given how Cavell understands an artistic medium, and the commitments built into his account of transforming such media as a result. Note that opting for the stronger claim leaves Krauss’s account with various debts to discharge that Cavell’s does not incur, only the most obvious of which is what would count as success or failure in newly invented media. That is, what would count as an inventive, unexpected but compelling, extension of a practice that is according to Krauss indexed to be no prior tradition of norms, expectations, extensions, or solutions to perceived problems governing its ongoing practice?³⁴ It is difficult to see how anything *could* count in this way, given the absence of any background history, theory and practice and an associated set of expectations against which to judge. But if nothing can count in this way, no putative ‘extension’ could be better or worse than any other: at that point, the idea of success as opposed to failure collapses. Even a robust sense of something counting as a move *within* the relevant practice would fall away, for what would distinguish making work within a given medium from doing something else entirely? I grant that adjudicating any of this—success, failure, value, relevance—will be a matter for critical judgement. But the

question remains: What could such judgement be based upon? What would give it traction, by providing a meaningful comparison class or theoretical background against which to judge?

Given that Cavell is committed to an honorific conception of art, such that to make something that holds up as art, under the testing conditions of modernism, is already to have achieved something, already to have succeeded in some way, rather than merely to have done something, it is hard to see how Cavell could endorse such a position. The most promising line of defence here may be that new artistic media, if that is what they are, are capable of generating their own conditions of success and failure internally, simply by virtue of their ongoing practice. So understood, what differentiates good artists from bad—think of Bruce Nauman’s exploration of the possibilities afforded by the multi-screen video installation or Jeff Wall’s use of the light box—is that they mine the resources of their chosen medium with sufficient intensity to establish such standards internally.³⁵ Though promising, explaining how this is possible in non-circular terms remains to be made out: for precisely how the ‘multi-screen video installation’, say, *comes to be* a medium for artists is precisely what is at issue. Should it turn out that this cannot be done, redescribing what such artists are doing as extending, modifying, or transforming existing media over time, even if beyond recognition, remains one compelling option. But it is not an option that is available to Krauss.

Setting aside the question of whether Krauss can get what she needs from Cavell, consider several questions that Krauss’s conception of reinventing the medium raises, even taken on its own terms. Most obviously: *Can* individual artists invent their own medium in the strong sense Krauss’s account requires?³⁶ To repeat: this is not an empirical question about the inventiveness or otherwise of individual artists; it is a conceptual question about what the very idea of an artistic medium entails. Could a ‘medium’ that remains unique to an individual artist constitute a medium as this idea is standardly understood? One can understand this question descriptively or modally. In the former sense it asks whether an individual artist could invent a medium that—as things turned out—remained unique to that artist: as it happened, no one took up the invention, but things might have turned out otherwise. In the latter, much stronger, sense it asks whether an individual artist can invent an artistic medium that remains unique to that artist in principle; that is, a medium that no other artist could work in.

Take these two senses in turn. Understood in the weaker sense, there is room for genuine disagreement here: some will be inclined to say that so

long it is in principle open to others to take it up, it can be a genuine medium. Others, myself included, are likely to respond that this significantly underplays the role that *publicity*—public norms, expectations and standards of correctness—play in constraining the relevant possibilities here.³⁷ Any putative ‘medium’ that is, even if only contingently, practiced by a single artist arguably does not yet function as a medium properly so-called. Until such time as it accrues public standards of success and failure, ways of going on and failing to go on, debatable borderline cases and the like, in virtue of being shared by a community of informed users and appreciators, the jury remains out as to whether it might yet become one. At best, it is a medium *in potentia*.

At this point, a defender of the idea that media can remain unique to an individual artist might want to distinguish between exponents and appreciators within a given ‘community of users.’ On my account, being in a medium requires being subject to criticism on the part of its appreciators. And the same is true on Cavell’s. This might seem to allow that the achievements of a Pollock or Stella—the new media within the medium of painting they can be said to have discovered on Cavell’s account—could in principle remain unique to these artists *so long as* they are amenable to informed criticism by a community of appreciators who recognize and value them. This is a nuanced response. But what it comes down to depends in the end on how ‘remaining amenable to informed criticism by a community of appreciators,’ other artists included, is to be understood.

Though Pollock and Stella’s achievements do not look like the kind of thing that could simply be aped by other artists who wish to make equally compelling work, what they show to be possible but previously unrecognized about painting more generally can, and arguably must, be taken up by other painters in order to secure their work’s standing *as painting*, and hence their claim to have discovered a new media within the medium of painting. Indeed what they show to be possible, but previously unrecognized, about painting is in large part a product of how their example is taken up by other artists. Rauschenberg’s mode of ‘flat-bed’ picture construction, for example, can be interpreted as one way of incorporating Pollock’s revolutionary way of making paintings—by constructing his pictures as though they were horizontal surfaces on which objects gradually accumulate, only subsequently rotated to the wall for viewing. Stella’s ‘Black Paintings’ can be seen in turn at least in part as a response to Pollock’s rejection of part-by-part composition, perhaps mediated by the distinctive all over flatness of Jasper Johns early targets and flags. While in neither case are such artists mimicking

their precursors, both nonetheless incorporate enough of their precursor's example that their own work would be hard to imagine without it. Indeed, one can envisage an argument from Kantian premises that such patterns of inheritance are precisely what secure their forbears' works exemplarity *as painting*.³⁸ Failing this, the achievement of a Pollock or Stella, however interesting, need not be understood as an achievement of painting.³⁹

Given that I am inclined to contest even the weaker version of the claim that media can remain unique to an individual artist and still be understood as instances of a medium as that idea is generally understood, I am committed in advance to contesting the stronger version: if the idea of a medium is an intrinsically public notion, then the stronger proposal *cannot* possibly pick out genuine instances of an artistic medium. Indeed, even advocates of the weaker view may balk at endorsing the stronger view. On the few occasions that Krauss does address such questions head-on, she becomes noticeably more equivocal. At the outset of her essay on Coleman, for example, Krauss initially seems to deny that artists can invent media altogether:

Artists do not, of course, invent mediums. Carving, painting and drawing were all in full flower before there was any socially distinguishable group to call itself artists. But mediums then individualize their practice: they intensify the skills associated with them; and importantly, they acquire histories. For centuries it was only within and against the tradition encoded by a medium that innovation could be measured, just as it was in relation to its reservoir of meanings that new ranges of feeling could be tested.⁴⁰

Or rather, this is how things were, even if they are no longer: 'Surrounded everywhere by media, which is to say by the technologically relayed image, the aesthetic option of the *medium* has been declared outmoded, cashiered, washed-up'.⁴¹ In effect, Krauss is agreeing with Cavell's diagnosis, but not his prognosis: whereas for Cavell artists respond by seeking out new sources of value *within* their respective mediums, that is, new ways of using their resources and thereby extending-by-transforming the traditions they inherit; for Krauss they respond by redirecting their attention to previously unexplored supports as potential sources of artistic value. Krauss acknowledges the 'extreme difficulty' that inventing a new medium involves: akin, she suggests, to trying to invent a new language. The comparison with natural languages is instructive. Though it is possible to invent a non-formal language

from scratch (think of Esperanto) such languages are not, unlike their formal counterparts in Mathematics, Logic and programming, the kind of thing one typically thinks of as being constructed from the ground up. On the contrary, artistic media, the analogy with natural languages strongly suggests, are much more likely, as a matter of historical fact, to emerge through a gradual process of accretion, revision, translation, and cross-fertilization over time—even if the possibility of their creation *ex nihilo* is not strictly ruled out.

The same is true of artistic media. Like natural languages, artistic media come, if not with formal grammars or an established syntax, at least with canons of competent use. That they do is important: it speaks to the public constraints built into the very idea of employing artistic media. In this sense, artistic media are necessarily non-private phenomena; they have public, if contested, standards of correctness. That is, they have ways of going on, or failing to go on, that can be meaningfully debated, even if such norms are subject to revision over time, such that what counts as successfully going on today need not have so counted yesterday, and may not so count tomorrow. When, for example, Greenberg anticipates the charges of ‘ugliness’, ‘repetitiveness’, ‘monotony’, ‘raw, uncultivated emotion’ and, worst of all, ‘wallpaper patterns’, while reviewing Pollock’s early shows between 1943 and 1948, it is the existing standards of competence and correctness (and with them established taste) associated with easel painting that he recognizes Pollock’s practice as putting under intense pressure.⁴² Media invented *ex nihilo*, by contrast, have no established aesthetic lineage to build upon capable of dignifying some extensions but not others. As Krauss puts it: ‘Each is so singular as a support that to adopt it as a medium is immediately to put a kind of aesthetic patent on it. *Each thus functions as the paradox of a “medium” that can only be practiced by one.*’⁴³

Here Krauss finally comes down on the stronger, modal version of the claim, and here one needs to ask: Is the ‘paradox’ of a medium that ‘can only be practiced by one’ an idea that we can make any sense of? Something that often distinguishes the work of remarkable artists is the way it allows us to see the prior tradition in a new light, by pushing it in an unexpected direction and thereby revealing some previously unexplored potential. In the case of a ‘medium’ practiced solely by one, what shared background is available against which to judge what the artist is doing *as* remarkable? And if there is no such basis, on what grounds can what they are doing show up as intelligible, let alone meaningful, to others? The idea of a medium that can only be practiced by one is incompatible with the background requirements on telling

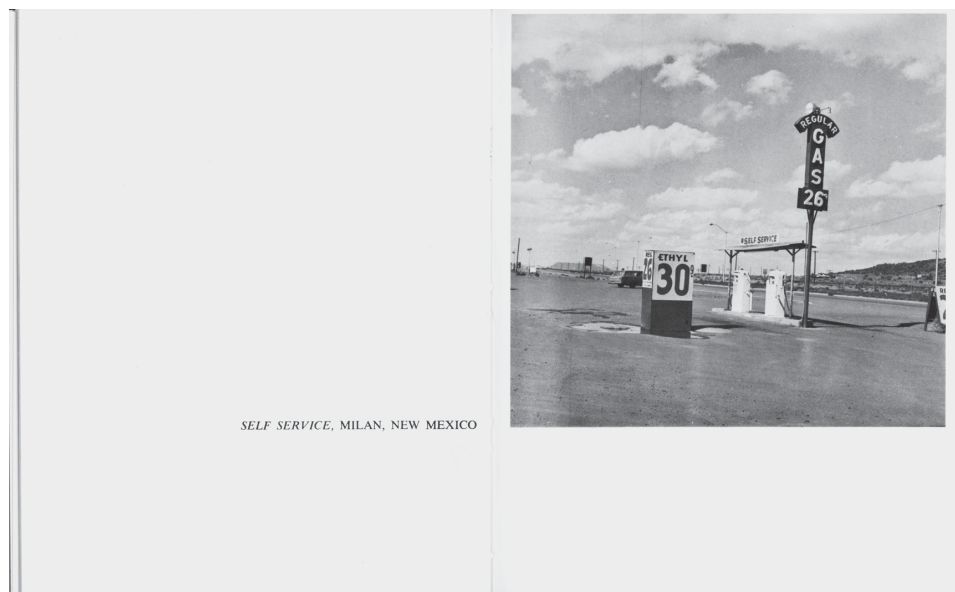
meaningful innovation from arbitrary activity. By analogy to Wittgenstein's charge against the would-be 'private linguist': Won't whatever novel move *seems* right to the artist *be* right, simply in virtue of so seeming? Assuming, that is, a situation in which there are no publicly available standards of correctness, no norms of established use or traditions of debating the value of (or indeed contravening) such usage against which to judge.⁴⁴ Once this is the case, what precludes whatever the artist *says* constitutes a work in a given medium from constituting such a work, simply in virtue of his or her say so? Understanding challenging new art on this a model seems to bottom out conceptually in a kind of Humpty-Dumptyism about artistic media incompatible with the kind of informed critical debate that has in fact greeted such art historically. By effectively closing off the conceptual space for such debate, Krauss's late conception of a medium makes a mystery of our actual cultural practices, her own criticism included.

iv. Conventions versus rules: the curious case of Ed Ruscha

The worry I have been pursuing emerges clearly in a tension within Krauss's account of Ed Ruscha, so I will conclude with a few remarks about this. As a painter, on Krauss's account, Ruscha emerges—entirely plausibly—as an artist obsessed with the medium, in a literal sense of that term: he has used a wide array of non-traditional media for suspending pigment, arguably to mock the heroic pretensions of high modernist abstraction. In this spirit, his series *Stains* utilizes iodine, oil, chocolate syrup, egg yolks, axle grease, caviar, and chutney, among other solutions, instead of linseed or turpentine, as media for suspending and thereby mobilizing colour. But as the creator of a series of little photographic books (*26 Gasoline Stations*, *34 Parking Lots*, *All the Buildings on Sunset Strip* among many others) Krauss argues, against their widespread reception as proto-conceptual exercises in 'deskilling', that Ruscha is not debunking the pretensions of high art photography so much as exploring the mass-produced automobile as an artistic medium. This is a provocative claim, and Krauss is not insensitive to its apparent counterintuitiveness. Her remarks about this merit quoting at length:

If the car can become a medium, then anything might be pressed into such service. It only needs the set of rules that will open onto the possibility of

(a)



(b)

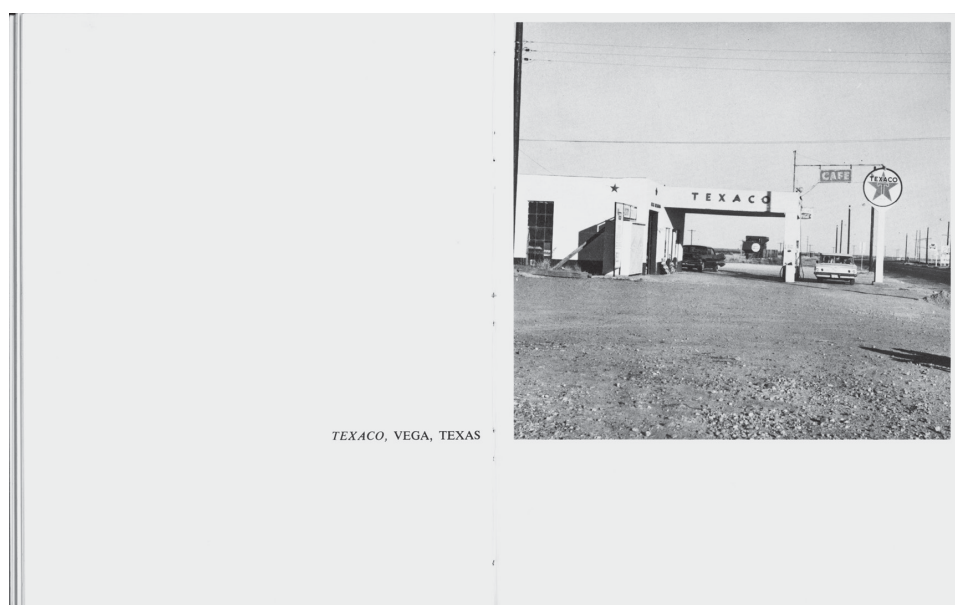


Figure 4.3 Ed Ruscha, two page spreads from *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, 1963: 'Self-Service, Milan' (30–31) and 'Texaco, Vega' (40–41) (Artist's book, 7 1/8 × 5 1/2 × 1/4 in. / 17.9 × 14 × 0.6 cm) © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.

artistic practice . . . The very idea of the artist's invention of a medium and thus his or her authoring a set of rules, will undoubtedly make us nervous. A medium is, after all, a shared language developed over centuries of practice so that no individual initiative, we would think, can either organize new sources of its meaning or change established ones. It is as though we were imagining the artist as playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally. Ruscha's inventions are arbitrary but not as eccentric as the one just mentioned. His *Stains* exult in the exoticism of his choices, but the very term 'stains' pays homage to the recent history of painting in which staining provided what was felt to be a necessary alternative to drawing . . . *The rules for 'stains' are thus 'invented' within the context of a set of principles for abstract painting; these principles are presupposed for the possibility and pertinence of the invention of the rules themselves.* [my italics]⁴⁵

Krauss is surely right about the relation between Ruscha's *Stains* and the history of recent abstract painting from Pollock to Frankenthaler and Louis, and the fact that this relation is necessary to make sense of what Ruscha is up to as painting (or, perhaps better, *anti*-painting), irrespective of whether she is right that this is intended as homage.⁴⁶ But the plausibility of Krauss's approach to *Stains* only highlights the problems with her understanding of Ruscha's books. *Stains* makes sense precisely in so far as it can be tied back to a tradition of staining, poring and the like in high modernist abstraction that it arguably lampoons. *Theoretically* at least, there is no problem making sense of this in Cavellian terms as an extension of, or even the invention of a new automatism within, the genre of abstract painting. It would of course be difficult to imagine Cavell endorsing this view of Ruscha's achievement critically, given the latter's deadpan sensibility and the former's high modernist seriousness, but that is a critical difference without theoretical import here. Irrespective of whether Cavell himself would have critically disparaged *Stains* as art, nothing in his theory precludes understanding these works along the lines Krauss suggests.

But what equivalent background is there for making sense of the automobile as vehicle of *determinate* artistic meaning, relative to which does doing *x* rather than *y* with a car holds up as art? It is, as Krauss herself recognizes, 'as if we were imagining the artist as playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally'. One could not ask for a more elegant description of the problem: if the rules of the

game are determined by artistic fiat, then whatever the artist claims is a legitimate move will, simply in virtue of their so claiming, constitute such a move.

This speaks to an important difference between rules and conventions that Krauss tends to elide. Rules can be public *or* private, whereas conventions cannot. Artists can, like anyone else, stipulate private rules for their own conduct or activity in a given domain: ‘photograph 26 (not 25 or 27) gas stations’ is a rule that Ruscha has always maintained he set himself for producing a book, and there is nothing in principle that would have prevented him keeping that rule to himself, should he have so wished. Krauss equivocates with respect to how this rule came about in the case of *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, but that does not matter here.⁴⁷ Conversely, rules can be publicly codified. Take Krauss’s own example, the rules of chess: there is nothing *private* about the rule that bishops may only move diagonally and castles orthogonally. But merely instituting a new rule for oneself in some particular domain does not suffice to generate a new convention or norm, let alone a new set of such norms. Giving oneself the *rule* ‘On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, hop over every third man-hole cover on the way to class, and every other drainage grill on the walk home; on Tuesdays and Thursdays do the reverse’ does not suffice to institute a new *convention* for getting to class. No one else, even the person walking beside you, need know anything about it: for all they know you may be drunk, or have an uncharacteristic spring in your step. Analogously, establishing a new artistic convention requires more than can be achieved through an effort of artistic will, no matter how heroic. Conventions are beyond the individual’s power to determine. Establishing a new artistic convention requires minimally that the convention in question acquire a ‘normative profile,’ pertaining to the adequacy of its fulfillment, and the aptness of the artist’s choices with respect to it in a given context. It is precisely the publicity of this profile that allows it to be debated, and its flouting to constitute a transgression of sorts. It is the relation between an artist’s adherence to, or flouting of, such conventions, and the history of their employment in previous practice that makes such debate meaningful. This is what Krauss’s own formula ‘the medium is the memory’ implies, and it is not something that merely giving oneself the rule or instruction ‘photograph N number of gas stations in Y circumstances’ could achieve.

These difficulties are created by a constant slippage in Krauss’s account between what Cavell would call the ‘medium’ and what he would call ‘the media *within* the medium’. In Cavell’s terms, individuals may create media within a medium but rarely—if ever—could they invent a medium itself. That is far

more contentious. Certainly, artists cannot invent media that could only be practiced by one, while remaining artistic media properly so called. Instead, on the line of thought I have been developing, artistic media only come into focus gradually, messily, and largely retrospectively, as the collective weight of a history of artistic trial and error gathers momentum and a sense of direction. Initially conceived as extensions to, or transgressions of, existing media, such anomalous cases may require the development of new or hybrid categories to capture what they make possible. Coleman relies on photography and its projection, Kentridge relies on drawing and its projection: whether either could be said to be working in a *new* artistic medium is something we may not yet be in a position to say. For all we now know, they might be working in the same medium, one as yet still in the process of coalescing.

Notes

1. Michael Fried, 'An Introduction to my Art Criticism', 14–15.
2. I am using 'artworld' not to pick out the commercial art market, but in the philosophical sense it has acquired since Danto's eponymous 1964 paper where it picks out the historically indexed background of theory that both constitutes, and significantly determines our understanding of, art as art. See 'Comedies of Similarity: The Artworld Revisited', in Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: the Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 33–54.
3. See Donald Judd, 'Complaints, Part 1', *Studio International* (April 1969): 184 and Krauss, 'A View of Modernism' *Artforum* 11 (September 1972) reprinted in Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT/October Books, 2010), 115–28.
4. Krauss employs a structuralist methodology to position sculpture at the intersection of 'not-landscape' and 'not-architecture'. See Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44, reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 276–90. On the infinite regress onto which this way of conceiving sculpture opens, see Stephen Melville 'What Was Postminimalism?' in *Art and Thought*, ed. Arnold and Iverson, 156–73.
5. See Krauss, 'Six', in *The Optical Unconscious*; and Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
6. See Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Use-Value of "Formless"', which serves as the introduction to Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 24 ff, 26.
7. Whether Krauss and Bois's use of Bataille's terminology respects his own meaning is contentious. See Michael Richardson, 'Bataille', in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
8. For a similar argument see Stephen Bann, 'Greenberg's Team'.
9. See Krauss, 'Horizontality' in Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 93–103.
10. For this reason, one needs to distinguish claims about 'new media' (understood as the plural of a new *artistic* medium) from claims about 'new media' (understood in the more everyday sense, which need not have any relation to art). I shall reserve 'new artistic media' for the former and 'new media' for the latter.
11. Taking issue with Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel's *House for Pigs and People* (Documenta X, 1997), Krauss writes: 'If the pig hut [is] are not instinctively felt to be mere-tricious, arbitrary, and thus the simulacrum of art rather than the real thing, this is because kitsch has become the polluted atmosphere of the very culture we breathe. *Their identity as*

kitsch derives from their feckless indifference to the idea of a medium, so long ago condemned by Greenberg's admonishment in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 68–69 (my italics).

12. Krauss takes the idea of 'differential specificity' from Samuel Weber. See 'Television, Set, and Screen' in Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996) 109–10 and Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 27 and *Under Blue Cup*, 119–23.
13. See Krauss, 'Lip Sync: Marclay not Nauman', *October* 116 (Spring 2006) as reprinted in *Perpetual Inventory*, 37.
14. See Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', 86.
15. With the exceptions of "' . . . And Then Turn Away?' An Essay on James Coleman', *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 5–33, 'Reinventing the Medium' in *Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*, *Critical Inquiry*, 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305 and 'A Voyage on the North Sea' Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999) the relevant essays are collected in *Perpetual Inventory* and reprised in *Under Blue Cup*.
16. See Krauss, 'Introduction' to *Perpetual Inventory*, xiii–ix.
17. Coleman's work often sits on this cusp between photography and film, partaking of film's projection, but without the illusion of movement. This is especially true of those works that draw attention to film's illusion of movement by slowing the progression of images to the point of undermining any illusion of movement.
18. Despite renouncing any illusion of movement, Coleman's medium fulfils Cavell's definition of film as a 'succession of automatic world projections'. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72–73. On whether Cavell's definition withstands the challenge of later, non-analogue film, see David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 41–62.
19. The resulting films are typically accompanied by musical soundtracks punctuated by the noise of various objects depicted in the films (Bakelite telephones, bells, hospital monitors, miners' drills, adding machines, communal showers, and so on). They are without dialogue, but feature occasional title cards. The films are generally projected in darkened galleries, but sometimes also shown in screening rooms or theatres with live musical accompaniment.
20. 'For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction, there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.' See 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema? (Vol 1)*, trans. H. Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 13. Even in the limit case of accidental photographs, Bazin's claim still requires ignoring the fact that cameras are designed by people for purposes. In Cavell, see 'Sights and Sounds' in *The World Viewed*, 16–23, and 'What Photography Calls Thinking' *Raritan* 4, no. 4 (1985): 1–21, reprinted in Richard Poirier (ed.), *Raritan Reading* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 47–65. For criticism of the automatism thesis, see Douglas P. Lackey, 'Reflections on Cavell's Ontology of Film', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 271–73; H. Gene Blocker, 'Pictures and Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 155–62; Joel Snyder, 'What Happens By Itself in Photography', and 'The Emergence of Mind-Independence' in Costello, *On Photography*, 37–46.
21. An example discussed by both Kentridge and Krauss is the sequence in *Mine* (1991), in which the plunger of a cafetiere turns into a lift descending a mineshaft. The difficulty Kentridge faced at this point in the film's narrative was how to connect the arrival at the surface of a lift full of miners with an image of the mine's owner in such a way as to foreground their 'possession' by its proprietor. The solution was to depict Soho ringing the bell for his breakfast in bed and in so doing signalling the beginning or end of his miners' shift below. The gift of 'fortuna' was the visual echo of cafetiere and mine shaft, allowing the plunger to turn into a lift when Soho plunges his morning coffee.
22. See the section titled 'Fortuna' in Kentridge, "'Fortuna': Neither Programme nor Chance in the Making of Images', *Cycnos*, 11 (January 1994): <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1379>.
23. One caveat may be in order here: although Cavell does not use 'automatism', like Krauss, to denote unconscious processes, he does have a very broad conception of 'artistic intention'. This encompasses intentions that may be attributed to an artist by the perceptive critic that the artist herself need not have recognized prior to this elucidation, but is capable of acknowledging on having them pointed out. So construed, the attribution of intentions is a form of reasoning—a way of explaining why the work takes the form that it does. Note, however, that while

- intentions so understood need not be thematized, this does not necessitate calling them 'unconscious'. They may simply have been non-occurrent. See Cavell's discussion of Fellini in 'A Matter of Meaning It', §III.
24. This has been disputed. See especially Charles Palermo, 'Automatism', and my reply, "'But I Am Killing Them! Reply to Palermo and Baetens' in *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 178–210. A further stage of this exchange appeared as 'Action and Automatism' in *Non-Site* 11 (Winter 2013/4) on 'Philosophy and Photography': <https://nonsite.org/feature/action-and-automatism>.
 25. See Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', 198–202.
 26. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', 221; my italics.
 27. This is analogous to the difference between Kant's notion of disinterestedness as one *condition* an aesthetic judgement must meet, and the psychological *mechanism* of aesthetic distancing that Greenberg believed to fulfil it. See Chapter 2.
 28. See Krauss, "'The Rock:" William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', *October*, no. 92 (Spring 2000): 10–11, reprinted in *Perpetual Inventory*, 55–88 and Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Chapter 14, especially 103–107.
 29. See Cavell, 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting', 108–18.
 30. See Fried, 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings'.
 31. See Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', 221.
 32. See Krauss, *Under Blue Cap*, 127ff.
 33. Here one might want to reply that nothing prevents the creation of new media, or even new art forms, from the transformation or cross-breeding of old ones. This seems plausible and, depending on how it is cashed out, perhaps even compatible with Cavell, but this is not the route Krauss takes. In certain respects Krauss's account of the creation of new media *ex nihilo* has more in common with Noël Carroll's idea of 'the self-consciously invented arts' than it does with Cavell's understanding of artistic media. Compare, for example, Carroll's discussion of new technologies in 'Medium-Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography' in Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3–24.
 34. Here one might reply: no such problems pertain to new artistic media understood as transformations of old ones. For in that case, invention may be judged relative to the 'precursor' media thereby transformed. This would be right. But given how Krauss understands the artistic media under discussion this option is not available to her.
 35. Krauss briefly considers Jeff Wall in these terms, before rejecting his practice for conflating painting and photography ('... And Then Turn Away?' 28–29), but it is hard to take her response to Wall at face value. Wall's use of the light-box looks like it should count, by her own lights, as *paradigm* case of rendering an outmoded technical support expressive by means of conventions drawn, in this case, from a range of pictorial genres (history painting, street photography, neo-realist film, etc.).
 36. I call this 'strong' because much weaker notions of an artistic medium are available. See David Davies, 'Medium in Art' in Jerrold Levinson, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 181–91.
 37. A subsidiary question might be: What would constitute trying, but *failing*, to invent a new medium? For if there are no conditions of failure, there can be no conditions of success.
 38. In Kantian terms, this would be what prevents the precursor work reducing to 'original nonsense'. Work that opens up new possibilities for subsequent artists cannot merely be original, it must also be exemplary its originality. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*; §46, Ak. 308.
 39. No less an artworld insider than Robert Motherwell is reputed to have remarked of Stella's *Black Paintings*, when first exhibited, that what Stella was doing was very interesting, but not as painting.
 40. Krauss, '... And then Turn Away?', 5.
 41. Krauss, 'And Then Turn Away?', 5.
 42. Summarizing the difficulties, Greenberg remarked in 1948: 'It is indeed a mark of Pollock's powerful originality that he should present problems in judgement that must await the digestion of each new phase of his development before they can be solved'. See Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. II: 16–17, 74–75, 201–203; this remark 202–203.
 43. Krauss, 'And Then Turn Away?', 8 (my italics).

44. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§243–315. For an overview see Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense and Imagination in Philosophical Investigations* §§243–315 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).
45. Krauss, ““Specific” Objects,” *Perpetual Inventory*, 51; my italics.
46. *Stains* is much more plausibly seen as the kind of deflationary gesture central to *L'informé*: an act of desublimation that brings high modernism down to the level of axle grease, much as Warhol's oxidation paintings lower Pollock's drip technique to the level of urinating. But this is a critical difference, and nothing of relevance to my theoretical differences with Krauss hangs upon it.
47. See *Perpetual Inventory*, 50–51 and *Under Blue Cup*, 75–76. Setting its plausibility to one side, Krauss's account of Ruscha is most interesting for what it suggests about how Krauss herself understands the idea of an artistic media as a ‘recursive structure’. If the number of gas stations refers to the number of refills *required* between Oklahoma and California, it emerges naturally from interacting in true modernist spirit with the capacities and limitations of a particular support, in this case Ruscha's pick up rather than a sanctioned artistic medium. So conceived, there is an *internal relation* between technical support and the rules with which it is animated. In Krauss's words, ‘The source of the “rules” comes from within the support.’ (“Specific” Objects,” *Perpetual Inventory*, 50.) The medium is then a ‘supporting structure, *generative* of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly “specific” to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity’. See Krauss, ‘*A Voyage on the North Sea*’, 26 (my italics). As Krauss is aware, this is a highly contentious account of how Ruscha's book originated. Ruscha has always insisted that the rule came first, as a kind of arbitrary instruction, which he then carried out: ‘When I set out to make that book, I had this fixation in my mind, through blind faith, that the title was going to be *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*. Don't ask me why. . . . I just felt like: this sounds good to me. Twenty-five doesn't sound good, twenty-seven doesn't sound good, it's twenty-six. So I followed that as a guideline as I took these photographs on trips between LA and Oklahoma.’ See *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, ed. Sylvia Wolf (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art/Steidl, 2004), 263. So understood, there is no longer any internal relation between Ruscha's technical support and the rules with which he animates it—other than the brute fact that cars need to be periodically topped up with gas. On the performative, ‘rule-following’ dimension of Ruscha's practice, more generally, see Margaret Iversen ‘Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography,’ *Art History* 32, no. 5 (December 2009): 836–51.