TALKING POINTS FOR A WORKING DEFINITION OF MODERN ART IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dedicated, in friendship, to the memory of Simon Hantaï (1922-2008) and his tenacious commitment to the purpose of modern art.

#1 Critique of the notion that the terms 'modern' and 'modernist' are synonymous.

The contemporary art world has adopted the practice of using the qualifying term of 'modernist' as interchangeable with 'modern' when talking of nineteenth and twentieth century art. At this point, art historians, critics and artists seem to all accept that these two terms can be employed as synonyms. This may turn out to be a mistake.

How much time has passed since we entered the 'modern world'? Once this question is framed, we must look back to fix when the new era began. It is both recent and removed. It establishes the boundaries of our identity in the past and yet it preserves the unfamiliarity of what we are becoming, without being able to identify ourselves now, which is the peculiar property of the present. According to the 'modernist' account, Manet is most frequently cited as the first modern artist. The reason given is that he appears to separate 'form' from 'content' in his painting. The notion that painting might contain a 'content', drawn from human experience of the world, had come to be associated with the old notion of art as a window through which the eye looks out on physical reality: the 'easel painting'. In its place, 'modernist' art would set itself the task of exploring 'formal invention' as an end in itself.

If this is a fair presentation of the 'modernist' outlook, then it affirms a rejection of all meaning outside itself. What then of Courbet? Does he not belong to the 'modern' world? If the 'modern' world is indissociable from the emergence of an industrial society linked, on the one hand, to competing political ideologies, with democratic, capitalist and socialist components, and, on the other, with a new individualist psychology, motivated by heterogeneity, is Courbet not the most 'modern' of artists? And what of Géricault?

One problem with 'Modernism' is that it is based on the notion of 'movements' of art[1]. 'Impressionism' is vaguely thought of as the first 'modernist movement'. Previously there had been 'Realism' and 'Romanticism'. Curiously Manet, the first great 'modernist' painter, does not fit in 'Impressionism'. Nor does the greatest of all the 'modernists', Cézanne. The term of 'Post-Impressionism' had to be thought up

[1] In an interview with Milton Esterow, Leo Castelli explained his success as an art dealer: "The secret was, in part, knowledge about art of the past. I studied art history and figured out that one movement followed another and that there were changes that occurred periodically …I knew all [the Abstract Expressionists], knew what they were doing. They dominated the scene for a while, so I felt that something else had to happen. I tried deliberately to detect that other thing and stumbled upon Rauschenberg [and] Johns." Leo and his Circle – The Life of Leo Castelli, by Annie Cohen-Solal, Knopf, 2010, p.250. These kinds of anecdote are offered as hagiography. However, two remarks need to be made here. First, the statement surely reveals an extraordinarily superficial and inadequate view of art. Second, it is, never the less, on this kind of rationale that the contemporary art world actually relies for its understanding of what is happening in art.

for him. What does that mean? In the twentieth century, the pace accelerates: 'Fauvism', 'Cubism', 'Futurism', 'De Stijl', 'Suprematism', 'Constructivism', 'Surrealism', 'Abstract Expressionism'. Then, since the Second World War: 'Pop', 'Minimalism' and an amorphous 'Conceptualism'. The problem here is not just that this taxonomy is arbitrary and inadequate. The real problem lies in its normative identity. This sequence of art movements allows us to classify modern art, establishing a space between it and us. Modern art becomes an object of study in the university and the museum. In this manner, the connection between modern art and contemporary experience is severed. Where the advent of modern art had introduced a profound strangeness into our understanding of ourselves, 'Modernism' seeks to foster a sense of familiarity. As it takes its place inside the ubiquitous account of contemporary art, it falls victim to contempt.

The most troubling example of this situation in the visual arts is the movement of 'Abstract Expressionism'. In the post-World War Two art world there has been a determined resolve to separate the great American artists who emerged at mid-century from contemporary art and to bury them in art history. However, Rothko, when asked at the conclusion of his famous address at the Pratt Institute in 1958, if he could define 'Abstract Expressionism', replied: "I never read a definition and to this day I don't know what it means. In a recent article I was called an action painter. I don't get it and I don't think my work has anything to do with Expressionism, abstract or any other. I am an anti-expressionist."[2] Where does that leave the whole panoply of 'modernist' art movements? Of course, it is one of the tenets of 'modernism' that the critic should pay, at best, only limited attention to the point of view of the artist. This 'modernist' position seems little more than a prejudice, calculated to stack the deck in a manner that is profoundly self-serving.

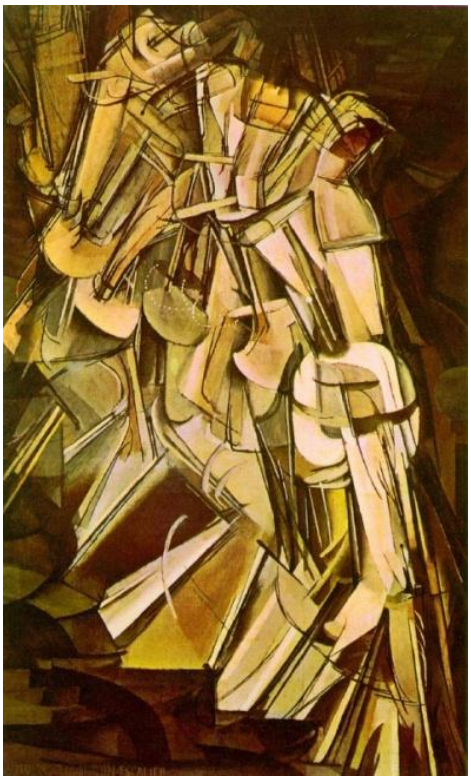
True, time has passed since Newman, Pollock and Rothko painted their great masterpieces and no one is saying to art historians that they should not evaluate this achievement in the context of art history, of Bonnard, Matisse and Picasso, of Cézanne and of what went before. However, to classify them as 'Abstract Expressionists', under the umbrella of 'Modernism', belonging to a time period which is now deemed past, is to deny the extraordinary innovation and searching vitality of their vision. How much more exciting and creative would it not be to think of all the above named artists, and include Manet and Courbet and Géricault, and no doubt many others, as discreet and independent exponents of an ongoing aesthetic and intellectual tradition which is defined anew in each individual life work? We would then speak of Cézanne and Rothko, but not of 'Post-Impressionism' and 'Abstract Expressionism'. In this manner, the work of these great artists of the modern age would be allowed to live in the present and engage in a dialogue with living artists. It will be objected that many contemporary artists do not seek this association. Perhaps our attention is on the wrong contemporary artists.

It is difficult not to conclude that 'modernism' is a barrier to looking at modern art and was intended as such. The terms are not synonymous, as we have grown into the habit of thinking. We need to distinguish between 'modern art', which we can point to on a wall, and a 'modernist discourse of art' seeking to interpret its meaning in very inadequate terms. This is, therefore, not a debate about 'modernism'. Modern art gets lost in the argument for and against the tenets of 'modernism'. The discussion of 'modernism' needs to be set aside and modern art needs to be looked at afresh, asking the question: "What are the issues at stake in modern art and do they address the concerns of our contemporary art world?"

[2] Mark Rothko, Pratt Lecture.

#2 Refusal, or acceptance, of the anti-academic identity of modern art

When we think of nineteenth century art, Manet and Cézanne may come to mind. However, these modern artists were peripheral to the period. In the eyes of the public of the time, nineteenth century art was 'academic art'. To be an 'academic' artist required long training in the Ecoles des Beaux Arts and exhibition in the 'official salons'. The dominant characteristics of academic art were its 'hierarchy of genres,' with historical and mythological subjects, the notion of an idealized vision attained by a neutral paint surface and achieving illusion of the subject, and a fondness for allegory. Its great exponents were, among numerous others, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, Thomas Couture, and Jean-Léon Gérôme.



Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912, 57 X 35 ins.

Academies proliferated throughout Europe and the United States. This historical truth of the preponderance of the academic system throughout the nineteenth century was confirmed, retrospectively, in 1986 with the inauguration of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, which presents itself as a museum of the period, placing a renewed, rehabilitating emphasis on academic art. In the nineteenth century, the 'modern' artists, from Géricault to Picasso, were rejected by their contemporaries and the only attention they gained was through scandal. But what of the twentieth century? Did it not belong to 'modern' art? Maybe not.

With hindsight we may come to see that a new Academy was born at the Armory Show in New York in 1913, with a painting entitled *Nude Descending a Staircase,* by the young Marcel Duchamp. It is always thought that modern art had overthrown the art of the past and that Duchamp's iconoclasm identified him as a modern artist. We overlook that modern artists, with the notable exhortation of Cézanne, have always studied the 'art of the museums'. In fact, modern artists did not seek to overturn the art of the past but, rather, academic art[3]. Nineteenth century public opinion understood this, quite correctly feeling that modern art was an attack on the school of academic art with which it identified. Its response was to cry scandal.

The ensuing scandal paved the way, ultimately, for modern art's success. Then, as today, it was sensation and scandal that the newly formed mass media public was looking for. To succeed, one must be scandalous. Duchamp learnt this lesson. However, Duchamp did not focus his attack on the art of the Academy. He decided to 'up-the-anti'. He declared his distrust for the entire history of art, claiming not to know the Old Masters very well, or even to have frequented Italy. "No, because when I go to a museum, I don't have a sort of stupefaction, astonishment, or curiosity in front of a picture. Never. I'm talking about the old masters, the old things … I was really defrocked, in the religious sense of the word. But without doing it voluntarily. All

[3] It is important to distinguish the difference in the early nineteenth century between Academic art and the art of history which was being brought back to Paris as the spoils of Napoleon's conquests in Europe. Academic art was the contemporary art of the day. In contrast, the newly arrived treasures of earlier art were placed in the old royal palace of the Louvre, which then becomes the first modern museum of art, thus making this art available for the first time in significant quantities for young artists to study. Géricault was perhaps the first artist to insist on the need to study this 'art of the museums'. After him, Courbet championed the practice. By contrast, the Academy did not recommend the 'art of the museums' preferring, instead, that its students follow its own educational curriculum.

that disgusted me." He concluded by stating that he had a desire to "wipe the past right out" because "I doubt its value [that of art] deep down[4]".

What Duchamp proposed was to finish with art and start anew. The first work of the new art would be a familiar and banal object drawn from the real world, a snow shovel, or a urinal. In this manner, with the New Academy, popular culture and consumer products would replace the Old Academy's adherence to the mythological and historical themes of an idealized classicism. The 'High' would be replaced with the 'Low'. Just as the old Academy identified with the subject matter of historical and mythological themes, the New Academy could identify with the objects of industrial production. The point is that in the New Academy, like the Old, the public could find its identity, in a way that it never could in modern art.

What gives Duchamp and his progeny away is that their work appeals to the public. People have never liked modern art. They have found it difficult to understand. The acceptance of modern art was begrudging and came very slowly. If we recognize that a New Academy was founded in 1913, one which is at least as hostile to modern art as the Old Academy ever was, then it may be true to say that the values of modern art were never accepted. This would hold good for both Europe and America. The art which descends from Duchamp, on the other hand, has been an enormous popular success[5]. Just look at that other nude descending a staircase, half a century later, by Gerhard Richter[6].

Gerhard Richter, *Ema*, 1966, 79 x 51 ins.

The only person in the post-World War Two New York avant-garde arena, who appears to have understood the dynamic of the New Academy that Duchamp had set up, was Robert Smithson[7]. Smithson's critique of Duchamp is devastating. His central complaint is that Duchamp is "mechanistic" in his treatment of "nature" and the "everyday". As an example, Smithson argues that Duchamp is trying to "mechanize the sex act", that paradigmatic function of nature, in his 'Large Glass'. This mechanistic view leads Duchamp to, in Smithson's opinion: "a certain contempt of the work process" and "offers a kind of sanctification for the alienated object …in order to

[4] In, Interviews, Pierre Cabanne. This attack on the old masters by Duchamp is clear evidence that he understood quite clearly what he was about. Duchamp, of course, knew that modern artists had broken with the Academy in favor of studying 'the art of the museums'. An attack on the 'old masters', therefore, was an attack on modern art.

[5] At issue here, is the history of Pop, founded in classic Surrealism, as opposed to Abstract Expressionism which takes its point of departure from the surrealist notion of 'psychic automatism', promptly abandoned by the Surrealists themselves. Leo Castelli was to say: "The key figure in my gallery is somebody that I never showed, and that was Marcel Duchamp. He was the great influence on all the younger painters [in my stable]. Painters who are not influenced by Duchamp just don't belong here." ibid., p. 267.

[6] In this connection, it is worth remarking the following statement: "I think that what today we call modernity has some surprises in store for us. The end of the nineteenth century had only one Bouguereau. We will have more than a thousand of them." Marcelin Pleynet, interview with Catherine Millet (1972), in Art et Littérature, Coll. Tel Quel, Ed. du Seuil, 1977.

[7] Smithson set down his views on Duchamp in an interview with Moira Roth in March 1973, shortly before his untimely death that July. It is clear from reading the interview that he wanted to get his position on Duchamp on record. At the outset he identifies the New York Armory show of 1913 as setting the future course for art in the United States. He identifies two tendencies which he calls 'modernism' (Matisse; Picasso) and 'post-modernism' (Duchamp). Obviously, I differ in my terminology, proposing the entity of 'modern art' (Matisse; Picasso) and a 'New Academy', stemming from Duchamp. In this scenario, 'modernism' is the term that the 'New Academy' applies to modern art. I never had the opportunity to discuss this approach with Smithson but I dare to think that we would have been in agreement. Equally, I understand that, in the literature, many specialists have employed the term 'modernism' in a genuine effort to discuss modern art. However, as I have been at pains to explain, it fosters, in my view, a confusion which plays into the hands of the New Academy so that it becomes impossible to know who stands on which side of the argument.

mystify it." Smithson concludes by stating that Duchamp's Readymades: "are just like relics … some kind of spiritual pursuit that involved the commonplace", leading him to adopt an esthetic of quasi-religious "transcendence". In other words, Duchamp wants to reduce art to the level of a fetish. Underlying these remarks is Smithson's awareness that Duchamp's cultural outlook is underpinned by Calvin and Descartes.

In the interview, Smithson declared: "The thing about Duchamp is that he's amusing, but I, for one, don't find him amusing. I am not amused[8]". This apparently innocuous remark is intended by Smithson to alert us to Duchamp's strategy. Duchamp's name would very soon become identified with his 'Readymades'. These banal objects, a bicycle wheel, snow shovel, bottle rack or urinal, were calculated to present a challenge to conventional definitions of legitimate art and, once more, provoke scandal. However, the Readymades, and the ensuing scandal which did not fail to present itself, did not alienate the art public, as the presentation of Manet's 'Olympia' or Matisse's fauve canvases had done earlier. Why not? Smithson means to intimate that Duchamp had calculated as much. He is suggesting that Duchamp was knowingly setting up a New Academy of popular taste and had realized that he could count on collusion from the art public. The Readymades do not, therefore, constitute a new phase of modern art but cater to the public's prejudice against all art that does not conform to its academic tastes. The Readymades were embraced, rather than rejected, by the contemporary art world because they are in complicity with the New Academy.

By and large, successive generations of young artists have missed this and felt that Duchamp offers them the opportunity to "emancipate thought, esthetics and creativity from the bonds of history and taste, and the arbitrary order those structures impose on art and everyday life[9]." Duchamp actually offers simpler and more immediate inducements. Paramount among these is that he makes the task of making art easy. However, the cost is enslavement in an academic system. Who can fail to have been struck by Marilyn Minter's recent Orwellian statement in the New York Times: "I've been around long enough to understand the role of artists in our culture, who we are and what job we perform (…) We are the elite of the servant class, I know my place[10]." Can one imagine a modern artist making this statement? So, the cruel question must be asked to the graduates of the New York Academy school, who find jobs in the workshops of contemporary academic artists: how does it feel, now, to be Pinochio in the salt mines of contemporary art[11]?

#3 The 'anesthetic' & the 'esthetic'.

"I shy away from the word 'creation' (…) I don't believe in the creative function of the artist (…) I doubt its value deep down." Marcel Duchamp

"History is a nightmare from which we are trying to wake up." James Joyce

[8] In Interviews with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp states that he wants things to "amuse him." No doubt, Smithson took the term from this source.

[9] This formulation belongs to Saul Ostrow, in the Letters to the Editors section of the Dec. 2010 issue of Art in America. Ostrow was replying to a letter from me. He did not intend his formulation to describe Duchamp. He was actually referring to 'modernism' . However, how well these words seem to fit my case with regard to Duchamp. This buttresses a central part of my thesis, namely that 'modernism' is so far removed from any relationship with 'modern art' that, in fact, it constitutes a sub-set of Duchamp's 'New Academy,' based on the 'object.'

[10] Marilyn Minter quote from New York Times, June 2, 2010.

[11] To bolster the thesis that Duchamp launched a new Academy, one should be aware of how it borrowed the whole system of art schools and assistants and, on the commercial side, auctions, art fairs, awards and prizes, from the practices of its nineteenth century model.

There is general discord on the question of what art might be all about and we may be forgiven for suspecting that the most vociferous on the matter care the least. The term 'esthetics', the prerogative of philosophers, intervenes and we quickly discover that it is all tied up with Reason & Morality. If we are unable to come up with a positive definition of esthetic experience, we do, however, understand its opposite: the 'anesthetic'. The anesthetic numbs the body and the mind. It dampens down sensation. It renders us acquiescent. Anesthesia has been an enormous boon in relieving acute human suffering in the treatment of illness. It is also central as an escapist release in the illicit drug culture. Modern art has identified anesthesia as a stumbling block, as, for example, in Proust's great novel, where it is identified as habit and the dull rote of conventional lives.

If the anesthetic represents the dampening of the senses, then it would follow that the esthetic is about awakening them and the mind to the intelligent experience of being alive in the world. In this case, the anesthetic of academic art is the enemy of human experience, and modern art represents its liberation. Matisse was making this point in the statement: "When artistic means have become impaired, so diminished that their powers of expression are exhausted, it is necessary to return to the essential principles which have formed human language. These are the principles which 'return to the source', retake a hold of life, and impart life to us. Paintings based on refinement, on subtle gradations, on syntheses lacking energy, summon up in protest beautiful blues, reds and greens, matter that stirs the well of human sensuality." For Matisse, the experience of modern art: "acts upon our senses like a reverberating gong[12]." These statements by Matisse are founded on the rupture with academicism that is initiated in the decision by Monet and his companions to paint outdoors, under natural light, and is most dramatically articulated by the exhortation of Cézanne to young painters: "Make haste to go out into the open air and, in contact with nature, invigorate yourself with the instincts and sensations of art which reside in you[13]."

This esthetic of 'liveliness' is also the subject matter of modern philosophy: of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille. Modern artists and thinkers are making common cause.

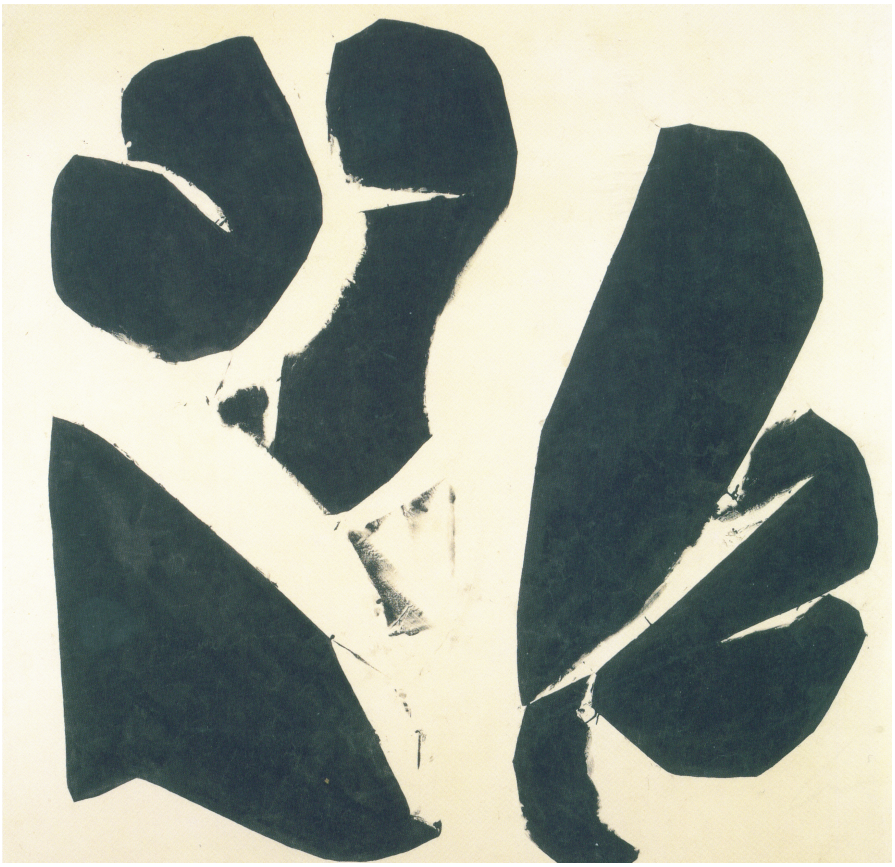
To those who hitch their ambition to social conformity, go approbation and wealth. The early modern artists, for the most part, lived on the margins of society, in a state of endemic impecuniousness. Nineteenth century patronage went to Monsieur Bouguereau and the other stars of the Academy. So it has been with the adepts of the New Academy in the twentieth century and on up to the present day. The commonly heard complaint in the current art world is that art has been co-opted by commerce, yet no one cares to ask why. Commerce finds common cause with anesthesia and with the conventions of the Academy. One only has to look at the fashion and entertainment industries, which offset the tedium of everyday life by distracting and suspending attention. Is it a striking irony, or naivety, or just plain acknowledgement of an inevitable truth, that the motion picture industry organizes itself under the aegis of an 'Academy', adopting the title as a badge of honor, and endorsing pursuit of the anesthetic 'American Dream'? Further, is it a coincidence that the New Academy has advocated ever more brazenly in recent years for the fusion of art and fashion?

In spite of these developments, Rothko's words continue to ring true across the years, to the effect that: the difference between the artist and other people is that they go around thinking about money while the artist thinks of beauty.

[12] This and further statements by Matisse, "Propos sur la Chapelle du Rosaire des Dominicains de Vence", Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art, ed. Hermann.
[13] Paul Cézanne, letter to Ch. Camoin, 13th Sept. 1903, in La Correspondence de Paul Cézanne, ed. Rewald, Grasset, 1978.

#4 Purpose & its Denial

"I love all men who dive." Herman Melville



Simon Hantaï, *Meun*, 1968, 94 x 85 ins.

Commerce is now the dominant force in contemporary art. There is an issue as to whether the people who are most directly concerned with art, the artists themselves, in first instance, of course, but also art historians, critics, and also all those who take an active interest and enjoyment in looking at art, will continue to be acquiescent. The issue is not to deny that great art is rare and valuable and that, in the practical world, esthetic value will translate into financial value. This has always been the case. If the social world did not place high monetary value on art, then great art, even if it were to be made, would not survive. The issue is whether we will naively continue to think, as we have over the last five decades, that art is subject to the logic of the economic system, that it is a product determined by demand. It is curious to watch the spectacle of the American contemporary art world's fierce attachment to this fundamentally Marxist premise. I understand that since the Second World War, there has been an inexorable drive to align art with consumer demand. However, it doesn't work. It can, and has been thought of in these terms but, as this tendency has developed, the intrinsic value of contemporary art has declined in inverse proportion to its astronomical escalation in financial value. How can we not be struck by Peter Scheldjahl's concluding remark in his

recent article on the current installation of Abstract Expressionism at New York's Museum of Modern Art, to the effect that, since the 1950's: "it's been pretty much one damn thing after another[14]?"

The mind of modern art has always been in an entirely other place: one defined by 'purpose'[15]. As with the 'esthetic' and its opposite the 'anesthetic', it is perhaps helpful, when considering what might be meant by the term 'purpose', to consider what it is not, namely 'chance'. This thought once again distinguishes modern art from the New Academy, which has placed chance at the center of its enterprise[16]. The leading exponents of modern art have always, in one manner or another, sought to make this distinction. Consideration of two artists in particular, Matisse and Pollock, will serve to confirm this.

Matisse constantly alluded to an independent or external force that guided his hand at work. There is a famous segment of film that recorded him in the process of drawing from the model. His hand is seen to hover, then begin to glide, hesitantly, yet fluidly, taking first the measure of the paper, and then possession of its subject. He spoke of his acute embarrassment, on viewing the film, as if he had been caught in a moment of intimacy. Can we label this independent force, 'chance'? No. Guidance is not capricious. Later, at the culmination of his career, in his comments surrounding the Vence Chapel project, this intuition of guidance is his central preoccupation: "Every time that I had gone as far as my ten fingers would allow, something which did not come from me, but from elsewhere, would arrive to finish the task." And again: "Beyond a certain point, it's no longer me, something reveals itself." This is an experience which may not be allowed to many people in their lives and, as a result, it may be greeted with skepticism. It is, nevertheless, central to modern art. We can deny it, or we can be grateful. One last confirming thought: "How strange it is! One is led, one does not lead. I am only a servant." What an ironic contrast exists between this last statement and the one, above, by Marilyn Minter!

As for Jackson Pollock, he explicitly took up the difference between purpose and chance on numerous occasions. In first instance, we have the celebrated telegram which he sent to Time Magazine. In its Nov. 20th 1950 issue, on the occasion of the 25th Venice Biennial, an article about Pollock had appeared, entitled: "Chaos, Damn it!". To this provocation, the artist had responded by telegram to Time's editorial offices: "No chaos, Damn it!" Again, in several preparatory handwritten notes, which have been preserved, he comes back to an idea which seems to have had great importance for him: "denial of the accident". This concern was publicly registered in the taped radio interview with William Wright, again in 1950. There he formally stated: "I don't use the accident, because I deny the accident[17]."

What then did Pollock think was happening in his poured paintings? His commentary is remarkably close to Matisse: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is a pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well." So, to recapitulate: there is no accident; art is not a matter of chance; the painting (art) has a life of its own!

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[14]"Big Bang: Abstract Expressionism on full show at MoMA', Peter Schjeldahl, New Yorker, Oct. 18th 2010, p.94.

[15] The mention of 'purpose' summons up the whole history of western metaphysics. Notably it is central to Kant's discussion of aesthetics in The Critique of Judgment, where art is characterized as a "purposiveness without purpose". This is particularly notable since Clement Greenberg referred back to Kant as the founding authority for his formulation of 'modernism'. It remains a curiosity that, as the early advocate of Jackson Pollock, a painter whose work, by the artist's own account, stems from 'automatism' and the 'unconscious', Greenberg was to base his thinking about art on the great philosopher of Enlightenment reason.

[16] In Interviews with Pierre Cabanne, previously cited, Duchamp emphasizes the notion of "pure chance."

[17] Statements by Pollock are collected in Thaw & O'Connor, catalogue raisonné.

A friend recently said to me: "they didn't want content, did they[18]?" What did 'they' not want? How do we define content? It is not the content of the eye looking through the window of an easel painting onto the natural world; we can agree on that. No! It must rather be defined as 'esthetic and intellectual content'. What should we understand by this formulation?

I have always thought that 1851 was a momentous year in the development of the modern esthetic. In that year Melville published Moby Dick and Flaubert began work on Madame Bauvary. Flaubert thought long and hard about the birth of the modern esthetic, as his extraordinary correspondence testifies. Like all the great modern artists of the nineteenth century, Flaubert understood that the idealized vision of academic art was a lie. He was above all aware that the changed circumstances of the modern world were calling for a new meaning in art. His response was to recommend the careful examination of form and content: "as long as any given sentence has not been separated into form from content, I will maintain that we have here two words empty of meaning." However, there is an ambiguity in what has been taken to be this advocacy of 'form' over 'content'. The question was how to create new meaning in art. It did not require the abandonment of meaning, nor the notion that form in itself could constitute meaning. Read him more thoroughly and you will see that he is quite clear on this: "There is no such thing as beautiful thoughts without beautiful form, and reciprocally (…) consider an idea which has no form, it's impossible; the same goes for a form which does not express an idea [19]." If we follow Flaubert's thought, form would provide the privileged point of entrance into a significant new world but, ultimately, the challenge would be to lay hold of new meaning attached to form. To the idea that form, in and of itself, might be sufficient, Flaubert was brutal in his rebuttal: "No, what we lack is the intrinsic principle, the soul of the thing, the very idea of the subject. (…) Where do we leave from and where do we go? We do a good job of getting it on. We osculate abundantly. We caress softly. But to fuck! To ejaculate, in order to bring forth the child! That is beyond us!"

Melville understood the enormity of the challenge: "The more I consider this mighty tail [referring to Leviathan], the more do I deplore my inability to express it. (…) Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back part, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say he has no face[20]." This is the challenge that every modern artist, in whatever medium, must take up.

In a letter to Gasquet, 29th September 1896, Cézanne noted: "At the moment, I am rereading Flaubert[21]." This remark serves to underscore that the 'modernist' separation of visual art from literature is specious. There is no more moving statement of the joint project of these two great modern artists, Flaubert and Cézanne, literature and painting, joined in the purpose of inventing modern art, than that recorded in Cézanne's correspondence. Throughout his life, Cézanne ruminated on the birth of a 'modern esthetic'. In 1903, to Vollard, he makes the celebrated declaration: "I work stubbornly. I can glimpse the Promised Land. Will I be like the great leader of the Hebrews or will I be permitted to enter?" And one month before his death, he returns to the same topic: "Will I arrive at the destination so sought for, and pursued for so long? I hope so (…) I still study after nature, and it seems to me that I make some slow progress (…) But I

[18] John Perreault, in conversation with the writer.
[19] This and proceeding remarks, Gustave Flaubert, Correspondence, ed. Gallimard.
[20] Herman Melville, The Tail, Ch. 86, Moby Dick.
[21] This and following remarks, La Correspondence de Paul Cézanne, ed. Rewald, Grasset, 1978.

am old, sick, and I have sworn to myself that I will die painting (…)" It should never be forgotten that André Breton, that other founding father of the New Academy, considered Cézanne to be an 'imbecile[22]'.

The great American painters at mid-century took up this question of the purpose of the modern esthetic. Newman unambiguously declared the concern: "In 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope – to find that painting did not really exist. (…) It was that awakening that inspired the aspiration – the high purpose – quite a different thing from ambition – to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before[23]." All of his writings testify to this search for the meaning, the modern meaning, of art. He was clear that painting would have to be reinvented. As for Rothko, he explicitly made the claim that painting was "philosophic expression": "Painting certainly is a result of thinking. It causes thinking. It, therefore, can certainly be a form, or means, of thinking, a means of philosophic thought[24]."

When Rothko asserts the prerogative of being able to think through painting, an artist is taking back from philosophers the thing that had previously belonged to him. But thought, in the interim, is no longer the same thing. As for most contemporary art, we have to conclude that it does not contain this, or perhaps any, thought or purpose, beyond the clamor to get attention in an effort to trade its chips in for social approval and reward. What kind of thought exactly does Rothko have in mind? Again, the usual run of academic thought, generated in the universities, envisages the application of a theoretical point of view to the phenomenon of art. We can have a Kantian account, or a Freudian, or a 'structuralist' account, or a 'modernist' or 'post-modernist' account. This academic mindset is what led Newman to declare that esthetics is for the artist what ornithology is for the birds. It is highly doubtful that Rothko had any such notion of thinking about painting in mind. In striking contrast, what begins to emerge here is something fundamentally different. Here the viewer does not organize his thinking as an instrument for interpreting art. To the contrary, he engages in an encounter with art in order to find a way towards modern thinking. The viewer does not think in order to understand painting. The viewer looks at the painting in order to understand his thinking. We look at Rothko's painting and thought becomes possible.

This new esthetic thought that modern culture has pursued across the two hundred years of its existence implies a fundamental reordering of objective and subjective experience. In the latter part of his life, Rothko sought to create total environments with his paintings. The viewer would stand surrounded by the paintings. Thinking would lodge in pictorial matter and matter would become thought. The subject and the object would exchange roles as art revealed its purpose, which is to: THINK THE SUBJECT.

Paul Rodgers

[22] "Cézanne, for whom I have absolutely no regard and whose personal outlook and artistic ambition, in spite of his panegyrists, I have always judged to be imbecilic …". From Les pas perdus, André Breton, ed. Gallimard, 1949. Cited in the ground-breaking essay on Freud and Surrealism, 'La peinture et le surréalisme et la peinture,' 1971, by Marcelin Pleynet in Art et Littérature, Collection Tel Quel, ed. du Seuil, 1977.

[23] Barnett Newman, from 'Jackson Pollock: an Artist's Symposium, part 1' 1967, collected in Selected Writings and Interviews.

[24] Cited in Mark Rothko, by James Breslin, p. 260.