even if it lasts millions of years... it will end without having been conquered
in painting.

Panofsky shows that the 'problems' of painting which magnetize its history
are often solved obliquely, not in the course of inquiries instigated to solve
them but, on the contrary, at some point when the painters, having reached an
impasse, apparently forget those problems and permit themselves to be attracted
by other things. Then suddenly, altogether off guard, they turn up the old
problems and surmount the obstacle. This unhearing [source] historicity, advanc-
ing through the labyrinth by detours, transgression, slow encroachments
and sudden drives, does not imply that the painter does not know what he
wants. It does imply that what he wants is beyond the means and goals at hand
and commands from afar all our useful activity.

1 "The spectacle is first of all a spectacle of itself before it is a spectacle of something outside of
it." Translator's note from Merleau-Ponty's (196 replacements. 
3 Henri Michaux, Aventures de lignes.
4 Ibid.

Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas
edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford, UK and
Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992

4 Clement Greenberg (b. 1909) 'Modernist Painting'

More than any other single text in English, this essay has come to typify the Modernist
critical position on the visual arts. Its aim is to represent a logic of development
supposedly connecting the most successful painting of the previous hundred years, and
thus to justify the findings of taste as involuntary responses to the inexorable self-critical
tendency of painting itself. Though clearly built on Greenberg's earlier analyses of
avant-garde art and culture (see Vo10 and Vo11), the argument of this essay relies less
on social-historical forms of evidence and more upon the observation of technical
changes in art itself. At the time of its publication Greenberg was closely engaged with
the painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, whose form of abstract painting he was
soon to label 'Post-Painterly Abstraction'. The essay can be read as a form of response
to this work, which Greenberg saw as paradigmatic of the expression of feeling in art,
and as preparing a position for it as the most advanced outcome of an unquestionable
historical development. First published in Forum Lectures (Voice of America), Washington
DC, 1960. Reprinted with slight revisions in Art & Literature, no. 4, Spring 1965,
p. 193-201, from which the present text is taken.

Modernism includes more than just art and literature. By now it includes almost
the whole of what is truly alive in our culture. It happens, also, to be very
much of a historical novelty. Western civilization is not the first to turn around
and question its own foundations, but it is the civilization that has gone furthest
in doing so. I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exagger-
ation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant.
Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of
Kant as the first real Modernist.

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic
methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself - not in order to subvert
it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic
to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old
jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained
to it.

The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of but is not the same thing as
the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticized from the
outside, the way criticism in its more accepted sense does; Modernism criticizes
from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being
criticized. It seems natural that this new kind of criticism should have appeared
first in philosophy, which is critical by definition, but as the nineteenth century
wore on it made itself felt in many other fields. A more rational justification
had begun to be demanded of every formal social activity, and Kantian self-
criticism was called on eventually to meet and interpret this demand in areas
that lay far from philosophy.

We know what has happened to an activity like religion that has not been
able to avail itself of 'Kantian' immanent criticism in order to justify itself. At
first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having
been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked
as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple,
and entertainment itself looked as though it was going to be assimilated, like
religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down
only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable
in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.

Each art, it turned out, had to effect this demonstration on its own account.
What had to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and
irreplaceable not only in art in general, but also in each particular art. Each art
had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar
and exclusive to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its area
of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area
all the more secure.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each
art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task
of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every
effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other
art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the
guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity'
meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one
of self-definition with a vengeance.

Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art.
Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the
medium of painting - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties
of pigment - were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be
acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to
regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged
openly. Manet’s paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the
frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted.
The Impressionists, in Manet’s wake, abjured underpainting and glazing, to
leave the eye under no doubt as to the fact that the colors used were made of
real paint that came from pots or tubes. Cézanne sacrificed verisimilitude, or
correctness, in order to fit drawing and design more explicitly to the rectangular
shape of the canvas.

It was the stressing, however, of the ineluctable flatness of the support that
remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized
and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique and exclusive
to that art. The enclosing shape of the support was a limiting condition, or
norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm or means
shared with sculpture as well as the theater. Flatness, two-dimensionality, was
the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting
oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.

The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called
the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of
flatness under the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent
contradiction involved – the dialectical tension, to use a fashionable but apt
phrase – was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success
of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this
contradiction; rather, they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the
flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the
flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before
seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is,
of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist,
but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism’s
success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.

It is not in principle that Modernist painting in its latest phase has abandoned
the representation of recognizable objects. What it has abandoned in principle
is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional
objects can inhabit. Abstractness, or the non-figurative, has in itself still not
proved to be an altogether necessary moment in the self-criticism of pictorial
art, even though artists as eminent as Kandinsky and Mondrian have thought
so. Representation, or illustration, as such does not abate the uniqueness of
pictorial art; what does do so are the associations of the things represented. All
recognizable entities (including pictures themselves) exist in three-dimensional
space, and the rarest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up
associations of that kind of space. The fragmentary silhouette of a human figure,
or of a teacup, will do so, and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the
two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting’s independence as an art.
Three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own
autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share
with sculpture. And it is in the course of its effort to do this, and not so much
– I repeat – to exclude the representational or the ‘literary’, that painting has
made itself abstract.

At the same time Modernist painting demonstrates, precisely in its resistance
to the sculptural, that it continues tradition and the themes of tradition, despite
all appearances to the contrary. For the resistance to the sculptural begins long
before the advent of Modernism. Western painting, insofar as it strives for
realistic illusion, owes an enormous debt to sculpture, which taught it in the
beginning how to shade and model towards an illusion of relief, and even how
to dispose that illusion in a complementary illusion of deep space. Yet some of
the greatest feats of Western painting came as part of the effort it has made in
the last four centuries to suppress and dispel the sculptural. Starting in Venice
in the sixteenth century and continuing in Spain, Belgium, and Holland in the
David, in the eighteenth century, sought to revive sculptural painting, it was
in part to save pictorial art from the decorative flattening-out that the emphasis
on color seemed to induce. Nevertheless, the strength of David’s own best
pictures (which are predominantly portraits) often lies as much in their color
as in anything else. And Ingres, his pupil, though subordinating color far more
consistently, executed pictures that were among the flattest, least sculptural
done in the West by a sophisticated artist since the fourteenth century. Thus by
the middle of the nineteenth century all ambitious tendencies in painting were
converging (beneath their differences) in an anti-sculptural direction.

Modernism, in continuing this direction, made it more conscious of itself.
With Manet and the Impressionists, the question ceased to be defined as one
of color versus drawing, and became instead a question of purely optical
experience as against optical experience modified or revised by tactile
associations. It was in the name of the purely and literally optical, not in that of
color, that the Impressionists set themselves to undermining shading and
modeling and everything else that seemed to confine the sculptural. And in a
way like that in which David had reacted against Fragonard in the name of the
sculptural, Cézanne, and the Cubists after him, reacted against Impressionism.
But once again, just as David’s and Ingres’ reaction had culminated in a kind
of painting even less sculptural than before, so the Cubist counter-revolution
eventuated in a kind of painting flatter than anything Western art had seen since
before Cimabue – so flat indeed that it could hardly contain recognizable images.

In the meantime the other cardinal norms of the art of painting were
undergoing an equally searching inquiry, though the results may not have been
equally conspicuous. It would take me more space than is at my disposal to tell
how the norm of the picture’s enclosing shape or frame was loosened, then
tightened, then loosened once again, and then isolated and tightened once more
by successive generations of Modernist painters; or how the norms of finish, of
paint texture, and of value and color contrast, were tested and retested. Risks
have been taken with all these, not only for the sake of new expression, but
also in order to exhibit them more clearly as norms. By being exhibited and
made explicit they are tested for their indispensability. This testing is by no
means finished, and the fact that it becomes more searching as it proceeds
accounts for the radical simplifications, as well as radical complications, in which
the very latest abstract art abounds.
Neither the simplifications nor the complications are matters of license. On the contrary, the more closely and essentially the norms of a discipline become defined the less apt they are to permit liberties (‘liberation’ has become a much abused word in connection with avant-garde and Modernist art). The essential norms or conventions of painting are also the limiting conditions with which a marked-up surface must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that the further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed. The intersecting black lines and colored rectangles of a Mondrian may seem hardly enough to make a picture out of, yet by echoing the picture’s enclosing shape so self-evidently they impose that shape as a regulating norm with a new force and a new completeness. Far from incurring the danger of arbitrariness in the absence of a model in nature, Mondrian’s art proves, with the passing of time, almost too disciplined, too convention-bound in certain respects; once we have become used to its utter abstractness we realize that it is more traditional in its color, as well as in its subservience to the frame, than the last paintings of Monet are.

It is understood, I hope, that in plotting the rationale of Modernist art I have had to simplify and exaggerate. The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l’œil, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations of a Mondrian still suggest a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye.

One begins to realize that the Neo-Impressionists were not altogether misguided when they flirted with science. Kantian self-criticism finds its perfect expression in science rather than in philosophy, and when this kind of self-criticism was applied in art the latter was brought closer in spirit to scientific method than ever before — closer than in the early Renaissance. That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience, is a notion whose only justification lies, notionally, in scientific consistency. Scientific method alone asks that a situation be resolved in exactly the same kind of terms as that in which it is presented — a problem in physiology is solved in terms of physiology, not in those of psychology; to be solved in terms of psychology, it has to be presented in, or translated into, these terms first. Analogously, Modernist painting asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art — which means its being translated in such a way that it entirely loses its literary character. Actually, such consistency promises nothing in the way of aesthetic quality or aesthetic results, and the fact that the best art of the past seventy or eighty years increasingly approaches such consistency does not change this; now as before, the only consistency which counts in art is aesthetic consistency, which shows itself only in results and never in methods or means. From the point of view of art itself its convergence of spirit with science happens to be a mere accident, and neither art nor science gives or assures the other of anything more than it ever did. What their convergence does show, however, is the degree to which Modernist art belongs to the same historical and cultural tendency as modern science.

It should also be understood that the self-criticism of Modernist art has never been carried on in any but a spontaneous and subliminal way. It has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory. Much has been heard about programs in connection with Modernist art, but there has really been far less of the programmatic in Modernist art than in Renaissance or Academic art. With a few untypical exceptions, the masters of Modernism have betrayed no more of an appetite for fixed ideas about art than Corot did. Certain inclinations and emphases, certain refusals and abstentions seem to become necessary simply because the way to stronger, more expressive art seems to lie through them. The immediate aims of Modernist artists remain individual before anything else, and the truth and success of their work is individual before it is anything else. To the extent that it succeeds as art Modernist art partakes in no way of the character of a demonstration. It has needed the accumulation over decades of a good deal of individual achievement to reveal the self-critical tendency of Modernist painting. No one artist was, or is yet, consciously aware of this tendency, nor could any artist work successfully in conscious awareness of it. To this extent — which is by far the largest — art gets carried on under Modernism in the same way as before.

And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling of anterior tradition, but it also means its continuation. Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art. The making of pictures has been governed, since pictures first began to be made, by all the norms I have mentioned. The Paleolithic painter or engraver could disregard the norm of the frame and treat the surface in both a literally and a virtually sculptural way because he made images rather than pictures, and worked on a support whose limits could be disregarded because (except in the case of small objects like a bone or horn) nature gave them to the artist in an unmanageable way. But the making of pictures, as against images in the flat, means the deliberate choice and creation of limits. This deliberateness is what Modernism harps on: that is, it spells out the fact that the limiting conditions of art have to be made altogether human limits.

I repeat that Modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations. It could be said, rather, that it converts all theoretical possibilities into empirical ones, and in doing so tests, inadvertently, all theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and experience of art. Modernism is subversive in this respect alone. Ever so many factors thought to be essential to the making and
experiencing of art have been shown not to be so by the fact that Modernist art has been able to dispense with them and yet continue to provide the experience of art in all its essentials. That this ‘demonstration’ has left most of our old value judgments intact only makes it the more conclusive. Modernism may have had something to do with the revival of the reputations of Uccello, Piero, El Greco, Georges de la Tour, and even Vermeer, and it certainly confirmed if it did not start other revivals like that of Giotto; but Modernism has not lowered thereby the standing of Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt or Watteau. What Modernism has made clear is that, though the past did appreciate masters like these justly, it often gave wrong or irrelevant reasons for doing so.

Still, in some ways this situation has hardly changed. Art criticism lags behind Modernist as it lagged behind pre-Modernist art. Most of the things that get written about contemporary art belong to journalism rather than criticism properly speaking. It belongs to journalism — and to the intellectual complex from which so many journalists suffer in our day — that each new phase of Modernism should be hailed as the start of a whole new epoch of art marking a decisive break with all the customs and conventions of the past. Each time, a kind of art is expected that will be so unlike previous kinds of art and so ‘liberated’ from norms of practice or taste, that everybody, regardless of how informed or uninformed, will be able to have his say about it. And each time, this expectation is disappointed, as the phase of Modernism in question takes its place, finally, in the intelligible continuity of taste and tradition, and as it becomes clear that the same demands as before are made on artist and spectator.

Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is, among many other things, continuity. Without the past of art, and without the need and compulsion to maintain past standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible.

5 Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) from ‘Commitment’

After the Second World War members of the Frankfurt School, who had been exiled in the USA during the Nazi years, returned to West Germany and re-established the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Adorno became its Director after Horkheimer’s retirement in 1959. Adorno remained hostile to overtly political art, a position which he had initially set out in his dialogue with Walter Benjamin in the 1930s (see Vo7). This debate was given renewed currency after the war by Sartrre’s essay ‘What is Literature?’, which had called for a committed art. In the present text Adorno reaffirms his belief in the critical power of autonomous art, a position which in the later 1960s was to bring him into conflict with a new generation of radical student activists. Adorno’s is not, however, a claim for l’art pour l’art. Rather, it proceeds from an acknowledgement that the moral high ground of commitment was open to claim by the Right as readily as by the Left. Adorno had earlier claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric. Without abandoning this claim he now reread it, not as a total prohibition on art but as a prohibition on committed art. For its very commitment required, as he put it, an entente with the world which was to be affected. The paradoxical result was that only the autonomous work of art could be the site of resistance to the competing interests of a debased reality. Written in 1962 the essay was published in English translation by F. McDonagh in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds.), The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, Oxford, 1978. The present extracts form three of the essay’s four concluding sections.

The Problem of Suffering

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. The question asked by a character in Sartre’s play Mort de Sémélé, ‘Is there any meaning in life when men exist who hate heart people until the bones break in their bodies?’, is also the question whether any art now has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society. But Enzensberger’s retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism. Its own situation is one of paradox, not merely the problem of how to react to it. The abandonment of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; Pascal’s theological saying, On ne doit plus dormir, must be secularized. Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realized this. The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as formalism, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time. Even Schönberg’s Survivor of Warsaw remains trapped in the aporia to which it, autonomous figuration of heteronomy raised to the intensity of hell, totally surrenders. There is something painful in Schönberg’s compositions — not what arouses anger in Germany, the fact that they prevent people from repressing from memory what they at all costs want to repress. It is rather the way in which, by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could stand upright before justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation. Works of less than the highest rank are even willingly absorbed, as contributions to clearing up the past. When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder. There is one nearly invariable characteristic of such literature. It is that it implies, purposely or not, that even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed