

versal, criteria. The “natural laws” of art which Wölfflin recognized in the alternatives chosen by the great historical epochs for him became the true objective of scholarly analysis. He pretended that it was possible to produce a perfect symmetry of vision and structure, and of interpretation and art. But the problem is greater than these objections might suggest. Seeing is surely not merely derived from biological conditions, but rather reflects cultural conventions which, to put it briefly, are not to be explained by the physical structure of the eye. Since vision is in its turn subject to historical conditions, Wölfflin finds himself at a loss to explain its transformation.

The whole topic of historical vision and historical style, obviously, raises still larger issues in the realm of psychology. Already Wölfflin had ventured into a potentially fruitful psychology of forms but did not develop it for fear that it would interfere with his system of humanistic values and aesthetic norms. Yet the crucial problem for any history of forms remained the problem of finding a psychological key to artistic form, a key which would unlock the mystery of the metamorphosis of art. Granted, it is never just pure forms which we see but rather forms already teeming with life and meaning. Thus as soon as artistic form was understood as a mediated reality, the psychological implications of vision could become explosive.

Psychology, however, cannot investigate the cultural communication of reality with its own means, because then it would have to define first what that reality was.⁴⁵ The relationship between the content or subject of an image and its form lies beyond the range of psychology, because one must first know *what* is communicated in an image in order to show *how* it is communicated. The psychology of perception and representation, so brilliantly spoken for in Ernst Gombrich's work, locates the problem in the conventions and transformations of mimesis: the reproduction of nature in the artistic image, the translation

of vision into representation.⁴⁶ It succeeded in correcting the naïve model of an ever more perfect duplication of nature in art by revealing in our conception of nature *conventions*, whose matching and correcting generate stylistic change.

Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* uses such generally valid patterns of perception to explain what takes place in the work of art when it reproduces the world. His “psychology of stylistic change” describes the history of styles (like the histories of taste and fashion) as a history of options for or against possible forms which are then tested against the object (nature).⁴⁷ The history of art is thus construed as a learning process in which the representation of reality is posed as a permanent problem.

It would, however, be an error to reduce the entire problem of artistic form to an act of imitation. Imitation is only measurable where art imitates *nature*. But when art imitates *reality*—social, religious, personal—the constants against which the result of the imitation are to be measured fall away. For reality is always changing. It must always be defined anew before its transmission or imitation can be evaluated.⁴⁸ But then of course each humanistic discipline (social history, intellectual history, and so forth) will insist on defining historical reality in its own way. Thus the art historian finds himself confronted with a methodological controversy which should only prompt him to greater modesty in his own field.

6. Art and Reality

Granted, some theories of art deny that art has anything to do with reality at all. A familiar variant is the view of art as a beautiful illusion which disguises or fancifies reality. A utopian version offers art as an apparition of a possible future, or a promise of personal happiness. But even the positions that see art only as an illusory reality, or only as a projection of a reality, offer an agenda for historical re-

search: for they too interpret reality, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively. Reality materializes first in the mind of the individual who interprets it (in our case the artist), and then again in the mind of the individual who apprehends this interpretation and either accepts or rejects it (in our case the beholder). Artistic mimesis thus always articulates an experience of reality. This reference to reality obtains even in cases of extreme aesthetic camouflaging or encoding. It applies, in ways which were hardly foreseen, to twentieth-century art.⁴⁹ I am thinking of the mystical claims of so-called abstract art to make the invisible visible and to reveal natural laws hidden behind perceived surfaces. Both Max Beckmann when he spoke of transferring "the magic of reality . . . into painting" and Paul Klee when he said, "Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible," were referring art to reality.⁵⁰ Reality is never what it seems to be at first glance. Even the apparent antithesis to abstraction, hyperrealism, is itself just another strategy of perception, and as such not altogether different. For the reproduction of reality is not simply a matter of technical ability. Not even photography, the self-proclaimed medium of objective documentation, kept its promise: instead it became, in the hands and with the eyes of the photographer, a highly individual vehicle for the interpretation of reality. Virtually as many appreciations of photography could be cited as there are ways of seeing and representing the world.⁵¹

In the nineteenth century the artist went out into the open air in order to see nature differently from the way it had been handed down to him by a canon or a workshop tradition. But nature was not the only object: the artist began to analyze contemporary civilization, whose urban and industrial aspects struck him as the quintessence of "the modern." Modern life brought subjects and themes into play unknown to the old academic hierarchy of genres: technology, for example, or the metropolis.

But even naturalism and realism, in the original versions of Courbet and his generation, did not in the long run succeed in providing art—still at the margin of society—with meaning and functions. Every "reproduction" suffered from the sheer inadequacy of reality, or from the mutability of reality, with which it could not keep pace. The ever circulating styles were already compromised by their pluralism and inflation. So arose the desire both for an unspoiled reality as well as for a compelling "truth" in art, to be manifested in an authentic, timeless style. Programmatic intentions were often subject to the utopias which developed with the pure forms of an ideal art. The tension between art and life, artist and public, persisted as the artists retreated into private worlds created only for their own visions.

In the nineteenth century art found itself estranged from ordinary experience and perception and so sought new ways of seeing reality. Disengaged from superficial reproductive tasks and discharged from conventional societal functions, art could formulate its own strategy of perception and cognition of the world. But these new ways were inevitably referred back to the old ways, to the banal, false, and culturally exhausted formulas for the reproduction and experience of reality. Naturalism acceded to the grand claims to objectivity of the natural sciences; symbolism on the other hand maintained its distance from those same claims. Finally, rejecting once and for all a static world view and the conquest of nature through linear perspective, art invented ways of seeing which were pre-linguistic and no longer culturally determined.⁵² The "réalités inconnues" (Monet) are always distinct from a known reality. Although such artists claimed access to a timeless reality, this reality too is ultimately only comprehensible historically. In this sense, Peter Gay, in his book *Art and Act*, reconstructed the historical contexts of Manet, Gropius, and Mondrian. New modes of perception

were tested, both as new approaches to reality, and as approaches to a new reality. The “nouveaux réalistes” sought to resolve the estrangement from mass culture which abstract painting had attained. Provocations and mental and perceptual games obliged the beholder to reflect on his own reality, and at the same time to acknowledge his own expectations from art. Art and life—either in mutual illumination or mutual denial—stood simultaneously at disposal. The history of this confrontation could be extended ad libitum. In our context it bears witness to the importance of speaking about reality whenever we speak about art. This relationship is immanent precisely in the form of the work of art, which either as image or counterimage always participates in a dialogue with a recognizable form of reality. It is supplemented by the diachronic relationship to other statements about reality which the artist encounters in the history of art, and which either correct or confirm him.

7. Art or Work of Art? Artistic Form as Historical Form

At this point in the argument we may agree that art does not merely exist within an internal history of forms exclusive to a particular genre or medium. Indeed, in such a state of isolation it is robbed of the full quota of reality with which it was endowed. Stylistic criticism is pitched at a high level of selection in its interrogation of the work of art, underrating both its claims and its binding force, indeed, selling it short. Art set free in this fashion, even to the idealistic extreme of being removed from the context of style, has always found its panegyrists. Art thus assessed is especially ill suited to a historical treatment. It can become the theme of philosophy but not of historical writing.

This thesis in no way denies the fundamental insight that artistic form survives as an object of contemplation even after the original message has lost its immediate force. For it is precisely this survival of form which con-

stitutes the experience of art in the familiar sense; indeed, the appeal, the fascination of form sets historical questions in motion in the first place. It manifests itself in the work as a creative power, not only to articulate reality but also to transcend it, thus letting the artistic answer to reality endure. Yet this is no excuse for not posing historical questions to the work of art.

The common denominator of the historiography of art had always been, above all, an ideal notion of art which was then explicated through the history of art. The loss of this paradigm did not eliminate the experience of art, but—just as did the loss of a traditional conception of history—it transformed scholarship.⁵³ The discipline won new insights into its material and had to account for these insights with new theories. Only the work of art itself—not a definition of art, whatever it might be—was capable of resisting the pressure of the new questions. This was of course always an object of interest, but now it was seen in an entirely new way. The work of art testifies not to art but to man. And man in his artistic appropriation of the world does not lose contact with the world but rather bears witness to it. He reveals his historicity in his limited world view and limited range of expression. In this sense the work of art is a historical document.

Thus it is understood by Svetlana Alpers when she poses the question “Is Art History?”⁵⁴ In this polemical formulation the work of art, instead of “art,” is put to interrogation and as a “piece of history” restored to that historical territory from which it had been uprooted by the champions of an autonomous art. Autonomous art had been thought of as the bearer of a “higher truth.” The mystery of the creative act itself, removed to a sort of aesthetic no-man’s-land, only fostered this sort of idealism. Thus Alpers could plead for a “demystification” of the creative process.

Artistic form is a *historical* form: it was so often conditioned by genre, material, and technique, but also by con-

tents and functions, that it cannot be extracted from this web as "pure form." No longer can Wölfflin's "inner history" of art, in which "every form works creatively further," be read from form.⁵⁵ Recent concepts such as "iconographic style" or "genre style" correspond to a change in questioning strategies. The new concepts demonstrate that the old notion of a style traveling on a one-way street of formal development has collapsed.⁵⁶ In its place appears the work of art, which occupies the intersection of the general historical and individual lines of development. It is bound as much to a contemporary horizon of experience as to historical traditions.⁵⁷ Just as it was generated by more than other works of art, so it bears witness to more than just art. Countless conditions which entered into it, and effects which proceed from it, converge to a single point, as in a lens, in the work of art.

Several recent studies have tried to relate or coordinate the visual structure of works of art, their aesthetic organization, to more general notions of their time and culture. I only mention the works of Michael Baxandall, such as *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, or Alpers's own much discussed *Art of Describing*.⁵⁸ But there is still another approach to artistic form as a truly historical form. Now that the notion of style, be it the style of an era or the style of an artist, has lost its central status, there has emerged a new interest in what it is that makes an image an image, or to put it differently, how artists have conceived of the aesthetic constitution of their products. Pertinent examples are Michael Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality*, Wolfgang Kemp's *Der Anteil des Betrachters*, and Norman Bryson's *Word and Image*.⁵⁹ For the "figurality" or quality as an image of a painting, as distinct from a text, has had a history of its own which is still largely untold. In writing such a history we find ourselves alongside the artist, tracing the career of the concept of image he was using and sometimes inventing. For it was never just the mate-

rial work as such that he was producing but also a certain conception or definition of what this work was to be. This applies most obviously to the seventeenth century and thereafter when painting became at times its own subject matter, commenting upon itself as art, or as a demonstration of painterly skill, or on the nature of such skill. But the awareness of visual structure as a problem surely predates the moment when the artist was allowed to make it the topic of his creation. The historical change of artistic form, finally, was prepared by a concern both with meaning entering the work from an outside source and with the reproduction of visual truth and "life." If we conceive of form not only as a witness of style but also as a witness of an image of style, then we discover a new historical sequence which makes room for all the various individual concepts of a work.

8. Possible Areas of Art-Historical Research

The project of writing the history of art has survived all too often on the fiction of elevating artistic form to the single hero of the story. But there is no new model in sight which could claim the same comprehensiveness. For the more complex our conception of the work of art and its manifold determinants, the more difficult becomes a synthetic treatment, a narrative still capable of bringing art into the unified perspective of a "history of world art."⁶⁰ Traditional art history, which had achieved precisely this, can serve today only as a foil before which new tasks for empirical research may stand out in relief. Some of these I would like to mention in passing, with no intention of setting out any sort of "program" for future research.

1. The dialogue among the humanistic disciplines is becoming increasingly more important than the independence of the individual disciplines. Theoretical statements from within fields, which especially the younger disciplines have cultivated in hopes of demonstrating their sci-

entific rigor, tend toward closed systems and only hinder this development. Openness to other disciplines is surely to be encouraged, even at the price of professional autonomy.

2. Stylistic history cannot simply be replaced by social history or any other simple explanatory model, though there have been several promising attempts to enlarge traditional models of sociological research in this area.⁶¹ Any approach which neglects the form of the work of art, indeed, fails to make it a central theme of the analysis, is dubious at best. For with this form the work expresses what it has to say. Form is not so easily deciphered as it might at first seem. Nevertheless, functional analysis and reception aesthetics offer the possibility of relating the specific qualities of a given work of art back to the world to which it referred.

3. Reception aesthetics as developed for literary history by Hans Robert Jauss, which is more complex than Gombrich's psychology of style, suggests specific directions for empirical research. With its help the history of forms may be integrated into a historical process in which not only works but also people appear.⁶² Reception aesthetics sketches out historical sequences in which a work is bound not only to its original audience, and not only to previous art, but also to future artists or works. Each new work of art is confirmed or corroborated against a "horizon of expectations." In this way production and reception together effect the historical transformation of art. Above all this procedure brings the original beholder together with the contemporary beholder: the one as cause of the work, the other as source of the question posed to the work. Accordingly, in the "perpetually necessary retelling" of art history, in Jauss's words, the "traditional evaluation and the contemporary testing" of the work must coincide.⁶³ The contemporary interpreter is now influenced not only by the "historical succession" of earlier interpreters but also by his own experience of art. In this way the inquiry con-

stantly finds new directions. With this we arrive at a further aspect.

4. Contemporary art not only violates the frontiers of aesthetic autonomy and repudiates the traditional experience of art but at the same time seeks renewed contact with its own social and cultural environment, resolving thus the celebrated conflict of "life and art." One might single out an analogous tendency in recent art historiography, that trend toward an integral view of things known under the motto of "art in context."⁶⁴ Studies of this kind disclose in historical art precisely that "grounding in life" which contemporary art is so eager for, or show how this relationship to life was later displaced or ideologically deformed. Hence the new attention on the part of historians to the "seam" between art and life.

5. Another experience drawn from contemporary life is the increasing familiarity with technical information and its manipulation through the mass media. This has edged the problem of language and media in general, in ideological as well as theoretical forms (e.g., semiotics), gradually into the foreground of the social and human sciences.⁶⁵ This is not to suggest that historical works of art should be mechanically interrogated as if they were modern media systems, because in the past they functioned altogether differently. On the other hand, the common study of language and art can certainly illuminate historical systems of symbolic communication. Interest in nonverbal languages is growing and correspondingly the understanding of images in conjunction with language finds ever more currency in the dialogue among the disciplines. Art may even be understood as another sort of language. With this I do not mean the conventional metaphor of a poetical "language of art" but rather a system of symbolic communication locked into the forms themselves.⁶⁶

It is no longer necessary today to justify our interest in media, linguistic systems, and symbols. We are sur-

rounded increasingly by images, signs, and sounds with unsettlingly wide ranges of effectiveness, in which, as Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography* detailed, the frontiers between reproduction and reality, medium and fact are blurred.⁶⁷ Contemporary art, too, which responds to similar experiences, is reflecting more and more on symbolic systems—whether images, words, or numerals—which throw light on problems of perception or suggest a new kind of technical “reading.” Modern art early on began the challenge to familiar formulas of seeing and perception. Contemporary art extends this inquiry with its analysis of advertising and other public media, which today all too often replace nature as the dominant experience of our world. In such an environment it is surely legitimate for art history to investigate formulas of perception and media in the historical material, too, though under all necessary precautions.

6. The retrospective on historical art possible today reveals aspects of this art which were simply not yet apparent earlier. In any empirical discipline, the permanently shifting reception of the object of inquiry invites a constant revision: every generation, in interpreting the object, appropriates it anew. Precisely that lack of a social role which distinguishes contemporary from traditional art sharpens our sensitivity to prior functions of art. This discontinuity between the two is not eliminated by the mere fact that art is still produced today.⁶⁸ Rather, this experience conceals the widening gap. It betrays itself in the permanent self-analysis of contemporary art, which has so long been dominated by questions about the very purpose of the production of art. Self-analysis in the sense of self-doubt and even self-criticism—which so often accompanies the consciousness of inherited art history as a burden—is not to be confused with traditional self-reference as described above (pp. 28–29). In such a climate the questions about the functions of historical art assume a special

urgency. Perhaps one day yet a universal history of art will be conceived along these lines.⁶⁹ This would no longer be a morphological sequence of masterpieces and styles but rather a succession of societies and cultures, each with a different repertoire of forms and functions of art.

Our sensitivity to this problem has been more acute ever since art, in Harold Rosenberg’s words, confronted “the dilemma of its own existence in an epoch of new media that have assumed most of art’s functions.”⁷⁰ Already in 1950 Jean Cassou argued in his book *La Situation de l’art moderne* that the medium of film “corresponds most exactly to the modern mentality.” It fulfills the function “which the public ascribes to art, namely to erect an image of the reality in which it lives.”⁷¹ This voice harks from the era of “abstract art as universal language.”⁷² Since then pop art and the “nouveaux réalismes,” up to and including junk art and hyperrealism, have invaded altogether new domains of contemporary reality; as a result the frontiers between “art” and other media have only been further disturbed. In our context this means that art once again, albeit with controversial methods and results, has regained a certain faculty for articulation in face of the world, a faculty which it seems no other medium is capable of replacing. To be sure, these are only experiments within a confusing diversity of contemporary notions of art and other media. The art market and world of collectors only succeed in further obscuring the role of the “visual arts” in our society.

Such insights are bound to affect our perspective on historical art. Even the existence of art can no longer be simply taken for granted, without asking how it came into being or to what tasks it was set. The observation that art once fulfilled other functions than it does today, or that it may have subsequently surrendered some of those functions to other media, suggests a new repertoire of topics for historical research, a repertoire which has of yet hardly

gained a foothold in the discipline. As long as art was considered a natural mode of expression for every epoch—which to be sure has stood in question since Hegel—one needed only to recount its history and extol its achievements, or, as the case may be, lament its current loss. Since we no longer enjoy this confidence in the eternal presence of an immutable art, there is far more justification for curiosity about the earlier history of this art. For only something which is not self-evident mounts real challenges to the understanding. In this sense the newly recognized historicity of art calls for a new audacity, a willingness to penetrate into realms long declared off-limits by the idealistic tradition. At the core of this project is the restoration of the bond between art and the public which makes use of it, and the consideration of how and with what intentions this bond determined artistic form.

9. Art History and Modern Art

Any unified account of the history of art must find room for modern art. Yet conventional introductory textbooks often give the impression that modern art does not exist at all. In the bookstores, meanwhile, it seems as if only books on modern art are published. Evidently the two types of literature have little to do with one another. The reasons for scholarship's neglect of modern art are manifold. The "discontinuity" of which we have spoken commenced not only with the desertion of the traditional genres and the repudiation of the concept of art which they embodied, for example in the first "actions" of Marcel Duchamp. It is equally apparent in the so-called abstract art, which seemed to have renounced art's rightful object. Art historians for the most part declined to take part in modernism's challenge, a challenge which might have inspired a radical reexamination of the orthodox account of Western art. Instead they placed themselves at the mercy of art crit-

ics, who tended simply to propagate or repeat the slogans of the avant-garde.

Granted, Wölfflin published his "grammar" of the abstract qualities of form simultaneously with the appearance of the first abstract paintings. Yet he took no concrete position on contemporary art.⁷³ With exceptions such as Nikolaus Pevsner or Meyer Schapiro, virtually all those art historians who have molded the profile of the discipline steered clear of modern art. Those who did confront modernity either failed to develop general models of interpretation (on the level of Wölfflin's "Grundbegriffe") or else practiced two different models of historical treatment simultaneously. Thus to the rupture of art in the modern era corresponds an analogous breach in art-historical scholarship. Conservative voices, to be sure, used to lament the betrayal of tradition in modern art, and thus admitted recent history to their accounts as an unfortunate aberration.⁷⁴ The champions of modernism used tradition in the opposite way: to justify the new in terms of the old. But even they did not continue the history of art "under the unity of the problem"; still less did they ask how modern art might have altered our understanding of premodern art.

We are always given the impression that one history of art ends just where the other begins. The "second history of art" had its zero hour under the spell of early avant-garde criticism and in the proximity of the *Refusés*. Since then modern art has certainly been historically treated, and with the greatest meticulousness. It is left to a few minds with imagination, and with a faith in the perpetual metamorphosis of an eternal art, to make sense of the process as a whole.⁷⁵ In the end this history is still just as distinct from the traditional history of art as the artists themselves wanted to be from traditional art. But ever since the avant-garde itself became tradition, the historical

model for the treatment of modern art which it inspired is no longer binding. Thus an art history becomes possible which shares neither the sacred ideals of the old art history—whether of classicism in Renaissance art or of the spiritual power of medieval art—nor the faith in an unceasing progress of the modernist art history. Instead art history is free to measure tradition against the modernist critique, and at the same time to hold modern art up to the canon established by tradition; above all it can remove the barrier between the two, a barrier which only conceals false diagnoses on both sides. The time seems particularly ripe for such an endeavor, now that so many facts have been accumulated, again on both sides, which contradict the familiar patterns of understanding. This situation has only made it clearer that the two art histories have been sustained by different traditions of evaluation and narration, traditions which are fundamentally incompatible. The pre-modern tradition, isolated by the wall of modernism, became either obsolete or sacrosanct, while modern art itself seemed only to consist of denials of tradition, to such an extent that its response to tradition, where this did occur, was no longer even perceptible. In the meantime it has become clear that the “tradition in the new” was just as important as Harold Rosenberg’s “tradition of the new.”⁷⁶ We are led to wonder whether it might be possible to apply similar standards and address similar questions to both older and modern art.

Indeed, something very like this was undertaken earlier in the century, although under different premises. When modern art (from impressionism to cubism) had its first impact on art-historical writing, its integration seemed simply a matter of adopting the proper perspective, possibly a new perspective, on the previous history of art. The rupture between tradition and modernism would then figure merely as another phase in art’s never-ending cycle of

transformation. To this end Julius Meier-Graefe traced the “evolution of modern art” back to the Renaissance and beyond.⁷⁷ Werner Weisbach, following up on the ideas of the Vienna School of art history, found impressionism to be a general “problem of painting in antiquity and modernity”; he insisted on the unity of artistic problems and thus of art as such.⁷⁸ Modern art did not betray but rather perpetuated tradition. And a constant notion of art promised to safeguard art history’s object. It was left to a handful of historians, such as Max Dvořák, to warn against the comfortable fiction of an eternal art: for in fact the very concept of art, Dvořák pointed out, was subject to historical change.⁷⁹ Nevertheless the idea of a “continuous chain” of evolution—as Hans Tietze phrased it—remained popular. Tietze, for his part, shifted the discussion to the problem of our own attitude toward historical art, altogether different from our attitude to yesterday’s modernism, and again different from our attitude to truly contemporary art.⁸⁰ But then the aesthetic appreciation of older art (via modern experience, as Tietze saw it) is not precisely the problem under discussion here, the problem facing contemporary scholarship.

A generation later it was no longer possible to deny that modern art had deserted the familiar territory of older art, be it the content of traditional iconography, the unidirectional evolution of style, or the mimetic function. Meyer Schapiro could relate the old and the new only by positing an irreversible “revolution” and by abandoning any dreams of harmony.⁸¹ The “self-sufficiency of forms and colors” was no product of an orderly evolution but rather the desperate self-expression of the individual in the face of modernity. Paintings recalled tradition by remaining “the last hand-made personal objects within our culture.” But they no longer served communication, and even consciously resisted mass communication. Instead they offered a last

refuge for “communion and contemplation,” an argument (and a concept) borrowed from nineteenth-century romanticism.

Schapiro was describing in these remarks of 1957 an actual episode in modern art: the emotional fundamentalism of the New York School. Only a few years later technology and mass culture reappeared in contemporary art. The self-reference of art, and thus the built-in retrospective on tradition, gave way to a reference to the culture of advertising and technology, especially in the United States, where European traditions sooner lost their dominance. The notion of a “pure art”—together with “anti-art” as its mirror image—dissolved when artistic products, whether displayed in museums or not, came to resemble applied art or everyday objects.

The question of what art has been in history, and whether it at all resembles this historical entity in our own time, hinges on our understanding of modern art. Scholars’ answers will differ according to respective backgrounds and dates of publication. Werner Hofmann, in his 1966 book on “the foundations of modern art,” takes a conventional postwar position when he draws attention to the “great realism” and the “great abstraction” culminating in the 1920s.⁸² This double-sidedness of modern art, directed either toward modern life or toward “pure art,” reflects in his view the dual heritage of Western art, which after centuries under the Renaissance ideals of illusionism and mimesis, discovers a new “affinity” to medieval art. In fact, already in the 1920s medieval art had been called in as a justification for expressionism and, in general, for spiritual values in modern art. But clearly the argument is of extremely limited applicability, for it rests on only a partial analogy. Hofmann’s arguments, despite his protests to the contrary, still revolve around formal structures and their transformation. Ten years later Hofmann expressed second thoughts about the official image of mod-

ern art, as it had been glorified by the commentators of the avant-garde and collected by museums.⁸³ He concludes that the orthodox account of a progressive evolution no longer offers any stable orientation, and that the concept of autonomous “art,” along with its rank within our culture’s system of values, has lost its clear outlines.⁸⁴ Again, the problem of how art history is to “explain” the continuity of an ongoing history of art appears unsolved, or even no longer solvable. And if it is unsolvable, then the consequences for our prospect upon previous models of art historical narrative will be grave. We can hardly close our eyes to a contemporary confrontation with the inherited subject of our discipline—art—for the mere reason that it presents us with problems of a new and unwelcome sort.

■

This call for a synthetic treatment of older and modern art, which is by no means yet a program, already begs a number of objections. Is it at all possible to embrace in the same conspectus traditional and modern art, so profoundly divided? And what does one gain in the end beyond a confirmation of their differences? In order to meet these objections we ought to characterize again the dilemma of the contemporary interpreter.

Traditional and modern art are certainly not to be thought of as a single entity. Rather, they should become the object of questions which, by virtue of the retrospective view possible today, admit them both as historical phenomena. Once they *both* become tradition and no longer bear witness against each other, we are relieved of the burden of playing them off against each other as cultural symbols. We can no longer labor under the illusion that we still “possess” or “represent” modernism, but rather must acknowledge to ourselves that we have already attained a historical distance from certain aspects of modernist art, a distance which until now we have only been accustomed to

with older art. This does not mean that we are to level off the gradient between older and modern art, as postmodernist art sometimes seeks to do. Rather, that gradient can only really be surveyed when the interpreter must no longer seek upon it a standpoint for himself and his personal aesthetic convictions. Once the opposition against tradition becomes itself tradition, traditional art no longer appears in the same light. One cannot appeal to modern art unchallenged, because it no longer leaves us with firm convictions of what "art" is. At the same time we must dispense with the notion of a closed canon of classic art as it appeared to nineteenth-century eyes. The reflection on art which is possible today alters the image of art which was handed down to us with the history of the discipline. It is now being asked how art came into being in the first place, and what it was meant to be in other cultures and societies. New questions emerge whenever the old, easy certainties falter: questions which have never been asked before, never subjected to the familiar tools and procedures of evolutionism, biographical analysis, or iconology, questions which therefore guarantee no safe answers. Such questions will probably never profit the art market or the organizers of exhibitions, for their answers will not oblige anyone to change the labels on works of art.

Art history's difficulties with modern art date back to the early nineteenth century, when art lost its traditional public functions. Art compensated for this loss with a reflection on its own aims and means, on the artistic realm. It justified its survival by insisting on absolute autonomy. Art history emerged at the time as a new branch of humanist scholarship, and appeared to follow the same path, isolating the artistic realm as its object of study. But this impression is misleading. For in fact art history undertook to canonize the very tradition which the living art of the time was trying to decanonize. Art history's intentions seemed to resemble those of art; in fact they were applied to

historical instead of contemporary art. Art history strove to restore the values of a lost tradition, while living art either escaped the inherited canon by means of a deliberate modernism, or else made this canon the very object of its reflection, of its comments, doubts, and desperate affirmations. The two projects shared only their faith in the genius of the artist; they parted ways when art history first explored the evolution of national schools and sought universal principles of artistic creation. Clearly such contrary aims would not lend themselves to an easy synthesis.

But this is only part of the problem of evaluating art from before and after 1800. An art which is already produced under the welcome or unwelcome awareness of its own history, which it then seeks either to escape or to reapply, is not very well suited to an art history interested in demonstrating stable principles or evolutionary patterns. What the modern artist either emulated or rejected (for example the ideal image of the Renaissance artist), the new art historian hoped to make accessible as a living reality by providing historical information and reliable tools of aesthetic appreciation. The possibility of applying this art history to Ingres instead of to Raphael was never even raised. It was left to art criticism to fill the gap, at least until art criticism itself, much later, was embraced by art history as a source for a historical treatment of modern art.

Another problem is best illustrated by comparing art history to modern literary history. The latter has explored Mallarmé's concept of a new poetic language or the vicissitudes of the modern novel—to offer only two examples—in view of the structure of the modern mind, and with considerable success. Literature, to be sure, has never been threatened by the loss of its medium, that is, language as a common denominator. In the visual arts, by contrast, the tableau and the statue lost their status as stable media; indeed, the activity of painting itself and even the notion of personal creation found themselves in jeopardy. Surely