

Dialectical Narcissism in the Visual Art of Modernity

Harvey Vincent Giesbrecht

A Thesis  
in  
the

Humanities Doctoral Programme

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at  
Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, Canada

December 2005

© Harvey Giesbrecht



Library and  
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-16307-8*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-16307-8*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Olivier Asselin for his encouragement in the initial phase of this project. The members of my committee each contributed essential perspectives. Charles Levin and I had many animated discussions on psychoanalysis and art, specifically related to this thesis as well as general discussions in which he shared his exceptional synthetic understanding of psychoanalysis and culture. Kristina Huneault's infectious enthusiasm, knowledge of both art history and psychoanalysis, and careful study of my ideas were invaluable. I also very much appreciated Martin Lefebvre's supportive encouragement and close attention to the coherence of the overall argument as well as his insights into problem areas.

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Judy Vogel, whose insightful support was central to its completion, and to my daughter Maia.

## Abstract

### **Dialectical Narcissism in the Visual Art of Modernity**

Modernist art and contemporary body and performance art seem radically different in their basic motivational structure, in their reception, in their contents, and in the theoretical discourse that they engender. Modernism is conventionally seen as a response to modernity that enhanced the unique aesthetic qualities of visual art, and because of that disposition, was frequently in opposition to the main thrust of both institutional academic art as well as developing modern society. This opposition was characteristically manifested as the avant-garde, a direction that progressively denigrated representational functions of art. Body and performance art, and other postmodern strategies brought back representation, especially of the body, with a stunning directness, eroticism, and frequently sadomasochistic performative challenges to the canon and modernist aesthetics. This thesis argues that narcissism as a drive operates dialectically within both these major trends as a fundamental unifying motivating force. The theme of narcissism is developed in psychoanalytic terms, not as character pathology of artists, but as a core idealizing drive central to the visual creative realm. The narcissistic drive imparts its qualities also to visuality itself, as a force underpinning scopical regimes. The idealizing effects of the drive assert themselves, paradoxically, also in recent developments such as “relational” art.

## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

Outline of the argument for narcissism	1
Methodological comments	
<i>Pathography, intention, and causality</i>	16
<i>The distinctiveness of psychoanalytic art history and theory:</i>	
<i>Interpretation of the unconscious</i>	23
<i>Interiority: Ontology and the psychic apparatus</i>	26
<i>Psychoanalytic models: Drive theory</i>	29
<i>Normativization and drive theory</i>	30
<i>The question of the subject of narcissism</i>	32
<i>Reductionism</i>	39

### 1 – EMPIRICAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF NARCISSISM

#### Part One: The Phenomenon of Narcissism

The observational clinical basis	43
The phenomena of narcissism in visual art: preliminary examples	47
<i>Explicit imagery of the myth of Narcissus</i>	47
<i>Mirrors, reflections, and reflexivity</i>	48
<i>The Uncanny</i>	54
<i>The culture of the copy</i>	60
<i>“Canny” narcissism</i>	60
Narcissism and utility	61
Privileged aesthetic spaces: symbolic and institutional	65
<i>Religion</i>	66

#### Part Two: A Short History of Narcissism

Variations of the Narcissus theme in antiquity	71
Narcissus within Neoplatonism	72
Christ, Narcissus, and interiority	75
The medieval period	78
The emergence of modern narcissism	80
Clinical reflections: Kristeva and Chasseguet-Smirgel	84

### 2 – NARCISSISM BOUND AND UNBOUND

Subjectivism	88
<i>Definitions of subjectivism</i>	97
<i>The tradition of philosophical subjectivism</i>	99
Transcendentalism and narcissism	108

<i>The Freudian subject</i>	113
<i>Narcissism – neurosis of choice</i>	117
Individualism	118
<i>Historicist narcissism</i>	127

### 3 – THE THEORY OF NARCISSISM

The psychoanalytic concept of narcissism	130
Post-Freudian theories of narcissism	141
Grunberger, pre-natal elation, and the drive of narcissism	142
Drive theory	147
Sublimation	153
Ocularcentrism and the narcissism of visual art	153

### 4 – NARCISSISM IN THE VISUAL ART OF MODERNITY: MODERNISM

Modernity, modernization, and modernism	157
Art for art's sake	162
<i>Psychoanalysis and art for art's sake</i>	166
Modernist practice	170
<i>Derealization</i>	171
<i>Colour field painting</i>	173
<i>Barnett Newman</i>	175
<i>Greenberg, Fried, Cavell</i>	177
<i>Flatness</i>	181
The “white cube”	181
Modernism and the loss of the ideal	183
The “anti-aesthetic”	190

### 5 – CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE APHANISIS OF MODERNISM

Aphanisis	196
Contemporary practice	198
<i>Use of the self</i>	199
<i>Narcissism and personal identity</i>	200
<i>Narcissism and identity politics</i>	202
<i>Exhibitionism</i>	203
<i>Regression</i>	205
<i>Aphanisis, narcissism, and sadomasochistic art</i>	209
Eclectic narcissism	215
<i>Helen Chadwick</i>	215
<i>Marina Abramovic</i>	217
<i>Abramovic and auratic retrieval</i>	220
Art theory	221
The drive of narcissism and its function of governance	225
The beautiful and the sublime	227

## 6 – THE NARCISSISTIC UNDERPINNING OF THE REGIMES OF VISION

Culture and its scopic regimes	229
<i>Interiority versus “metaphysics” of interiority</i>	234
<i>Baroque regimes</i>	239
<i>The dialectic of regimes</i>	245
The acoustic and the visual	245
Scopic regimes and their cultures	246
The aura and its relation to the regime	249
Narcissism, scopic regimes, and the aura as <i>l’objet petit a</i>	253

## 7 – NARCISSISM AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

The legacy of the critical historians of art	254
Relational art: Corrupted Marxism or a new paradigm for art?	257
Socialist concerns of relational art: residual Marxist idealization	269
Dialectic of the boundary	275
Parasitic idealization	276
Narcissism of relational art	280

## CONCLUSION

The empirical evidence for narcissism	281
Recapitulation of theoretical arguments	282
Picasso, <i>Guernica</i> and the role of narcissism in political art	286
Lukács, the fantasy of transparent relationality, and the centrality of narcissism	295

LIST OF FIGURES	300
-----------------	-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	301
--------------	-----

## INTRODUCTION

### Outline of the argument for narcissism

In his work *Der Augenturm* (The Eye Tower) (fig. 1) Dieter Appelt photographed himself nude, sitting within the top, basket-like portion of a tower made of branches.

Approximately six metres high, the tower is built over a lake. The ambiance speaks of a self in isolation – looking out into the world from a superior and removed vantage point – but a self also caught in the situation of being an object which is looked at. The figure here is once again the isolated artist, Appelt, having reworked the mythology of the alienated artist/genius into a personal, now fragile, version of that trope. Within this piece we see evidence of the drive of narcissism – the (conscious and/or unconscious) preoccupation with the conditions of the self, among which is the fantasy of the ideal self. While visual art has often or perhaps always struggled with the search for the ideal (within the beautiful or the sublime), the art of modernity translates that struggle into personal terms – what is here called narcissism. The structure of Appelt's tower is almost pathetically fragile, evoking the image of a nest. Within this nest the artist's apparent self-enclosed self-sufficiency extends the narcissistic associations by recalling Freud's metaphor of the egg as the state of narcissism.<sup>1</sup>

*Der Augenturm* may possibly extend the allusion to narcissism through the play of “eye” and “I,” adding to the narcissistic feature of the artist's using his own body as part of the actual artwork. A tower at the water's edge suggests a lighthouse, informing ships of the presence and situation of landforms, shorelines, hidden rocks or shallows.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII, p. 219n4. All future references to Freud's works will be indicated by ‘S.E.’



## Introduction

Here, however, an artwork takes the place of the lighthouse. Is the substitution an unconscious idealization of the role of art – a guiding or warning function? This substitution could be thought of not just as an artwork replacing a lighthouse, but more generally as art replacing utility. In fact, this thesis will explore in some depth the idea of art as anti-utilitarian, as a central feature of the drive of narcissism.

This thesis argues that the fantasies involved in the psychoanalytic concept of dialectical narcissism contribute to understanding the visual art phenomena of modernity. Narcissism exists in a variety of manifestations, each having to do with the insistent expression of a particular version of intense and idealizable subjecthood. The term narcissism refers to a large number of attitudes and behaviours, which involve the following observable phenomena: self-promotion, self-discovery, identity formation, self-reference, and self-maintenance. Psychoanalytic understanding reduces them to deeper unconscious components such as fantasies of perfection, omnipotence, grandiosity, self-sufficiency, solipsism, abolition of objects, and idealizations. There are also fantasies of merger that may be seen as somewhat paradoxical strategies of solipsism.

Appelt's work also allegorizes a central dynamic present in many works of art – it is simultaneously intimate and distant. Although the artist's nude state suggests intimacy, he is situated high up and out of reach, as if to retract the offer of intimate engagement. This play on distance and intimacy involves the work in the dynamics of the auratic and the transcendent, terms that will be explored in detail in the chapters that follow.

## Introduction

The fate of the auratic, the transcendent, and the spiritual/moral are all linked in the developments of visual art and the surrounding discourse in modernity, and can be schematized in a preliminary way as follows:

- Narcissism is a key concept in understanding the visual art of modernity, a concept that bridges the strikingly dissimilar practices and theory of modernism on the one hand, and contemporary body and performance art, on the other.
- Narcissism historically comes to replace institutionalized and otherwise “bound” forms of idealization (religion, art for art’s sake, the Romantic cult of the artist/genius).
- Narcissism appears in modernity after certain conditions of possibility have been created, through the development of a robust subjectivism that penetrates more or less every discourse in Western philosophy, and socially, through the development of individualism.
- In *modernist* art, narcissism is expressed in one form; an emblematic version of it is eradication of objects. The visual art that most clearly instantiates this is formalist modernist work from approximately 1940 to 1960.
- In *contemporary* visual art, narcissism is expressed in a dialectically opposed form: eroticized embrace of many objects, and conscious promotion of immanence and unconscious retention of transcendence. Body and performance art from 1960 to 1995 is especially relevant to this study.

## Introduction

- Narcissism as a core force will be evident not only in modernism and the postmodern period of body and performance art, but also as a force continuing to assert itself in the new forms of “relational” and social art emergent in the past few decades.
- The pervasiveness of the narcissistic drive in modernist formalism, body and performance art, and relational/political art leads to the possibility that vision itself is a highly narcissistic modality.
- The ruptures and discontinuities observed in modern art are less the result of repression/de-repression than the consequence of a dialectic reworking of narcissistic strategies to find new idealizations when a particular modality becomes exhausted.
- Narcissistic drives are seen in motivational terms but are compatible with other art historical and art theoretical forces. This compatibility may involve the furthering of an aesthetic or political agenda, or the aesthetic or political agenda may enhance the narcissism. Aesthetic narcissism may bolster masculinism, feminism, or attempt to wrest itself free in an idealized way entirely from sexist/sexual considerations.
- Narcissism will be not be viewed pejoratively in terms of character psychopathology, but as a drive or psychic force essential to the creation of visual art.

*Der Augenturm* can be kept in mind as an emblem in which reside the deeper associations of narcissism, whose working definition will be developed later. Narcissism will be shown to involve not only fantasies about the self but also a way of seeing,

## Introduction

underpinning “regimes of vision” (a term that has been applied to perspectivalism), and, most importantly, an expression of resistance. In its most basic form, this resistance is against the social order and results in either utopian attempts to reform it, or narcissistic attempts to evade, defeat, or transcend it. I argue that in the visual practices of modernity there is evidence of this deep and perhaps unradicable resistance, which by means of narcissism as a drive aims to express or keep alive some form of the ideal. This ideal appears at times as transcendent, but also in the recent past as the abject and is easily disguised within the fold of the relational to which it will always hold an ambivalent connection.

The last five or six decades have seen the theory and criticism of art, the practice of art history, and the practice of visual art itself undergo important or even convulsive changes. Modernism, with its avant-gardes and manifestos, evolved in a direction of progressive de-realization<sup>2</sup> until formalist trends within it culminated in eradication, or at least reinterpretation, of content in favour of pure aesthetic form – for example, the colour fields of Barnett Newman or the *White on White* paintings of Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>3</sup> A dramatic reintroduction of the object and the body occurred in the decades after 1960 with body and performance art. With that development, the search for a pure aesthetic was almost totally abandoned or at least significantly marginalized, and

---

<sup>2</sup> “De-realization” will be used in a specific way to describe the trend toward abstraction within modern art.

<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that within the colour field, the content *is* the colour – or in its absence, the content could be that very absence. But here the merging of form and content to an absolute oneness becomes the endpoint, and in fact such a perfect merging was accomplished by Yves Klein in the exhibition *L'exposition du vide* (Paris, 1958), which consisted of an empty gallery. The work's form was “absence” as was its content. On a continuum, this is more or less the endpoint of de-realization – more or less, because a conceptual version of such an “exhibition” could exist in someone's mind without going to the trouble of inviting guests to the gallery.

## Introduction

visual art became a performative celebration of the physical, with explicit and frequently scatological challenges to the canons of art history and theory.

With the appearance of dramatically changed visual art practices, and the apparent rupture in the form and content of visual art, various theorists and historians seemed compelled to formulate apocalyptic declarations. Not only has painting been declared dead innumerable times (Crimp 1981; it had already been declared dead by Laroche in 1839 at the birth of photography), but the larger realm of art and art theory had been given the death sentence by critics of markedly differing persuasion, such as Arthur Danto (*After the End of Art*, 1997) Donald Kuspit (*The End of Art*, 2004), and Victor Burgin (*The End of Art Theory* 1986). These positions can also be considered against the backdrop of the Hegelian *Auflosung* (dissolution) of art or *Das Ende* (the end) of Romantic art; another death<sup>4</sup> after *Geist* is fully revealed in its historical sojourn through Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic art.<sup>5</sup>

Kuspit sees an entropic process in both recent art making and aesthetics that logically concludes with a total loss of aesthetic value – and thus for Kuspit – the end of art. Danto also views the current situation of pluralism and heterogeneity as an end of art because the aesthetic theory that formerly determined and limited the possibilities of visual art has finally exhausted itself in its quest to define what art is or should be. This exhaustion occurred when pop art showed that art could be anything – and anything could be art. These two positions coincide, since there is no need for the term “art” if either nothing is art or anything could be art. Danto, however, overestimates the freedom

---

<sup>4</sup> Although Hegel does not use a formulation as concrete as “death of art,” the implications are clear.

<sup>5</sup> To the list of apocalyptic declarations could be added Fukuyama’s “end of history.”

## Introduction

involved in the “could.” What, asks Peter Burger, marks the difference between Campbell soup cans in the grocery store and Warhol’s *Campbell Soup Cans*?

It is well known that Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* are very similar to Campbell soup cans. And that’s exactly what makes them so confounding. Here we have a mere duplicate with all the rights of an original. The subject has put a line through its ability to express itself in a work of art. But it is precisely through this gesture of self-effacement that it gains an aura which far outshines that of an artistic ego still living off its own powers ... Here we come up against what I want to call the dialectic of the boundary. Borders such as those between art and non-art, or fiction and reality, do not disappear as easily as theorists of the post-modern suppose. They exist, instead, constantly under the sign of their own disappearance (Burger 1991, p. 5).

Burger’s analysis of the dialectic of the boundary will be taken up at a later point in the discussion of the merging of art and life as seen in the theory and practice of “relational” art. Here, however, his comment serves to draw our attention to the covert idealization in positions such as Danto’s, inasmuch as it expresses the idea that the attempt to move beyond theory generates, as Burger puts it, an “aura that far outshines that of an artistic ego.” Whereas each wave of the avant-garde rose in opposition to a previous practice, style, or limited area of art, now the vision encompasses the complete overthrow of the entire corpus of antecedent theory-laden art. In that sense, it is more idealistic than anything we have yet seen. For Kuspit, idealization remains in his hopes for a redemptive retrieval of value in alternatives to “post art” (his term for the non-art of postmodernity) such as the “New Old Masters.”

Art history conventionally theorizes the perceived demise of modernism and its replacement by heterogeneous practices, especially body art, by invoking the Duchampian challenge to traditional aesthetics as the central explanatory factor of these changes. The Duchampian paradigm has been put to a multitude of uses, many of which

## Introduction

lead to “apocalyptic” results, and has been linked to a variety of resistances and/or reactions, frequently Marxist, but almost always questioning authenticity and authorship. Although there is an abundance of theory within modernism, and also within postmodern practice, there is no adequate *bridging* theory. In this project, a psychoanalytic theory of the narcissistic drive in modern art will be developed by adding a psychoanalytic dimension to the understanding of each of these pathways. In addition, extreme “apocalyptic” critical positions will themselves be seen as part of a process made intelligible by psychoanalytic investigation. Modernist theorists – Clement Greenberg (1961, 1965), the “early” Michael Fried (1965, 1980), Stanley Cavell (1984), and others – had defended their aesthetic positions both as inevitable and desirable, against positions and practices they understood to be regressive, ill-informed or simply bad art. Postmodernist theory often merely critiques the inadequacies of modernist theory and practice, frequently from polemical and rhetorical positions (feminist, anticolonialist, and other significant postmodernist political standpoints). The declaration of these “deaths” also presents a special challenge to theorists, since the very means by which they might express themselves is also declared dead. Clearly, this is rhetorical hyperbole; art continues to be made and people make aesthetic distinctions. The “deaths” themselves need to be brought into some framework of explanation and understanding. The psychoanalytic theory of narcissism, in its dialectical form, will meet the challenge of providing a bridging theory since narcissism, as a drive, has a certain transhistorical constancy, which will be discovered to bind diverse practices together.

## Introduction

One notable exception is Hal Foster (1996), who does attempt to provide an overarching, bridging account.<sup>6</sup> He sees in postmodern practices some sense of the partial completion of strategies begun in modernist avant-gardes. For example, the 1920s Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko is echoed by the constructions of Carl Andre in the late 1960s; Vladimir Tatlin in the 1920s has a counterpart in Dan Flavin in the early 1970s. Historical and neo-avant-gardes challenge institutional art, high culture, commodification, the cult of the artist-genius, and the separation of art and life. These repetitions are strictly speaking not merely repetitions: Foster identifies the disappearance and return of ideas, forms, and styles in recent decades as the result of the process of repression and return of the repressed, in keeping with his deployment of the Freudian notion of “deferred action.” The reappearance signals the true nature of the “original,” yet never accomplishes complete capture; a dialectical process is at work and as such, the genealogies of artists and art-making creatively reveal new aspects of art. Current work can then be thought of as innovative rather than a tiresome compulsion to pastiche the historical past. In this respect, Foster differs markedly from Peter Burger (1984), who argues that the avant-garde has passed through three historical phases, in which the central project of a critique of bourgeois autonomous aesthetics has essentially failed. As Foster points out, for Burger, the repetition of the historical avant-garde in a neo-avant-garde is therefore an even worse failure; the avant-garde has moved from “tragedy” to “farce.”

---

<sup>6</sup> Other commentators have also attempted to think through alternatives to apocalyptic approaches. Peter Burger, Christa Burger, Andrew Benjamin, and others present arguments in response to those who see the demise of traditional aesthetics either as an outcome consistent with Hegelian thought or as a partly failed or partly successful Marxist critique. See Benjamin and Osborne 1991.



## Introduction

Foster “rescues” art from that pessimistic conclusion by proposing that the dialectical work of the avant-garde is never complete. If repression is in some sense operative in the early twentieth century, the partial lifting of which explains re-occurrences, re-workings, and re-appearances, what are the roots of that repression in the first place? What was being repressed and why? Since it is the (Lacanian) Real and the body that have “returned,” evidently it was the Real and the body that were being repressed within modernism. Foster confuses the issue, however, by claiming it is the avant-garde itself that is repressed because “it is traumatic – a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it” (1996, p. 29). A psychoanalyst would define repression as a term that describes an unconscious psychic strategy necessary to protect a subject from overwhelming anxiety or pain. But here the traumatic agent seems to be the same as what is repressed. To simplify and hopefully clarify matters, one could posit two causal agents and two effects. First, we could invoke Adorno’s notion of massive trauma to the symbolic order by the Holocaust, after which art is felt to be impossible. There the trauma arises as an almost unimaginable breakthrough of id aggression despite an advanced and sophisticated social “ego.” Repression could be seen as caused by massive anxiety about the aggressive potential of the body. Second, the avant-garde had itself begun a process of eliminating the sensuous body and the Real well before the Holocaust occurred. This process has little to do with repression, but everything to do with the vicissitudes of another drive, narcissism.

This idea is actually suggested, but not realized, by Foster’s account. The appearances, disappearances, and re-appearances within modern art are importantly linked with the dynamics of the “auratic” experience, whose threatened loss is described

## Introduction

by Walter Benjamin, and made even more infamous by Andy Warhol. “They didn’t want my product. They kept saying we want your aura” (Foster, 1996 p. 114). A psychoanalytic understanding of the aura sheds light on the problems with Foster’s argument, that is, that the aura can be understood as one of the manifestations of the narcissistic drive within visual art, related to the wish for the ideal and the experiences of idealization. This interpretation of the aura will be defended at a later point. In this view, the wish for the auratic experience will not disappear, because the narcissistic wishes from which it is derived will continue to be a feature of human life. The auratic, of necessity for its survival, must be cycled through different forms, as conditions such as commodification erode its status. Foster correctly perceives this cyclicity as a dialectical process.

Within the diachronic dynamic of disappearance and return, however, even the most avant-garde practices are co-opted into the institution, into cultism, and into elitism and commodification. No matter what the critical strategy (neo-avant-garde, appropriation, critique of originality, minimalism, pop, to name a few), the art object/practice begins to manifest some form of fetishism. Jeff Koons, for example, who cynically exploits the process of fetishizing the object by means of staged Duchampian manoeuvres, ends up himself as a fetishized figure. As Foster claims, the continual recoding of fetishized signs within the “art economy which trades in commodities and a political economy that circulates signs” (1996, p.116) leads to an aesthetics of cynicism (both about ideological protest and art itself), to reactionary infantilism, and to an embrace of the real, often in the form of the abject. For Foster, this does not signal the end or exhaustion of art, painting, or sculpture, however, but rather points to ongoing

## Introduction

moments of endless creative re-workings. I can agree with Foster's cautious optimism, but attribute the creativity to the vicissitude of the drive.

The drive, precisely through its vicissitudes, that is, its variable expression, will be shown to bridge the art practices and theory of modernism and those of contemporary and body art. The idealizing wishes of narcissism will be shown as equally, although differently, present in both categories,<sup>7</sup> modernist and contemporary. Narcissism will be revealed as an underlying aspect of the return of the Real and the body, a motive for the perennial re-appearance of the aura, and the wish for transcendence, and above all, a fundamental motive within the challenge to the idea of the aesthetic itself. The last idea seems intuitively to be the least likely, since conventional thinking about the "overthrow" of the aesthetic is precisely that what is being rejected is the hegemonic power of idealization, expressed always through economic power, masculinism, or other forms of subjectivist domination. The argument here is that the underlying narcissistic drive is more primary and it has, after modernism, merely redefined itself.

The aura and its dynamic throughout the period of art history under consideration is related to another issue, that of transcendence. In an additional relevant study of the transition from modernism to postmodernism, Suzi Gablik (1984) tries to cope with her own ambivalence about the attributes of modernism and their counterparts in postmodernism. Individualism as ever greater self-reflexivity in modernism becomes a mere exercise of entitlement disguised as professionalism as artists become co-opted into

---

<sup>7</sup> I will not attempt a robust periodization, because part of the argument is that periodization of the modern era into modernism and postmodernism is reconfigured into dynamics of the drive. For purposes of demarcation, however, modern practices and theory before 1960 (that is, 1850–1960) are distinguished from those beginning in 1960 to the present. A discussion of the terms modern, modernity, and modernism will be taken up in chapter 4.

## Introduction

the economic engine of the hugely successful art market in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> She looks back with nostalgia to modernism: “The *engagement* of modernism, even in its most ‘alienated’ manifestations of art for art’s sake or anti-art, always involved a negative attitude toward bourgeois society: refusal of easy success, dissatisfaction with the values of the marketplace, and that permanent revolution waged against the tempting habit of conformity” (p. 74). Yet she agrees with the basic Marxist critique of that art: “Marxist aesthetics demand that art illuminate social relationships and help us to recognize and change social reality” (p. 25). On the other hand, both Marxism and postmodernism are decidedly secular, and the moral/transcendent centre of traditional art is also painfully absent. According to Gablik, a renewed resistance to commodification, to the excess of freedom in pluralism, and to the artist as charismatic marketer (via the gallery system) would clear the way for a wished-for transformative retrieval of “spiritual dignity” (Gablik’s expression, p. 124) But a move such as this sets up the conditions for aesthetic alienation once more, since any consistent resistance would simply bracket off a selective realm again, repeating the “error” of modernism.

What Gablik’s analysis lacks is a discussion of the dynamics of the wish for idealization in both modernism and postmodernism. In modernism, the search for autonomy and purity is the attempt to protect the transcendent, an act that is carried out by the dynamic drive of narcissism. The very same force, in a dialectically opposing version, remains active in the postmodern, however, now expressing itself, as we shall

---

<sup>8</sup> Co-optation in some cases began earlier with Picasso and Dali, whose productions were at times geared to a form of mass production. Picasso made easel drawings in which he lightly embossed the paper beneath the drawing in order to create the next drawing quickly using the embossed outline.

## Introduction

discover, as a raw, vibrant, and often “enfleshed” personal and public narcissism of the erotic. In *both* modernist and postmodernist art, the corrupting forces of crass commodification and/or popularization continue to strike at the (often unconscious) wish to transcend the utilitarian. Furthermore, the unconscious force in appropriation art and renewed intensity of quotation and mimesis is an envious and anxious retrieval of the now unavailable transcendent.

The development of these themes as an interdisciplinary work encompassing psychoanalysis, art history, and aesthetics will unfold as follows. Chapter 1 will outline the phenomena and history of narcissism in order to show how this clinical concept can be used in the non-clinical situation of the study of visual art. After the Ovidian myth of Narcissus was brought into cultural circulation, narcissism as such never became a subject of study until the French Romantic writers Gide, Mallarmé, and Valéry extolled the virtues of reflectiveness. Narcissism in the period between Ovid and those writers could be described as unexpressed and perhaps unexpressable. The idea that narcissism influenced the formation of Western subjectivism, having been in evidence both in Neoplatonism and Christianity, will be suggested, although clearly the adequate exploration of such a topic is beyond the scope of this work.

Chapter 2 will explore the theme of subjectivism, showing how its presence in Descartes, Fichte, and Kant prepares the way for the emergence of narcissism in modernity. Transcendence, a preoccupation of idealist philosophers, is a kind of predecessor of narcissism in philosophical and religious terms. When transcendental philosophy breaks down and sociocultural conditions begin to favour the emergence of individualism, narcissism can bear some of the load of wishes for transcendence.

## Introduction

Dovetailed with this will be a discussion of the sociological perspectives of Lasch and Giddens, and of the important role of individualism as another condition of the possibility of narcissism.

Chapter 3 will consider Freud's theory of narcissism. Although it is a continuation of the subjectivist tradition, yet it shares with phenomenology the language of lived bodily experience. The analyst Béla Grunberger's formulation of narcissism as a dialectical drive is a useful adjunct in this context.

Chapter 4 will contextualize modernist theory and practice within the art of modernity. In modernity, visual art adds to the two main trends or attitudes of art based in antiquity – art as *imitation* and art as *form* – by developing the notion of art as *expression of feeling* in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The other significant development, related to its new role of expression of feeling, is the beginning of the establishment of art as an autonomous activity in the eighteenth century through the writings of Baumgarten and Kant, a development that culminates in the notion of “art for art's sake.” Modernism builds on the art for art's sake tradition, and generates a series of avant-gardes as strategies in the service of autonomy and aesthetic authenticity. The understanding of the narcissistic drive is integrated into the understanding of modernism as a form of the wish for the ideal and the wish for transcendence, wishes that are easily exploited by capitalist ideologies, but which are more subtly exploited by other ideologies, including, of course, utopian aspects of Marxism.

Chapter 5 shifts to a discussion of forms of narcissism in contemporary art (with special attention to body and performance art), where narcissism is expressed in a form dialectically opposing that operative in modernism. Whereas modernism involves

## Introduction

eradication of the object in order to secure the pure aesthetic (a narcissistic fantasy), contemporary body art, in a dazzling reversal, celebrates an almost indiscriminate eroticization of all objects, forms, and styles. Here the narcissism is a self-conscious deliberate *use* of the object as immanent – but with transcendent and idealized fantasy agendas nonetheless.

Chapter 6 proposes narcissism as an underpinning of “regimes of vision,” building on the notion developed in differing ways by Eagleton, Foster, and others, that visuality is a culturally determined activity, rather than a mere question of optics and/or styles and techniques of representation. While the underpinning drive itself is theorized by psychoanalysis to be unvarying, the manifestation of the drive, in the form of the conscious visuality of the regime, is culturally determined.

Chapter 7 concludes with a brief discussion of “relational art” and the issues of the attempted eradication of autonomy and idealization in favour of an art integrated with everyday life, or the issues of art with serious political engagements.

## Methodological Comments

### *Pathography, intention, and causality*

Transcendence, the aura, idealization, and narcissism will occasionally be treated as if somehow they were agents with their own inherent intentions. This is to some extent a rhetorical effect, but it also reflects the inescapability of intentional language in this kind of interdisciplinary work inflected by psychoanalytic drive theory. Intentionality and the related issue of causality will not be a major issue in this thesis, because no extensive use of biography will inform the discussion, but I do want to maintain the sense of an

## Introduction

intentional psychoanalysis in order to convey the idea of narcissism as a drive, which, like the drives of sexuality and aggression, permeates our phenomenal world. The drives will be seen to be transindividual and transhistorical, but always experienced as if they belong to the self and originated there. If we take the sexual drive as an example, humans seem never to view the emergence of their sexuality as a mere participation in the banality of yet another living being now fulfilling its reproductive destiny among billions of other beings, but rather, to paraphrase Leo Bersani (1986), as an explosively disruptive personal event, shattering to the ego. This is the work of narcissism, itself another drive, imparting a sense of urgent agency and uniqueness to the operations of the ego.

In the history of its development, psychoanalysis has had a separate history of involvement with visual art and literature, starting with Freud's "pathographic" method of interpreting Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Madonna, Child, and Saint Anne. For Freud, interpreting the intention of the artist was the goal.

In my opinion, what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist's intention, in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work ... what he aims at is to awaken in us the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create ... [The work of art must admit of the application of psychoanalysis] if it really is an effective expression of the intentions and emotional activities of the artist (S.E. XIII, p. 212).<sup>9</sup>

Freud's explanation of Leonardo's homosexuality, his major shifts of interest and activities, and his tendency not to finish work are derived from a small amount of biographical information and a few of Leonardo's personal journal entries. Freud also

---

<sup>9</sup> Although this particular quotation is from "The Moses of Michelangelo," it applies here as well.



## Introduction

examined themes from the visual work itself to support his theory of Leonardo's neurotic personality development.<sup>10</sup>

Pathography as a method has conflicted with a number of disparate contemporary critical approaches, which agree with one another at least in their anti-intentionalism. The first challenges came from formalist art critics such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and from New Critics like William K. Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley,<sup>11</sup> whose approach was also formalist and who regarded the work of art as autonomous and removed from its cultural setting and from the intentions of the author/artist.<sup>12</sup> They regarded the process of interpreting the work as a motivated consequence of the artist's life as an "intentional fallacy," especially when it involved inferring causal connections between psychological trauma in an artist's life and the work. Anti-intentionalism was also an effect of structuralist and post-structuralist theory, the development of semiotics as an art historical analytic tool, deconstruction (Derrida), and New Historicism.

In psychoanalysis itself, post-Freudian theoretical development would mitigate against pathographic approaches as the Romantic origins of the psychoanalytic method gave way to other models of mental functioning. The Romantic trope was to see

---

<sup>10</sup> Freud's study of Leonardo is found in S.E. vol. 11. For a discussion of Freud and Leonardo, see Collins 1997. The pathographic study of Leonardo seems less compelling than, for example, the idea that the content and form of at least some of Magritte's paintings have something to do with Magritte's having witnessed, as a young boy, the dead body of his mother who had drowned herself. In other words, connections between traumatic events and subsequent work may be valid in *some* circumstances. In the case of Magritte, there is adequate documentation of the trauma, and a wealth of biographical material. There was also a milieu of surrealist practice, in which connections between art work and the unconscious were actively pursued – although not by Magritte himself.

<sup>11</sup> See Wimsatt and Beardsley 1987

<sup>12</sup> See also Dalton 1979; Skura 1981.

## Introduction

psychoanalysis as a tool to decipher the expressiveness of the individual psyche caught in the conflicts of id/superego, pleasure/unpleasure, or culture/nature.

However, to deny entirely the relevance of intention in art historical study, as does David Carrier (1991) for example, seems limiting. Carrier states:

The humanist will think that my account leaves out one further essential point – that narrative must be a truthful representation of the artist’s intention. A central argument of this book is that this appeal to the artist’s intention adds nothing. (p. 7) ... The test of these interpretations ... is not as the humanist thinks, whether they match some hypothetical reconstruction of the artist’s intentions. That test is both useless in practice, as we can have only indirect knowledge of these intentions, and methodologically flawed. The right test is simply whether these interpretations help us understand the paintings. (p. 197)

One of the interesting things about this statement lies in its revelation that the intentionalist/anti-intentionalist debate is not, even in recent decades, settled, despite the extensive and prolonged critical emphasis away from the author/artist to the reader/receiver; emphases strongly reinforced by forms of interdiscursivity and intertextuality theory. The most significant problem with Carrier’s approach is that once criteria are outlined for what constitutes enhanced understanding of the paintings, they will inevitably show themselves to be dependent on intention if they are to function as criteria at all. That is, anything judged to aid understanding is supported by some person’s or group’s *preferences*, preferences that cannot escape being designated as intention, no matter how skilfully they are disguised or even claimed to emerge out of the work itself.

While I do not intend to develop any extensive motivational interpretations of artists on a personal level, motivation, intention, and causality all are necessary to theorizing narcissism in visual art, because narcissism is conceptualized as one of the *causes* of the visual art of modernity, operating within a matrix of other social, cultural,

## Introduction

and personal factors. The notion of causality used here is a non-positivist formulation of cause – a “cause of event A” is merely something that “makes a difference to the occurrence of A” (Grunbaum 1993),<sup>13</sup> or that answers a “why question” (Salmon 1967, 1989, 1998).

In action theory,<sup>14</sup> popular in the 1980s, actions were understood to be caused by beliefs and desires; beliefs, desires and intentions provide necessary and sufficient conditions for causing acts. *Intention* to act is a step in a causal sequence, between beliefs and desires and the act itself. Putting it into Adolph Grunbaum’s terms, desires and beliefs “make a difference” to the occurrence of actions. The particular term “cause” is not actually defended by this position. For those who find it troublesome, Alvin Goldman (1970) suggests merely agreeing that actions “result from” or “stem from” beliefs and desires. Psychoanalysis posits unconscious desires and beliefs, called fantasies, as additional “causes” for actions and thoughts.

In the case of *Der Augenturm*, narcissism is thought to be a cause; it may have been consciously intentional on the part of the artist, but more likely it was caused by intention at an unconscious level. Unconscious intention as a cause involves beliefs and desires just as conscious intention does. The content of the unconscious is in a general way shared with others – we all have generic unconscious fantasies involving sex, aggression, and narcissism. The classical example of these are pre-Oedipal and Oedipal fantasies, which are reworked in post-Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as more generalized fantasies of loss and desire in the context of dyads and triads.

---

<sup>13</sup> This is a contemporary version of an Aristotelean idea; the four causes, – material, formal, efficient, and final – all “make a difference” to the event.

<sup>14</sup> See Goldman 1970; Davidson 1963.

## Introduction

We have in our unconscious (as a result of repression) content particular to us as individuals as a result of unique, conflictual experiences. Returning to the example of *Der Augenturm*, there may be particular correspondences between this work and Appelt's personal repressed unconscious that we cannot have access to, but in any case, because of the transindividual nature of the drives and the mechanisms of defence like repression, a resonance may exist between the work and the observer's unconscious. With respect to Appelt, then, there are elements of form and content in the work that derive from three sources: his personal conscious intentions, his personal unconscious (repressed) intentions, and the expression, through both those avenues, of externally derived social and historical form and content. Each of these represents vast and often unknowable territory. Intentional fallacy really involves commitment to any one area as if the meaning of the work could be totally derived from it, rather than an openness to co-determinacy. Furthermore, an artist himself could describe his conscious personal intention with great conviction and certainty – but were his work and his relations to it analyzed it might become clear that conscious intention had a minor part to play. His estimation of his own intentions as causes could be as fallacious as anyone else's. In other words, intentional fallacies can be present at all levels of intentional discourse.

The thesis that narcissism is a causal factor within modern and contemporary visual art is not meant to be a totalizing theory; in fact, totalizing theories are themselves shown to sometimes be part of narcissistic dynamics. Narcissism as an aspect of visual art will be seen to have a complex relation with other sociopolitical factors in a causal matrix. Psychoanalytic theory conceptualizes events to be multidetermined and/or overdetermined when considering causality (Waelder, 1936).

## Introduction

Keeping this in mind, the intentional fallacy will be dealt with, not by avoiding intentionalist language or avoiding the issue of causality (as defined above), but by staying with levels of intention that are not developed to the extent of totalizing personal explanatory interpretations. This approach may allow a kind of “minimal” pathography at times, where some aspect of the art work as psychological product is related to some known aspect of the artist’s life – an approach that appears quite frequently in contemporary art history writing. An example is Parveen Adams’s discussion of the photographer Joel-Peter Witkin.<sup>15</sup> As a young boy, Witkin witnessed a horrendous traffic accident in which a little girl’s head was severed. Adams theorizes that Witkin’s work demonstrates his attempt to find an identity that was destroyed by the trauma. This approach creates a link between an important biographical event and the artwork without a totalizing “art as neurosis” consequence. T. J. Clark does something similar in discussing Cézanne’s treatment of bodies in the various versions of the “bathers paintings.”<sup>16</sup> To deliberately avoid such connections would be to commit another version of the intentionalist fallacy because strongly suggested causal connections are intentionally edited out.

Mieke Bal, when confronted with these issues in her discussion of Caravaggio, also opts for an alternative to the total denial of intentionality:

I contend that the subject’s agency matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic makeup does not, consists not of inventing but of *intervening*, of a ‘supplementation’ that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it. This attention to agency as supplementarity (Derrida 1976)... does not construct a fictitious intention or unconscious psychic makeup, nor is it totally relativistic

---

<sup>15</sup> See “‘Se faire être une photographie’: The Work of Joel-Peter Witkin,” in Adams 2003, pp. 165–80.

<sup>16</sup> Clark 1995.

## Introduction

subjectivism in which anything goes but which is rigorously contemporary in its effect (Bal 1999, p. 13)

Anxiety about imputing intention leads Bal to propose that a subject's *agency* in intervention is a preferable formulation, and it avoids intentionality. However, Bal's solution is a toned-down intentionality, since agency implies acting from a position of will, or it implies an executive function of carrying out another's will. Bal's formulation expresses something of the approach I would like to pursue.

### *The distinctiveness of psychoanalytic art history and theory: Interpretation of the unconscious*

One methodological objective is to impart some of the ambiance of clinical psychoanalysis to this thesis. Psychoanalysis, after all, was founded in the clinic with the analytic pair, the analyst and the analysand, engaged in a complex non-linear project of understanding the unconscious level of the analysand's emotional life and mind. This engagement with the person, the body, and lived experiences is characteristic of a phenomenological method, perhaps a reflection of Freud's contact, through Brentano, with phenomenology.<sup>17</sup> Although cognition plays a part in understanding the phenomenological presentations of the analysand, interpretation is also understood to arise from a non-cognitive resonance of the analysand's unconscious with that of the analyst. This resonance is taken account of by responses to free associations that both become aware of. Interpretation by the analyst results from enriching such associations by processing them through metapsychologically derived principles.

---

<sup>17</sup> Franz Brentano (1838–1917) is sometimes referred to as the “grandfather of phenomenology”

## Introduction

The activity of interpretation in psychoanalysis initially had as a goal the reconstruction of a past psychic reality on which a current neurosis was predicated. There is now much less emphasis on this reconstructive aspect, certainly in the intersubjective, object relational, narratively oriented, and Lacanian schools, and more weight given to the relation of the analyst and analysand. Similarly, in art history an important form of interpretation, iconography (first conceptualized by Erwin Panofsky [1961, 1982]), in which visual motifs are traced back to some prior visual, textual, or mythological source, has to a large extent given way to less reconstructive tasks. In both psychoanalysis and art history there appears to have been a shift from the signified to the signifier, from concrete origins and goals to process, from the realness of the referent to the discourse surrounding meaning, and to the semiotic turn that in the case of visual art places art practice itself in the model of the text.

Rosalind Krauss (1986), for example, has paid special attention to the index. Krauss notes that Jackson Pollock, by placing the canvas on the floor in order to drip or fling paint onto it, *indexes* a regression<sup>18</sup> from the civilized posture of working on a canvas placed on the wall or easel. The regression from upright posture to horizontal “on all fours” is a reversal of the founding moment of human civilization, where, Freud claims, posture became upright in order to distance the face from its former proximity to the genital (where the sense of smell had a primary function). In the upright position the eye becomes objectifying and thus civilized. Here a semiotic approach leads back to foundational Freudian metapsychology, which postulates psychic invariance, in this case, of the sexual drive. The drive, in its archaic form of human existence, was closer to the

---

<sup>18</sup> See Krauss, 1993 pp. 244–308.

## Introduction

condition of satisfaction, since the body was subject to more constant sexual stimulation – the body was on all fours, in copulatory position, the genitals were in view, and the sense of smell was stimulated. The idea of instinctual invariance is present in Krauss's perspective, since she assumes that Pollock's move indexes a regression to this archaic aspect of the drive, which has remained, although unconscious, in the modern civilized psyche. In this model, sexuality is not as Foucault would have it, a matter only of social construction, where its meaning follows changes in the social/political context. Rather, civilization itself results from repressions or transformations of the drive, which itself remains unchanged, if only in the repressed unconscious. While the context obviously has a role in determining the practices of sexuality, psychoanalysis would argue for a consistent core.

Krauss's interpretative gesture was to note this process of indexing an archaic current of sexuality in a contemporary practice, a process that took place unconsciously. This kind of interpretation is, in my view, a good model of psychoanalytic contribution to art history because there is no attempt to derive the interpretation from the personal history of Pollock – but neither is there an exclusion of the personal history, in principle.

Similarly, I will use that kind of model of the psychoanalytically interpreted body where the narcissistic carnality of vision indexes a variety of fantasies, each of which has an invariant (archaic) core. To return to my introductory example, *Der Augenturm* is said to express narcissism, because it indexes fantasies of narcissism. The lonely, reflective observer, cut off from others, yet above the range of the ordinary, suggests a special vision or perhaps a nostalgic wish for retrieval of such vision. The tower's situation over a body of water also suggests the possibility of its occupant gazing at his reflection. This



## Introduction

tower is non-relational in contrast to functional towers such as the lighthouse; it has a different scale and scope – the individual. The dominant regime of vision in the West has been described as “Cartesian” perspectivalism, a regime in which the objectifying viewer controls and owns the object. Such a regime is now challenged by a dispersed corporealized vision, where seeing is less cerebral/retinal than corporeal. Yet, *Der Augenturm* positions itself in exactly the intersection of those two regimes. On the one hand, it is a depiction of the objectifying eye that sees from a heightened and removed perspective, its lines of sight radiating in all directions, suggesting the Panopticon. On the other, it is a mere fragile object, in which is cradled a nude, vulnerable body. This naked body would seem to disavow pretensions to visual supremacy and embrace a simple corporeality. But the artist has placed his own *self* at the conjunction of these two regimes – a move that would seem to place him now at the precise point where formerly the image and vision itself disappeared – the vanishing point – the point of the greatest tension, the point the discovery of which was thought to be a moment of genius. The work is thus interpreted as narcissistic.

### *Interiority: Ontology and the psychic apparatus*

Use of the language of beliefs and desires (fantasies) locates the enactments of human psychic activity (in this case, art works) close to their immediate source – the psychoanalytic interior is invoked here. Sources are meant as a kind of hybrid of the *sui generis* (the drive) and experience. This hybrid can be thought of as an infinitely repeated scenario of a founding moment of the psyche. In “Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Function” (S.E. XII) Freud outlines the idea that early in neonatal life, frustration

## Introduction

(delay of drive satisfaction) can be compensated with an hallucination of the needed state or object – for example, the breast. Since the mother’s attunement tends to supply the need quickly (in her attempt to simulate intrauterine conditions), the hallucinatory mechanism is at first reinforced. But the failure of hallucinatory fulfillment in the infant psyche (as the drive’s unsatisfaction gets worse with increasing exposure to reality) is the occasion where the psychic apparatus “*had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world*” (emphasis mine) (S.E. XII p. 219) – this is the description of the acquiescence of the pleasure principle to the reality principle.

The distinctiveness of psychoanalytic theory hinges on this formulation, because it postulates the origin of pleasure prior to a “concept” of reality. This idea is also the source of confusion since it invokes the self in a moment of paradigmatic narcissism. One difficulty has been that this moment has been taken to imply objectlessness. Such objectlessness would appear to be necessary to render the notion of pleasure without reality, or pleasure without experience, consistent. The confusion has been resolved in large part by post-Freudians, who postulated a state of undifferentiation early in development, or a state of primary narcissism prior to the development of fantasy and a sense of conflict. This position also requires that the idea of mental representations would emerge only later (somewhere between one year and eighteen months), which would then begin to take the infant out of the state of undifferentiation and primary narcissism. Levin (2003) explains that as these theoretical positions were being worked out, infant studies were moving in an opposite direction, showing convincing evidence of very early differentiation and object discrimination. Levin also notes that there is nothing in Freud to suggest objectlessness, and that the real issue is not objects versus objectlessness, but

## Introduction

“inside” versus “outside.” Freud theorized that very early in psychic life the infant experiences its own muscular apparatus in two ways – one in which stimuli *are* affected by its muscular actions (that is, avoidance is achieved) because the stimuli arrive from the outside, and another group of stimuli that *are not* affected by its own muscular actions, because the stimuli arise internally. “The perceptual substance of the living organism will thus have found in the efficacy of its muscular activity a basis for distinguishing between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’” (S.E. XIV, p. 119).

While the idea of the early negotiation of inside and outside solves some problems and is certainly germane to the idea of narcissism employed here, a tension remains in these Freudian notions. Obviously, the perception of inner and outer itself implies an agency (ego) capable of such a distinction but such an ego could be gained only by an experience in the first place of inner and outer. The only way out is to revert to a Kantian notion of a *synthetic a priori*, an innate idea in the mind that makes it possible to perceive space and time. This is really the same thing as Freud’s idea, with the latter positioned phenomenologically rather than as part of transcendental logic.

The problem of how and when the organism begins to apprehend the object world would seem to be a logical conundrum without a solution. Even if we concede to the neonatal researchers that there are intrapsychic objects very early in post-natal life, there has to be a time when the developing baby or embryo has no such capacity. The formulation, however, of an original interior state of pleasure out of which emerges a concept of reality is distinctive of psychoanalysis. This state is an absolute reference or end point of the idea of narcissism. The psychoanalytic model that I use here suggests

## Introduction

that humans never abandon attempts to reproduce the conditions of this state – at least in fantasy equivalents.

Works of art, by virtue of their participation in the complex network of social significations, will always have interpretations made about them that relate to their context. But for psychoanalysis truly to contribute to these interpretations, it must show how these works also use psychoanalytic concepts. In particular the narcissistic drive (and we shall see its “regulation” of the other drives of aggression and sexuality) demands an imaginative pathway back to interiority of the subjects that make the works.

### *Psychoanalytic models: Drive theory*

As psychoanalysis generated new paradigms, different approaches to its relation with art began to develop. Rather than review those here, I will merely indicate that my preference is a drive/defence psychoanalytic model. This model does not exclude object relational approaches, Lacanian perspectives, or some aspects of ego psychology (Hans Hartman and others), self-psychology (Heinz Kohut), or even intersubjectivity theory (Jessica Benjamin, Robert D. Stolorow, George E. Atwood, Owen Renik, and others). A drive model is the most appropriate, since I will be avoiding the adaptational perspectives developed by some ego psychologists such as Gilbert Rose (1980). Rose notes that much visual art involves an interplay between primary and secondary process, creating a situation of tension and release. For Rose this process is adaptive, strengthening the harmonious connection between id derivatives and ego functioning. While art may at times provide such connections, so most activities. What Rose’s account leaves out is

## Introduction

why so much visual art is strongly in defiance of reality, and often seems to work against adaptation.

The idea of sublimation, important in any discussion of culture and psychoanalysis, is also a concept that requires drive theory.<sup>19</sup> I will develop the idea of narcissism as a drive that can be expressed directly, through drive derivatives, and through sublimation of this drive, just as conventional psychoanalysis would have described much of cultural production as sublimation of the sexual drive. In the model developed here, however, there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between any person's drive and works of art. All three drives – sex, aggression, narcissism, and their derivatives, sublimations, and de-sublimations – are involved in complex permutations and combinations in the creation of cultural objects and phenomena.

### *Normativization and drive theory*

Drive theory allows for a different approach to the understanding of human psychology since the raw data of sexuality and aggression are not subjected in the same way to normativizations. Instead, drive theory diminishes the tendency to normativize by accounting for behaviour first at a bodily level. Freud's notion of the "first" ego being a body ego also reduces the "normativization effect." Another way of looking at this would be to understand that any account of a *coherent* self is already a normative social construction. This view stands in contrast to the drive model, which claims that coherence is achieved only by compromise (repression, obsessional defences, and so on)

---

<sup>19</sup> See Loewald 1988. Loewald makes the point that object relations cannot be sublimated, only a drive can, since a drive must include the component of energy that is, in Freud's initial formulation, redirected to a *higher* aim.

## Introduction

and thus the resulting coherence is an illusion, even if one necessary for civilized living. Although the argument could be made that a drive is also a similar (social) construction, I would claim that in its classical sense, “located on the boundary between the somatic and the psychic,” it is abstracted away from normativization, and accounts for phenomena at a different level than other non-drive formulations. *The reduced tendency to normativization will be less likely to generate a theory of art as neurosis.*

There is another reason to choose the drive model. For Freud, the drive is less interested in the object than in its own satisfaction; or, stated another way, the object of the drive is the least constant feature of the drive’s operation. Thus defined, the drive, in effect, is said to operate outside of history. In an extreme historicist approach, each object relation would require an account relevant to its particular historical context.

Intersubjectivism tends toward such an extreme historicism, and the idea of the drive loses its meaning. Similarly in art history, in the situation of an extreme historicism, each “movement” would demand explanations relevant to its own particular historical context. In contemporary theorizing, forms of contextualism are often preferred over trans-historical grand theories. Psychoanalysis, however, can contribute something short of a trans-historical theory but more than yet another contextual element.

It may well be objected that Freud imbues drive psychology with as strong a normativity as any of the approaches I have discussed. Although it is true that texts such as “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905) seem to suggest a very strong norm of adult heterosexual genitality, I follow Leo Bersani’s argument that, taken as a whole, the Freudian discourse on sexuality is nothing short of a catastrophe of theory! I understand Bersani (1986) to mean that the tensions, contradictions, and subversions

## Introduction

within the text (especially the tensions between main text and footnotes) are consequences of Freud's literary enactment of the *shattering* (Bersani's term) truth of sexuality on the ego. While the ego and cultural processes in general try to normalize the drives (through theory itself), the "collapse of theory" obvious in Freud's work *attests to the actual function of the drives*. A drive theory of the narcissism of visual art, it would seem to me, will similarly unite form and content.

Authenticity that derives from the kind of paradox that Bersani notes, is also an indication of an aesthetic fit between the drive model and the art under consideration. This thesis will argue for a dialectical swing from modernism, where much art aspired toward transcendent visual purity, to contemporary and body art, which is raw and excessive, corporeal, and frequently scatological. Object relations and ego psychology, with their emphases on adjustment, seem more bound to clinical normativity than to art history and theory, unless employed for the somewhat outmoded project of pathography. The sense in which narcissism will be shown to lie beneath and prior to the other drives, and at times direct their energies, fits well with the sense of alternating suppression and energetic release of sexuality and aggression we see in the postmodern period. Although narcissism is a very important part of all paradigms of psychoanalysis, only drive theory lends itself to a dialectical expression, which will be a significant aspect of the way I theorize that narcissism brings out the oppositions of modernism and postmodernist art.

### *The question of the subject of narcissism*

Another way of framing issues of cause and intentionality is to question the role of the subject. Narcissism is subjectivist because it involves fantasies of particular kinds of

## Introduction

subjecthood. I have already described in a preliminary way those fantasies as solipsistic, grandiose, self-sufficient, and idealizing. The meaning of those fantasies are theorized by psychoanalysis and they are brought to consciousness in the process of analysis, a process that necessarily involves two individuals, both involved in the interplay of both of their psychic realities. But in the project of understanding narcissism in visual art, the fantasies within individuals that give rise to narcissistic phenomena are for the most part not available for observation. Who then is the subject of the narcissism? To answer this question I would suggest first that *narcissism as a drive is like sexuality and aggression – it is everywhere in social and cultural objects and phenomena*. In semiotic terms, the signs are available for interpretation whether they appear in the consulting room or elsewhere. The interpretive context from which they are viewed and the use made of them will be normatively oriented in clinical treatment, but non-normative in cultural analysis. The result is that at one moment we may speak of the work as narcissistic, because its semiology indexes narcissistic fantasies as they are generated by subjects in a general way. Or, we may speak directly of the narcissism of a collector whose craving for the unique object (and its aura) will make him pay enormous sums for an object whose value absolutely defies ordinary rules of supply and demand. The narcissism of groups may be another designation when the group behaviour seems to suggest collective idealization, and so on.

Accounts of social organizations, especially histories, are often conceived on the model of the individual subject. Foster (1996) does exactly that when he attributes repression and deferred action to the art institution. Gablik (1976) models an entire history of art from antiquity to the present on the Piagetian model of cognitive



## Introduction

development. Lasch provides a well-known polemical account of an entire society as narcissistic, again ascribing an individual trait to the whole group. In fact, many theoretical approaches which are developmental and which use tropes of birth, growth, and death are similarly modeled on the subject. These approaches all have weaknesses, but there are three main reasons against discarding that model. First, as I have suggested, it is unavoidable; we swim in the waters, so to speak, of the drives of sexuality, aggression, and narcissism, being unable to bracket off behaviours and thoughts that result from those drives. Although the drive is conceptualized as trans-individual, the model of a subject is essential to any discussion of the drive. Second, the fact of sublimation blurs somewhat the boundaries between the discourse of the individual and the group, since the individual cannot sublimate anything without the group. A significant proportion of the practices that will be discussed concern the sublimation of the drive of narcissism, a concept that is originally presented here. Third, there is no other way to describe some of the qualities of cultural products than to use psychological ascriptions, despite their subjective baggage, because the subjective is actually the only locus of the meaning of these ascriptions.

This last concept needs some explanation, for which I turn to Charles Taylor (1985) on the irreducibility of certain terms that are involved in the idea of the human as a self-interpreting animal. Taylor's larger argument need not concern us here, but his comments on qualitative evaluations of desires and emotions are relevant. The import or meaning of *some* emotions can be reduced to a structural analogue of the kind that complex machines or even extraterrestrial beings might learn accurately. Taylor gives the example of fear of a tiger. A device could presumably recognize the danger of an

## Introduction

approaching tiger, and implement a response that would not differ significantly from a human response. The import of the situation would seem to be comprehensively covered by the analogue except for the *feeling* of fear, which could be regarded as an epiphenomenon. But in the case of many other human emotions, the import cannot be reduced to any analogue. The example here, conveniently congruent with my purposes, is the emotion of shame (shame on some occasions being involved with narcissism). Taylor observes:

Shame is an emotion that a subject experiences in relation to a dimension of his existence as a subject. What we can be ashamed of are properties which are essentially properties of a subject...I may be ashamed of my shrill voice or my effeminate hands ... Both voice and hands may clash with what I aspire to be, feel that my dignity demands that I be, as a person, a presence among others ... These properties are thus only demeaning for a subject for whom things can have this kind of meaning [and in short the meaning is relative to the experience of inner states of aspiration] ... the very account of what shame means involves reference to things – like our sense of dignity, of worth, of how we are seen by others – which are essentially bound up with the life of a subject of experience (pp. 53-54).

The dynamics and meaning of shame contrast in a fundamental way with fear. I take narcissism to be much like shame inasmuch as its meaning cannot be understood outside of subjects that experience it. Narcissism would have no meaning to beings who could not experience it. For that reason, when objects, phenomena, or groups are described as narcissistic there is an understood reference to the model of a subject that is capable of experiencing it

This subject is not coherent, original, autonomous, and authentic, however. Such a subject is deconstructed by both psychoanalysis and Derrida. The interpretive method assumes that a given verbal communication of the analysand cannot be taken at face value – it is deconstructed for hidden unconscious material. Those interested in Derrida

## Introduction

have assumed that he dispenses altogether with the subject. He does not.<sup>20</sup> The situation is complex; although Derrida retains the subject, the subject is decentred in a major way. This decentring is accomplished not only within deconstruction, but had already occurred with structuralism (Levi-Strauss), with Foucault (the subject as an “unnecessary mark in the sand”), within anti-subjectivist philosophical turns to phenomenology (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), and with Baudrillard, who would think of the subject as yet another simulation. Psychoanalysis is usually included in these attacks on the subject, because it brings about the so-called scandal of the unconscious. That is, the fact of the unconscious is a serious setback to the notion of coherent rationalism. Furthermore, Lacan would, in the famous scenario of the “mirror stage” establish the ego on a process of misapprehension.<sup>21</sup>

In all of these anti-subjectivisms, only psychoanalysis can retain both positions – the subject exists (almost as a necessary fiction) but the subject is nowhere to be found. On the one hand, the subject does not exist because psychoanalysis is in fundamental agreement with each of the critiques. The simulacrum (Baudrillard) is the term for the product/sign that cannot be traced back to a concrete origin. We cannot claim accuracy in the attempt to distinguish reality from representation. Similarly, psychoanalysis has always maintained that despite the transindividual nature of defences, reaction formations, and biological dispositions (drives), the imitative nature of the subject is

---

<sup>20</sup> See Burke 1992. Burke quotes Derrida: “The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it ... I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions” (p. 18).

<sup>21</sup> I consider the “mirror phase” an overused construct. If taken together with Lacan’s almost legendary dislike of the adaptational perspective of American psychoanalysis (ego psychology), the result is an overemphasis of the notion of the dispersal of subjectivity.

## Introduction

established since character is seen as the “abandoned cathexes of lost objects”.<sup>22</sup> Next, the subject is Foucauldian in the sense of interpreting and manufacturing its reality in terms of its own drive for mastery in the particular era it finds itself. It is often more determined by the problematics of its power or lack thereof than by its subjectivity. Furthermore, recent developments in infant research would opt for a kind of phenomenological dispersal of the subject as in-the-world in a real and experiential way practically from birth. Certainly the infant is more Heideggerian than “normally autistic” as Margaret Mahler theorized.

Nonetheless, I want to claim that psychoanalysis is robustly subjectivist, having an origin in subjectivism, because it takes into account the consequences of the ability of each individual to fantasize his/her subjectivity (“I fantasize therefore I am”) and because it retains the subject of experience that gives meaning to psychological states such as those already described – shame and narcissism (to which could be added certain kinds of pain, anxiety, love, and so on).<sup>23</sup> Joan Copjec (1994) defends the necessity of some kind of universal subject as follows:

One must first recall that the concept of the universal subject is not itself ahistorical; introduced as we have said, by Descartes only at the end of the seventeenth century, it must instead be acknowledged as a modern, historically specific concept – one without which psychoanalysis would have been unthinkable. For psychoanalysis, too, addresses itself to the nonconcrete subject; it finds itself on the nominalist claims that all one encounters in everyday reality

---

<sup>22</sup> See Freud, S.E. XIX “The Ego and the Id”. Abandoned object cathexes are replaced in the ego by ‘identifications’.

<sup>23</sup> The argument might be posed that these states would have properties that could be analogized, such as galvanic skin responses, or heart rates, which could be simulated. Or, that lacking those external indicators, brain studies eventually would be able to describe correlative brain states such as specifically increased perfusion of blood in certain brain areas. This kind of argument eventually ends up in the domain of the older argument John Searle long ago settled with the so-called Chinese room paradigm. See Searle 1983.

## Introduction

are particular, determinate individuals. The subject is never determinate according to psychoanalysis, which treats this indeterminateness as a real feature of the subject. This is why the historicist response to the psychoanalytic concept of the subject is so misguided. The response – which characterizes much of contemporary theory – approaches the universal subject as a *vague* concept that can, with more or less effort and a better knowledge of history, be given more precise attributes. This hasty historicism fails to understand that the universal subject is not a vague concept but, in Charles S. Peirce's sense of the term, a *general* one. That is, the concept does not poorly or wrongly describe a subject whose structure is actually determinate but precisely indicates a subject that is in some sense *objectively indeterminate*. Against the faddish critique of the universal subject, psychoanalysis insists on this concept's political importance (p. 221).

Copjec's notion of the *objectively indeterminate subject* states that there is a stable way in which the subject negotiates its indeterminacy – that is, through fantasies and derivatives of the transindividual drives and defences, and through the stability of identifications structured historically by Oedipal, narcissistic, and phylogenetic mythogenic sources.

Simultaneously with “eradication” of the subject, there has been a kind of search for a suitable subject that has in different ways occupied many twentieth-century intellectual movements. For, even if the subject is an *effect* of discourse, or of an episteme, or of the structure of the economic system, a subject suitable for corrective political projects, frequently utopian, is still wished for. This appears as Deleuze and Guattari's radicalized “rhizomatic” subject, as neo-Marxist within the Frankfurt school, or as a Bataillan anti-Enlightenment figure, or as the intersubjective relational subject of recent psychoanalytic revision, to name some of the alternatives to failed Western rational subjectivism.

## Introduction

But the common denominator of this failed subjectivism is the narcissistic subject. Part of the theoretical task will be to show how and why this narcissistic subject has evolved and why it has such a strong presence within visual art.

### *Reductionism*

The problems of theory reduction and methodological reduction will be dealt with by admitting a certain amount of reductionism into the process as an unavoidable and at times desirable way of enhancing explanation and understanding. Theory reduction involves expressing or translating the terms of one theory into those of another.

Methodological reduction involves explanation by finding progressively smaller or more fundamental units or concepts to understand phenomena.<sup>24</sup> In our scientifically oriented culture, methodological reductions are hardly even conscious as method, and reductionism seems to be taken to mean unwarranted or simplistic reductions to absolute final “molecular” causes. Any attempt at explanation and understanding can stop at a particular level of reduction in a seemingly arbitrary way. Psychoanalytic insights involve a willingness to reduce some part of conscious phenomena to unconscious determinants but refuse to attempt extensive biological reductions.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, one might note that mild winters in northern climates are followed by increased brown areas (observed aurally) in the landscape. Several reductions would be involved in an explanatory process. The brown colour could be found to involve dead trees. The units have been reduced in size from patches of brown to trees. Then another reduction could be made to discover that the dead trees are infested with insects. Further investigation could reveal a complex staged life cycle of that insect. Then one stage could be found to involve sensitivity to cold winters. The milder the winter, the more insects survive and so on. Explanation is achieved here by reduction to progressively smaller units.

<sup>25</sup> The psychoanalytic theory of depression, for example, is reduced to biological models, both by scientific theorists and by cultural acceptance of the reductionist language. Thus depression seen as a “problem with serotonin” represents one of the dangers of reductionism. A psychoanalyst

## Introduction

Narcissism as used here is also somewhat reductionistic. I have characterized the phenomena of narcissism as self-directed, and have suggested that underneath or behind these phenomena lies another order of phenomena – fantasies, mostly unconscious – and have given some preliminary examples. The theory of unconscious fantasy is a central feature of psychoanalytic understanding; reduction of phenomena to those fantasies gives meaning to observable phenomena. To a certain extent, psychoanalysis shares with the sciences the reductive method, but stops short of guaranteeing the reproducibility of particular causal reductions. Philosophers of science such as Grunbaum have unwisely attempted to convince psychoanalysts to pursue a hypothetico-deductive method in showing proper causal logic in at least the levels of reduction that are pursued.

Narcissism will be shown as a causal factor in the visual art of modernity, but because of the complexity of the concept, it cannot be sufficiently concretized and isolated to be bound within a hypothetico-deductive method of explanation. Grunbaum wrongly concludes from Freud's wish to derive psychoanalysis from the empirical and scientific methods of his time that those methods would have the features of a contemporary scientific method. Freud was convinced of the need to observe in order to reduce phenomena at one level, but he also seemed able to allow another qualitatively different method of introspective imagination to supply further meaning to those levels of understanding.

---

would not reduce depression to biological causes, no matter how compelling the biological evidence might be because the meaning of the term depression would in the first place be regarded as not totally reducible to biological states. Inasmuch as *some* of the phenomenology of depression is reducible to symptoms understandable and treatable in biological terms psychoanalysis works along with other models.

## Introduction

This thesis will argue that although the appearance and ideologies of modernist and contemporary art (if contemporary art can be said to have an ideology) are dramatically different, the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism binds together these practices and ideologies. Narcissism, as an attribute of subjects, will be shown to run a course through the art of modernity. Narcissism will be theorized to be a drive like sex and aggression and, like those drives, is a powerful generator of behaviours and fantasies.

The methodological considerations discussed above are influenced by my own daily experience as a clinical psychoanalyst. Although analytic sessions should evolve, as Wilfred Bion suggested, “without memory or desire,” that is, the analyst’s ideal is to avoid the intentional posing of goals and agendas as these would introduce normative and defensive elements, it is also true that intention is unavoidable within the moment-to-moment decisions about what the analyst responds to or takes notice of silently. Intention and subjectivity are built into the analytic couple’s sense of a wish to claim responsibility for what comes to be understood. The desire for meaning, however, also adds intentionality at the level of subjectivity that undoes any pretence of dismissing the memory and desire, and is normally coded into what could be called the theoretical bias of both the analyst and analysand. What I mean to suggest here is that the desire for some kind of day-to-day personal coherence is very strong in most people most of the time. This means that the tendency to attach the meaning of one’s life to a reifiable theory is very powerful. Psychoanalysis straddles the border between the psychotic denial of coherence and the neurotic dependence on it. Although this study is not clinically oriented, I think connection to the analytic methodology that recognizes the strength of fantasies and desires for personal meaning and coherence can add a dimension to



## Introduction

aesthetic theory that can otherwise become abstracted away from the actual lived motivations of humans. In that sense, the analytic ear hears the pleas, almost the shouts, of the subject, striving for recognition in the form of the core narcissistic fantasies, not merely as infantile wishes, but as the spectrum of a primal aesthetic drive.

## **CHAPTER 1 - EMPIRICAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF NARCISSISM**

### **Part One: The Phenomenon of Narcissism**

In this chapter I describe the phenomena of narcissism, first in clinical terms, and then show how they also can be seen empirically as present in visual art. I will present a brief discussion of the history of narcissism, even though I will not initially focus on its appearance in visual art. An outline of its history will bring meaning to the notion that narcissism, as a manifestation of deep and commonly held human fantasies, has emerged over time. As a drive, it has probably always been part of the human psyche, but like the drives of sexuality and aggression, new manifestations emerge diachronically. In the context of these descriptive levels, it then becomes possible to study the theoretical aspects of narcissism and its centrality to visual art.

#### **The observational clinical basis**

Narcissism has already been defined as a large number of attitudes and behaviours that involve the observable phenomena of self-promotion, self-discovery, identity formation, self-reference, and self-maintenance. Underlying these observable phenomena are fantasies of perfection, omnipotence, grandiosity, self-sufficiency, solipsism, abolition of objects, and perhaps most importantly, idealizations. I will make some general comments about these two levels – empirically observable phenomena and the (frequently unconscious) underlying psychic fantasies – and then discuss narcissism in visual art.

The term “narcissistic” refers to the personalities of individuals who are self-preoccupied, who are often said to use others for their own ends, and who require seemingly endless admiration from others. They often harbour unrealistic self-images: an

## Chapter 1

inflated self-esteem or a sudden collapse into self-critical humility. In a discussion, narcissistic characters may substitute their own selves in place of a general instance, or often in place of anything grand and important. The narcissist, it has been jokingly said, is the bride at every wedding or the corpse at every funeral. The self-referentiality of some narcissistic personalities is quite self-contained; instead of neediness, they present an iron-clad self that apparently cannot be injured. Such personalities often have grandiose self-images and seem impervious to attacks as if they are above them. These descriptions belie the complexity of concepts of character that account for the behaviour and intricacy of the psychic processes involved.

Those psychic processes may involve strategies that defend against trauma in a variety of ways. Perfection, or the belief in perfectibility, may be used as an escape from, or as a compensation for, trauma (Rothstein 1980). Heinz Kohut (1971, 1978) describes a mirror-hungry type of narcissism: an excessive demand for positive mirroring feedback in adults who were deprived of maternal empathic mirroring in infancy. He also describes a phallic type of grandiose narcissism in adults who, as children, lost an idealized love object (or the idealizability of that object) in a sudden catastrophic way – a father, for example. The child compensates for the loss by massively introjecting the ideal qualities of the lost object as if these qualities belonged to the child himself, resulting in a grandiose narcissistic self.

Such defensive preoccupation with the self is frequently considered a negative attribute, and in clinical psychoanalysis, narcissism that interferes with object relationships may be the subject of treatment. In the simplified account above, it is easy to see how narcissistic behaviours and attitudes could become a focus for treatment

## Chapter 1

owing to the destructive effect of the narcissism on the development and maintenance of relationships. Such a treatment becomes inescapably a normative project. While this study will not focus on the clinical situations of narcissistic object relations, it is still important to make some comments. Narcissism and relationality are not strictly opposed. It was part of Freud's contribution to recognize that the traditional binary division of types of love into self-love (narcissism) versus love for others did not adequately reflect the range of possibilities (Freud 1914). One can also love others *narcissistically*, in that one loves the other for confirmation or affirmation of one's own self and ideals rather than loving the other for valuable attributes properly belonging to that other.

Freud placed such narcissistic love in conceptual opposition to what he termed anaclitic love, this latter form being modelled on the relationship the infant experienced with the nurturing mother or the protecting father. The intention here is clear: if one loves anaclitically, the other is loved for attributes that provide care and bestow value, recognizing dependence on the person bearing those attributes. Narcissistic love, on the other hand, is based on how much the object is able to aid (often unconsciously) the subject's denial of need, dependence, and death, and instead reflect to the subject his own already possessed (or fantasized) self-ideality. That ideality may be characterized by beliefs that all others love him or may be characterized by denials of the ambivalence of others towards him, or even by the fantasy that the other has no complex inner independent psychic life. Although the difference between these two categories is clear, it is likely that every relation individuals have to their objects is a mixture of the two.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In chapter three, I show that Freud's concept of narcissistic and anaclitic designations is seriously flawed.

## Chapter 1

### Narcissism in visual art

This thesis focuses on the phenomena and corresponding fantasies that appear in works of art, in theoretical and critical texts, and in the contexts in which visual art is displayed, collected, and marketed. The personal relationships of artists, collectors, or receivers of art are not the focus here, as they might be in a clinical study. Nonetheless, a discussion of narcissistic object relations may at times be illuminating, and if biographical data relating to a particular artist, collector, or viewer happens to be relevant, it would not, in principle, be excluded.

I have already suggested that underlying the phenomena of narcissism are fantasies (the stuff of psychoanalytic enquiry) both conscious and unconscious, which involve grandeur, self-sufficiency (even solipsism), perfection and/or perfectability, and idealization. At a later point (chapter 3), a theory of narcissism will be explored where metapsychological meanings are developed for each of these fantasies. These fantasies, which can give rise to “aberrant” object-relationships (from the normative point of view of clinical psychopathology) are the *same* fantasies that give rise to narcissistic phenomena in visual art. This is problematic at times, since the pejorative attitudes that may be entrenched in certain terms are inappropriate for thinking about visual art. One way of resolving this problem is to understand that each of the fantasies of narcissism can be used defensively (against trauma, fear of death, relational ambivalence, and so on) but can also be thought of as the results of a drive. As I have indicated in the introduction, narcissism is usually presented as a quality of object relations, describing the distribution of libidinal investment in self or object. Here, however, narcissism is conceptualized as a

## Chapter 1

drive. Humans are internally impelled towards self-sufficient achievement and towards the ideal and the perfect – these are primary sources of pleasure.

The remainder of this chapter presents illustrations of the empirical presence of narcissism in visual art, mostly without theoretical discussion, and then offers an historical overview of the emergence of the concept of narcissism.

The phenomena of narcissism in visual art - preliminary examples

Narcissism has its origins in the fantasies of subjects, and becomes embodied and embedded in social practice and in objects themselves. Visual art objects and practices come to be designated as narcissistic by virtue of personal and/or collective narcissistic fantasies invested in them.

### *Explicit imagery of the myth of Narcissus*

The actual depiction of the Narcissus myth itself is the most direct connection between narcissism and visual art. These works include Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1600), Nicolas Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* (c.1630), Alexandre Desgoffe's, *Narcissus at the Fountain* (1844), Jehan-George Vibert's, *Narcissus* (1864), Jules-Louis Machard's *Narcissus and the Source* (1872), Gustave Coutois's *Narcissus* (1877), Gustave Moreau's *Narcissus* (1890), George Desvallieres's *Narcissus* (1893), Alexandre Charpentier's, *Narcissus* (1897), William Waterhouse's, *Narcissus and Echo* (1903), and H. L. Greber's marble sculpture *Narcissus* (1909).

## Chapter 1

### *Mirrors, reflections, and reflexivity*

Paintings, photographs, or videos with the general theme of persons gazing at themselves in mirrors are also examples of the depiction of narcissism. Visual work based on the play of optical reflexivity<sup>2</sup> (that is, with or without persons and/or with or without mirrors) could be designated narcissistic by virtue of the formal conditions of the work. The genre of the self-portrait also falls into that category. Rosalind Krauss (1978) draws attention to such formal conditions in video, and comments on Vito Acconci's work

#### *Centers:*

As we look at the artist's sighting along his outstretched arm and forefinger toward the center of the screen we are watching, what we see is a sustained tautology. A line of sight that begins at Acconci's plane of vision and ends at the eyes of his projected double. In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition of the entire genre. Yet, what would it mean to say, "The medium of video is narcissism?" (p. 44)

Similar comments are also made about *Boomerang* by Richard Serra and Nancy Holt. Here the viewer/participant notes that the technique of mirror-like feedback of speech or parts of speech with various degrees of time delay disrupts her ability to speak or think and is disorienting because of a collapsed present, a destruction of normal temporal relations. The viewer might well comment, "I am surrounded by me."

Krauss suggests that there are various mirror devices in these video pieces,<sup>3</sup> and she asks whether this mirror technique is not a variant of the "reflexive" mode in which

---

<sup>2</sup> See Miller 1998. This catalogue for the National Gallery exhibition *On Reflection* documents the many aspects of reflective phenomena in visual art across the span of art history. Almost one hundred works are organized around the theme of reflection, investigating formal reflective properties as well as some psychological issues relating to self-regard, identity, and self-assertion.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss also comments on Acconci's *Airtime* as well as work by Linda Benglis.

## Chapter 1

contemporary painting, sculpture, and film have successively entrenched themselves. She also claims there is a difference between reflection and reflexiveness. She describes *reflexiveness* within Jasper Johns's *American Flag* as opposed to *reflection*, a process that vanquishes separateness in contemporary video. Thus the *reflexiveness* of modernist art is said to be a *dédoublement* or doubling back in order to locate the object (and thus the objective conditions of one's experience), but mirror *reflection* of absolute feedback in video is a process of bracketing out the object. In video, one's attention is withdrawn from the external object – an Other – and invested instead in the self – a description of narcissism. I think Krauss is only partially correct, however, and where she is right, it is for the wrong reason. I have already suggested that the object in modernist art is denigrated. There is no doubling back to locate it, but rather the reflexiveness eventuates in repression of the object qua object in order to promote the pure function of the aesthetic. So it is in modernism that the object is bracketed out. With regard to the narcissistic mirror function of many video installations, Krauss is correct, but the goal is not to bracket out the object, but rather to merge with it, as if to become it.

What Krauss is noticing here is not only the condition of video,<sup>4</sup> but the condition of the art of modernity. One of the forces driving the early development of video art was similar to forces involved in much postmodernist work – a deep suspicion of elitist aesthetics and the commodification that accompanied it. Video art was seen as a medium that could defy commodification, possibly better than any other medium, since it was conceptual and/or process oriented, and because, at least in the early stages, its

---

<sup>4</sup> Much of the video art in recent decades has moved away from this paradigm – particularly work such as Bill Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium*, or his work on the human passions. See *The Passions* at <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/viola/exhibition.html>



## Chapter 1

production values were distinctly anti-mass market. This constituted a kind of withdrawal from the concerns of relationality – since relationality always generates questions of value and exchange and hence some kind of commodification<sup>5</sup> – a withdrawal that added energy to the narcissistic trend of art in modernity. Thus the concerns turned to issues of the medium itself, where the apparatus became a tool in the investigation of identity, often using the camera/display apparatus to stage types of reflexivity as described above.

Additional examples of this reflexive “narcissistic” use of video are found in much of Gary Hill’s work. One installation, in particular, consisting of three venues (first shown at the Guggenheim SoHo in May–August of 1996 and again at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal in 1998), places the viewer in a relation to the work in such a way as to put the identity of the viewer at issue. In *Learning Curve*, the viewer sits at the apex of a school desk that fans out to become a horizontal spatial plane. There is a screen at the wide end of this plane and from a projector above the viewer’s head a continuous moving image of an endless breaking wave is projected. Robert Mitterthal states, “To sit in *Learning Curve* is to become a part of the piece; one is physically supported by the same object that focuses one’s attention on the pure visual space of the projected wave. The chair forces the viewer into a single-point perspective” (see Plate 1996, p. 3). The lines of projected light match the lines of the desk. “Lacan’s comments on the imaginary realm of projection are fitting: ‘Each time the subject apprehends himself as form and ego, each time that he constitutes himself in his status, in his stature, in his static, his desire is projected outside’” (ibid.).

---

<sup>5</sup> Marxist and other utopians believe that commodifications can be largely avoided, or at least that use value and exchange value can be brought in line with each other.

## Chapter 1

The subject is said to constitute himself at the static point of the school desk while desire is projected onto the screen. This component of the installation suggests the Renaissance position of mastery. Lacan also introduces the idea of the gaze, in which the subject is the “picture.” This is represented by a second venue where the viewer sits at the base of a triangle, and a tiny monitor showing the same wave is positioned immediately in front of him. Lacan’s famous move is to complicate the relationship of the eye (first venue) and the gaze (second venue) with an overlapping of triangular fields and thus to create the model of a more comprehensive embodied viewer. Here the viewing subject is not simply either the master of perception (as in the Renaissance schema) or objectified by the gaze. The subject is represented as a truly embodied being whose identity exists in a complex interplay of symbolic and imaginary, gaze and eye, and the “splits and gaps enlisting desire and the need of mediation” (ibid., p. 6). Gary Hill’s *Beacon* is a third venue in which the viewer circulates with other viewers in a room where images are projected from the two ends of a centrally suspended horizontal rotating pipe. At times the viewer is caught as a screen for the image, or other persons in the room become screens, or the walls and shadows of others all become ways of capturing the moving image. Occasionally viewers try to look into the pipe for the source of the image, they may move to avoid being a screen, and more playful viewers may “chase” the images as they move around the room. The subject’s desire is now represented by his attempt to place himself in a preferred position – for viewing the entire spectacle, for being a screen, or for blocking the image. This situation can be seen to animate the static elements of the first two installations in an “embodied” presentation of vision, in which there is a confused array of lived visual situations.

These installations are visual allegories of processes of ongoing identity formation. The first two venues demonstrate the participation of narcissism. The first is analogous to Narcissus's looking, as if his looking at the imago (in the Ovidian narrative – his own) were an action that ended there: “what he sees is what he gets.” It is narcissistic in the sense that it is the viewer's desire that is seemingly projected on the screen, as he is identified with the projector above his head. The image exists in a closed loop “from” him and “for” him; thus it is a narcissistic desire rather than “desire *for* the desire *of* the Other,” as Lacan would put it. This is also analogous to the first moment of the Lacanian mirror stage, where the infant looks at the mirror. The second venue represents the gaze. This is the second moment of the Narcissus scenario in which the reflected image “looks back.” Narcissus is caught in a gaze that he misapprehends as not his own. He is jubilant in the love of this gaze. The narcissism here is clear. While being in the gaze of the other is said to instigate anxiety,<sup>6</sup> the narcissist basks in the gaze, believing no one could fail to love him. This is analogous to a second moment of the Lacanian mirror stage where the infant is said to be jubilant in the gaze of a wholeness he also misapprehends – that is, he mistakes this gaze as a sign of his perfection. Thus these first two “moments” are narcissistic. But “slippage is already occurring. The sight of the other (the perfect wave, the imago) enthralls, captivates, and causes the viewing subject to begin to dissolve because the other is finally only the image of the subject her or himself projected onto the other. For a final entry into subjectivity the other must become more than a screen for a projected image of the subject.” (ibid., p. 3) The third venue is a representation of movement beyond narcissism towards the symbolic order, since it

---

<sup>6</sup> This is the Sartrean “paranoid” position. See Sartre 1956.

## Chapter 1

allegorizes the active pursuit of understanding the image and its visual possibilities, rather than the passive closed loops of the first two venues. This third term is the third term of the Oedipal constellation – symbolic order, the father, the *nom du père*. But the aesthetic moments, per se, would seem to involve the moments before the third, before the fusion or “suturing” of the two Lacanian triangles.

These two moments involve the desire to see, but as if the object of sight were not truly other, only oneself or oneself as perfectly recognized by the other (even if that other is also oneself). Yet this is the realm of the aesthetic. Lacan (1978) says of the eye and its desire to see, that too much fascination turns to envy. “The envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction” (p. 116). This is not to deny that the symbolic order, living in the world, cannot also have its aesthetic aspects, but that there is a fundamental tendency to move back to the preceding two positions to capture them. All of this is another, perhaps arcane, way of saying that the visual aesthetic resists relationality in a fundamental way, preferring to exploit the narcissisms of the gaze (being looked at) and of looking itself (looking at the object of one’s projected desire.) The idea of a tendency to resist relationality is not meant to claim that *all* art is therefore narcissistic, but rather to identify a strong motivational core of art that is. Certainly, this tendency can in turn be resisted, thus satisfactorily representing, allegorizing, or even celebrating object-relations. This is analogous to human interconnections, any one of which may be “truly” or “anaclitically” relational at one level, and narcissistic at another.

## Chapter 1

### *The uncanny*

Among the narcissistic phenomena relevant to visual art are other aspects of images that play on the mirror/reflection/reflexive aspect that evokes the uncanny as described by Freud (1919). The sensation of the uncanny is complex, and was thought by E. Jentsch, (1906) to be stimulated by witnessing automata, situations where it is difficult to distinguish living from non-living objects, or where the non-living simulates the living. Freud deconstructed these phenomena and developed a psychoanalytic explanation that involved “doubling, dividing or interchange of the self” (S.E. XVII, p. 234). Such uncanny doublings simultaneously create recognition of the perfectly familiar and yet produce a feeling of estrangement.

Otto Rank (1971) wrote a number of psychoanalytic articles culminating in a book titled *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. He cites extensive examples from the literature of the double, such as E.T.A. Hoffman, whose work frequently centred around the double motif very popular in Romantic literature (*Fantastic Tales, The Devil’s Elixirs*), Dostoevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov, The Double*), Jean Paul (*Titan*), Ferdinand Raimund (*The Spendthrift*), Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), Heinrich Heine (*Nights in Florence*), Guy de Maupassant (*The Horla*), and Edgar Allan Poe (*William Wilson*). Rank also includes extensive anthropological material that links the images of shadows and reflections to doubles with terrible powers. For example, assaulting someone’s shadow could injure its owner, and even stepping on a shadow could injure the person since his soul was thought to be located there. Losing one’s shadow (at high noon ) could result in death. Mystery and superstition surrounded the

## Chapter 1

idea of a rupture between the person and her shadow or reflection. In some cultures, reflections had special properties that resulted in particular behaviours, for instance, covering mirrors during the Jewish shiva. Hundreds of practices relate to the shadow/reflection (doubles), all of which seem to originate in a belief in a basic “two-fold” human existence. According to Rank, the theme of a weaker or less visible double appears in Homeric ideas, as well as in the *genius* of the Romans, the *fravaulti* of the Persians, the *Ka* of the Egyptians (double, soul, image, shadow), and the *Rephaim* of the Hebrews.

This innate sense of duality provides a basis for the doubling that occurs in the Narcissus myth, which Rank interprets as a defense against death. Rank believes that the death meaning of the Narcissus scenario was incorrectly replaced by the conventional interpretation as moralizing about self-love. He claims that anthropological evidence supports the Greek belief that a dream of seeing one’s reflection in water meant impending death; both Indic and Greek superstitions held that gazing into water would result in death. This belief appeared in Germanic tradition as well. Rank also cites Proclus’s report of a myth concerning Dionysus, in which he looked at himself in a mirror forged by Hephaistos and, “*led astray by this image, he then created all things*” (1971, p. 67). “This late-Greek idea of the creation of the material world has its archetype in Indic cosmogony, which took the reflection of the primeval essence to be the foundation of the material world and which continued in the Neo-Platonic and gnostic doctrines. Thus the gnostics asserted that Adam had lost his divine nature by gazing into

## Chapter 1

a mirror and becoming enamoured of his own reflection” (ibid.). Rank thus connects the meanings of the myth to two seemingly opposed ideas, death and creation. This dual aspect of narcissism will emerge repeatedly in the discussion that follows.

In the final analysis, Rank suggests that the kind of narcissism the myth exemplifies stems from the compilation of self-love and the denial of death. A primitive narcissistic ego, which assumes no death, explains these phenomena. This ego is grandiose and megalomaniacal; hence the creation fantasy associated with reflection. When this primitive narcissistic ego comes into contact with reality, however, the double is invoked to save it. For example, if the ego’s libidinal investment in itself is threatened by a real “object,” it tends to reject it, knowing of its potential *dissolution* in sexual love. In the Narcissus myth this is represented by Echo. Another situation occurs in the confrontation with death – here the annihilation of the loved ego is resisted by creating a double. The thought of death, observes Rank, is rendered supportable by the assurance of a second life (after this one) as the double. The importance of seeing the double, therefore, is not as an enactment of self-admiration or self-preoccupation (although it can also be those things), but that ultimately the magical creation of the double – by finding a specular reflection – insures the survival of the original through its ability to double. In this sense narcissism is ultimately a self-preservative strategy.

Dissatisfied with those conjectures,<sup>7</sup> Freud further deconstructed the double to its function of indexing *recurrence* and *compulsion to repeat*. What recurs or is brought back is something that was repressed; hence its simultaneous strangeness and familiarity.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rank’s *The Double* was translated into English and published in 1971, but the original basis for these ideas had appeared in 1914 as “Der Doppelgänger” (*Imago* 3), before Freud’s 1919 paper on the uncanny.

## Chapter 1

When doubles in the forms of mirror images, shadows, twins, repetitions, and splits occur they may be uncanny if their appearance is unexpected, has been repressed, and evokes the feeling of complete familiarity while being at the same time unknown, as if from an alien place. This is further developed as Freud specifies two main classes of the uncanny: “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (S.E. XVII, p. 249). These primitive and/or infantile beliefs refer to an ancient animistic conception of the universe, which is

characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject’s narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers ... in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, which strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. It seems as if each one of us has been brought through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage of primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which still are capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as “uncanny” fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. (ibid., p. 241)

Uncanny images abound in Surrealism where the “residues of animistic mental activity” of the unconscious are brought to visibility. For example, uncanny objects promote narcissistic overvaluation of one’s own mental processes in such a way that they are projected onto the object, thus conjuring up the sense of “detached recognition.” This is operative in Charles Ray’s *Fall '91*, where a realistic but oversize figure of a woman (she is almost 2.5 metres tall), puts the adult viewers in contact with their own childhood, when all women seemed that tall. The uncanny effect depends on the projection of the



viewer's childhood imago of the mother onto the sculpture.<sup>8</sup> Other examples include photographs by Hannah Collins, such as *In the Course of Time II* (1994), Louise Bourgeois's installation *Cell III* (1991) or Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991), a frozen sculpture of his own head using his own blood. Gilbert and George's performance *Singing Sculpture* is an interesting variation, playing on a number of aspects of the uncanny, since there, they, as living beings simulate the inanimate (fig. 2). They replace the aesthetic object with their own selves; bronzed skin and flesh stand in for bronze metal, transience supplants permanence, and their mimed song *Underneath the Arches*,<sup>9</sup> refers to homeless men living under bridges. In this way they subvert the canon by means of a narcissistic substitution as well as by aligning art with "low" rather than high culture. A more complete discussion of Gilbert and George will be undertaken in chapter 5.

The theme of the uncanny effect of images (with the resulting narcissistic implications) could be extended to self-portraiture in general, where the artist and his self-portrait form an uncanny double. This effect is operative in any naturalistic representation, where the paired image and object evoke the narcissistic doppelgänger effect. Similar phenomena are especially prominent in photography as theorized by Roland Barthes (1977, 1981). Juli Carson (2003) notes that even in Barthes's early structuralist Marxist work there is an "analogy between subject and photograph" (p. 80). This analogy derives from the obscure and seemingly complete relation that both the subject and the photograph have to the "reality" around them, especially the past. Barthes calls this phenomenon "the message without a code." The photograph seemingly indexes

---

<sup>8</sup> Although statuary may well have often been oversize, this work is rendered uncanny by having none of the formalities of the *pose* and, more importantly, by its contemporary garb – a skirt and jacket.

<sup>9</sup> A music hall song.

## Chapter 1

in a totalizing way the past moment of its creation. But its uncanny effect is that it indexes in an unconscious way the traumatic death and passing of the scene or the living person depicted in the image. This leads Barthes to describe what happens to his own identity when he is in front of the camera:

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes imposture. (1981, p. 13)

The transformation into a photographic object has enacted what the photograph is, for Barthes – an uncanny device in which subjectivity is played out. There is a strong sense of narcissism because the “code” turns out to be, as Carson points out (2003, pp.87-90) the subject’s own drive ascribed to the photograph. This is brought to full theoretical completion in Barthes’s notion of the “studium” and the “punctum” of the photograph. The studium is the sum of the cultural meanings more or less available to anyone looking at the photograph. The punctum, however, is a non-generalizable effect that a certain detail may have on a viewer, a detail that shoots out and “punctures,” as it were, the viewer (and disrupts the studium in so doing). According to Martin Jay, the punctum may evoke “...an uncanny, Baudelairean fantasy of utopian bliss, like that of the maternal body” (1993, p. 453). Jay also points out that in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes searches for a punctum that would “reactivate his connection with the lost object” (ibid.), which was his mother. He finds it in a photo of her taken when she was only five years old, realizing that he looks back in order to look forward to her death, as if that catastrophe is somehow already inscribed in that photograph. But the punctum is a purely personal, non-

## Chapter 1

redemptive, non-nostalgic response, and for that reason I suggest it involves the transformation of a picture with its publicly available meanings to a narcissistic personal project. In that sense, photography is especially prone to narcissistic reception.

### *Culture of the copy*

Hillel Schwarz (1996) argues that in our culture, fascination with the copy has become a paradigmatic way of being. This is evidenced by our preoccupation with doubles (twins, self-portraits, doppelgängers), but more importantly, by our technological commitments to copying, cloning, and simulation. Much of that interest is counterphobic, since absorption into likeness is a terrifying dissolution of individuality. On the other hand, those same doubling phenomena promise us faithful companionship and mutual understanding. Schwarz recognizes or hints at the wishes behind such phenomena, but does not include a psychoanalytic perspective, such as an analysis of narcissism, in order to understand them.

### *"Canny" narcissism*

Uncanny narcissism reflects an unexpected juxtaposition of past and present, or repressed and unrepressed. The effect cannot be easily designed, and it is produced by artists (writers) who, for some reason, can allow unconscious processes to become evident. In other works designated as narcissistic, complex and frequently unconscious fantasies also become embodied and embedded in the work, but the manifest content is anything but uncanny, as it seems to be shrewdly staged. For example, some works by Gilbert and George consist of very large panels of "graphicized" photographs of the two men nude,

## Chapter 1

exposing their anuses, or apparently sailing through the air on large faeces (fig. 3). Their own discourse and that surrounding their work indicates a great deal of idealization, associated with their apparent willingness to demystify the role of the artist, to reveal their vulnerabilities, and so forth. This idealization takes several forms. The first level of narcissism occurs in their using own selves in their work; they put themselves in the position of the visual object of interest. The most intense narcissism, however, consists in the paradoxical manoeuvre of disavowing the idealization of the canon, the academy, and the market forces of the art world in such a way as to direct the energies of those idealizations to their own selves. This is “canny” because there is a bold and deliberate appropriation of idealization by exhibiting what is normally taboo, thus creating an effect of transparent naiveté, rather than the uncanny, which depends on opacity.

### Narcissism and utility

The aesthetic realm is frequently characterized by anti-utilitarianism – an implication of the art for art’s sake idea to be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4. This anti-utilitarianism is one of the most significant aspects of the narcissism of visual art, serving what will be seen as the core value of narcissism – idealization/idealizability. The ideal can be best attained with an eradication of reference to utility, instrumentality, or functionality. The process of rendering aesthetic objects ideal becomes fully operative in modernity, where, for example, Renaissance paintings originally intended for use in religious settings gradually become property for aesthetic viewing in museums and private or public secular settings. They are, in effect, taken out of a utilitarian context, and reinvented as anti-utilitarian. In modernity, the art object is anti-utilitarian both in its

initial conception and its eventual disposition. Late modernity sees bold actions in which ordinary materials are removed from utilitarian functions or contexts and transformed into anti-utilitarian aesthetic objects such as the early use of collage and in Dada and Surrealist practices, for example, Duchamp's *Bottle Rack*. The evaluative process in the art market defies the laws of ordinary economics in this anti-utilitarian dynamic. Robert Hughes comments,

The flight of speculative capital to the art market has done more to alter and distort the way we experience painting and sculpture in the last twenty years than any style, movement, or polemic. It has shifted the ground rules of museum going: what was once a tomb becomes a bank vault as every kind of art object is converted into actual or potential bullion ... Colossal sums of money are exchanged every day ... no work of art has an intrinsic value, as does a brick or a car. Its price cannot, of course, be discussed in terms of the labour theory of value. The price of a work of art is an index of pure, irrational desire; and nothing is more manipulable than desire. *Only when an object is truly useless, it seems, can capitalism see it as truly priceless.* (1990, p. 396)

The transformation from utility to the ideal became commonplace, especially in minimal art. Carl Andre took ordinary bricks out of a utilitarian context and aestheticized them by exhibiting them in the gallery. Everyday materials such as Plexiglas, galvanized metal, or even cardboard were deliberately used to erode the distinctions between fine art and ordinary objects, as if their relation to former utilitarian function had been maintained. Minimal artist Donald Judd preferred the name "specific objects" for such artworks. The fact remains that these objects and practices inevitably end up in the gallery or museum system, becoming precious objects, rather than specific objects by virtue of the idealization invested in them. Jérôme Fortin<sup>10</sup> (fig. 4) creates beautifully textured and finely crafted aesthetic objects by serial folding or assembly of ordinary utilitarian objects

---

<sup>10</sup> *Appearances*, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal 2005.

## Chapter 1

– wire ties, rubber bands, tin cans, bottle tops, nails, or bits of paper such as labels. These surprisingly rich and beautiful objects derive much of their impact precisely from the transformation of the banally utilitarian into the aesthetic.

Utility might be defined narrowly as “put to practical use” or more broadly to include the “use” of providing aesthetic pleasure. In this study, the narrow definition is intended. However, while this narrow definition works in most common sense situations, it might break down when discussing the more subtle idea of the use made of the aesthetic by ideology. The claim that the aesthetic avoids utility in that sense would seem to be contradicted by Terry Eagleton’s (1990) persuasive demonstration of the inherent ideology within any aesthetic position. Furthermore, it would seem to be counterfactual given the degree to which political art has become visible in reaction to autonomous apolitical modernist art.<sup>11</sup> Such conscious and manifest ideological components, however, may coexist with unconscious fantasy components. Among the photodocumentary work of Sebastião Salgado, for example, *Exodes* (2000) is a powerful account of human displacement as a result of war, famine, exploitative economic practices, and technological developments. Although the photographs seem tied to complex issues of sociopolitical import, they are exceedingly powerful aesthetic objects. In a similar vein,

---

<sup>11</sup> For example, the theme of the Prague Biennale 2 (26 May–15 September 2005) was “Between New Painting and Political Action.” It was advertised as follows: “Today’s painting, along with its relationship to technology and other media such as photography, video, cinema, and installation is interpreted here as a conscious critique on society and the world, not simply as an appeasement of the eyes and the senses. To see this one only must look at such works as those of Maurizio Cattelan, Damien Hirst, Ugo Rondinone, Jim Lambie, Wilhelm Sasnal, Shirana Shahbazi, Martin Creed, Ansel Reyle, Sophie von Hellermann. Particular attention will be paid to countries that have not yet come to real prominence on the international stage, but where artists are establishing themselves forcefully and rapidly” (Flash Art Newsletter, 30 October 2004).

the ecological photographs of Edward Burtynsky<sup>12</sup> would seem to be politically motivated, thematically concerned with the degradation of the environment, but here also the sheer beauty of the images undermines the political effectiveness<sup>13</sup> – or perhaps simply indicates that the work serves two agendas, one ideological and another, aesthetic. The ideological components, however, are destabilized by the presence of a strong aesthetic. In other words, the narcissism of the aesthetic is in a perpetual struggle with reality, since reality, with its demands for use, quickly de-idealizes whatever it touches.

Interestingly, the anti-utilitarianism of the aesthetic does not derive from the Greeks; we find the opposite in Plato, where in the *Greater Hippias*, Socrates maintains that what is beautiful is what is useful, although he does not claim this position to be without problems. But to the extent that it is valid, it is consistent with the theory of forms and with the denigration of artists (in the *Republic*), since beauty can easily enhance the undesirable effect of increasing the “distance” from the Form. In the Platonic

---

<sup>12</sup> Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, 8 October 2004 to 9 January 2005. Burtynsky says of his work: “These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire – a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times.” See <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>

<sup>13</sup> For example, the series *Nickel Tailings, Nos. 31–35 Sudbury, Ontario* (1996) comprise exceptionally beautiful compositions in which the red chemicals from the extraction process are seen flowing out across the barren landscape, or filling a small river. The pollution is obvious, but the beauty of the composition distracts us from an emotional response of, for example, anxiety. The landscapes are reminiscent of the temporary alterations sometimes created by Andy Goldsworthy, where thousands of brilliant red leaves are used to outline a feature of nature not usually seen in that colour. As I shall outline briefly in chapter 5, psychoanalytically speaking, I understand beauty to be the result of a psychic disavowal of aggressive (destructive) aspects of the object or experience; hence the political impact is lost because the image no longer communicates much about the destruction, but aestheticizes the destruction to make it acceptable or even desirable.

## Chapter 1

scheme, the Form is ideal, and perfectibility involves the pleasures of the best functional [re]creation of the Form rather than enhancement by the artifact of pleasing appearance. Thus for Socrates, a soup ladle made of fig wood would be more beautiful than a golden one – the gold has nothing to do with the function, which is adequately performed by the wooden ladle.<sup>14</sup> But the wish for the ideal, which in modern times becomes located in the aesthetic, is nonetheless a very powerful wish in Greek thought.

### Privileged aesthetic spaces: symbolic and institutional

Narcissistic fantasy is not only contributory to aesthetic practices and objects, it is also centrally responsible for the creation of privileged social and symbolic spaces.

Conventional art theory and history would claim that only modernism fosters the idea of a privileged aesthetic space; and that this idea describes an elitist feature of modernism. I claim, however, that such a privileged space is sought by all modern<sup>15</sup> visual art – notwithstanding the *manifest*<sup>16</sup> efforts of contemporary practice to avoid privilege and to foster communality.

Such privileged space is seen both as concrete spaces (galleries, museums, and so on) and as “symbolic” space. The actual spaces of exhibition have been the subject of much interrogation. The so-called white cube is the paradigmatic example of how exhibition space and practice support the narcissism of visual art. The white cube refers

---

<sup>14</sup> See *Greater Hippias* (section 290) in Hamilton, Edith (1961) ed. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*.

<sup>15</sup> I will differentiate among the terms modernity, modernism, and modern in chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> The term “manifest” is used here in a psychoanalytical technical sense suggesting that opposed to it is another realm of “non-manifest,” that is, unconscious meanings and motivations. The claim is that at all levels of visual art there are dynamic but unconscious narcissistic fantasies which are often at odds with manifest agendas, including especially the wish to maintain aesthetic idealizations. This wish results from the narcissistic drive.



## Chapter 1

to the pristine white walls of contemporary exhibition spaces, designed to eliminate distraction. The art object is “auratized,”<sup>17</sup> as it were, simply by being placed in such a space. Many up-scale gallery spaces now occupy abandoned industrial sites (such as garment factories) that have been transformed from utilitarian to idealized spaces, but elements of the former function and structure often remain as an aestheticized infrastructure for the new exhibition activity. Names alluding to former functions – the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, or the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh – and structural elements such as massive beams, steel-plate floors, or industrial gridded windows act as utilitarian foils against which the dynamic of the “white cube” exerts power. The importance of the white cube as an anti-utilitarian practice in itself will be taken up again in chapter 4.

### *Religion*

The creation of privileged social and symbolic spaces was the main function of traditional religion.<sup>18</sup> Religious assets were traditionally free from taxation, and religious premises such as monasteries or churches were sanctuaries, to some degree protected from the reach of the law. More importantly, religion was, and to a lesser extent continues to be, a site of idealization through spiritualization. While all religion involves idealizations such as claiming to define perfect or all-powerful beings, Christianity in particular brings its own idealizations to an extreme level of development in the German

---

<sup>17</sup> The idea of the “aura” was brought up in the introduction pp. 10-12 and will be discussed in chapter 6.

<sup>18</sup> This is probably the case for all religions, East and West. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism – all have sacred spaces such as temples, shrines, gardens, stupas, and symbolic systems such as ritual, ceremony, and worship.

## Chapter 1

tradition of systematic theology, including such theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth. Their writings contain totalizing intellectualized claims that Christianity offers “Disclosure and fulfillment of the meaning of life and history” (the title of chapter 11 of Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1943). There is no doubt some connection between the emergence of aesthetics and the demise of religion, some degree of transfer from one realm to the other. Idealized religious subject matter continues to contribute to “auratic” aspects of art originally associated entirely with religious practices. A decline in religious belief might indeed lead individuals to search for substitute idealizations, and it might also allow the emergence of expression of already existing narcissistic wishes, especially aesthetic ones.

This displacement is complex and began long before religious practice was visibly in decline. Terry Eagleton describes a process that he calls the “aestheticization of morality,” which was most smoothly effected in British rather than continental society.<sup>19</sup> Moral social living for the emerging middle class became almost an expression of good taste or good breeding copied from the aristocracy, and less the result of “leadен Kantian duty” than a harmonization with others through an enlightened appreciation of beauty and manners. This kind of morality is aptly described in the following quotation from the Earl of Shaftesbury, which consists in “a real antipathy or aversion to injustice or wrong, and in real affection or love towards equity and right, for its own sake, and on account of its natural beauty and worth”<sup>20</sup> (Shaftesbury 1727, p. 15).

---

<sup>19</sup> See Eagleton 1990, chapter 2. His nuanced discussion shows that although this process of aestheticization occurs, there are also complex counter forces resisting the subjectivization of morality.

<sup>20</sup> The relation between the beautiful and the moral is also developed elsewhere, especially in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, where beauty is held to be a “symbol” of the moral (section 59).

## Chapter 1

Basing moral authority on such aesthetic and pragmatic considerations weakens the idealizations within religious practice; no longer is an all-powerful God the reason for moral restraint. With this loss of power comes a loss of idealization and idealizability. Art, once in the service of those (religious) idealizations, becomes free to pursue its own ends, still imbued, however, with the aura of its past. This means that visual art was able to take up and use for itself a surplus of now undirected idealizations. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, the prohibitions against individual expression were also eroding, leaving greater room for the expression of individual narcissistic phenomena.

Another equally important social change was taking place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the form of new modes of economic organization and production. Commodification radically altered every aspect of life. Eagleton points out that although this process began to degrade the artist to a “petty commodity producer,” the birth of aesthetics as an intellectual discipline signals the transformation of the artist to the status of “transcendent genius.” “What art is now able to offer, in that ideological reading known as the aesthetic, is a paradigm of more general social significance – an image of self-referentiality which in an audacious move seizes upon the very functionlessness of artistic practice and transforms it to a vision of the highest good” (1990, p. 65).

This assertion captures quite precisely the idea of narcissistic dynamics, inasmuch as “self-referentiality” and anti-utilitarianism are linked with a transformation “to the highest good” (unavoidably involving idealization). Eagleton does not direct his analysis towards the idea of narcissism, but rather shows how the complex and plastic idea of the aesthetic becomes, as it were, a handmaid for various ideologies. In each and every

---

Eagleton (1990) is suggesting, however, that such connections are corrupted by imitation of breeding and manners.

## Chapter 1

capacity, however, “aesthetics is always a contradictory, self-undoing sort of project, which in promoting the theoretical value of its object risks emptying it of exactly that specificity or ineffability which was thought to rank among its most precious features” (ibid., p. 2). This contradictory, self-undoing aspect is, I shall argue, the dialectical narcissistic component of the aesthetic, which cannot rest too long within any one ideological framework. One of the functions of the aesthetic within ideology is to bear the load of idealization, unconscious or hidden though it might be. In that role the aesthetic is always unstable and seems to need to transform itself into new visibilities.

\* \* \*

This first section has emphasized that the phenomena of narcissism can be seen not only as clinical entities, but also that the drive quality of narcissism appears empirically in visual art in the general manifestations of the explicit narrative of Narcissus, self-reflexive and uncanny functions of the image – especially through the so-called punctum of photography, in anti-utilitarian tendencies associated with overvaluing the unique object, and in the replacement of privileged real and symbolic spiritual spaces by aesthetic ones. Examination of the more specific narcissistic fantasies and mechanisms in modernist and contemporary art will be delayed until narcissism has been presented in its historical and theoretical contexts.

I shall now turn from the discussion of general aspects of the phenomena of aesthetic narcissism to a brief history. This history contains some rather large gaps, periods of time when related ideas such as subjectivism and individualism were under development. These terms will be discussed from philosophical and sociological

perspectives, followed by a psychoanalytic discussion that will synthesize the topics of narcissism, subjectivism, and individualism.

### **Part Two: A Short History of Narcissism**

The word “narcissism” appears to have been created by the German psychiatrist Paul Naecke (1899) as a response to the American psychologist Havelock Ellis’s use of the phrase “narcissus-like tendency” in the latter’s text on autoeroticism. There are two histories to be considered here: the history of the use and interpretation, in literature, theatre, and philosophy, of the Narcissus figure and myth dating back to Ovid’s account; second, another history of the idea of narcissism as it becomes a psychiatric or psychological condition or personality attribute.

The Ovidian<sup>21</sup> account is well known and not included here for that reason. Ovid may have combined two previously separate stories of Narcissus and Echo because of their formal similarity. Interestingly, it is the Narcissus part of the myth that has captured the Western imagination and given rise to innumerable derivatives ranging from warnings to those who contemptuously reject the “normal” order of things, to vanitas themes and readings that support the search for the exalted self. In most of these readings Echo acts as a foil and an advocate for passionate love, in that way seemingly more virtuous in comparison with Narcissus’s deadly perverse self-love. Yet Echo was rendered echolalic as a punishment by Juno for distracting the goddess from noticing the nymphs in the company of Juno’s consort, Jove. In this context, Echo was hardly a model

---

<sup>21</sup> The story of Narcissus is found in the third book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, believed to be written sometime before the author’s exile in 8 BC.

## Chapter 1

of love, but rather more a promoter of jealousy, a voyeuse, and herself an agent subversion of relations.<sup>22</sup>

### Variations of the Narcissus theme in antiquity<sup>23</sup>

Conon, a Greek writer living between 36 BC and AD 20, tells the story of a Narcissus who rejects a male lover, Ameinias, who then kills himself because of the rejection. In a state of confusion after having fallen in love with his own image, Narcissus also kills himself. Pausanias, another contemporary of Ovid, presents a different version, in which Narcissus has a twin sister with whom he is in love. The sister was carried off while she was alone playing with narcissus flowers in a field. When Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool, he recognized it as himself, but nonetheless felt comforted in his loss by seeing the likeness of his sister. As one of the phenomena of narcissism, twinship is salient. Actual twins can in many ways satisfy narcissistic needs in their relationship, often supported by caregivers who promote extremes of sameness in outward resemblance through dress, and who may also promote psychological lack of differentiation between the two. More relevant here are the twinship fantasies that I believe are central to friendship and which are always an important part of the array of necessary internal and external sustaining objects (Giesbrecht and Vogel, forthcoming). Heinz Kohut has formalized related ideas in his concept of the alter-ego self-object. Twinship fantasies, as in the Pausanias version, have narcissistic roots.

---

<sup>22</sup> For another reading of Echo, see Lawrence 1991

<sup>23</sup> See Vinge 1967 for a full description of the evolution of those themes.

## Chapter 1

The themes in the various accounts share some common elements such as the acclaimed beauty of Narcissus, an error of interpretation of the reflected image, and death. The Narcissus and Echo theme also appears in Greek epigrams on statues or paintings and as images on coins.

Julia Kristeva (1983) enriches the understanding of the force of narcissism in art, despite what would appear to be her strong ambivalence toward the role of narcissism. “The more or less underhanded [Kristeva’s term is *sournoise*] claim of narcissistic experience as necessary foundation for art, as creation of semblances and yet as unique access road to truth, torn between pleasure and death, is a constant one throughout the centuries” (p. 167). Kristeva develops the idea of two intertwined themes within Western philosophy and literature dating back to Ovid and Plotinus. The Narcissus narrative, in the Ovidian account, relates a story of “crimes” of non-response (to lovers of both sexes, including Echo) and “punishment” (death). The regime of archaic justice, as an “Other,” against which the “crime and punishment” of Narcissus takes place, is the very same Other that repeatedly makes its presence felt in the historical narrative of the emerging Western subject. The idea of the subject seeking itself is the other strand of meaning in the Narcissus narrative.

### Narcissus within Neoplatonism

This latter theme is taken up by Plotinus – that is to say, Neoplatonism reworks dualistic Platonic idealism by making reflection the model of internal mental process – and may be one of the most important sources for the Western tradition of “speculative internality” (and “specular” internality). This internality of the subject is essentially a dynamic source of power for Neoplatonism since the human subject is a reflection of “essential unity”

## Chapter 1

with the “One.” All things natural and material are a reflection of this original unitary source, this Originary Being. The One becomes many by the necessary extension of its essence *without* loss, but because of the essential unity of all things with the One, all things tend to return to the One.

Certain passages in the *Enneads* (I, 6, 8)<sup>24</sup> refer to the fable of a “senseless man” misled by images and reflections, and to his error of responding to their beauty:

For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water – is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away into nothingness?

This is generally accepted as a reference to Narcissus. Kristeva (1983) cites the following precept from the *Enneads*:

Withdraw within yourself and look. If you do not yet therein discover beauty, do as the sculptor, who cuts off, polishes, purifies until he has adorned his statue with all the marks of beauty. Remove from your own soul therefore, all that is superfluous, straighten out all that is crooked, cleanse what is obscure and make it resplendent, do not cease sculpting your own statue until the divine resplendence of virtue shines forth ... Have you become thus? Do you see this? Do you purely dwell within yourself, without any obstacle to unity, does nothing foreign anymore, by its submixture, alter the simplicity of your interior essence? ... you shall then have become light itself... Then must you observe carefully, for yours will be the only eye that is able to observe supreme Beauty ... For the eye will have to be rendered analogous and similar to the object it is to contemplate. Never would the eye have seen the sun unless first it had assumed its form. (p. 108)

Kristeva comments,

Here one witnesses a masterful synthesis between the Platonic quest for ideal beauty and the autoeroticism of one’s own image, which inevitably suggests Narcissus. As if, within the Plotinian plan, narcissistic autoeroticism allowed him for the first time to rehabilitate the *activity* of the narcissistic process ... By this process Platonic dialogism is transformed, with Plotinus, into a monologue, that

---

<sup>24</sup> The *Enneads* is the translation of Plotinus’s writing by his disciple Porphyry.



## Chapter 1

must indeed be called speculative: it leads the ideal inside a Self that, only thus, in the concatenation of reflections, establishes itself as an *internality*. (ibid., p.109)

As Kristeva notes, Plotinus achieves a change of focus from the corporeality of Narcissus's suffering to a noetic plane. This shift is particularly important as a stage in the establishment of a subjectivity that becomes centred on consciousness rather than an embodied subjectivity. The Plotinian "One" "is simultaneously the loved one and love; He is love of himself; for He is beautiful only by and in Himself" (*Enneads* VI, 8, 15). Kristeva observes, "That *auto eros* that I see as sublime hypostasis of narcissistic love was to constitute the decisive step in the assumption of inner space, the introspective space of the western psyche" (1983, p. 111).

However, Plotinus also formulates a basic *aesthetic* position that is summarized by Jean-Marc Narbonne as follows:

The aesthetic of Plotinus proceeds, according to the ancient alliance between pulchrum and bonum, from sensible beauty to the beauty of the incorporeal and then culminates in the pure vision of Beauty as such, itself invested with the infinite power of the Good, the true object of the quest. But this aesthetic is, above all, an inward odyssey toward oneself, for the path opened by the Good is the one that our soul must itself open, hence the task rests on each of us to cease being the mirrors of evanescent realities and to veritably want to attain grace. (2002, pp.15–16).

Neoplatonism thus extracts from the Ovidian narrative and Platonic idealism what could be called the root of aesthetic idealization, in which the 'pure vision of beauty' is linked with an 'inward odyssey' towards one's self. This function of idealization cannot take place within the realm of the sensory, or be related to real objects, but must detach itself from objects, which it does by relating to the reflected image inherited from the Platonic forms. An idealizing orientation, seeking to detach itself from contingency, would seem

## Chapter 1

to be evidence of what later comes to be understood as psychological narcissism. Such images, perfect simulacra, function in semiotic terms as icon, index, and symbol all at the same time, rendering mental function conceived thus as a perfectly suited vehicle for the idealizing function. It can “toggle” between everything and nothing.

Neoplatonism is a significant point in the history of Narcissus since, if Kristeva is correct, narcissism is preserved but disguised. The *activity* of narcissism, in her words, is rehabilitated.<sup>25</sup> This is a reflexive activity; it fosters awareness of awareness, and it creates the conditions for subsequent subjectivist contemplative speculation.

Furthermore, it reverses the strictures placed on the imitative arts by Plato.<sup>26</sup>

*Neoplatonism thus marks the first occurrence of the linking of the aesthetic and the narcissistic.*

The resulting interiorist Western subject escapes from the Other, and from Eros by means of retreat to the narcissistic or narcissian realm. It is in effect an escape from the body, and it is this escape which creates the conditions for the aesthetic of the ideal. The body, with its disposition to desire and its susceptibility to disease and death, is hardly idealizable. This reality might seem counterfactual when one notes the Greek preoccupation with the body in classical and Hellenistic sculpture. The ideal body, however, was a composite of ideal features of many models, and its idealization is of the body outside of historical corporeality.

### Christ, Narcissus, and interiority

---

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva uses the term “Narcissian” to identify the narcissistic presence within Neoplatonism and beyond, a term she coins to suggest the activity of interiorist contemplation nonetheless dissociated from the corporeal aspect of the Narcissus fable.

<sup>26</sup> See the *Republic*. Plato also bans the poets.

## Chapter 1

Christianity, although in paradoxical ways, also achieves the ideal interiorist subject. It builds upon the Judaic model in which humans are intrinsically ideal because “man is created in God’s image.” By a reversal, through Christ, God is re-created and temporarily exists in man’s image. Thus there is a double mirroring – man is made in the image of God and God is made in the image of man. God is made flesh through the human person of Christ. The corporealization of God is taken as a token of God’s love, according to the New Testament gospels. On the other hand, the body of the Christian is to be denied pleasure and importance, except as an idealized space, a temple for God, and perhaps in moments of martyrdom, in which the suffering and mortification of the body is an emulation of the suffering and mortification of Christ’s body. According to Christian doctrine, the death and resurrection of Christ signifies a transcendent victory over the body and the ultimate mortification of the mere physical. It heralds the possibility of eternal life of the soul, an outcome obviously denied to the body. For the Christian believer, conversion achieves a change in the status of her relation to the body; poverty, pain, infirmity, and hunger are now valued, since they are the indices pointing to the blessedness of the state of the soul, now unified with God.

The devaluation of the body would seem to be the result of the significant influence of Greek ideas on emerging Christian belief during the first three or four centuries. The Nicene Creed and subsequent Christian doctrine would have a Greek “style,” emphasizing metaphysical questions rather than continuing to assume a direct communicative connection between man and God as there had been in the Judaic tradition. Christianity shares with Neoplatonism a retreat from the material to the inner spiritual. The rituals of religious Judaic life, which were centred on the body, are thus

## Chapter 1

rendered irrelevant. Early Christians practised only a few bodily rituals such as baptism and communion. Christianity also asserts the value of each individual. The precursors of narcissism are thus seen to be present in the Christian tradition – the importance and perfectability of the individual are guaranteed by a direct and personal access to God. The individual is allowed to identify with the ideal and become God-like given the historical precedent of Christ, who was God despite his human body.

There are some other aspects of Christianity that would seem to be, in Kristeva's terms, narcissian, if not narcissistic. Christ, like Narcissus, experiences a moment of the most intense interiorist subjectivity just before his death. Thus it will be for each individual believer – the process of redemption will be a moment of personal confrontation and transformation. The Christian scenario is analogous to that of Narcissus in other ways. The counterpart of the masculine God, Christ (God's image) is brought into being by the feminine body of Mary. This is analogous to the masculine Narcissus, whose counterpart image is brought into being by a reflecting body of water – the feminine, the amniotic. If the amniotic is taken to represent the maternal, we note an additional aspect of the unconscious fantasy inherent in narcissism – the fusional state with the maternal. Christ is the ideal human formed by the (narcissistic) fusion of the ideal (God) with the maternal. This connection is noted by Stephen Levine,<sup>27</sup> who also brings to our attention Erwin Panofsky's comparison of the formal qualities of the *Dead Christ*, a painting by Paris Bordone (Palazzo Ducale, Venice), and Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

---

<sup>27</sup> Levine 1994 (see chapter 2, note 27).

## Chapter 1

Neoplatonism and Christianity are two principal sources of the subjectivism that was to develop – a subjectivism which now had narcissistic *activity*, or in Kristeva's terms, the *narcissian* quality built into it in a disguised way. Clearly, subjectivist interiorism is itself not necessarily narcissistic, but its relevance lies in the fact that a necessary condition for future manifest narcissism is thus created.<sup>28</sup>

### The medieval period

Louise Vinge's (1967) study of the Narcissus myth in the medieval and Renaissance periods has no equal. Although the Ovidian texts seem to disappear for nine centuries, forms of the myth eventually reappear, often somewhat revised, in troubadour songs, fables, poetry, and prose. The myth accrues meanings that centre around *vanitas* themes and other moralistic lessons condemning pride in beauty and rejecting the rules of courtly love. During the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, the myth appears in minor literary texts and is taken up as well by many major literary figures: Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Marbeuf, Jonson, Milton (in *Paradise Lost*, the myth is inserted into a biblical context with Eve as the subject) Calderon, and Juana Inés de la Cruz.

The section of Vinge's book on the fifteenth century provides a very important confirmation of the connection between Neoplatonism, narcissism, and aesthetics. Of the Renaissance, Platonism, and Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino (translator in the Florentine Academy), Vinge comments:

In order to represent the situation of the soul, Ficinus calls attention to Narcissus face to face with the reflection. He explains the instruction

---

<sup>28</sup> The appearance of subjectivist interiorism may be seen as a manifestation of narcissism. It is not viewed as part of a teleology that is in some way working towards progressively more visible forms of narcissism.

imparted to Socrates by Diotima. She leads Socrates, Ficinus says, from the body to the soul (*animus*), from the soul to the angel (*angelus*) and from there to God. God is above eternity; the angel, entirely in eternity; the soul, partly in eternity, partly in time, the body is entirely subject to time. (Chap. XVI) ... If one would see the beauty of God one must, starting out from the body, first eliminate the weight of matter and the limitation of space, then the movement of time, and finally the manifold composite form and also the simple one. If one imagines light pure and simple one has the idea of God's beauty. (p. 124)

While the Narcissus myth depicts the death of Narcissus gazing at his reflection, the Neoplatonists have seen the hidden truth of that scenario because the reflection allegorizes the required movement from body to light (reflection) to God. Narcissus dies because he remains at the level of the body, unable himself to interpret the meaning of the image.

These ideas would seem to strongly support the argument for the suitability of reflection and self-reflexivity in representing the relation of the human to God; or, restated in a contemporary psychological way, the relation of the human to the wish for transcendence or the idealizable. In other words, the idealized aspect of the aesthetic, which I claim is a constant component of visual art, has a *necessary* connection to narcissism because narcissism can supply the format for an immediate intuitive grasp of the ideal through reflection. This notion of the mirror function as the central apparatus of the mind, as well as the primacy of vision in the West – what Martin Jay calls “ocularcentrism”<sup>29</sup> – will be shown to persist as forms of narcissism even where the formal aspects dependant on reflective visuality and epistemology are broken down.

---

<sup>29</sup> See Jay 1993, where he examines in detail the tradition of Western ocularcentrism and its critiques.

## Chapter 1

### The emergence of modern narcissism

Beginning in the eighteenth century with Rousseau, Pope, Edward Young, Swedenborg, and Herder, Vinge signals the deeper philosophical issues in the treatment of the narcissus theme involving debates such as the role of individualized self-knowledge. The role of individualism as a condition of possibility for narcissism will be addressed in chapter 2. The idea of the artist as Narcissus arises for the first time in the writings of the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel. A. W. Schlegel wrote poetry in which he somewhat ironically casts himself as Narcissus; he also sums up the idea of the artist as Narcissus in the aphorisms:

Dichter sind doch immer Narcisse ... [and] Der Dichter kann wenig vom Philosophen, dieser aber viel von ihm lernen. Es ist sogar zu befürchten, dass die Nachtlampe des Weisen den ihre fuhren moechte, der gewohnt ist im Licht der Offenbarung zu wandeln. (Vinge 1967, p. 307)

Poets are thus always Narcissus ... [and] The poet knows little of philosophy, which can learn a lot from him. It could even be feared that the beacon of knowledge, although accustomed to living within the light of revelation, will be led astray. [my translation]

The focus here is on the unique position of the self-sufficient poet. Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* (1799) uses the mirror and reflection as central symbols. The characters revel in a blessed state of idleness. Vinge observes, "The water is calm and peaceful, and its reflecting surface indicates the final goal of idleness, the divine absorption in oneself. Narcissus becomes the symbol of a state beyond moral evaluations" (1967, p. 308). This comment resonates with the anti-utilitarian and non-normative aspects of narcissism in art already noted. The Narcissus myth forms a group of similar motifs and leads Vinge to conclude that the motif of error (Narcissus's erroneous interpretation of his image, or the

error of spurning love of the other in favour of pride, and so on) becomes transformed, especially by the Schlegels, to

illustrate a new relationship to one's own self and to artistic creation ... the mythical figure receives the positive meaning of self-observation and the highest virtue in the awareness of the powers of one's own self. As a development of these ideas, together with the inheritance from the mystical mirror symbolism, Narcissus becomes a symbol of the artist. (ibid., p. 314)

Vinge's account takes us up to the early nineteenth century, and Kristeva's comments concerning the Romantic Narcissus are in accordance with the direction Vinge has articulated. Kristeva's account of Paul Valéry is of Narcissus rehabilitated, now surviving as a poet, a "watery prowler" (*maraudeur aquatique*) (Kristeva 1983, p. 170), a prototype of the alienated modernist artist, reaching back also to the Cartesian cogito in a kind of polemical assertion of the love of the self. "I love what I am. I am the one who loves. I am alone. I am me. I am authentic. I hate you"<sup>30</sup> (Valéry 1941). Gide and Mallarmé are briefly presented by Kristeva as posing equally Romantic aims for a modern Narcissus, but with more irony and perhaps less nostalgia.

We can turn for a moment to Steven Levine's study of Monet (1994) for a detailed exploration of the inter-relation of that late nineteenth-century version of narcissism and the artist. Levine imbricates various discourses such as the cult of the self in Octave Mirbeau (*Sous l'oeil des barbares*, 1888 and *Un homme libre*, 1889) with allegories of Monet as Narcissus, seen through the poetry, writings, critiques, and relationships of Valéry, Mallarmé, Gide, Regnier, Gasquet, Rollinat, and Mauclair with

---

<sup>30</sup> J'aime que je suis. Je suis celui qui aime. Je suis seul. Je suis moi. Je suis vrai. Je vous hais.

<sup>32</sup> See Chasseguet-Smirgel 1985. One of her examples is the character of Dr. Moreau in H. G. Wells's 1896 novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, where Moreau's aestheticized creation of hybrid life forms is related to the dynamic of perverse demand for mastery.



## Chapter 1

Monet and his paintings. Much of the analysis hinges on the character of Monet as a Narcissus, in the sense of the Romantic artist who must yield to the sheer force of his personal vision, and thus becomes a mirror of the phenomenal world for the less visionary. Pertinent to this analysis is Monet's well-known preoccupation with water and reflection. The sea held a terrible attraction for Monet, and time spent at Antibes (1888) is described as "intoxication of solitude" (Levine 1994, p. 75). "Narcissistic entrapment in self-annihilating contemplation is the story of Monet at Antibes" (ibid., p. 83). Monet is filled with somatic complaints, tortured self-doubt, and a conviction that he would become mad if his paintings were unable to satisfy his belief that he would and should produce masterpieces. Such a stance is supported by family, friends, and critics, and results in what seems to the contemporary reader almost a caricature of the Romantic figure of the heroic artist/genius, caught up in the hyperbole of his own self involvement.

Levine articulates a carefully researched discussion of works such as *The Four Poplars* (1891), *The Poplars, White and Yellow* (1891), *The Poplars, Three Pink Trees* (1891), and *The Ice Floes* (1893) with what I would call the manifest philosophy of Romantic narcissism, expressed by contemporaries of Monet such as Valéry, Gide, and Mallarmé. Camille Mauclair (*Eleusis: Causeries sur la cité intérieure*, 1894) brings together the cult of the self, the Narcissus myth, and an idealist philosophy of the aesthetic, described by Levine in the following terms:

Narcissus is the apotheosis of the artist and his pool is the mirror of the work in which "the pure crystal of the visible Idea is unpolluted." Through an implicitly political strategy of allegory Mauclair reaffirms "the flourishing and honored legend of ancient hermeticism, the reformed and reknotted symbolic chain over and above the crumbings of time.' (p. 160)

## Chapter 1

Mauclair's book of idealist faith is respectfully and filially dedicated to Mallarmé, and Narcissus is the icon of the cult: "We stand before life as before a glass, and we contemplate ourselves in it." (p.187)

"Mauclair's epistemology is joined to Mallarme's poetics in the image that Richard Rorty (1979) has shown to subtend virtually the whole of Western metaphysics: 'It is said of every human being examining a notion that he reflects: the same term expresses the property of the mirror.' By way of the metonymy of the mirror Narcissus becomes the allegorical figure of thought" (ibid., p.161).

Here we could resume a connection with Kristeva's history and note that the two strands of meaning of Narcissus are neatly brought together by the occasion of the Romantic Narcissus. On the one hand, Narcissus is the artist, an alienated figure, resisting the social and natural order, and what Kristeva had called the archaic "other," having a mandate to create love and meaning (especially through art) only with reference to the self. The other strand is the emergence of what we have been calling Western subjectivism, with its implications for epistemology, given that its central methodology was modelled to a large extent on the specular, reflective, and contemplative moment.

This second strand of meaning will be carried over to the next chapter. There the inquiry will concern whether the seeming connection to narcissism within the tradition of subjectivism makes a significant contribution to the self-reflexive, narcissistic phenomena in the aesthetic realm as it developed in modernity. It may be that if the drive participates in the articulation of subjectivist epistemologies (most obviously in that of Descartes, given the reflexive formulation of the cogito and the component of transcendentalism), it does so in a covert or unconscious way. A preliminary formulation might be that the narcissism within subjectivist philosophy is *bound*, and with the

## Chapter 1

developments of modernity becomes unbound – and expressible. These themes will be taken up in the next chapter, but a brief return to narcissism’s “history” will complete this current chapter.

### Clinical reflections: Kristeva and Chasseguet-Smirgel

A more thorough examination of the metapsychology of narcissism will be undertaken at a later point, where it will become clear that the narcissism inherent within the aesthetic is perhaps the most complex manifestation of that drive. Kristeva’s history has suggested the possibilities of complex transformations of narcissism but, in the end, she seems to align herself with denigrated interpretations of narcissism as anti-relational, perverse, and regressive; we can recall her attack on the “underhanded claim of narcissistic experience as necessary foundation for art” (1983, p.70). Her (normative) dismissal is due in part to the model she uses, where narcissism is a quality of object relations, rather than a drive with complex expressions, derivatives, and sublimations.

I suggested above that there are two histories of narcissism: one, which I have just sketched, is the aesthetic/philosophic tradition stemming from the myth; the other is the clinical use of the concept of narcissism in psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, which had been incorporated into a theory of perversion (see Naecke 1899, p. 356) before Freud “rehabilitated” it. This rehabilitation involves a recasting of the opposition between self-love and passionate (object) love. But now the archaic Other, the law (the father), the unacknowledged third term, is retrieved and installed within the subject as the ego-ideal. One becomes a Narcissus only when that installation fails, or is corrupted by a mother who leads him to believe he is already his own ideal with no need for the work of

## Chapter 1

achieving the ideal. In this situation, the ideal is a fake, argues Kristeva, and it is constituted, not with the (paternal) phallus, but with remnants of maternal oral/anal fixations. For Kristeva this “ideal as fake” theme has implications for art:

Echolalic, vocalizing, gestural, tilting, muscular, rhythmical ...there is enough there to establish premises for all art. “Authentic” or “fabricated,” art in any case includes its narcissistic moment, its necessary share of seeming, of fakeness if you will, with which it challenges the universe of established values, pokes fun at them, and appeals to us by means of a bonus of ease and pleasure. (1983, p.127)

This theme is taken up later by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985), who re-establishes the association of narcissism with perversion. For her, the wish to take the “short” route to the maternal primary object is the source of narcissistic fantasies of grandeur and perfection that characterize perversion. In this situation, the mother may bolster the young boy’s fantasy of being an adequate (sexual) partner for her by inappropriate gratifications of various kinds. These gratifications form the basis for future “perverse” solutions to the problems of adult relations, especially sexual ones. This short route is contrasted with the “long,” arduous, developmental route that delays gratification, that involves slow piecemeal accomplishments based on identifications with the parental figure (mostly the father), or in other words, that requires a person to traverse through the painful Oedipal situation before claiming adult status. There exist some personalities who partially transform those perverse fantasies and/or behaviours into aesthetic equivalents, however. These aesthetic activities are full of highly idealized disguises of the perverse underlying fantasy.<sup>32</sup> For Chasseguet-Smirgel, true creativity is not such an idealized disguise but rather a genuine sublimation of the pre-genital drives and object-relational derivatives, which she claims is an avoidance of the narcissism involved in the perverse

solution. This manoeuvre also involves the ego-ideal, which will be discussed below, but can be summarily described here in Freudian terms as the substitute for an original infantile narcissism. Chasseguet-Smirgel hopes to distinguish narcissistically contaminated “creative” moments from those that are Oedipally mature, and regards sublimation, as do many analysts, as being less regressive, and an indication of this Oedipal maturity. She thus hopes to be able to distinguish perverse art (and artists) from those who are creatively mature. Although some art might be perverse, it is not due to its narcissistic character or because it reveals idealizing wishes; it is perverse because it may be presented in an inappropriate context, perpetrates some significant kind of disingenuousness, or trades on gratuitous violence or intent to portray harm.<sup>33</sup>

Both Kristeva and Chasseguet-Smirgel associate aspects of narcissism as they are implicated in creative aesthetics as regressively maternal. While there are clearly some narcissistic fantasies related to the maternal, the fantasies at work in the narcissism that I am suggesting account for a major motivational stream in visual art that pushes past the maternal.

Kristeva’s “history” of narcissism is an account of the sojourn of the Western psyche back to the reflecting pool – psychoanalysis. In it we see ourselves, no longer as reflection of deity, no longer as inherently idealizable. Our idealization is now shown to be merely ourselves – call it the “One,” God the Father, transcendence, or some form of the idealized primary object, the mother. Much of the psychoanalysis of art is intent on dismantling regimes based on idealizations. For Kristeva, an aesthetic based on Narcissus is bound to be repetitive, regressive, failed, and melancholic.

---

<sup>33</sup> Robert Stoller (1975) has developed a theory of perversion that is defined by the component of intending harm, rather than being defined by the type of erotic fantasy involved.

Yet Kristeva's history seems too much in a hurry to get rid of the failed idealizations and idealisms, as if the drive of narcissism would simply yield itself to interpretation. What accounts such as hers do not acknowledge is that the wish behind the failed project of idealization never goes away. Neither Kristeva nor Chasseguet-Smirgel notes the drive aspect of narcissism, the varieties of its presentation, the possibility of sublimations of this drive, and the interaction of this drive with sexuality and aggression. Viewed in this way, narcissism is a transhistorical force that presses for expression or satisfaction. Narcissism will always be searching for a new vehicle, a new domain. Visual art, already specular, became the favoured site of idealizations, which are always threatened with extinction. Narcissus is a transhistorical figure who weaves in and out of history.

In this chapter I have traced the self-reflexive, self-studying, and idealizing fantasies and phenomena of narcissism from their provenance in the Ovidian myth to modernity. The drive behind the myth is claimed by psychoanalysis to be transhistorical, but the various expressions within historical time and cultural developments depend on the evolution of certain conditions of possibility. With the arrival of modernity, subjectivism was established, along with the basis for individualism. These are two requirements for a full expression of narcissism. The next chapter will explore those conditions in some detail. The model used by Kristeva and Chasseguet-Smirgel guaranteed a constrained role for narcissism. This limitation will be addressed by showing narcissism to be much more complex: it has participated in the very structuring of subjectivism and individualism, and as a drive thus mobilizes much more than mere regressive maternal yearnings when it comes to play within the aesthetic.

## CHAPTER 2 – NARCISSISM BOUND AND UNBOUND

### Subjectivism

I have already discussed in the introduction the idea that subjectivism is an essential part of psychoanalytic theory because affective experiences cannot be fully described without subjectivist language. Emotions, fantasies, drives, dreams, and narcissism do not have full meaning outside of subjective interiority. Furthermore, intersubjective communication itself requires subjectivity, because it involves assessment and anticipation by one person of the other's intention. Colwyn Trevarthen (1977, 1978, 1979) has shown that the newborn infant comes to post-natal existence with the unimpaired faculty of teasing apart his mind from other people's minds. Consequently, the infant's inner subjective experiences are potentially shareable with someone else, chiefly with the mother.

For infants to share mental control with other persons, as they do constantly when interacting with the mother, they must have two skills. First, they must be able to exhibit to others at least the rudiments of individual consciousness and intentionality.<sup>1</sup> This attribute is called *subjectivity*. In order to communicate, infants must also be able to adapt or fit this subjective control to the subjectivity

---

<sup>1</sup> The gesture of pointing and the act of following another's line of vision are among the first overt acts that permit inferences about the sharing of attention. Mothers point and infants point. For mother's pointing to work, the infant must know to stop looking at the pointing hand itself and instead, look in the direction it indicates, to the target. This kind of sharing starts rather late, at about 25 weeks of age, and improves and enriches the scope of joint attention other than the mother herself, i.e. attention to a target (a situation Trevarthen has called Secondary Intersubjectivity) until the onset of language (at 15 to 18 months). "The issue of intersubjectivity forces us to reformulate our conceptions about human communication. Communication encompasses language, as one of the resources we resort to to get in touch with others, and not the other way round. The unspoken part of human communication is present and plays a large role long before the infant can speak. Such an inquiry is forced upon us when we admit that language may be a part of the far larger function of interpersonal communication and relatedness that grows in the child and accompanies us from the cradle to the grave" (1978, p. 126).

of others – they must also demonstrate intersubjectivity.<sup>2</sup> (Trevarthen 1979, p.322)

Clearly, the faculty of “teasing apart one’s mind from others’ minds” is a necessary condition for narcissism. Narcissism could be viewed as an extension of that teasing apart, in the development of fantasies that overvalue or idealize aspects of that apartness. Narcissism as a complex concept, not a mytho-poetic trope, is first theorized by Freud in the context of the highly subjectivist enterprise of psychoanalysis. We will look at the way in which psychoanalysis creates and offers a view of the subject, but at the same time erodes it. Psychoanalysis continues to utilize the construct of a subject because the fantasy of the self as a resistance to dissolution in pure affect is a resistance to psychosis. Freud’s rescue of the subject from the failure of its transcendental derivation is discussed by Paul Ricoeur (1970, 1974) and Joel Whitebook (1995).

We must first note with Ricoeur that, in Freud, there is a “flight from the question of *the I think, I am*. The cogito does not and cannot figure in a topographic and economic theory of systems or agencies; it cannot possibly be objectified in a psychical locality or a role; it denotes something altogether different from what could be spelled out in a theory of instincts and their vicissitudes” (1970, p. 420). Whitebook supplies a further explication of the issue involved:

Ricoeur provides the distinctions that make it possible to offer a more differentiated account of the ego, which is to say, to “deconstruct the false *cogito*” and its self-deceptions, thereby preserving the subversiveness of the Freudian project without at the same time repudiating the ego as pure *meconnaissance*. Ricoeur then introduces the Husserlian distinction between apodicticity and adequacy. He argues, that, while the distinction itself had already been implicit in

---

<sup>2</sup> Much intersubjectivist resistance to subjectivism (and interiority) begins with Edmund Husserl. “The experiencing ego is still nothing that might be taken *for itself* and made into an object of enquiry on its *own* account. Apart from its ‘ways of being related’ or ‘ways of behaving’ it is completely empty of essential components” (1952, p. 214).



the traditional philosophical distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, “before Freud, the two moments were confused.” The advent of psychoanalysis, however, “drives wedges between them.” “Apodicticity” refers to the unassailable moment of my existence, which, for Descartes, cannot be denied even when I am systematically and totally deceived by so thoroughly and paranoid and omnipotent a figure as the evil genius. It refers to the indubitable fact *that I am* insofar as I mentate, regardless of how delusional that mentation may be, and is therefore the moment that survives any deconstruction of the naïve cogito. “This impregnable moment of apodicticity,” however, “tends to be confused with the moment of adequation, in which I am *such* as I perceive myself.” The adequacy of my consciousness of myself, my self-knowledge, can no longer, to say the least, be taken for granted after psychoanalysis’ documentation of the innumerable ruses of desire and especially after its discovery of narcissism, “the great screen between self and oneself.” (1995, pp.130–31)

Thus what is achieved by Freud is neither total loss of the subject nor claims to its adequacy, but a subject that is constituted by the drives, the body, and the conscious and unconscious moments of apodicticity derived from them, without ever, of course, adequation as such.

An analysand of mine recalls a time when, as a little girl, she played silently one afternoon beside the bed of her sleeping depressed mother. She noticed a raindrop course down the windowpane. She knew later and was able to articulate later that she had been feeling great pain and loneliness, and perhaps terror that her mother was dead. This was perhaps mixed with a wish that she would die, and be replaced by a living, responsive mother. At the moment of seeing the raindrop she became intensely aware of knowing that “I exist.” Her affective situation clarified without a doubt her subjectivity, in a way that goes beneath or behind the formulations of social constructivism. Such a moment captures some of what Hegel calls the “alienating foreignness of nature”; here a pathetic fallacy mimics her tears, yet she is without a sense of a being within the natural order, an exact opposite of an “oceanic” feeling. This account is an uncanny double of the

## Chapter 2

narcissistic dynamics described above as the formative moment of the reality ego. This is “another” mirror stage, where the fictional wholeness of the self is constituted, not in an imaginary excess of pleasure, in jubilation, but in pain. It is for this reason that narcissism appears in two forms, a positive one based on the self and its “recollection” of the pure pleasure ego, and a negative aspect recalling the formation of the self as distinct through the pain of reality.

Such an experience also points to the necessity to re-establish what psychoanalysis *does* claim about the reality ego (socially constructed) and its relation to other more primordial structures, such as a “body ego.” I will include a lengthy citation from Joan Copjec, who in this passage eloquently establishes the relation between drives, the primordial “body” ego, and the object world:

One of psychoanalysis’s deepest insights is that we are born not into an already constituted world that impinges on our senses to form perceptions, but in the wake of a primordial loss; it is not, then, our relation to the *order of things*, but our relation to *Das Ding* that decides the objectivity of our reality or its collapse. In Freud’s commonly cited but imperfectly understood formulation, objective reality is not where we find objects, but where we re-find them. By *object* Freud meant something distinct from a hallucination, but by qualifying objects as *re-found* he declined to sever reality completely from the pleasure with which the hallucination was associated. *Das Ding* is roughly equivalent to the maternal body, more specifically to that experience of pleasure which it once provided, though Freud maintained from the very beginning that this maternal object has no existence anywhere before it is lost.

In short, psychoanalysis does not take reality or the world for granted, but asks how the subject comes to be constituted and thus ‘have’ a reality or a world. This constitution becomes precarious not only because it has to be accounted for rather than assumed, but also because the loss out of which she is born disposes the subject *not* to form attachments to external objects, but to pine for the lost one. Relocating the agency of reality’s constitution from the ego to the drive, Freud rethought the role of the body and pleasure in the formation of worldly attachments. While the ego was conceived, in Freud’s words, as a “projection of a bodily surface” with which the “I” of the subject coincided and, from there, confronted the world, the drive led to a new conception of an embodied subjectivity wherein the subject and its world were less separate than elaborately

intertwined. (2002, p.192)

We need add only that whatever recalls *Das Ding* could be experienced as either pleasure (the *object* is refound) or pain (the *object* is lost yet again). In countless experiences, we ‘recall’, that is, we re-formulate that founding moment. My analysand recounted one of these experiences in which in her bodily awareness (perception of the raindrop, the feeling of emotional pain at a bodily level) is a replication of the primordial loss. Lacan’s mirror stage then must be placed within a series of replays of the “founding” of the ego, rather than the first and only moment of its founding, that is, in the sense suggested by Anthony Wilden – as a timeless algorithm of the interaction between the three orders of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic.<sup>3</sup>

I claim that, apart from early narrative forms, narcissism did not have significant *lived expression* before subjectivism had laid the groundwork by drawing attention to the self, not only as subject distinct from objects, but as one able to become analytical of its relation to itself and those objects. Such a self fully “arrives” only with modernity, and as Foucault suggests, with modernity come “technologies of the self.”<sup>4</sup> The discourse surrounding such a self is radically broken off from the pre-modern discourse that may have produced it – at least from the Foucauldian perspective.

The Foucauldian model is not actually an appropriate one with which to theorize aspects of psychoanalysis, considering his ambivalence toward psychoanalysis and his

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilden suggests that the mirror stage be thought of in three ways at once: as a substitute for a much more primordial identification; as a staging in development; and as a timeless algorithm of the interaction between the three orders of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic. See Lacan 1968, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault states: “I am interested in fact in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self; these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns he finds in culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group” (1988, p. 11).

## Chapter 2

antipathy for subjectivism, even though the phrase “technology of the self” aptly describes something of the quality of narcissism emerging in modernity. Technologies of the self are the specific practices by which subjects constitute themselves within and through systems of power and which often seem to be either “natural” or imposed from above. According to Foucault, such technologies are not operative in pre-modern societies since the operative episteme was then metaphysical. Only toward the end of the eighteenth century, and later with the notion of the death of God (Nietzsche), was a space opened up for the emergence of the modern episteme and what Foucault calls the “invention of man.” The argument being developed in this thesis is that although the discourse may have changed, some essential features of the subject did not. In modernity, the discourse began to change from a Platonic frame of reference involving dualisms such as subject/object, appearance /reality, noumena/phenomena, and nature/convention to one that destroyed the dualisms. For Foucault, in the modern episteme, “all analytic knowledge is thus invincibly linked with a praxis” (1970, p. 376). The subject, the self, or “man” is not there to be unveiled or figured out; it is created by praxis. In epistemology, knowledge is not generated by penetrating to the essence of things or the reality behind the appearance. Philosophy in general becomes less subject-centred (see Heidegger, Habermas, Derrida) and more of an exercise in making meaning through “communicative rationality” (Habermas 1979). This notion of making meaning through practice rather than finding meaning already present in the nature of things finds its most direct expression in pragmatism. The Foucauldian form of poststructuralism<sup>5</sup> signals a dark (and paranoid) demise of subjectivism in this famous image:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty would classify Foucault as a kind of pragmatist.

## Chapter 2

date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment see no more than the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault 1970, p. 387)

For psychoanalysis, however, the human subject, since it is not in that sense invented, cannot be so easily erased. What *is* invented, brought out, or released is a particular relation (that is, the modern one) of the self to the social order and to itself.

Psychoanalysis is concerned with such cultural formations, but it is also intent on pushing back to those moments in which identity could not be described as simply socially constructed.

Narcissism is the drive to return to the unity and pleasure that is accumulated in the series of such founding moments, keeping in mind that this can be achieved only through fantasy, since actual regression is, of course, unavailable. In the account of the girlhood experience of my analysand, the discovery of the existence of the self is occasioned on a perception of the world in which the particular phenomenon (the raindrop, etc.) merely acts as a foil against which her existence is defined. The raindrop and window pane (pain) *mean nothing more than her existence*, and act as a projective screen, as objects are generally seen to do for so-called narcissistic operations.

Although Foucault sees the self as created through praxis, through technologies, he recognizes that psychoanalysis constitutes the self pointed towards death and the unconscious. In the following quotation, it becomes clear that he posits a distinct methodological demarcation between psychoanalysis and the human sciences. This seems to be a projection onto the epistemological level of the demarcation that, in endlessly repeated moments of human consciousness, is made as it was by my patient.

Whereas all the human sciences advance towards the unconscious only with their back to it, waiting for it to unveil itself as fast as consciousness is analyzed, as it were backwards, psychoanalysis, on the other hand, points directly toward it, with a deliberate purpose – not towards that which must be rendered gradually more explicit by the progressive illumination of the implicit, but towards what is there and yet is hidden, towards what exists with the mute solidity of a thing, of a text closed in upon itself, or of a blank space within a text, and uses that quality to defend itself. It must not be supposed that the Freudian approach is the combination of an interpretation of meaning and a dynamic of a resistance or defence; by following the same path as the human sciences, but with its gaze turned the other way, psychoanalysis moves toward the moment – by definition inaccessible to any theoretical knowledge on man, to any continuous apprehension in terms of signification, conflict, or function – at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather stand gaping, upon man's finitude. (1970, p. 374)

For Foucault, psychoanalysis, as it dares to look directly at the unconscious origins of desire, the law (of the father, the social order, against incest, and so on), and at the origins of the repetitions that are a response to death, merely forms the outline or margin of what empirical knowledge of man is not. If psychoanalysis “moves toward the moment – at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather stand gaping, upon man's finitude,” it is precisely narcissism which is activated at that point, as the stubborn refusal to accept such a finitude.

In a sense I have begun with the conclusion to this chapter, the conclusion that subjectivism is ineradicable, notwithstanding discourse to the contrary. Subjectivism is ineradicable because beneath it is the drive of narcissism. This subjectivism has a history, not a teleology – a development towards something – but a history in the sense that ideas of what the subject might be, build on what has been there before, which are then elaborated, explored, or destroyed.

While narcissism is seen here as a transhistorical drive that may be identical in each living human in the so-called series of founding moments, it must nonetheless have

## Chapter 2

widely varying instantiations throughout history, various attempted expressions in different persons and in different cultures. Neoplatonist and Christian thought were shown to be important preliminary steps in the development of Western subjectivism, but also the locations of some aspects of narcissism. Narcissism as an idea or way of being, after its initial introduction, becomes disguised or in any case incompletely expressed, as if it needed certain conditions to be present before it could be overtly manifest. This is not unrelated to the inhibition that the Thomist tradition exerted on subjectivity – since in Aquinas’s view only God is creative. Kantian subjectivity does allow for human creativity, but it becomes fully realized in Nietzsche and in modernity. Narcissism plays a central part in that creativity, but as I have expressed in chapter 1, it is initially bound within subjectivism. Thus a brief study is undertaken to understand how narcissism, in that bound condition, inflects the subjectivism it inhabits, and to understand why those particular subjectivisms break down, releasing the narcissism. As I have indicated in the introduction, Anthony Giddens (1991, 1994) characterizes this process as a burgeoning self-reflexivity, which he considers paradigmatic of modernism.

Subjectivism will now be traced from Descartes to the point where its transcendental foundations crumble, revealing, as it were, what that subject was all along – *the objectively indeterminate* subject of psychoanalysis (see Copjec 2002, see my Introduction, p. 37.) This is not a teleological revelation, however, in the sense that early subjectivisms were working toward revealing the narcissistic subject beneath; it is development by creating conditions of possibility. Philosophic subjectivist epistemological and ontological struggles are thus seen in some way responding to the narcissistic drive. But the narcissism is initially limited to or disguised as, for example,

## Chapter 2

the transcendental ego of Kant. Anything more personalized would have constituted a kind of hubris. It should be made clear in this discussion that I am not in any way advocating for those kinds of subjectivity, but that their relation to the psychoanalytical subject I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter is best seen as a formal similarity. If the philosophical subject of Descartes, Fichte, and Kant can be shown to be “covertly inhabited” by narcissism, the psychoanalytic subject comes to “overtly exhibit” it.

### Definitions of subjectivism

There are a number of operative definitions of subjectivism, which most basically stated is the theory that humans develop knowledge only through their own conscious processes. Another perspective, emphasizing content, suggests that those judgments which pertain to objects are said to be objective, and those that pertain to subjects are subjective. A more inclusive definition ignores the content and focuses on the idea that those approaches are subjectivist where the “conviction that the [mere] distinction between subjectivity and non-subjectivity is the most fundamental distinction in an inquiry” (Cahoone 1988, p.19). In this model, even an avowed non-subjectivist position might be subjectivist, if the terms of reference were the distinction between its own position and some other subjective position, because in order to assert its non-subjectivity it nonetheless brings about a subject.

Subjectivism will be used in the first sense, that the base of knowledge is generated by and within subjects. This position describes those philosophical stances which proceed from the inside, that is, the conscious individual human subject’s mind and its autonomous operation are the basis for knowledge about itself and the world. This



## Chapter 2

starting position makes intuitive sense, as Alfred Schutz notes, "...the individual living in the world always experiences himself as being within a certain situation which he has to define," which includes "the ontological structure of the pregiven world" (1962–66, vol. 3, p. 122). This "pregiven" ontology would seem to be the locus of the variability among subjectivist positions, with ghosts of the Cartesian *cogito* always in the background.

Although Schutz is not a subjectivist, he takes it to be true that the "mundane" experience of all individuals is essentially subjective. Schematically, all idealists, for whom all ideas thought to be known about the world are really features of the mind, must be subjectivists, but not all subjectivists need to be idealists. Non-idealist subjectivism could be found in either rationalism or empiricism, since both could proceed from the assumption that human knowledge is contingent on analysis of a given real world by the individual mind.

The notions of subjectivism and narcissism are intertwined with a third term, individualism. This current study will not claim to explicate all the inter-relations of those terms, but will, with broad strokes, indicate some of their interconnections. Philosophic subjectivist positions, beginning with Descartes, precede the development of individualism, a sociological descriptor. Subjectivism no doubt served to help the development of individualism. If narcissism were simply regarded as one of the aspects or attributes of individualism, then one could claim a kind of historical developmental sequence of subjectivism, individualism, and eventual narcissism. The approach I am taking, however, is to trace some of the roots of subjectivism and individualism, to show that narcissism was an underlying force or drive having a great deal to do with the appearance of both. With subjectivism and individualism firmly in place, however, the

## Chapter 2

aesthetic realm was then poised to “utilize,” and, indeed, almost assist in the manifestation of the robust narcissism we see in the modern era.

### *The tradition of philosophical subjectivism*

The following study of the subjectivism is necessarily brief and, for the most part, involves the rationalist/idealist tradition represented by Descartes, Fichte, Kant, Hegel and the phenomenologists Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Subjectivism begins with Descartes, who derives the subject by the method of doubt, determination of sensation (*aisthesis*), and intellection as activities of consciousness (*res cogitans*). The problem of external reality, especially of the body (*res extensa*) and its relation to the *res cogitans*, is solved by a “transcendental” bridge – which is God and the light of reason (called “natural light” by Descartes).

Descartes’s undisputed centrality in the development of Western rationalism stems from his revolutionary shifting of the locus of knowledge from the realm of the metaphysical to the mind. Even Ricoeur states: “The *I think, I am*, is the reflective foundation of every proposition concerning man” (1970, p. 419). This is the first, and in some sense the most crucial, step in creating conditions for the eventual modern expression of narcissism through the position of subjectivity, that is, the position of awareness of the “I” studying its own operations. This method is also used by Kant, but in a disguised way. For Kant, the “I” studying its own conditions of operation is itself brought into the definition of the transcendental. Kant uses the operations of so-called transcendental logic to derive the notion of the *synthetic a priori*, which replaces God or “natural light” as the bridge between the knowing subject and that which is known. For

## Chapter 2

Kant, the *synthetic a priori* involving such concepts as space, time, and causality produce the conditions for being able to experience anything in the phenomenal world. But the world is occupied by objects that are essentially unknowable, inasmuch as they all are “things-in-themselves.” This aspect of thingness does not contribute to the perception (intuition) of objects. The difficulty with Kant’s system is the incommensurability between that part of the mind which is able to work with objects (by virtue of its *a priori synthetic* components) and the unknowability of objects. At times Kant is transcendentalist in the pure idealist sense and at other times he resorts to naturalism, a position in which the mind is said to be affected by outer objects. This position is repeatedly overridden, however, by the idea that regularity and “knowability” of the world are the products of transcendental subjectivity. Kant’s work can be viewed as an attempt to secure the power of the transcendent subject against scepticism – Hume’s scepticism was said to awaken Kant from his “dogmatic slumbers.”

Before continuing with the discussion of Fichte, another transcendental subjectivist,<sup>6</sup> it is necessary briefly to reinforce the aim of this current discussion – that is, the investigation of how the modern idea of narcissism developed within the context of subjectivism. It can be noted that narcissism, defined in the simplest terms as the psychological disposition to be occupied with the self, is in some sense represented in the cognitive and intellectual activities of the philosophers under consideration here.

*Formally*, the self in a situation of thinking about itself, mimics the initial narcissistic scenario; thinking about oneself is said to be reflecting. T. P. Hohler expresses something similar in this comment on Descartes: “The Cartesian philosophy is not only reflective, but also tries to ground itself in that reflection. Such a philosophy grounds itself in a

---

<sup>6</sup> Hohler (1982) claims to see intersubjectivism within Fichte’s philosophy.

## Chapter 2

separation and an affirmation. It begins with the separation of oneself from the contingencies and vicissitudes of life and with the affirmation of the steadfastness of the I in its thoughtfulness” (1982, p. 2). Yet recalling the history of narcissism outlined in chapter 1, the process of “assumption of inner introspective space” fashioned in Neoplatonism was also said to be an autoerotic “sublime hypostasis of narcissistic love.” This passionate side of self-investment would seem to be missing or repressed in Descartes and the subjectivist tradition generally, and only in the Romantic era does that aspect become manifest.

J. G. Fichte removed some of the difficulties of the Kantian system by refusing to admit the notion of the “thing-in-itself.” In the following directive, Fichte determines both the methodology of transcendental philosophy and the eventual fate of epistemology in a superlative egology: “Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and towards your inner life; this is the first demand that philosophy makes of its students. Our concern is not with anything that lies outside you but only with you yourself” (1988, p. 422) This attention involves a complex derivation of knowledge through the self attending to itself in an expanded imaginative capacity. The “I” that thinks is distinguished from the “I” thought about. For Terry Eagleton, however, Fichte does not manage to achieve what Hohler ascribes to him, namely, a subjectivism that hoists itself out of solipsism by bootstrapping its way to the object. “For Fichte, the subject is no more than this inexhaustible process of self-positing; it exists exactly in so far as it appears for itself, its being and self-knowing wholly identical. The subject becomes a subject only by positing itself as an object; but this act remains entirely within the enclosure of its subjectivity, and only appears to escape into otherness” (1990, p.128).

## Chapter 2

The struggle to define what the subject is in such a way as to include objects of the phenomenal world seems to end in failure – transcendental solutions became unsatisfying in an increasingly secular world, and those solutions that attempted to build an object world into subjectivism were always beset by the incompatibility of the linguistic terms of subjectivism with object properties and descriptions. Lawrence Cahoone suggests that in order to establish the possibility of relations between subject and non-subject and to make claims about the nature of things independent of the subject, the subjectivist had two options – transcendentalist or naturalist. Within the naturalist option, the subject, albeit inconsistently, imports into itself attributes from the outside so that knowledge is possible. The transcendentalist option affirms characteristics belonging to the subject that can transcend the subject's limits, accessing knowledge through the transcendental connective. Descartes's concept of "natural light" functions as such a transcendental bridge.

Cahoone claims that various kinds of subjectivism were viable when transcendentalist elements maintained such philosophical systems. This kind of "compensated dualism" (my term) served to accomplish the following gains in modernity: first, it made possible the epistemological grounding for the development of modern science; and second, it separated the domains of science and religion, and thus made it possible to retain Christian beliefs regarding the nature of the soul while pursuing a separate realm of science.

These conditions (along with multiple other factors) resulted in a decline in feudal values, promoted the emergence of democracy, and promoted the retreat of religion into the private personal sphere. Thus the emerging modernist subject itself became altered,

giving rise to the growth of scientific, medical, technological, economic, and organizational mastery over the conditions of life, especially over natural conditions. While all these effects further separated the subject from the now more neutral object world and allowed a greater manipulation of it, transcendental reason as the overarching connective began to collapse.

Documenting the collapse of the idea of the transcendental subject is far beyond the scope or intention of this current project. A few markers can be put in place, however. This transcendent subject finds its fullest lived expression in the Enlightenment. Fully developed, the transcendental pretence has two central components: remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self, ultimately encompassing everything; and the right to project the subjective structures of one's own mind, and thereby ascertain the nature of humanity as such (Solomon, 1988). For critics of the Enlightenment, the transcendental subject is arrogant and erroneously certain of his ability to change the world for the better. Cahoon adds:

The gradual loss of the transcendental, the breakdown of the subjectivist-transcendental synthesis that had made subjectivism workable since the seventeenth century, initiated a profound alteration of the subjectivist categories themselves.<sup>7</sup> The subject and object categories were thereby freed to be universally and radically applied, unencumbered by God or reason or any other trans-subjective factor. But these categories also lacked any transcendental means of relation or mediation, any overarching context to limit their respective applicability and harmonize their respective scope ... this loss of relation changes the internal nature of each, because ultimately, neither subjectivity nor objectivity can make sense without some relation to the other. (1988, p.72)

---

<sup>7</sup> Here we might think of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, both of whom attack transcendence whether in the form of a deity or in the form of a type of rationality.

## Chapter 2

Thus the “thinking subject” and what belongs to it and what does not belong to it became isolated, mere logical opposites.<sup>8</sup> Cahoone next posits that the resulting philosophies to a large extent fall into a now radicalized subjectivism, which he calls “philosophical narcissism.” It is narcissistic because the subject, now without a (transcendental) bridge to the object world, tends toward solipsism. There are two major exemplars of this philosophical narcissism in the figures of Husserl and Heidegger. Cahoone thinks that a subjectivism “radicalized” in this way more or less automatically becomes narcissistic. Preoccupation with the self, at the most superficial phenomenal level, is correctly identified as narcissistic, but does a “bridgeless” subjectivism necessarily take on the other more interesting and hidden attributes that we have also identified as narcissistic?

Cahoone shows that the radicalized subjectivism of Husserl and Heidegger does lead closer to an *expressed* narcissism in an overall sociocultural sense. For Husserl, the objective of phenomenological description was to arrive at the essences or ideas (*eidōs*) that present themselves in experience – to those features which are “absolutely given in immediate intuition.” His method of “transcendental reflection” and his philosophy elevated the idea of the transcendental subject even “higher” than the idealists who preceded him. Husserl insists not only that truth must be found in the self, but that it is

---

<sup>8</sup> “The turn away from subjectivist-transcendental systems and toward philosophical narcissism was conditioned in part by the sheer quantitative advance in social-cultural activities and achievements that tended to legitimate subjectivism and the transcendental. Abstractly conceived, the shift takes place at the point when the transcendental mediating images and beliefs become less important than the progressively more influential and useful subjectivist dualism for the interpretation of social reality. When the latter finally overtakes the former, after two to three centuries of competition, its inherent incompatibility with the former asserts itself and the synthesis breaks down. Suddenly the irreconcilability of individual thinking subjects and the communal-natural world becomes apparent, and the formerly synthesizing, transcendental factors are we conceived as factors within the thinking subject, rather than between subject and World” (Cahoone 1988, p. 71). This is what Cahoone calls philosophical narcissism because the transcendental is now located within the subject rather than across subject and object.

the self itself that must find it there. “Thus he assigns a double role to subjectivity – as both the locus of truth and as its discoverer” (Solomon 1988, p.13).

The Husserlian phenomenologist performs an *epoché*, a suspension of judgment about the existence of the object that his consciousness is aware of. Such an object is “bracketed.” The “therefore I am” of Descartes is also bracketed, as opposed to the “I think” or “I am conscious,” which is an unbracketed or transcendental ego or subjectivity. Husserlian phenomenology is liable to the charge of solipsism, and Cahoone suggests that this subjectivism is exemplary of philosophical narcissism of the type *in which there is no object*.

Heidegger’s project<sup>9</sup> can be read as a reaction to the Descartes-Kant-Fichte-Husserl tradition, which places the subject at the centre of existence and epistemology. He attempts to use Husserlian methods and yet claims to reject egological subjectivism – producing a narcissism *in which there is no subject*.

While eliminating nearly all of the language of subjectivism, Heidegger has in fact produced a radically subjectivist picture of human being-in-the-world, a picture not unlike Husserl’s. *Dasein* is nothing in itself; it is the disclosing of the world, yet the world too is nothing in itself, but it is rather a project of *Dasein*. This is essentially the same dialectic of philosophical narcissism that we saw in Husserl, albeit without the terms “subject” and “object.” Those who admire Heidegger’s “destruction” of the post-Cartesian metaphysics of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and the subject-object epistemology often fail to see that the same volatilization of “de-structuration” of these categories was implicit, however unintended, in Husserl’s transcendentalism. Unlike Husserl, Heidegger speaks not of the human consciousness which intends phenomena, but rather of the phenomena that are disclosed in human being. Yet, while Heidegger’s language is, so to speak, on the side of the object or that which is disclosed, and not, like Husserl’s on the side of the subject, the implicit dichotomy is still operative. The philosophical narcissism of *Being and Time* is the mirror image of the Husserlian position from which it is derived, and both are the product of the development of the modern subjectivist position. (Cahoone 1988, p. 139)

---

<sup>9</sup> The discussion here involves the pre “Kehre” Heidegger, that is, die Kehre (the turn)– a term Heidegger used in his *Letter on Humanism* (1947) in referring to his later thought.



## Chapter 2

The concept of “philosophical narcissism” is meant as an analogue of psychological narcissism. Cahoone is at times quite concrete. He examines the psychoanalytic idea of narcissism as developed by contemporary British and American psychoanalysis – referring to Kernberg, Kohut, and Winnicott. Narcissism as a psychopathology involves the distortions in personality that may result in a self that is depleted and empty, requiring constant external gratification and mirroring. The external sources of gratification and mirroring do not actually work to promote well-being since what is lacking is an actual *relational* foundation. The idea of philosophical narcissism is similar, since what is lacking is the connective between the subject and the object world – in an ontological and epistemological sense. Cahoone develops parallels between various types of narcissistic psychopathology and various kinds of philosophical narcissism as sketched above. The etiology of psychopathological narcissism in simplistic terms is said to be caused by lack of parental love in infancy. Thus the “narcissistic self which is based on fantasized infantile love must constantly ask the world whether or not it is lovable, good and beautiful” (ibid.,p. 85). Although Cahoone does not extend the analogy to philosophical narcissism, the obvious etiological candidate would then be the lack of the transcendental connective which had begun to fail as a “parental” function to the philosophical ego.

The argument that begins to emerge, then, is that narcissism is an outcome of various failed subjectivisms – or that narcissism is a degenerate form of subjectivism. I revise Cahoone’s conclusions somewhat; it is not that subjectivism minus transcendentalism equals narcissism, but rather that subjectivism plus transcendentalism is *already* a form of narcissism. The transcendent in those cases would function as the

location for the idealizing component of the narcissistic drive. By virtue of the transcendent, the self is able to function in god-like ways. When the transcendent disappears, narcissism becomes more identifiable, and transcendent wishes are, as we shall see, transferred elsewhere. The aesthetic realm takes up a large part of those wishes.

Fichte's attempt to derive the object from within the subject anticipates by more than a hundred years the structuralist and post-structuralist struggle with the concept of difference. The development of that struggle, through Saussure (binarism), Frege (set theory and propositional calculus), Freud (the fort/da game), Lacan, Jakobson, and Derrida (*différance*), might well be regarded as the consequence of the failure of the earlier theorizing of difference as a *quality* within subjective consciousness.

We could reformulate the Cartesian formula "I think, therefore I am" as the preliminary attempt to locate difference, that is, the ability to differentiate something from something else, within the subject itself. "I think" as a process is posited as occurring in a situation of radical doubt, as though there were no objects. This process results in a product, an "I" that exists. The subject has been split into an epistemological and an ontological function. As we have seen, Fichte also goes through the exercise of finding a difference, the difference between an "I" and a "not-I." The Kantian transcendental subject produces difference through *a priori* appreciations of space and time. As a response to the inadequacies of those philosophies, within the so-called linguistic turn, the structuralist/post-structuralist arguments that replace them "want to provide some formula of what difference is, and generally to define it in wholly schematic linguistic terms, ignoring (but sometimes even denying) the significance, or even the existence of substantive differences – differences which can be experienced

## Chapter 2

without the aid of so called *systems* of difference, such as binarism in language” (Levin 1991, p.153).

Such experiences of difference are theorized by psychoanalysis in terms of the existence of very early symbolic capacities, especially the ability to symbolize the difference between inner and outer. This brings us back to the discussion of interiority (Introduction, p. 26-28 ) where Freud’s derivation of the reality principle is stated in terms of a decision to *take account* of reality as a response to the frustration owing to the inability to hallucinate satisfaction (of a drive). Thus it is the drive which is responsible for the connection between the inner and outer, between the self and the object world. Instead of a transcendental bridge, there is an immanent one, emergent from the operation of drives. Narcissism in its most reductive sense is the drive to pass back over that “bridge” to the idealized state of pleasure prior to the need to take account of objects. This state of pleasure was in fact not objectless – the breast was already contingently present – but hallucination allowed an experience that was as close to objectless satisfaction as is possible. Here I have reiterated a conclusion already reached in the discussion above with respect to subjectivity and the “body ego” (see p. 92 above), but from a slightly different starting point.

### Transcendentalism and narcissism

The terms transcendent and transcendental are used to describe in a general way the existence of things that are beyond sense experience, as in the paradigm case of the transcendent: Platonic forms. These terms are also used as they have been in the preceding discussion to refer to a philosophic method, transcendentalism, as in Kant, in

## Chapter 2

which a particular type of logic brings about the possibility of knowledge. In all senses of the transcendent, the non-contingent, the perfect, and the ideal are evoked, and for that reason I have associated it with narcissism. Transcendentalism then is seen as one of the sublimations of that narcissism.

In a cultural sense, narcissism is either a memorialization or celebration, in fantasy, of all the attempts to link different aspects of consciousness to the original hallucinatory state of satisfaction, to the pre-objectal moment before the “*ego had to decide to take account of reality.*” (emphasis mine, S.E. XII p. 219) While “solipsism” is the term describing subjectivisms that fail to relate to or create the object, narcissism penetrates beyond to fill out that pre-reality state or moment with fantasies about what such a state entails in a psychological sense.

For that reason, we might call such a founding moment *pure* narcissism and dispense with the term primary narcissism, loaded as it is now in psychoanalysis with the burden of trying to sort out the mess of having thought that state to be objectless. Such pure narcissism is likely to be neither objectless nor undifferentiated, but whatever it is, it is the conceptual limit-point of self-experience, invested with the fantasy of pleasure and lack of frustration. This fantasized limit-point (or limit-point of fantasy) is a wish to exist before difference, that is, without loss, since difference always points out what is not, what one does not have, or what one is not able to be. Such a fantasy generates the idea of pure being, totalized pleasure, perfection, and all the other attributes of narcissism. Grunberger thinks of it as having a prenatal experiential origin in what he calls “pre-natal elation.”

## Chapter 2

Cahoone does not move on to a discussion of Merleau-Ponty, who offers a solution to the subjectivism-solipsism problem. Like his predecessor Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty does break with Husserl's transcendentalism. Reading Merleau-Ponty's *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* (1973) is an unusual experience because philosophy has not, until Merleau-Ponty, included any theory of development of the human from infancy. Here, however, one is immersed in a philosophy of language that discusses its pre-verbal and non-verbal functions. The baby's babbling, for example, is said to be charged with affective meanings of bodily activity and meanings of a bodily relation to its world. This anti-structuralist formulation argues for the priority of affective experience, and resonates with a psychoanalytic approach. But Merleau-Ponty does away with the subject in terms of an interiority central to psychoanalysis. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he asserts, "the world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only the inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (p. 38).

In *Eye and the Mind* (1964), Merleau-Ponty compares painting and science, and observes:

The painter does not depict representations in his mind but rather paints with his body, which is mingled with the perceived world. The self, revealed by painting, is thus "not a self through transparence, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought. It is a self through confusion, narcissism, through inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees." (cited in Jay 1993, p. 314)

## Chapter 2

Jay explains that this narcissism is appropriate because the world and the body of the painter are made of the same material. Merleau-Ponty is Heideggerian in his ideas of epistemology and ontology. The disclosure of the object world to the subject, the *Dasein*, collapses both being and knowing into one lived moment. His phenomenology, however, becomes impersonal and anonymous as he speaks of the visible and the invisible, seen as the grounding of both the subject and the object in the “flesh” of the world. This notion of the flesh of the world thus undermines the idea of a coherent viewing subject, because meaning and matter are reversible dimensions of the same medium. Although Merleau-Ponty began to explore the notion of communication through language (a challenge to earlier commitment to perception), he died without reaching a well-resolved position. Jay suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology was discredited by other major intellectuals of our time: Lyotard, Irigaray, Foucault, and Metz all reduced his phenomenology to a misguided attempt to re-establish the primacy of visual perception.<sup>10</sup>

In twentieth-century Continental philosophy, phenomenology acts as a kind of hinge between the transcendental subject and intersubjectivity. Husserl, while reviving transcendentalism, claims to be able to do so while giving the subject a new phenomenological status rather than an essentialist spiritual one. Sartre felt that the Cartesian subject was a perfectly valid starting point for the development of his existentialism, an existentialism where transcendence was maintained as a goal, but seen in subjectivist humanist terms. Merleau-Ponty, while arguing for an embodied consciousness and an intersubjectivity, nonetheless remained within the Cartesian dualism. “And yet the Cartesian, subjective position remains at the heart of his philosophy: ‘all my knowledge, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own

---

<sup>10</sup> This is relevant to the French intellectual scene more so than elsewhere. See Jay 1993.

## Chapter 2

particular point of view ... I am not a 'living creature' nor even a 'man' nor a 'consciousness' ... I am the absolute source" (Solomon 1988, p. 177). Yet within the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty there is no way to separate the subject and the object; perception is not a confrontation between a self-contained subject and external reality, but a complex interlocking relationship since the seer is caught up in what he sees – radical reflection is an alternative to analysis.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of intersubjectivity may overshoot the mark, however, for several reasons. The most important problem is the invalidation of the idea of privileged access to one's own mental states, a stance shared with Wittgenstein and Ryle. By denying Cartesian or mentalistic theories, which understand predicates such as "intending" or "understanding" in terms of internal mental processes, Merleau-Ponty suggests that they can be understood only in terms of the practical actions of the situated body/subject. He also creates the false impression that humans are comfortable with loss of subjective separateness when they seem not to be. That resistance, in the form of a wish for subjectivity, *even if it is largely through the fantasy of such an ownership of a self*, requires both an ability to move away from the intersubjective to an interior realm of private access, and a concept of a meditative, rather than active, meaning. This is narcissism. This is not a reinvocation of mentalism, but rather the idea that out of the primal experiences, one can use the drive itself as a place-holder for subjectivity. The drive of narcissism, in particular, posits, as fantasy, its own ontological claims, which, to begin with, are empty of content. But the moment the drive becomes operative, the experience of *claiming* itself becomes a content, which takes the form of "I fantasize – therefore I am." This formulation points out the problem with Cartesian mentalism, that

## Chapter 2

*thinking* the “I am” is too advanced a cognitive function for the role of creating subjectivity. The creation of fantasy in response to the drive, however, can begin, in some form, very early in life, certainly as early as the putative hallucination of satisfaction of the baby.

### The Freudian subject

One cannot make a simple transition from the philosophical traditions discussed above to the Freudian corpus, because it is an exceedingly complex “pastiche” of what has gone before. I use the term pastiche in its most respectful sense, as a mixture of creative ideas – borrowed, recombined, and reworked. It is a pastiche in the sense that it is a compilation from diverse sources (Rose 1993).<sup>11</sup> Freud uses classical Greek (Aristotelean) terms such as catharsis, cathexis, or anaclisis, employs Platonic notions of a tripartite psyche, and incorporates ideas from mythology, neurology, sexology, Kraepelinian nosology, Jewish tradition, Darwinism, and ethology. The idea of listening and interpreting another’s monologue stems from Plato. Freud read Shakespeare, the Bible, and European history extensively; his sexual theory was highly influenced by Schopenhauer,<sup>12</sup> Havelock Ellis, and Kraft-Ebbing; his ideas of the unconscious were

---

<sup>11</sup> “Yet not only may pastiche describe the combination of elements from one or more works in another where the intention to forge is not to be found, but the recombination of different elements which is described as characteristic of pastiche may be found in many of the so-called ‘original creations’ to which pastiche is contrasted in such definitions” (Rose 1993, p. 72).

<sup>12</sup> From Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) “Will” seeking quietus or relief from suffering, Freud seems to derive the relentless instincts pressing for homeostatic discharge. His pessimism is Schopenhauerian, and his belief in the pervasiveness of sexuality is found among Western thinkers only in Schopenhauer.



influenced by Samuel Butler, and his Romantic view<sup>13</sup> of the emotions by Heine, Rilke and Goethe. This is a very abbreviated source list.

A subject derived from such diverse sources would be complex indeed, but the diversity is united in a phenomenological approach influenced by Franz Brentano whose lectures Freud attended as a first-year student at the University of Vienna. Freudian theory is subjectivist in the sense that I have outlined above, namely, the conscious individual human subject's mind and its autonomous operation are the basis for knowledge about itself and the world. This subjectivism is non-idealist, however, and knowledge is an empirically based phenomenology.<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur emphasizes that the idealist subject denotes something different:

Freud very clearly ignores and rejects any problematic of the primal or fundamental subject. We have repeatedly emphasized this flight from the question of the *I think, I am*. The Cogito does not and cannot figure in a topographic and economic theory of systems or agencies; it cannot possibly be objectified in a psychical locality or role; it denotes something altogether different from what could be spelled out in a theory of instincts and their vicissitudes." (1970, p. 420)

What I have attempted to trace above is more or less the opposite argument – I have suggested that the subject of idealist subjectivism plus the operation of transcendence *is* a kind of narcissism, which became more manifest as transcendence became transferred to other realms such as the aesthetic. The drive of narcissism is different from the other drives; it is more archaic, and to some extent is an executive for them. Consequently, when Ricoeur suggests that the "Cogito" denotes something different from what could be

---

<sup>13</sup> All that is central to Freud is tinged with Romanticism – conflict theory, the drives and their restlessness, ambivalence towards origins, and even the ego ideal (as unattainable lost perfection). The struggle of the new dual instincts - Eros and Thanatos seem to derive from the Romantic Faustian struggle. The Romantics were aware of a kind of troubled unconscious realm threatening to tear man apart one moment or perhaps lead to infinite and creative heights the next.

<sup>14</sup> Part of psychoanalytic theory is not empirically based and forms a "metapsychology."

spelled out in a theory of instincts, he is referring to the usual “instincts” such as sex and aggression, but is not including narcissism among them.<sup>15</sup>

Freud begins with the conscious phenomenally defined subject, who reveals or indexes her unconscious by means of absences, since the unconscious by definition is not presented as such. These absences are the enigmatic gaps of consciousness, speech, and thought, parapraxes, symptoms, and condensations and displacements in the dream. The subject represses, denies, or repudiates what is actually an intimate part of her experience (because of trauma or anxiety of the incommensurability of the drives and desires with social life). Thus major and important areas of that very subjectivity are unknown to the subject.

The subject in Lacanian terms is, of course, the same internally divided one we find in Freud, described with somewhat more nuanced conceptual tools.

Lacan’s use of the term [subject] emphasizes the state of subjection of the speaking being (*parletre*) in relation to the signifier. It is in and through the concrete experience of speech that the subject becomes the object of his/her own passions, drives, lines of fate, historical contingencies, and, fundamentally, of his/her own desire, which is always the desire of the Other. This is the indestructible desire, which Freud described as constitutive of the unconscious. Desire and subject can only exist at the price of a loss ... what Lacan calls a symbolic castration (Seminar IV, 1956–7). It is precisely the loss produced by the subject’s immersion in speech and language that constitutes the unconscious. (*Compendium* 2001, p.193)

In this scheme, the ego comes to mediate between the subject and his/her desire, the ego that is formed in the well-known mirror phase. This ego is said to be a “deceived and deceiving agency which conceals from the subject the contradictory intricate components

---

<sup>15</sup> The implication of this is that those aspects of rationalism dealing with the subject are essentially instinctualized enterprises, but where the instinct is repressed. In other words, if Descartes does not seem to posit an embodied mental apparatus, it is only because the body is repressed. See Bordo 1999. This reading of Descartes shows a very strong tension created by a repressed stream of thought within Descartes.

## Chapter 2

of its own genesis and structure,” and “the subject is condemned to meaning given by the Other” (ibid., p.194). The ego is forced through the taboo of incest to join in with or identify with the signifiers of the Other. The subject then comes to exist in the gap between signifier and being, in what Lacan calls the cut.<sup>16</sup> Lacan maintained that psychoanalysis could not do without the concept of the subject. In psychoanalytic experience – not only in psychoanalytic theory – the concept of the subject is indispensable as it concerns the assumption of responsibility for one’s own structure, that is, for one’s own desire” (ibid., p. 196).

Harmonizing the concept of the mirror-stage with Freudian theory involves some technical considerations not important here, but we might say, as a generalization, that the ego in its deceiving and deceptive agency involves without a doubt, narcissism. Narcissism is involved in an attempt to reassure the subject of its unity. For Lacan, the mirror phase results in “le corps morcelé,” an outcome that is repressed by the narcissistic need for wholeness. Or, put another way, desire seems *not* to be the desire of the Other, when narcissism is active. The identification that occurs in the mirror phase is said to give the subject “an anticipatory sense of identity, unity and mastery” (ibid., p.194). This, then, is a restatement of the way I have characterized the subject earlier, as a play on the Cartesian formula, *I fantasize, therefore I am*. Thus psychoanalysis acknowledges in particular theoretical and practical ways the subject’s struggle to define its relation to itself, a struggle that includes narcissism.

---

<sup>16</sup> The cut can also be thought of as the bar that separates the signified from the signifier in the Saussurean algorithm *s/S*. See *Compendium of Lacanian Terms*, pp. 51–54.

Narcissism – neurosis of choice

A number of psychoanalytic commentators have noted that whereas in Freud's era, hysteria (along with obsessiveness) was the "neurosis of choice,"<sup>17</sup> in our time, narcissism has replaced it. Psychoanalysis would seem to have created some level of cultural awareness that rendered obsolete the "primitive" defenses involved in true hysteria in which conversion takes place.<sup>18</sup> For Freud, narcissism was a normal feature of the human condition, yet its dynamics could be so severe, as in the "narcissistic" psychosis, that patients were seen to be untreatable. Narcissism prevented appropriate transference from taking place and thus rendered the analysand inaccessible to treatment. In the post-Freudian era, clinical theory revises that assessment in favour of treatment options for the personality disorder of narcissism. Interestingly, the establishment of narcissism as a common condition, a neurosis, occurs exactly when the subject *qua* subject comes under attack, that is, in the early years of the twentieth century. Emblematic of anti-subjectivists is José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955): "Suppose that this idea of subjectivity which is the root of modernity should be superseded, suppose it should be invalidated in whole or in part by another idea, deeper and firmer. This would mean a new climate, a new era, was beginning" (1961, p. 45). We have already noted the numerous "deaths" of the subject<sup>19</sup> (Foucault, Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Derrida,

---

<sup>17</sup> Freud claims that we choose our neurosis. See S.E. VII, p. 275, S.E.XII, p. 314, and S.E. X, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Conversion disorder is now rare. In its classical form it involves the hysterical defense of paralysis, blindness, or overt functional incapacity.

<sup>19</sup> In contextualizing the Freudian (narcissistic) subject, it is worth pointing out that the formulations by Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault of the "death of the author" and of anti-subjectivisms may have involved motivations that had to do with issues of *Continental* thought. Sean Burke suggests that, "the death of the author ... is inseparable from the massive reaction in

Baudrillard). In a schematic way, burgeoning narcissism might be seen as a counter-phobic reaction to the threatened extinction of the subject.

### Individualism

Another condition of possibility for narcissism is the emergence of individualism, defined as the view that “the mental natures of all a person’s or animal’s mental states (and events) are such that there is no necessary or deep individuating relation between the individual’s being in those kinds of states and the nature of the individual’s physical or social environments” (Burge 1986, pp. 1–2). What this definition intends is to define the individual as one whose states and actions are not attributable *necessarily* to his/her environment, but arise outside of or despite the environment.

The individual came into being in a complex matrix of forces, some of which began to erode that individuality almost as soon as it was built up. For example, increased privatization and ownership of property developed with technological changes in production of consumer goods with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century. There was a further enhancement of the individual by

---

France against the resuscitation of the Cartesian cogito in Husserlian phenomenology, it being only as a particularly vigorous form of anti-phenomenologism that French structuralism and poststructuralism can be properly understood” (1998, p. 180). Barthes was breaking the strong authorial hold in the French academies, while in the United States there was no equivalent interest in phenomenology except that of the early Paul de Man and Hillis Miller. Burke points out that both de Man and Miller did an about face in the years after Derridas’s first visit to a Johns Hopkins symposium in 1966. The result, according to Burke, was that de Man and Miller, as well as virtually the entire academic establishment, espoused a blatant deconstructionism that obliterated the subject rather than displaced it. Burke quotes Derrida himself to that effect: “The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it ... I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions” (ibid., p. 18).

## Chapter 2

Enlightenment values during this same period. As Anthony Giddens shows, however, individuals and institutions, by virtue of their new-found power and acquisition, had to develop ways of monitoring power and acquisition. Giddens signals this self-monitoring function, this reflexivity, as one of the hallmarks of modernity. He reasons that social relations are progressively “disembedded,” that is, lifted out of their former loci – in time and space – and resituated into extended and alienated space/time. In the past, for example, when money was used as medium of exchange, the location and extent of the exchange could be visualized by the user. Money was visible in localized enterprises and relations, where initially its function as a medium of exchange actually depended on the transparency of those relations. Disembedding creates use and circulation of money in a representational field that is unknowable by any user, and in fact becomes abstracted to the transfer of figures in computers. This disembedding occurs in many or all social relations and forces people to trust a huge variety of symbolic tokens and expert systems, but in these cases the trust is based on relations of vastly reduced transparency. People’s habitual activity thus becomes what Giddens calls “calculative deliberation” in the constant monitoring of their use of things and other persons. Institutions also become centred around self-creation and self-monitoring. Clearly this process has become necessary because of the degradation of more fixed determinants.

Ian Heywood (1999) points out that such a view of reflexivity in modernity is not incompatible with the implications of Hegelian phenomenology. Culture becomes directed along the lines of tradition (*Glaube*) and investigation (*Aufklärung*). These two modalities clash, but as the gains of culture produce greater and greater freedom for the individual, the ultimate fate is tighter circles of self-reflexivity and self-monitoring – and

## Chapter 2

in a sense – nothingness. These underpinnings for the ideas of Giddens cannot be developed here, but it would seem obvious that the modern individual is progressively reflected back upon himself – free to do so, and paradoxically forced to be free to do so.

In modernity, the emerging individual, despite the new and central role of designing and protecting her own destiny, begins to enter into collectives of similar units, opening the way for mass-market economies. In this context the significance of the individual again begins to diminish. Without the overarching sources of symbolic systems of meaning such as religion or other areas for transcendent “transference,” the individual necessarily turns inward. Another source of decreasing relevance of the individual would come through the burgeoning of populations and their urbanization.

Marshal McLuhan repeatedly drew attention to the loss of identity through speed – “Everybody at the speed of light tends to become a nobody” (1996, p. 100) – and to the stimulation of violence as a response to the “violence” of the media itself.

The violence that all electric media inflict on their users is that they are instantly invaded and deprived of their physical bodies and are merged in a network of extensions of their own nervous systems. As if this were not sufficient violence or invasion of individual rights, the elimination of the bodies of the electric media users also deprives them of the means of relating the program experience of their private individual selves, even as instant involvement suppresses private identity.” (ibid., p. 82)

The effect of the collision of forces, that is, those which would enhance individualism with those that render it into repetitive units with ever-diminishing power, is to enhance narcissism. The idea of technologies of the self, as envisioned by Foucault, is not wrong; individuals are required by modernity to design and monitor their own lives in ways that are fundamentally different from their predecessors. However, there is a psychological

## Chapter 2

dimension missing in the Foucauldian account, which will be addressed in the following psychoanalytically inflected discussion of the individual.

The theory of narcissism involves a particular theory of the individual, which will first be placed within its cultural and historical context. Early nineteenth-century thought brings the term and concept of individualism into existence (Edmund Burke, the Saint-Simonians, de Maistre, and others). Most of the sentiment of that period reflects a negative view of individualism, claiming it to be divisive and promoting social anarchy. Alexander Vinet (1797–1847), however, distinguished those negative connotations of *individualisme* from *individualité*, the latter term connoting personal liberty and self-development, and according to Alexis de Tocqueville:

Individualism [is] a deliberate and peaceful sentiment which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends, [which] at first saps only the virtues of public life, but in the long run ... attacks and destroys all the others and is eventually absorbed into pure egoism. (1835 Book II, Part II, Chapter II)

Our fathers did not have the word *individualisme*, which we have coined for our own use, because in their time there indeed was no individual who could be considered absolutely alone. (1856, p. 103)

Individualism is derived from a great variety of sources in the development of modern Europe: the Reformation, the Renaissance,<sup>20</sup> the Enlightenment,<sup>21</sup> the French Revolution, the decline of the aristocracy and the Church, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of capitalism. These sources involved various aspects of what Steven Lukes

---

<sup>20</sup> See Burkhardt 1860. Burkhardt idealizes the Italian Renaissance for its championing of autonomy, privacy, and individuality of character.

<sup>21</sup> I have already called attention to the way in which Enlightenment values promote subjectivism. This humanist subject can feel the right to his autonomous individualism while part of the “social contract.”



(1990) has called “component ideas,” that is, the supreme intrinsic value of the human being, the notion of self-development, and self-direction or autonomy.

Some component ideas are more than descriptions of aspects of the individual; they describe relations between the individual and society. For example, methodological individualism is a doctrine that rejects the understanding of social phenomena or institutions in terms of collectives; rather, they are understood as resulting *from* the attributes and behaviour of individuals. An understanding of individual motivation is thus essential to an explanation of social phenomena. The best known exponent of methodological individualism is Karl Popper.<sup>22</sup> Most of Freudian theory clearly concerns the individual, even though some aspects of are highly intersubjective (for example, the formation of character through identification). While the theory does not start with the collective, the “social” nonetheless appears in the individual, especially in the form of the small group of the family. Freud also brings psychoanalysis beyond the individual in “Future of an Illusion” (1927) and in “Civilization and its Discontents” (1930).

Although psychoanalysis is an example of methodological individualism, historically there have been attempts to integrate it with or transform it into social theory, one such attempt being the integration of psychoanalysis and Critical Theory by the Frankfurt School. Members such as Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, and Herbert Marcuse all influenced the interface between the individual, seen psychoanalytically, and society, viewed in Marxist terms. For Freud, the individual mediates drives that conflict with society and/or with each other. Reality, especially social reality, is made tolerable or compatible with the drives by processes of repression, sublimation, and reaction formation. Furthermore, for Freud, the object (located in the social order) is the least

---

<sup>22</sup> See Popper 1945, vol. 11, chap. xiv.

## Chapter 2

constant component of the drive. Drive is thought of as having a source, an aim, and an object. Object relations theory modifies Freudian individualism by changing the emphasis to the object and to normative considerations of relations with the object, but it does not become a social psychology. The individual is said to seek objects; object-seeking behaviour is shown empirically to begin very soon after birth, and is regarded by some as drive-like.

Dissatisfaction with the lack of psychological depth in Marxist thought led some members of the Frankfurt School to attempt what would seem to be an unlikely alliance between Marx and Freud. Marx's economic determinism was based on the notion that it is not the consciousness that determines human existence, but rather, social existence determines consciousness. This basic incompatibility could be demonstrated by respective theories of human acquisitiveness. A Marxist view would regard the excesses of capitalist acquisition as a by-product of an (always) aberrant social situation, but an orthodox Freudian view would relate acquisition to the drives of sex and aggression mediated by the Oedipus complex, which would assert itself regardless of the social context.

Within the Frankfurt School Erich Fromm held the most "social" view, having rejected Freud's second dual instinct theory (which theorized Eros and Thanatos as the basic drives) and libido theory in general. He adhered to the first dual instinct theory, which pits self-preservative instincts against the sexual instincts. For Fromm, the need for self-preservation, given a strong natural wish to survive, makes humans vulnerable to adverse social conditions. Greed, avarice, and aggression are less innately driven than they are results of frustration. The work of analytical social psychology would be to

## Chapter 2

understand the effect of the social structure on these drives at the level of unconsciously motivated behaviours.

Fromm suggested that the libidinal structure of society was not necessarily fixed according to Oedipal determinants, but could change with variations of the socioeconomic base – with obvious implications for theories and therapies of “neurotic” relations between the sexes. Furthermore, since patriarchy is aligned with capitalism, he became interested in matriarchal theory as an alternative basis for social organization (Bachofen, 1861). Another of Fromm’s enrichments of Marxist thought with psychoanalytic insight is found in his study of the relation of character type to capitalism, where bourgeois possessiveness and rationalist inhibition are seen as repressive anal traits.

Only a few salient examples are given here of Fromm’s ideas, and in fact Fromm is most widely known for works such as *Escape From Freedom* (1941) and *Man for Himself* (1947), published after he severed ties with the Institute and became disillusioned with many basic concepts of Freudian theory. Fromm’s drift from Freudian to social psychology is captured by the following quotation: “The social character comprises only a selection of traits, the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as a result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group” (1941, p. 239). In Fromm’s view, the individual emerges from a matrix of oneness with others and nature, and may succumb to the distortions of the social order, to destructive behaviour, or may realize that “the more he becomes an individual he has no choice but to unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work” (Jay 1973, p. 99). But this utopian picture is not

## Chapter 2

in agreement with observations of psychoanalytic practice, nor apparently with the great, and perhaps regrettably failed, socialist experiments of the past century.

On the other extreme is Christopher Lasch's well-known description of a culture of narcissism. These works (1979, 1984) are an account of an emboldened and entitled self-reflexivity within acquisitive individualism. Individualism here, however, is seen to evolve into a quasi-paranoid survivalism. For Lasch, narcissism may have had something to do with the origins of the hedonistic self-preoccupied American culture, but there is a distinct nostalgia in his writing for an earlier "imperial" self, a self disposed perhaps to forms of narcissism, but nonetheless better than the minimal narcissism of contemporary society. This latter form is "minimal" inasmuch as it has actually substituted overblown images, manufactured objects, and self-directed elements of the environment for a self that has been evacuated of meaning. Lasch considers this survivalist individual the result of a regressive connection to the maternal. Although he does not use the concept of perversion as such, he draws from Chasseguet-Smirgel's theory, where a narcissistic psychic "short-cut" to the maternal object allows the subject to avoid an Oedipally mature developmental struggle.

This is a narcissistic dynamic, as it is predicated on the Freudian notion that primary or original narcissism (which was linked with the mother) is safeguarded by the substitutive formation of the ego-ideal. If the early ego-ideal attains mastery, that is, if practices allow the individual to simulate his/her own ideal self or merge with it rather than modify it by reality and through requisite help from paternal and other identifications, the result, for Chasseguet-Smirgel, is a kind of double denial of reality of the difference of the sexes, and differences of the generations – the core of perversion.

Lasch views the majority of contemporary individuals as frightened and empty, concerned with survival, and coping either by denial, or by enactment of maternal identifications and their symbolic equivalents. These maternal identifications take the form of feminist, environmental, and other anti-masculinist movements that share assumptions with the utopian speculations of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. According to Lasch, the argument is a familiar one: masculine sexual anxiety and traditional roles based on conflict (destruction of nature, making war, “Promethean separation of man and nature”) are seen as a rebellion against dependence on the maternal. Traditional psychoanalysis is accurate in describing the psychic outcome of “radical rejection of the mother, fearful submission to the father, and the internalization of his authority in the form of a guilty conscience” (Lasch 1984, p. 243).

Lasch links feminist psychoanalytic theory (Nancy Chodorow, Stephanie Engels, and Jessica Benjamin) to an attempted revisionism; rather than have society continue to be dominated by this failed masculinism shaped by the super ego, a new order is envisioned in which the ego-ideal, a structure theorized as the replacement of primary narcissism – hence maternally based, is reconciled with the ego. This fantasized new order does away with instrumental masculine reason and substitutes various social and/or environmental utopias in which mystic union with nature (mother) does away with masculine rationalist authoritarian models, represented by Gregory Bateson, Robert Disch, and Marilyn Ferguson. Lasch argues for a return to self-hood, and “practical reason” (as opposed to instrumental reason) and is willing to tolerate a guilty conscience, that is, one that comes from the reality of dependent compromise and attacks on good

## Chapter 2

objects, a formulation that he sees as rejecting the regressive narcissism that has led to both the paranoid and the utopian survivalist.

### Historicist narcissism

Up to this point, the argument has been made that narcissism is a transhistorical force, a drive whose expressions and derivatives depend on its being bound or free. As modernity unfolds, this drive is said to become more visible, especially in the context of a general condition of self-reflexivity, immanent subjectivism, and individualism. Lasch historicizes narcissism in such a way as virtually to eradicate the longer perspective in favour of an assessment of narcissism that cannot engender any richness of expression. My view of narcissism is not exactly that it is redemptive, but that in any case its dialectic is centrally involved in the creative process. Lasch's particular examination of narcissism and the kind of individual that is involved in it leads him to a discussion of the minimalist aesthetic, which he presents as a correlate of the "minimal self." Minimalist aesthetics, in which the self plays a "minimal" or non-existent role, are a sign of another variety of survivalism. They erect a barrier to the psychic interior, an interior lost in the modernist commitment to flatness. While Lasch seems to lump different aspects of modernism together in ways that suit his polemical purposes, he is right about the attack on the interior, about the idea that in certain ways the self is eradicated, and that valorization of impermanence is often a defence against belief and commitment. Lasch seems to long for an old style "imperial" self, against which one could rebel, or which one could excavate in order at least to have a foil against which to define oneself. He identifies the problem with modernist and minimal art as a regressive merging of self and non-self, another form

## Chapter 2

of evading reality by regressing to the formlessness of absorption into a maternal universe.

Writing in 1984, Lasch could hardly have imagined the burst of creative energy and return of expression, bold new figurative styles, and intensely eroticized body art that characterized the latter part of that decade the 1990s, and beyond. In chapter 4, the dialectical view of narcissism will be seen to locate these practices in a more coherent framework, where it will become clear that although the movements Lasch considers are at times regressive, they are not as emptied of meaning as he seems to think. Where there is emptiness, even in Rauschenberg's white paintings or Reinhardt's many black paintings, looking psychoanalytically beyond the manifest content and discourse reveals a continued and seemingly ineradicable desire for idealization.

This section began with the idea that the development of individualism was one of the conditions of possibility for narcissism. Lasch shows that a type of individualism – survivalist, acquisitive, and minimal – can also develop, one that seem paradoxically to erode that condition of possibility, because the self involved here is so depleted as to be incapable even of narcissism in the old Romantic sense. He falls into the trap of believing the manifest discourse of apocalypse which I already identified as a false alarm in the introduction. In these first two chapters I have traced a path, touching on Greek metaphysics, transcendental subjectivity, the Enlightenment, early modern individualism, and the arrival of what Philip Rieff (1966) was to call “psychological man.” At each point of contact, I have noted (and perhaps suggested further in-depth studies) the components of narcissism, its incomplete expression, or conditions that were to favour future expression.

## Chapter 2

In this second chapter I have selected two of those points to show how narcissism, bound, as it were, participated in the emergence of full-blown Western subjectivism and individualism. Narcissism in turn emerges from these necessary conditions of possibility, and becomes central to understanding the modern subject of psychoanalysis. Narcissism conceptualized in this way is considered not merely as a regressive quality of object relations, as much early psychoanalysis theorizes it, but as a drive that permeates phenomena such as sexuality and aggression, that pushes for expression and satisfaction.

The next chapter will take up the “early” psychoanalytic theory of narcissism, discuss its relevance, and show how the drive approach is derived by Grunberger. Again, it must be emphasized that a definition of narcissism that relates it only to regressive object relations is inadequate for theorizing a role in aesthetics.



## CHAPTER 3 - THE THEORY OF NARCISSISM

### The psychoanalytic concept of narcissism

In his 1914 paper "On Narcissism," Freud developed a model to explain various types of relations that the ego formed to its world. The concepts of neurosis (hysteria and obsessiveness), the Unconscious, and dream formation had put in place a level of description that had not adequately taken into account the operations of the psyche in its regulation of sexual energy vis à vis objects. This emphasis on energetics is called the economic model, since it involves understanding of sexual energy as a quantity that, in effect, responds to psychic laws of supply and demand.

Freud's previous theorizing about the sexual development of children, homosexuality, and dementia praecox had needed a theory of narcissism, which was absent as such from the original texts dealing with those subjects.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the sexual development of the little boy as outlined in 1905 in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (S.E. VII) the coherence of the theory of castration depends on the boy's *narcissistic* valuation of his penis, given that its use-value is unknown to him. Similarly the little girl's penis envy, as the obverse of the boy's reaction, also hinges on the understanding of the lack of a penis as a narcissistic injury. While the theory breaks down exactly because of the untenability of those narcissisms,<sup>2</sup> it is nonetheless true that

---

<sup>1</sup> In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) there is no mention of the term narcissism, except for sections and footnotes *added later*, one in 1910, and at least three added in 1915, that is, after the writing of the narcissism paper of 1914. For example, in the third essay, the entire section on Libido Theory, in which the narcissistic energy dynamic was outlined, was added in 1915, and in the case of one paragraph of that section, in 1920.

<sup>2</sup> The theory of castration depicts the Oedipal situation for the boy as a fear of losing the penis under threat of the castrating father, who is the boy's rival for the mother. That fear is said to be strong enough for the boy to give up the maternal object and identify with the father instead. However, the fear would be contingent on the boy's valuation of the penis, that is, on his *narcissistic* investment in it. Other parts of Freudian theory would suggest there is no basis for that valuation, since the use of the penis is not known

## Chapter 3

a theory of narcissism was essential for Freud's theory of sexual development. Freud was also working out the general question of the variations of the ego's relation to the world, in the "over-valuation" of the object in sexual love, in the situation of homosexuality, in the disease of schizophrenia, in the withdrawal from life's objects in illness and hypochondria, and in the withdrawal of cathexis to objects in the state of sleep.

Empirical evidence suggested to Freud that the autoerotic instincts are present in the human from the start. Libido, or sexual energy, is therefore in some way active also from the start. As a preliminary step on the way to object love, libido has to flow to the forming infantile ego.

I may point out that we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first; so there must be something added to auto-erotism – a new psychical action – in order to bring about narcissism." (S.E. XIV, p. 77)

This he called original or primary narcissism in 1914. In the situation of love,<sup>3</sup> libido flows out to the object or is retracted, "as the pseudopodia of the amoeba reach out to engulf a particle or can be retracted back into the body of the amoeba" (S.E. XIV, p. 75). This libidinal flow is strictly reciprocal (p. 76); the more the object is cathected, the less libido remains in or cathected to the ego, and conversely, the more the ego<sup>4</sup> is narcissistically cathected, the less libido is available to flow out to the object. This

---

by the boy given there is no knowledge of the vagina in either sex until later. Thus if there is an over-valuation of the penis, it is entirely a sociocultural affair – which was not Freud's intention.

<sup>3</sup> Here also is a source for confusion, Freud is not talking about object relations – they are, of course, present very early in life. He is talking about the dynamics of *sexual* object relations – that is, love. Thus primary narcissism could also be thought of as devoid of specifically *love* objects, but the infant clearly has had experiences of objects or part-objects even if the ego has not had the unity it is said to acquire when libido flows into it. This remains problematic, since the question then would be, what exactly is the organization called that has experienced anything prior to object relations, or even the auto-eroticism that preceded the development of the ego?

<sup>4</sup> The terminology here is not precise, since Freud used the word "ego" to mean more or less the "self" until the tripartite model was developed.

process is analogous to the behaviour of liquid in the two arms of a U-tube – if pressure reduces the volume of liquid in one side, the volume of the other side always increases by exactly the same amount. Libido theory as used here has undergone a modification. Whereas earlier Freud thought of it as an energy that needed to be discharged, now (1914) the emphasis is on its hydraulic properties; there is a reservoir of libido, it flows, it can be dammed up, but its overall quantity remains constant.

There are obvious limitations to a model so mechanical, and the importance of Freud's 1914 theory is found in the aspects of the concept that provide an armature on which to construct and locate fantasy. *Fantasies* within narcissism, in other words, are of interest, rather than some precise mechanism of energy flows. The metaphor of fluid energy flow is useful from time to time, especially since it suggests *physicality*, an important aspect of psychoanalysis. With this in mind, there are three principal insights in the 1914 paper that proved to be foundational for narcissism theory – be it object relational, self-psychology, or drive-defence theory.

The first important insight, already noted, is that the theory of narcissism added complexity to traditional notions of romantic and sexual love. The study of the erotic life of the sexes led to the discovery of different types of love – narcissistic and anaclitic.

A person may love:

- 1) According to the narcissistic type:
  - a) what he himself is (i.e. himself)
  - b) what he himself was
  - c) what he himself would like to be
  - d) someone who was once part of himself
  
- 2) According to the anaclitic (attachment) type
  - a) the woman who feeds him
  - b) the man who protects himand the succession of substitutes who take their place.

(S.E. XIV, p. 90)

The subtypes of narcissistic love establish the narcissistic situation as a dynamic one, with potential components of past, present, and future.

In general, men are said to love according to the anaclitic type, and women according to the narcissistic type. This is not deprecatory, according to Freud, since it would be consistent with other parts of his theory of feminine sexuality. Men, according to this formulation, attach to their female love object, modelled after the mother that nurtured them. They are attracted to the narcissism of the female, whose self-contentment and inaccessibility are an important cause of the sexual over-valuation that men are willing to invest in them, presumably because there is a transference of the qualities of self-containedness and inaccessibility from the mother to the female love-object. Consistent with this part of the theory was Freud's notion that homosexuality in men, since it is not involved with sexual over-valuation of the woman, is therefore not an anaclitic love and hence must be a narcissistic one. It may not have occurred to him that the anaclitic subtype relating to the "father that protected him" may lead to an "anaclitic" homosexual love.<sup>5</sup>

The distinction between anaclitic and narcissistic is not very robust, and Freud himself realized that most relationships are a mixture of the two. Nonetheless, the intention of these categories is clear. A case could be made that anaclitic love is actually narcissistic, since the relation established between the "mother that feeds" and the infant

---

<sup>5</sup> The most significant contemporary theorizing of homosexual relations in men by Richard Isay (1986) is almost entirely directed to this idea, although he does not call it "anaclitic." Isay does revise the origin of homosexual love from a reactive traditional model (homosexuals choose men in reaction to over intense suffocating mothers and absent fathers) to a model of primary homosexual attachment in which the (gay) little boy has, from the outset, an intense erotic wish for the father, which is then transferred to a mature homosexual relationship. Narcissistic dynamics do not primarily determine the homosexual relationship, although they may be narcissistic, just as heterosexual relationships may be.

is also one of the bases of narcissistic dynamics, as is made clear by post-Freudian theory. However, Freud suggests that the relation to the nurturing mother or protecting father is a *dependant* relation, and thus involves an appreciation of the parent as an ambivalent object. This aspect of relations is also theorized with much greater clarity by the post-Freudians such as Melanie Klein. For Klein, the depressive position is the non-narcissistic type of relation to the object.<sup>6</sup>

The second important insight concerns the factor of fantasy in the scheme of narcissism. Freud says:

If we look to the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognize that it is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned ... Thus they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child ... they are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims and privileges which were long ago given up by themselves ... Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – “His Majesty the Baby,” as we once fancied ourselves. The child shall fulfill those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out – the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father's place, and the girl shall marry a prince as a tardy compensation for her mother. At the most touchy point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child. Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature. (S.E. XIV, pp. 90–91)

---

<sup>6</sup> Klein posits “positions” as more important than strictly Oedipal dynamics. The “paranoid/schizoid” position involves earlier relations to objects in which part-objects are split into good (gratifying) and bad (persecuting). The split is motivated by an attempt to keep the bad from contaminating the good object. These bad part-objects are projected and feared; hence the paranoid anxiety results from the splitting. When the more mature relation to a whole object is achieved, it is not split and becomes integrated – that is, good and bad belong to the same object. The depressive position refers to the loss of the potentially totally good (part) object, that is, it has to be mourned. This “depressive” type of object relation is sometimes called anaclitic, in keeping with the distinction Freud made, because narcissistic relations often involve part objects that are ultimately part of an ongoing attempt to retain something purely good, uncontaminated by pain or disappointment.

Fantasy about the state of the infant, by the parents, thus becomes one of the primary contents of the child's narcissism, through the child's introjection of those fantasies. Although the infant's actual experience of the world may include experiences of perfection and power, given the parent's actual adoration and indulgence and virtually instant gratification of its needs, this passage should make it clear that infantile narcissism is mostly representative of the wishes and fantasies of adults, who need a projective object for their own wishes, especially for immortality. The infant's state, in the best of childhoods at least, provides such a situation. Thus it is the parent's reawakened narcissism that is projected. Since Freud had already conceded that the infantile state of narcissism is not observed or observable, he states that it is inferred in the manner in which the parents do in fact ascribe power and perfection to the baby. In other words, infantile narcissism describes a situation in which the environment is in harmony with the needs of the infant, in such a way that the parent/observer would project desirelessness, objectlessness, and power into the baby's relations with its world. That infantile narcissism would seem to be objectless at that moment since, in a state of perfect harmony, there would be no need for awareness of subject and object. At the moment where frustration reappears, the object is needed, and the majestic (narcissistic) baby collapses into a helpless subject – and now the monarch is the mother. While children and babies might derive some sense of megalomania from their own experience of magisterial command of the world, their actual stage of psychic and cognitive development is such that the scale of their megalomania is in reality not very significant. Their continual identification with the parent's projection of perfection, control, and centrality simultaneously reinforces the parental estimation of the child's narcissism, and

provides what will become an unconscious template for the child's own future adult narcissism in its emerging psyche. In fact, the dynamics of narcissism are such that its emergence is conditioned by the intense intersubjectivity of the parent-child relationship, where innumerable identifications, projections, and projective identifications are activated during the development period of the child.

Freud complicates the 1914 essay by making the terms "primary," "original," and "infantile" narcissism more or less interchangeable. There have been a variety of responses to the problem of "primary narcissism" – associated with implications in Freud's theory that primary narcissism is objectless. Margaret Mahler (1968) describes the primary state as "normal infant autism," a concept unfortunately derived from a population of psychotic and autistic infants. A great number of others have either disavowed primary narcissism based on infant observation studies, which revealed the intense interrelatedness that exists between infant and mother from birth (Brazelton, Winnicott, and Stern), or have replaced it with alternative constructs: primary love (Balint), undifferentiated primary object relations (Henseler), fused maternal and infant object relation (Kernberg; Kohut 1971, 1978; Rosenfeld, and Klein 1952).<sup>7</sup> The problem of the untenability of "objectlessness" is resolved by Laplanche (1989, pp. 76-79). Furthermore, although I have already suggested that most of those difficulties are removed if the orientation to objectlessness is resolved by understanding primary narcissism to be a limit point of adult's projective fantasy about origins, there are other textual references to objectless states. For example, "narcissism is the universal and original state of things, from which object-love is only later developed" (S.E. XVI, p.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kernberg and Rosenfeld have a somewhat different notion, however, of what is fused. For them it is an "internal object"; external relationships interact with these internal fantasy relationships.

416). This citation suggests as well that this original state is by implication objectless.

However, Freud is referring to object-*love*, not to object *relations*. Ego interests or ego-instincts always involve object relations. This is further explained a few pages later:

Narcissism, I believe, is the libidinal complement to egoism ...  
It is possible to be absolutely egoistic and yet maintain  
powerful object cathexes, in so far as libidinal satisfaction in  
relation to the object forms part of the ego's needs. It is possible  
to be egoistic and at the same time exceedingly narcissistic –  
that is to say have very little need for an object. (ibid., p. 417)

I have already suggested (chapter 2, p. 110) that instead of primary narcissism, a term now tainted by the untenable idea of objectlessness, we could use the term “pure narcissism” to refer to the limit-point of what narcissistic fantasy states could entail.

The third important insight in Freud's 1914 paper “On Narcissism” is his development of the concept of the formation of the ego ideal in the context of narcissism. The formation of the ego-ideal is a complex manoeuvre designed to protect and/or reinstate childhood narcissism. When the child begins to mature, and the parents and the environment generally begin to criticize or otherwise challenge the child's narcissism (as part of their attempt to bring the child into the sphere of reality), the child responds by replacing that narcissism with the development of the ego-ideal. Whereas formerly the child was his/her own ideal, now the ego knows its failures, but with varying degrees of repression retains “the satisfaction it [he] once enjoyed” (S.E. XIV, p. 94) in the form of the ego-ideal. “What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal” (ibid). The ego-ideal thus becomes a combination of memories of satisfactions actually experienced (embellished with fantasies of lost perfection, magisterial power, and invulnerability), and the narcissistic projections of the parents with which the child has identified. Object relations



based on this narcissism (as outlined above in contrast to anaclitic relations) are attempts to bring the actual ego closer to its ideal by relating to objects only in terms that bolster the wished for ideality, rather than experience the object through involvement with the ego's reality needs and dependencies. Freud does point out that no relation is purely narcissistic or purely anaclitic, and that a "happy love" is a mixture, in which the libido invested in the self and invested (anaclitically) in the object are indistinguishable.

The origin and function of the ego-ideal and its involvement in narcissistic object relations are important elements of clinical psychoanalytic theory. The current project is not concerned with the clinical aspects of artists' characters and their object relations viewed normatively. Instead, aspects of the theory just reviewed that relate to generalizable human fantasy are significant and will be elaborated further. These are fictions of perfection of the idealized self, and as the quotation from Freud suggests, they are fantasies of immortality and transcendence over the laws of nature.

There may be some confusion at this point because in chapter 2, Lasch was noted to critique contemporary *narcissistic* society as regressively merging the ego with *maternal* ego-ideal components. If he had restricted himself narrowly to a Freudian theory of the ego-ideal, he would not have made that formulation, since the ego-ideal is said in the 1914 essay "On Narcissism" to be formed as a substitute for the child's own lost narcissism. This childhood narcissism, symbolically represented as "His Majesty the Baby," is constituted by the parent's indulgence and projection of their own lost narcissism. The more specifically maternal component was to be brought out in post-Freudian theory, which was characterized by a major shift of attention from Freud's almost exclusive attention to Oedipal dynamics to the pre-Oedipal relationship the baby

has with the mother. In that pre-Oedipal connection with mother, the contribution to narcissistic elements consists more of mirroring and merging. Thus the ego-ideal could be seen as having a basis in a much earlier child-mother relationship and therefore regressive and infantile in nature.

The definition I will use conceptualizes narcissism as a drive and therefore will avoid identifying its origin within relationships per se, although its expressions may be inflected and/or distorted by the kinds of objects and quality of object relationships this drive encounters, just as the drives of sex and aggression are brought out in differing ways by different relationships. The idea here is that the drive, at its archaic core, remains the same; drives as such do not develop and mature.

Freud's next major contribution to the theory of narcissism appears in 1923 in the "Ego and the Id" (S.E.XIX). In the simpler scheme of the second dual instinct theory, self-preservative and sexual drives are all considered to be libidinal. Thus when libidinal energy is withdrawn from objects and retracted and reinvested in the ego, the ego seems to assume characteristics of an object "forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and ... trying to make good the id's loss by saying: 'Look, you can love me too -- I am so like the object'" (ibid., p. 30). Another action, which had already been outlined in "Mourning and Melancholia" (S.E.XIV), has taken place along with the transfer of libidinal energy to the ego. This action is a simultaneous identification in the ego with the lost object. The character of the ego is thus said to be a collection of these identifications or "precipitates" of abandoned object cathexes. Not surprisingly, the formation of the ego thus takes place by means of narcissistic process.

In other words, the ego has two main ways of narcissistic employment of objects: one is through narcissistic object relations per se, and the other is incorporation (that is, identification) of the object into the self. (In addition, the ego may relate “anaclitically” to objects.) Freud managed to make the economic (energetic) model of narcissism articulate with his two dual instinct models, and with emerging ideas of neurosis and the transference, as well as an emerging model of object relations. Narcissism is shown to be foundational in the areas of ego formation, love relations, transference, self-esteem regulation, and gender identity formation through its actions in all phases of life.

The limitations of the Freudian model, however, stem from the association of narcissism with energetics. While it is useful at times to “metaphorize” the operations of the instincts in terms of hydraulic energy flows, damming up of energy, and cathexis, the function of the various agencies and the instincts and their interaction with objects is a homuncular/mechanical model. For this reason, although the foundational importance of the Freudian model is acknowledged, the main aspect of Freudian theory utilized in understanding the aesthetic narcissism under consideration here is the reference to fantasy. Although Freud does not use the term fantasy per se in the 1914 paper, there are various references to “wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out.” Post-Freudian theory relevant to the current discussion is that which builds on the fantasy aspects of narcissism, although the weight of psychoanalytic literature is concerned with the clinical, object-relational aspects.

One final comment about the 1914 text is that Freud refers throughout to “objects” and “object–libido.” It is easy to read the text as if Freud is referring to external objects, that is, persons. Theory of internal objects starts more or less with Klein, but a

footnote on page 217 of the third essay of “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (S.E. V II) reads: “It is scarcely necessary to explain that here as elsewhere, in speaking of the libido concentrating on ‘objects,’ withdrawing from ‘objects,’ etc., Freud has in mind the mental presentations (*Vorstellung*) of objects and not, of course, objects in the external world.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Post-Freudian theories of narcissism

Psychoanalytic literature contains an extensive body of work on narcissism. Much of the work was devoted to the purpose of elucidating key, but problematic, concepts within Freud’s thought. The main areas focus on clinical management of narcissistic psychopathology (Rosenfeld 1964, 1971; Bing, McLaughlin, and Marburg 1962; Kernberg 1975; Rothstein 1980; Masterson 1981; Winnicott 1965, 1988), the issue of primary narcissism (Balint 1960; Laplanche 1989), the death instinct and narcissism (Rosenfeld 1964, 1971; Eissler 1971; Fayek 1981; Greenberg 1990), autoerotism and narcissism (Kanzer 1964), anthropological antecedents (Rank 1971), themes of narcissism in creativity, literature, and culture (Alford 1988; Chasseguet-Smirgel 1974, 1985; Gediman 1975), narcissism as developmental arrest (Masterson 1982<sup>9</sup>), and rethinking narcissism as a separate line of development (Kohut 1987).

---

<sup>8</sup> Note by the editors of the Standard Edition

<sup>9</sup> For Masterson, narcissism is the outcome of a developmental arrest occurring before the phase of rapprochement. This leads to a “defensive or libidinally grandiose, self-omnipotent object relations fused-unit object representation that contains all power and perfection” (1982, p. 15). This fused unit is projected in a ubiquitous manner into all subsequent object relations.

Grunberger, pre-natal elation, and the drive of narcissism

Most pertinent, however, is the perspective on narcissism developed by Béla Grunberger (1989). He quotes Hart:

When in psycho-analytic literature such varied phenomena, as a state of sleep, a baby sucking its thumb, a girl primping before a mirror, and a scientist exulting over the Nobel Prize are all referred to as “narcissistic,” a more precise definition of the term seems indicated. They may be traced to the same root but they are manifestly different things.... Narcissism is reported as inherent in the most sublime of sublimations and in the most psychotic of regressions. In some instances it is held responsible for the heightening of male potency, but in other cases blamed for its diminution. It can be found at work both in feminine frigidity and feminine attractiveness. It is supposed to neutralize any destructive tendencies, yet becomes a source of anxiety to the ego. It is a defense against homosexuality, yet homosexuals are particularly “narcissistic.” Sleep is a narcissistic withdrawal of libido (Freud, 1914), yet sleeplessness is the flight of enhanced narcissism from further augmentation (Pfeifer, 1922). It is used to explain the drag of inertia and the drive of ambition (Greenacre, 1941). (Hart 1947, p. 106).

For Grunberger, these terminological and theoretical difficulties arise because the concept of narcissism was pictured initially within an instinctual framework, namely, Freud’s first dual instinct theory, where ego instincts (self-preservative) are pitted against sexual instincts. Libido as sexual energy located in the ego is, in this schema, called narcissism. The presence of sexual energy in the ego has now upset the distinction – since in that original distinction sexual energy should have been located only in the sexual instincts. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the initial duality could not work for other reasons as well, since it would seem obvious that self-preservation in the larger sense of species preservation entirely depends on the consequences of sexual energy.

Freud’s attempt at resolution in the second instinct theory (Eros and Thanatos), outlined in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (S.E.XVIII), is also highly flawed.

Grunberger regards the Eros/Thanatos theory itself as a narcissistic move on the part of

Freud – suggesting that the idea of death would be less narcissistically injurious if it could be thought of as somehow part of our own instinctual makeup. Grunberger resolves these problems by deriving a definition that he suggests was an underlying intention of Freud's that emerged in his reference to "the narcissism of germ cells" (S.E. XVIII, p. 50), "the narcissism of the foetus" (1926a), and "the absolutely self-sufficient narcissism" of foetal existence (1921). Grunberger also draws attention to another infrequently cited Freudian formulation, "a displaceable energy, which neutral in itself, can be added to a qualitatively differentiated erotic or destructive impulse.... It seems a plausible view that this displaceable and neutral energy, which is no doubt active both in the ego and in the id, proceeds from the narcissistic store of libido – that it is desexualized Eros" (S.E.XIX, p. 44). Narcissism, according to Grunberger, is structured like a drive, and is present at and before birth (1979, p.105) – as a kind of "prenatal elation" (ibid., p.12). Lying beneath the instincts and preceding the ego, it *governs* instinctual life (ibid., p.106). This narcissism, as a drive, produces pleasure in its satisfaction. Because it precedes the ego, some of the contradictory features listed above (by Hart) are explained, since it may derive satisfaction by sometimes augmenting the ego but opposing and defeating it at other times. "One thing is certain: that narcissistic pleasure, or narcissistic libido [which is] not transformed by the use that instinctual drives make of it, has a basically different tonality, and it is that tonality I am evoking when I speak of elation" (ibid., p.107). Grunberger claims that this state of elation of the foetus arises from the state of its perfect homeostasis. The foetus is said to be "truly omnipotent and sovereign (in his universe which for him is one and the same as the universe); he is autonomous, knowing nothing other than himself" (ibid., p.15). These

conditions are said to be the origin of fantasies of narcissism, that is, perfection, omnipotence, grandiosity, self-sufficiency, solipsism, abolition of objects, and idealizations.

“Elation” is a subjective experiential term, implying the ability of the foetus to distinguish elation from other states. This, although poetic, is highly problematic. There is neither evidence nor any other reason to believe that a foetus has the ability to experience a complex psychological state such as elation. One could speculate that early affective discriminations might involve ability to distinguish some kind of proto-pleasure from proto-pain, or might involve discrimination between states of arousal and passivity. On the other hand, pleasure and pain themselves, at least under the description of the Lacanian Real, are understandable only in their Imaginary and Symbolic presentations, so that the origin of narcissism is unlikely to be the prenatal *experience* of totalized satisfaction, or even some reference point of postnatal satisfaction, but most probably a fantasy that adults have of such states.

Grunberger emphasizes the idea of narcissistic injury, and the relentless attempt to regain the sense of narcissistic integrity. For example, in his view the taboo against incest is instituted primarily to spare the developing child the narcissistic injury of attempting to utilize premature genital “equipment.” Thus pathology may arise from the Oedipal period, not because of enmeshment in conflict, but because of avoidance of it. This perspective also allows him to reformulate the “discontents” of civilization, not as mere instinctual renunciation (Freud), but as narcissistic injuries resulting from the renunciations required by civilization. The theory developed here fits into that idea, because the aesthetic can then be seen as a cultural activity that redresses that injury

through a recovery of narcissism, that is, a secondary gain, as well as the more primary gain of direct satisfaction of a drive.

Grunberger also derives a dialectical aspect of narcissism in this theory.<sup>10</sup> The origin of the dialectical method is Greek. For Plato, dialectic is in its simplest meaning a form of back and forth debate, the Socratic style of question and answer. But it is, even in Plato, more than that. In the *Sophist*, dialectic is described as a purgation of the soul for the purposes of moral change. For Kant, the dialectic is an aspect of reason itself, which contains contradictions within apparently consistent methodology. Hegel believes the process of history itself to be dialectical; thus a particular state of being or thesis has within it the seeds of its destruction, which will bring about its opposite. The resulting thesis will generate another movement, however, perhaps a synthesis of the original pair. In fact, the work of the dialectic of history in Hegel is far more complex than the somewhat vulgarized idea of “synthesis, antithesis, and synthesis” suggests. Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1947) provides an excellent example of dialectical thinking. Here the central premise is that the early Enlightenment aimed at liberation of man through freedom from nature, by a “notion of nature as fungible atoms” – a kind of instrumentality (Jay 1996, p. 261). “The instrumental manipulation of nature by man led inevitably to the concomitant relationship among men ... the objectification of the world had produced a similar effect in human relations” (ibid.). Freedom thus produces (at least according to this analysis) its reverse – enslavement to technology and to capitalism where relations themselves are “fungible.” It is from

---

<sup>10</sup> The term “dialectic” is used frequently in the present project, with apologies to those philosophers of the German philosophic tradition, for whom dialectics is truly intricate and ponderous.



within the terms of freedom itself that the enslavement arises – and it is in this way that the dialectic brings about reversals.

A dialectical theory of narcissism arises in the Grunberger theory because the trauma of birth associates itself unavoidably with the so-called pre-natal elation. It inscribes a negative component onto the experience of narcissism. Thus whatever arouses fantasies associated with the positive “elational” part will bring up, unconsciously of course, the potential negative traumatic association of the same fantasy. Even if the idea of birth trauma is discounted, there are a number of other sources for a dialectic of narcissism. One source has already been noted – narcissism may be expressed either by the self alone, with libidinal energy directed towards itself, or, paradoxically, with the libidinal energy directed at objects, albeit in a narcissistic way. Thus there are immediately two narcissisms, a “narcissistic” narcissism, or an object-directed narcissism. One might object that even the “narcissistic” narcissism has objects, but these objects have been appropriated into the very structure of the personality in such a way as to no longer exist as objects, even in the sense of “internal” objects. They are dead objects or “precipitates” (see p.140 above). We shall also see that a dialectic was imposed on narcissism after Freud proposed his second dual instinct theory in 1920.

Grunberger’s notion of narcissism as a drive expressed dialectically is relevant here with respect to certain aspects of modern art. One preliminary connection could be made with Anton Ehrenzweig’s notion of de-differentiation (1970). Ehrenzweig thinks that the superego is, in one sense, a paradoxical motor of aesthetic creativity, since its aggressive attack on the ego scatters and fragments it, creating a temporarily de-

## Chapter 3

differentiated reality. An aesthetic response involves the expulsion of the “fragments” into a container (a kind of womb according to Ehrenzweig), where the container or “womb” could be a mytho-poetic theme, subject, or representational art object. The phase of de-differentiation could be compared to an oceanic mix-up of subject and object, that is, one of the ways of thinking about the pre-conflictual state that Grunberger calls “pre-natal elation” – the state sought by the drive of narcissism. Such an oceanic state is itself, however, the memory or fantasy of an experience of a pre-conflictual state, and it is unavoidably connected with aggression because it is only after it ends that it becomes a reference point of experience. This aspect is included in Grunberger’s account by the trauma of birth, which not only marks the end of elation, but generates a whole universe of negatively inflected narcissistic drive.

Grunberger’s formulation is valuable on a number of levels, but the idea of theorizing narcissism as a drive is the most innovative. The drives have been denigrated in recent psychoanalytic theory, and for that reason a brief digression to the theory of the drives is included at this point. The idea of a drive as a force or pressure in fact supplements Freud’s metaphor of narcissism as libidinal energy flowing to the self. Extending metaphors too far can be facetious, but here the idea of libidinal flow *with pressure*, leads naturally enough to narcissism as drive.

### Drive theory

The word “drive” is now the preferred translation of Freud’s term *Trieb* (from *Trieben*, “to push”) – as opposed to “instinct,” used in the Standard Edition. When Freud used *Instinkt* rather than *Trieb*, as he did in the case of the Wolfman, he calls the boy’s

response to the primal scene a “kind of inherited mental formation ... something that is analogous to ‘Instinct’ in animals” (S.E. XIV, p. 195). Otherwise the distinction between instinct in the animal world and drive in the human is clearly made in favour of the drive being a complex response involving both the body and the mind. The drive is a “psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a ‘stimulus,’ which is set up by a *single* excitation coming from *without*. The concept of the (instinct) drive is thus one of those lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical” (S.E. VII, p. 168). The sexual drive is understood as manifesting itself within the body in the various zonal components, and having some kind of involvement with objects appropriate to achieving the aims of the drive. Finally, the drive is said to have four defining qualities; it has pressure, a source, an aim, and an object<sup>11</sup> (“*Instincts and their Vicissitudes*” S.E. XIV, p. 122).

Defined by Grunberger, narcissism as a drive (the attempt to recover a state of “prenatal elation”) could be slightly recast as a fantasy to attain a level of pleasure associated with *no frustration* with respect to the objects (or their contexts) thus involved. Normally, the sexual and aggressive drives are discharged in situations where there is some degree of compromise in terms of the objects involved. Drives may be discharged in a situation in which the central operative fantasy is highly directed, behind the scene, so to speak, by another one, the narcissistic drive, which attempts to “stage manage” the discharge process in such a way as to simulate a situation of a [fantasized]

---

<sup>11</sup> Pressure is a measure of the amount of work it requires from the mind, that is, in repression rather than in satisfaction. The aim is always said to be satisfaction, which can be achieved only by removing the stimulation at its source. The object is that which enables the drive to achieve its aim. The object is said to be the aspect most variable about a drive. The source “is meant to designate the somatic process which occurs in an organ or part of the body and whose stimulus is represented in mental life” (S.E. XIV, p. 123).

## Chapter 3

perfect earlier state in which that particular zonal drive was not discharged by a compromise event. This earlier state has, as a limit point, Grunberger's "pre-natal elation."

As for negative narcissism, while Grunberger derives it from birth trauma, we can see it in Freud's concept of the death drive as developed in 1920 in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle".

Our speculations have suggested that Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a "life instinct" in opposition to the "death instinct" which was brought into being by the coming to life of inorganic substance. These speculations seek to solve the riddle of life by supposing that these two instincts were struggling with each other from the very first. (S.E. XVIII, p. 61 note 1)

What Freud accomplished there is a highly speculative piece of metapsychology in which he also attempts to correct areas of incompatibility within narcissism and drive theory. This incompatibility was that ego or self-preservative drives, seen as non-libidinal, could not be pitted against sexual drives, since in narcissism, the ego was said to receive libido – and those same ego drives are libidinal after all. However, these self-preservative drives are cast in this essay in a very counterintuitive way in that they are several times equated with a new concept, the death drive. How could a drive of death be self-preserving? Freud explained that the organism can generate its future death within its own drives, and that it prefers this fate to being destroyed from the outside. In other words, it has a drive to survive the environment, but only so that it can carry out its fate by means of its own mechanism. After all, every drive seeks to restore the organism to homeostasis, and the death drive is the special case in which this restoration is really to the inorganic state of origin. The life drive, Eros, may promote life and appear to be

opposite to the death drive. Yet they are not opposed in that they both work towards death, but in a fundamentally different way, that is, in the Schopenhauerian sense that the aim of life is death. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud postulated that the attempt to derive satisfaction apart from objects, what was formerly called narcissism, is actually another drive – the death drive. Narcissism would then take on new meanings, such as two forms of retrieval of the pure pleasure ego. In one form, where the death drive rules, objects are treated as if eradicable and the fantasies of self-sufficiency, perfection, and idealization that constitute the phenomenology of narcissism are achieved entirely within the ego, through the “death” of objects. In the other, erotic, form, the very same fantasies are also achieved by the ego but with “narcissistic” use of objects, as described earlier. Both forms are compatible with Grunberger’s concept.

This new dual drive theory emphasizes how the forces of life and death are mystical and self-generating; they are neither brought about nor ended by the environment. This is entirely consistent with the concept of the drive as originating from within, as opposed to a stimulus originating from the outside. The human organism can take steps to evade, avoid, flee from an external stimulus by muscular action, but cannot avoid the endosomatic drive. This idea is used in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” as a means of deriving, among other things, a first ability to distinguish an “inside” from an “outside.” In the introduction and again in chapter, this concept was approached along slightly different lines. The idea of the drive is thus fundamental to object relations, because the drive, in effect, opens the way up for objects and their accompanying stimuli to be known, namely, by virtue of contrast with endosomatic pressures (drives). The drive then becomes the conceptual centre for a reductive empirical epistemology –

an unexpected consequence of drive theory! This is further developed in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes.” Since the drives cannot be disposed of by muscular action, “they oblige the nervous system to renounce its ideal intention of keeping off stimuli, for they maintain an incessant and unavoidable afflux of stimulation. We may therefore well conclude that drives and not external stimuli are the true motive forces behind the advances that led the nervous system, with its unlimited capacities, to its present high level of development” (S.E. XIV, p. 120). This is one of the most remarkable formulations ever to be ventured as an explanation of human cerebral complexity and deserves more thought than allowed for here. What it seems to mean is that the *body*, as en fleshed drives, supplies enough endosomic stimuli to demand an enormous neural network to deal with them. This formulation reinforces the idea that appears in various forms throughout Freudian theory: the basic, most fundamental operational disposition of the organism is to avoid excitation. If this is true, what would account for the development of a drive from the “endosoma” in the first place? Also, as Freud himself notes, if increase in tension is associated with unpleasure, what accounts for the fact that sexual pleasure seeks, as it is initiated, to first increase the tension and then achieve its own extinction?<sup>12</sup> As Bersani puts it, “What would it mean to say that in sexuality, pleasure is somehow distinct from satisfaction, perhaps even identical to a kind of pain?” (1986, p. 34).

This brings us to another large, ungainly aspect of theory which can only be alluded to briefly, and involves the concept of fusion and defusion of the drives. If there is a primary masochism, it would have to arise as a result of the death instinct, as does sadism or destructive hatred of objects. As part of the death drive, why should it appear

---

<sup>12</sup> See S. E. VII, p. 210, and the second essay in “Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality.”

as part of sexuality? Freud theorized that although the drives are conceptually distinguishable, they are in general fused in various ways. In fact, the two drives, oddly enough, do not seem to constitute a conflict framed in terms of their basic dispositions, but seem to be aspects of all the drives. Defusion of the death instinct from Eros is conceptually important for Melanie Klein, since the paranoid/schizoid position could be thought of as a state of defusion and the depressive position one of refusion.

While there are unsatisfactory aspects to the theory of the drive, clearly object relations theory, adaptational “ego-psychology,” and self-psychology do not have the conceptual tools even to attempt the projects of accounting for these psychoanalytic views of “epistemology” and sexuality. As discussed above, those models tend to normativize psychoanalytic theory and are less suitable for the non-normative approach required for an aesthetic investigation of narcissism.

Drive theory is especially appropriate for the discussion of the phenomena of visual art given its variability of expression in modernity. Drives are presented in somewhat essentialist terms, and this allows for the kind of reductions psychoanalysis strives for. Reductionism has been briefly discussed above and is here employed as a particular strategy. The claim of psychoanalytic theory is that it provides an opportunity for both methodological reduction to “smaller units” of explanation, as well as theory reduction in which ideas are re-presented in a language and with concepts that are derived within a distinctive methodology.

## Chapter 3

### Sublimation

The idea of narcissism as a drive also allows for a very interesting consequence – as a drive it can be sublimated. Hans Loewald (1988) has noted that strictly speaking, object relations and self-psychology do not need or cannot have a theory of sublimation. Since only drives can be sublimated, theories that more or less dispense with the drives cannot consistently claim a theory of sublimation. The aesthetic theory here advanced is that visual art in the modern era is a product, not as “older style” psychoanalytic theory suggested, of sublimated sexual drives, but a product of *three* drives (sex, aggression, and narcissism), their derivatives, and their sublimations, in various permutations and combinations.

### Ocularcentrism and the narcissism of visual art

Ocularcentrism<sup>13</sup> arose, according to Martin Jay, not only as a function of the biological supremacy of vision,<sup>14</sup> but is also deeply rooted in a Greek visual bias, whose aims have been theorized by Bruno Snell, Hans Jonas, Rudolph Arnheim, and Iris Murdoch. In *Downcast Eyes* (1993), Jay analyzes the intricacies of the undisputed primacy of vision as a model of epistemology, as a central metaphor of the Enlightenment, and of what is often referred to as an entire regime of visuality (Cartesian/Albertian perspectivalism), as well as the counter forces of antiocularcentrism emerging as early as the nineteenth

---

<sup>13</sup> Visual bias is reflected in the West in epistemological and ontological models favouring ocular terms and defining characteristics.

<sup>14</sup> “With the maturation of the child, however, the superior capacity of the eyes to process certain kinds of data from without is soon established. Having some eighteen times more nerve endings than the cochlear nerve of the ear, the optic nerve with its 80,000 fibers is able to transfer an astonishing amount of information to the brain ... over 120 million rods take in information on some five hundred levels of lightness and darkness, while more than seven million cones allow us to distinguish among more than one million combinations of colour. The eye is able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third” (Jay 1993, p. 6).



## Chapter 3

century. This antiocularcentrism culminates in what he calls the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought by Bataille, Breton, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Foucault, Althusser, Lacan, Irigaray, Barthes, Metz, Derrida, and Lyotard. In chapter 6, I will once again revisit the theme of ocularcentrism in the development of the idea that narcissism “underpins” scopic regimes.

Jay makes reference to narcissism when discussing Lacan, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Althusser. The main thrust of Lacanian theory in the context of antiocularcentrism is that the mirror stage is one of the paradigmatic examples of why there needs to be a critique of visuality. The mirror stage brings about a “specular” or imaginary version of the ego, one that is based on *méconnaissance* or misrecognition. Thus the attempt of some therapies to bolster the ego is a fundamental error, since it merely serves to enhance a structure founded on deception, and on dyadic recreations of the mother/child “mirroring” relation. The subject must instead aspire to the “triadic” Oedipal ego, a universe of the symbolic, as a saving move. The consequences of remaining in the imaginary ego formation are to set up human relations based on the projection of this “narcissistic” ego, or worse, to regress to “imagine” the unrepresentable contents of the Real by means of an analogy to the mirror stage, that is, psychosis.

The other reason for a critique of visuality in Lacan is found in the theory of the eye and the gaze. The regime of the eye is the ocular bias of Western ideology of the determinate subject (and thus object) concretized by perspectivalism. The gaze is, in effect, a look of the eye plus desire that thus notes the subject is in a situation of lack. Ocularcentrism assumes that the eye and the gaze can be made to register one upon the

other, for example, as in the subjective position of Renaissance perspective. However, an ego invested in knowledge gained from the look (the eye) deceives itself, merely projects its own image of itself as it sees itself rather than coming to terms with its inability to project a coherent image of itself. In the analogy with perspectivalism, one would say that the view the subject has leads him to view his perception as adequate to the scene. While he sees himself seeing, he thinks the self he sees is simply the one doing the looking. Rather than seeing himself seeing, he must take account of the gaze, that is, those “versions” of him that see him in ways possibly entirely strange to him.

In both these ocularcentric modalities, the mirror phase or the regime of the eye, a narcissism is involved, rather than an intersubjectivity based on a valid operation in the symbolic order. The idea of the gaze, however, in which the narcissism of the subject is denied, summons up the fear of castration, that is, the anxiety of the subject unable to control being in the gaze of the other. This is where art comes in. For Lacan, the picture is a sublimation of the dynamics of the gaze, and has a calming effect.

[The calming effect is due to] ... the presence of the gaze in the picture for both the painter and the viewer. Not that the painter wishes to be looked at, Lacan says, like the actor; the painter offers something “beyond” the picture, something for the gaze to be appeased by – something “given up,” something “yielded to.” This is the most poignant aspect of the work of the picture, and explains the calming effect of viewing a work of art. He agrees with Freud that it is sublimation that is involved in artistic creation, but it is not just the painter that experiences the sublimation. (Sara Murphy, in *Compendium of Lacanian Terms* 2003, p. 82)

This is problematic on several levels. What starts out being a critique of visuality is turned around through sublimation to become a valorization of it. A further problem is the idea that the work of art produces a calming effect, because, while certain works do have that effect, *frisson*, excitement, intrigue, disgust, and as Lacan says elsewhere,

envy, are all more likely to emerge as responses. It is more the case that the primary process, that is, an intimation of the Lacanian Real, is approached in the experience. Art is precisely the product of the (unconscious) ego that has in some sense refused to enter into the “triadic” symbolic order, as if it would rather remain trapped in the mirror phase or the deceit of the eye. There may, of course, be aspects of art that assert “Oedipal” acceptance and participation in the symbolic order, but these are manifest overlays that seem more often than not to be subverted by the more primary narcissistic drives working “beneath.” This accounts for the relatively rare appearance in most art of the celebration of relationality per se. What Lacan seems to deny is that such refusal may not be psychotic or even neurotic. To rest within the Imaginary, to narcissistically refuse the group and relationality, and to fantasize *through objects yet without objects* what an original state of pleasure may have been is perhaps the core of the aesthetic experience. This is to refuse the gaze. In some sense the argument of this thesis is that visual art is a kind of insistence of ocularcentrism, through its narcissistic pleasures.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude on this note is really to say that ocularcentrism developed, not as an accidental or arbitrary event among other possible types of culture, but as a result of the drive of narcissism. Since the drive for narcissistic gratification is seen as a central human psychic disposition, and the modality that narcissism can quickly utilize is the visual, ocularcentrism itself is seen as a drive satisfaction. This argument will be elaborated in the following chapters, where the visual aesthetic realm in modernity is shown to involve ocularcentrism in the form of visual narcissism, precisely when, as we have seen, philosophy was trying to rid itself of the legacy of the transcendental subjectivists and its inherent forms of narcissism.

---

<sup>15</sup> See also Marcuse (1955) whose idea of narcissistic refusal is not unrelated.

## **CHAPTER 4 - NARCISSISM IN THE VISUAL ART OF MODERNITY:**

### **MODERNISM**

Modernity, modernization, and modernism

In philosophy, the modern era is sometimes said to begin with Descartes, but I will confine my discussion to a more restricted time period and situate modernity in art as beginning in the mid nineteenth century. This positions it during the career of Edouard Manet (1832–1883), who is often cited as a founder of modern art. Manet's modernity consists not only in altering the kind of space involved in painting (a space that was to evolve in modernism into flat surfaces where the flatness was not merely a matrix upon which the picture existed, but an important part of the visual aim), but also in his break with traditional literary, moralistic, and aesthetic treatment.

The term “modern” has a number of functional definitions. Habermas (1979, 1984) points out that early use of the term usually casts modernity in opposition to antiquity, whereas a “modern” notion of modernity arose within Romanticism, in which the modern is set in *abstract* terms against tradition, and thus the relation between “modern” and “classical” loses a fixed historical reference (Habermas, 1984, p. 4).

Three descriptive terms – modernization, modernity, and modernism – appear in the discourse on the modern, and signal differing aspects of its development.

Modernization can be taken to refer to the development of technology, the mechanization of all spheres of life, and the rise of administrative rationality. This development involves mass production methods, new intensive communication modalities, domination of the natural world, and replacement of human and animal labour by machines. Technology comes to augment the human senses immensely, becoming so integral to humans'

## Chapter 4

relationship to the environment that this extension of the senses can almost be considered part of human evolution.

Modernity is a description of the attitudes, philosophies, methodologies, and lifestyles involved in the modernization process. Those processes could not have occurred without the simultaneous evolution of new attitudes towards efficiency and efficacy. Modern attitudes also include revolutionary views of social relations coming to fruition, epitomized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1763), who proposed a society with the rights of liberty and equality for the individual in his *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract*. All of these changes were occurring against the backdrop of waning religious power (Nietzsche 1844-1900 proclaimed the death of God) and the erosion of overarching symbolic systems.

Modernism can be seen as a response to modernization and modernity. Modernism "...defines a specific form of artistic production, serving as an umbrella term for a melange of artistic schools and style which first arose in late-nineteenth-century Europe and America. Characterized by such features as aesthetic self-consciousness, stylistic fragmentation, and a questioning of representation, modernist texts bore a highly ambivalent and often critical relationship to the process of modernization." (Felski, 1995. pp. 12-13.) Although its onset is imprecise, modernism can be characterized by the emergence of a self-critical tendency. Self-monitoring and self-assessment are what Anthony Giddens calls the self-reflexive style of the modern, a tendency that results in critiques that are necessarily always ambivalent, since the terms of the critique are themselves posed from positions within modernity. For example, Martin Heidegger,

George Simmel, T. S. Eliot, and E. M. Forster all offer critiques of technological society,<sup>1</sup> but each has a coexisting investment in the modern as well. In art and aesthetics the “quarrel between the ancients and the moderns” had already been decided in favour of the modern, but the tension between conservative and modernizing tendencies persisted throughout modernity. It was the Symbolist movement of the later nineteenth century that mounted the first significant challenge to the traditional paradigm of imitation of nature (or other preoccupations of the ancients). The notion of representing and expressing the inner world through symbolization meant that somewhere in the process of finding “authentic” expression, the process of self-examination became central. With that increased self-consciousness, however, would also come the questioning of the relations of the self to society in the form of the avant-garde. The avant-garde movement seemed perpetually caught in the tension between self-discovery and social relations, if not in actuality, then certainly in accounts of subsequent art historians. A good case in point is Cubism – a movement that is paradigmatic of the avant-garde.

Cubism’s technical innovations were rapidly assimilated by avant-garde artists. However, the question as to what Cubism meant, how it was to be thought of and understood, remained a focus of conflict. The autonomous decoration of a surface; penetration below surface appearance to constants of “true” reality; a modern Realism of “conception,” transforming the terms but nonetheless retaining critical interest, of a tradition derived from Courbet; a Kantian transcendental idealism in which the picture could achieve what language could not, namely the representation of the *ding-an-sich*; a Nietzschean imposition of a new beauty, moulding the masses to the artist’s own Truth; a Bergsonian epistemology of flux. (Harrison and Wood 1993 p. 129)

---

<sup>1</sup> For a review of these and other modernist critiques of modernity as well as a discussion of the effect of technological modernity on discourse itself, see Tim Armstrong, “Technology,” in Bradshaw 2003, pp. 158-178.

Harrison and Wood conclude that the Kantian approach seems to be the most serviceable, and seen through that lens, the avant-garde came to function as

a relatively autonomous specialized practice and as a kind of luxury commodity ... their cumulative effect was to prise apart the two aspects of Cubism which in retrospect seem almost central to its critical force; its continued referentiality and its preoccupation with the autonomous picture surface. This had the effect of driving a wedge between a concern for art's realism in respect of wider social forms and its own reality as a signifying practice. (ibid., p. 129)

The notion that art could be Kantian, Nietzschean, Bergsonian, or even Courbetian complicates the interpretive field in art history, a discipline that has undergone a proliferation of methodologies.<sup>2</sup> However, even if we stick with the "Kantian," we still note the "divide" to be very much intensified in Dada and Surrealism and ultimately leaves us guessing whether art is functioning to decode and modify the world, or whether its aims are entirely self-reflexive – to use Giddens's concept.

Through structuralism and discourse analysis (Barthes, Foucault), modernism also produced a denial of authorial subjectivity. Thus modernity generates idealized notions of authorship, originality, autonomy, and individuality as well as a totalizing critique of the same subjectivities. Art in late modernity<sup>3</sup> is caught in a web of irresolvable tensions, such as social responsibility versus individual indulgence, autonomy versus engagement, avant-garde versus kitsch, and abstraction versus representation. In such a situation, the claim that psychoanalytic interpretation could clarify understanding of visual phenomena

---

<sup>2</sup> These methodologies include style theories, connoisseurship, semiotics, Marxist approaches, and feminism.

<sup>3</sup> Late modernity is characterized by its scepticism concerning the central role assigned to reason and rational thought. Against indubitable truth-claims, an overconfident faith in science, and a metaphysical way of reasoning, the interrelatedness of truth-perspectives, ethical pluralism, and cultural relativism is typical of the postmodern perspective. For some, late modernity merges with "post-modernity."

might be seen as overly optimistic. Nevertheless, I will pursue the psychoanalytic idea that the drive of narcissism appears consistently in both the theory and practice of modern art and has a unifying effect on conflicting theories and views about art.

A base for understanding modernity is supplied by Max Weber (1864–1920), whose analysis argues that as metaphysics and religion fell apart, three differentiated realms of culture came into being – science, morality, and art – each with characteristic structures and methodologies, namely, cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive. A simplified view of the Enlightenment “project” is that the inner logic of those realms releases their potential with the consequent betterment of all.

In visual art, as well as in music and the fine arts in general, this “inner logic” played itself out in the development of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere, based on the pillars of Kantian metaphysics<sup>4</sup> and Alexander Baumgarten’s (1750) definition of the aesthetic as a special cognitive domain of sensual thinking. As part of the development of autonomy, art history came into its own as a discipline most notably with Johan Winckelmann (1764) and Friedrich von Rumohr (1827). Artistic practice was only slowly detached from ecclesiastical and overt political function, with remnants of the latter

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant’s establishment of an autonomous area of aesthetic mental activity in the *Critique of Judgment* is held to be disinterested, compared with, for example, the interest of the cognitive faculties in gaining knowledge. This is an extremely important part of the theory; intersubjective validity of claims of taste relies on this disinterestedness. If the judgment of taste were not disinterested, then one’s awareness of delight in an object could be merely an awareness of his or her personal subjective response that corresponded to the pre-existing interest. If, however, the delight is experienced without pre-existing interest, the immediate conclusion would be that for other subjects in a similar state of disinterestedness the same delight could occur. since they also had no investment in such an object. Hence an intersubjective validity of the judgment of taste is established. This is stated in Kant as follows: “For since [the delight] is not grounded on any inclination of the subject (nor any other considered interest), but the judging subject feels himself completely *free* in respect of the delight which he accords the object, he can discover no private conditions as grounds for his delight, to which his subject alone is party, and must therefore see it as grounded in that which he may suppose in everyone else” (1790, section 6, p. 211).



## Chapter 4

affecting the Salon and the Academy well into the nineteenth century. Fine art also became defined in contradistinction to craft.

### Art for art's sake

The autonomy of the aesthetic became expressed in the idea of "art for art's sake."

One can trace a line of its development from Kant (the aesthetic is established on a rational, autonomous, and disinterested basis) to Schiller<sup>5</sup> (aesthetic activity is removed from nature, the idea of the "disinterested" fraternity of the aesthetic is promoted), Schelling<sup>6</sup> (the artist is seen as idealized genius), Schopenhauer<sup>7</sup> (1788–1860) (the aesthetic is a refuge from 'Will'), and then to Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other eighteenth and early nineteenth century Romantic poets, and Baudelaire (nineteenth century) (the romantic vision endorses the superlative importance of art). If the claim that art exists for its own sake is true, then the demand for freedom from censorship, harassment, and other control by both church and state could be justified.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Schiller 1795. Here the aesthetic helps man remove himself from nature by elimination of sensuous will – toward moral perfection. For Schiller, "Taste, with its autonomy, universality, equality, and fellow-feeling, is a whole alternative politics, suspending social hierarchy and reconstituting relation between individuals in the interest of a disinterested fraternity" (p. 111). See also Eagleton 1990, pp. 102–103.

<sup>6</sup> See Schelling 1802. According to Schelling, the greatest achievements of the idealist rational subject is won by the artist/genius. See also Schelling 1800: "Art is at once the only true and eternal organon of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious" (p. 220).

<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer's pessimism seems unrelenting, except for the confusing sense that the aesthetic functions for him as a kind of relief, where subjectivity seems to vanish temporarily within the aesthetic experience, and with it the torturing drivenness of the Will. The aesthetic moment brings one into contact with a sort of Platonic experience of Idea, but this is not instrumental in any of the functions of subjectivity, and for that reason can be thought of as supporting the art for art's sake idea. See Sprigge 1995, pp. 802–4 and Eagleton 1990, pp. 60–72.

The idea of art for art's sake is thus seen as partly a declaration of artistic independence and partly as an expression of the alienation of the artist from society ... [This leads to] ... a compound of protest and pride which become centered around four poles: 1) artists inveigh against conventional morality with its prudery and hypocrisy 2) they repudiate conventional bounds of utility in all realms including moral utility 3) they repudiate the spread of scientific mentality with its emphasis on brute fact, and 4) they reproach the sentimentality of the public which relates artistic representations to the simple ideas, events, and objects of their own small lives. (Jenkins 1968, p. 109)

In the extreme, the “art for art’s sake” view “assigns supreme importance to art in human life, claiming that life should be lived for art’s sake, or that the highest form of life is devotion to art, or, rather, that in Nietzsche’s words, “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (Budd 2002, p. 10). We can see here that art, by setting itself up as autonomous, has also denigrated the two other Weberian realms of science and morality.

Different aspects of this formulation are brought out in aesthetic theories or as part of general philosophic, economic, and political discourse in the modern era. A notable exception is Hegel (1770–1831), for whom art does not exist for its own sake. For him, art is a tool, a vehicle for *Geist* to reveal itself, and it is not considered the best one, that role being reserved for philosophy.<sup>8</sup> A partial list of those philosophers and aesthetic theorists who *do* contribute to the art for art’s sake notion would include Kant

---

<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Gombrich names Hegel the “father” of art history. Hegel’s ideas of evolution and dialectical development are important for art history, for example, in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) and other “Hegelian” art historians, and we can note his own theory of the progressive revelation of *Geist* through the three periods of art (the symbolic, classical, and romantic).

## Chapter 4

(disinterestedness), Alois Riegl (1858–1905) (*Kunstwollen* –the will to art),<sup>9</sup> August Endell (1871–1925) (the beauty of form),<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) (art as autonomous and abstract versus an aesthetics of *empathy*), Henri Matisse (1869–1954) (personal expressiveness), Benedetto Croce<sup>11</sup> (art as *intuition or vision* and not as a utilitarian act, ideality of art), Roger Fry (1866–1934) (autonomy of art from life, importance of form), Clive Bell (autonomy), Clement Greenberg (autonomy and aesthetic purity), Michael Fried (autonomy, anti-theatricality), Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) (truth, the “suprematist”<sup>12</sup> version of formalism), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) (“spiritual” art functioning autonomously acts as an index of general social progress toward heights of spirituality).<sup>13</sup> The Romantic vision (Goethe, Baudelaire, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Mallarmé, Whistler, and Oscar Wilde) connects with and supports the art for art’s sake idea:

The Romantic claim [is] that artists are distinguished as such by the relative vividness of their inner life and the relative strength of their intuitions. The “abstractions” of the artist could then be advanced as the significant form of an underlying and enduring reality, their critical potential all the greater for their emancipation from the merely apparent and contingent realities of the physical and social world. (Harrison and Wood 1992, p. 14)

The autonomy of the aesthetic gives rise to practices that eventually cluster around the

---

<sup>9</sup> The idea of an inner “will to art” is not mediated through the autonomy of the artist, but it does suggest art as an autonomous realm with its own logic and destiny.

<sup>10</sup> See also Benton and Sharp 1975.

<sup>11</sup> “Art considered in terms of its own nature has nothing to do with the *useful*, or with *pleasure* and *pain* as such” Harrison and Wood 1993, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> The group of suprematists included lesser known artists such as I. Puni, M. Men’kov, I. Klyun, and K. Boguslavskaya.

<sup>13</sup> See also “Concerning the Spiritual in Art” [1912], in Lindsay and Vergo 1982.

enhancement of formalist values. Bernard Berenson,<sup>14</sup> Clive Bell, and Roger Fry form the nucleus of [European] modernist aesthetic formalism. Fry (1920) traced formalism's roots back to the thirteenth century in the sense that the development of representation was a necessary condition for the formalism emerging in his own time.

When once representation had been pushed to this point where further development was impossible, it was inevitable that artists should turn around and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the moment it was posed it became clear that the pseudo-scientific assumption that fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no logical foundation." (Fry 1920, p. 8)

Clive Bell<sup>15</sup> agrees almost entirely with the formulation that Fry had already made as early as the 1920s about the autonomous source of aesthetic emotion.

There is a particular kind of emotion evoked by works of visual art and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art by pictures, sculpture, buildings, etc., is not disputed by anyone capable of feeling it. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion. (1949, p. 122)

Bell, Fry, and other modernists declared that the attribution of meanings aside from so-called aesthetic meanings does violence to the aesthetic purity and unitary experience of art. Bell tried to dissociate the idea of emotion, as used psychologically, from the idea of aesthetic emotion, whose quality he related to form: "Significant form stands charged with the power to provoke aesthetic emotion in anyone capable of feeling it," and "Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world" (1949, p. 67). Sydney Zink, among many others, addressed the theme of the denigration of mere denotation "The poetic statement makes no reference to external entities. Its meaning

---

<sup>14</sup> Berenson claimed that Florentine artists such as the fourteenth-century painter Giotto concentrated their efforts on *form* alone.

<sup>15</sup> Bell is slightly more insistent than Fry on the irrelevance of representation.

may, it is true, 'depend for its nature on prior experience of such external instances' but such reference is to other poetic meanings with which it is aesthetically organized" (1956, p. 23).

The art for art's sake position, upheld by modernist critics, has been traced from its origin in Kantian aesthetics. One qualifying comment should be made about Kantian aesthetics, however. Some readings of the Third Critique would suggest that Kant intended a more communicative aspect to the idea of the aesthetic experience; in other words, the universality in judgments of taste comes about in what Terry Eagleton calls a "public communicative moment."<sup>16</sup> This aspect was de-emphasized or even forgotten, and "disinterestedness" fed into the concept of art for art's sake, undoubtedly in the service of the idealizing impulse.

*Psychoanalysis and art for art's sake*

Formally, art for art's sake, a prevailing aesthetic paradigm of modernism, is exactly analogous to the self-reflexivity of narcissism. To some extent this could be seen as a consequence of one of the general conditions of modernity – self-reflexivity – noted by Giddens. In chapter 2 I traced the development of subjectivism and individualism as conditions of possibility for the modern expression of narcissism, which naturally also become conditions of possibility for an art that takes its own process for its subject.

While the drive of narcissism can be seen to have emergent social manifestations, these

---

<sup>16</sup> See Eagleton 1990, chapters 2 and 3. "Aesthetic intersubjectivity adumbrates a utopian community of subjects, united in the very deep structure of their being" (p. 97). In the same way that beauty is experienced as a result of harmony of the faculties in the individual subject, universality in judgments of taste occur in the public sphere as an extension of such harmonies to groups, in an act of suspension of personal aversions or appetites, almost an act of altruistically placing oneself in the position of the other.

do not make sense without methodological individualism, which was pointed out in chapter 2. In other words, a phenomenon such as art for art's sake, as a movement, needs a kind of critical mass of *individuals* whose robust *subjectivity* generates or even demands satisfaction of the narcissistic drive.

Art for art's sake, however, has more in common with narcissism than form, more than a common modern paradigm. Art for art's sake shares with narcissism the phenomenon of anti-utilitarianism as well as the underlying fantasies involving the search for purity, uniqueness, and idealization. Recalling the description of art for art's sake offered by Jenkins above (see p. 161), we can see how its various agendas (of "protest" and "pride") are narcissistic equivalents. In that description, artists were said to "inveigh against conventional morality with its prudery and hypocrisy," a stance founded on the narcissistic fantasy of uniqueness as well as self-idealization. As well, they "repudiate conventional bounds of utility in all realms" a cornerstone of modernism.<sup>17</sup> This resonates with several aspects of the descriptions of narcissism so far developed. Narcissistic love, for example, was said to be based on the person's own self-image rather than on the model of *dependence*. In other words, the fantasy at the core of narcissistic love is avoidance of utility. Wishes for idealizability also tend to remove the aspect of utility from narcissistic transactions, since it is much easier to idealize a person, object, or even an ideological position that is not worn down by the use and abuse of the working, actual world. The objection to "the spread of scientific mentality with its emphasis on brute fact" is a consequence of the anti-utilitarian stance. Finally, artists "reproach the sentimentality of the public which relates artistic representations to the simple ideas,

---

<sup>17</sup> One exception to the elimination of utilitarian considerations would, of necessity, involve architecture. In modernism "form follows function," although perhaps even here there is a commitment to purity.

events, and objects of their own small lives.” This description of the artist is overtly narcissistic, drawing attention to aspects of grandiosity, uniqueness, and fantasies of transcendence. Presented like this, artists seem to be elitist and contemptuous. It must be remembered, however, that what is being described here is the collective investment of modern and (modernist) society in the aesthetic realm. Thus, whatever narcissisms the visual arts inherently tend toward, the public reinforces by virtue of its own (unconscious) wishes for an idealizable realm.

“Protest and pride” describe very well the attempt to pull back from the object world. Protest and pride are not solipsistic, however, because the protest is *against* something, and the pride is *about* something, and thus objects are engaged, even in pushing against them. In that way as well, narcissism, in its reflexive form, is not isolation, but rather resistance or protest against the demands of relationality. Narcissism as a drive to attain purity, uniqueness, and above all, the ideal is clearly seen in all aspects of art for art’s sake. Yet in order to distinguish itself as autonomous and pure, art must *use* objects and relationality in a manner that demonstrates the uniqueness and ideality of art. Art thereby engages with objects, ideologies, and relationships in exactly the same manner as I have described the core dynamics and fantasies of narcissism.

The trope of narcissism as “prenatal elation” can also be mined for its connections to the art for art’s sake paradigm. The foetus is said to experience the elation of perfect satisfaction. This notion was criticized on the grounds that some difference, some negativity has to be introduced, against which the elation is experienced as positive, rather than neutral. In addition, it seems impossible to imagine that the foetus experiences anything more than a kind of proto-pleasure or proto-pain, and elation seems too nuanced

## Chapter 4

a pleasure to ascribe to a foetus. For those reasons, the notion of the driving force of narcissism as an attempt to retrieve this putative elation is complemented by understanding it as constructed by the fantasies of adults who project their fantasies into this state. The drive is nonetheless still held to be a drive, derived somehow in the context of intrauterine "experience." An image of narcissism arises then, as existing in a state of perfect satisfaction surrounded by objects which progressively become experienced, as the outside world gradually impinges on the foetus. This outside world is, however, kept at bay for "his majesty the foetus" by the physical conditions of its confinement, as it is during early infancy by the protecting mother. Narcissism becomes meaningful only when the more mature infant comes to interact with the environment (which we now know occurs very soon after birth), because at that time the position of narcissism is one of "protest" (against objects) and "pride" (of his own self).

A paradox then arises, since the more objectless the narcissism is, the less significant it is. Narcissism is really the product of *keeping out* the demands of the object world, or in its other form, using them for one's own purpose while denying them meaningful subjectivities of their own. This means that, in a sense, narcissism emerges as object relations develop, and is both a reaction to objects and a repudiation of them. Narcissism may well be "installed" in the prenatal experience, but becomes operative only much later when objects take on full meaning in the context of the child's achievement of individual subjectivity out of the early intersubjective matrix. This is the exact sequence of the emergence of narcissism in social terms, that is, the conditions of possibility of narcissism were said to be subjectivism and individualism.



Perhaps the metaphor of “prenatal elation” has been pushed too far, since what emerges here is that *phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny*. This may be what McLuhan meant when he suggested that culture develops as an “outering” of the mind – an exact reverse of Foucault. It is in this sense that the narcissism of art for art’s sake must be understood. It is not that the art object is a solipsistic object. Rather, after an already full history of engagement with aesthetic objects, the drive could be said to devise a new source of idealization in the withdrawal from them. Fry had claimed as much (see page 166 above) stated that formalist abstraction had gone through a necessary phase of representation before it could become autonomous from the task of representing objects. For these reasons, the dialectical expression of narcissism in art is in evidence not only in the move from modernism to contemporary and body art, it was already present in the move from art as religious, political, or other institutional icon to art for its own sake. This is the move from an intersubjective phase to a narcissistic one.

Before looking more closely at the specific discourses of Greenberg, Fried, and other modernists, which further demonstrate narcissism, I will examine some aspects of modernist practice.

#### Modernist practice

In the pre-modern era, the two main trends or attitudes of visual art based in antiquity were art as *imitation* and art as *form*. Art as imitation was more or less replaced by the notion of art as *expression of feeling* in the late eighteenth century. Although Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?* (1896) was translated and widely read, and is perhaps the epitome of the point of view that art communicates intense emotion, Tolstoy himself did not view such

emotion as fitting in with the notion of art for art's sake. In fact, his idea was that the emotion should serve high moral and/or religious purposes. This view led to his notorious condemnation of works such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, and as a result to the marginalization of his ideas, except those pertaining to the principle of expression in art. Art as form became integrated with art as feeling, with both orientations becoming autonomous, anti-utilitarian, non-denotative, and elitist.

### *Derealization*

The denigration of denotation and the interest in form can also be viewed as a progressive derealization, where almost all of the major movements in modernity exhibit types of derealization. In a grossly simplified and schematic overview, Impressionism changed the emphasis from the represented object to the light that makes it a visible object, Cubism derealized perspective and the geometric integrity of the object in favour of multiple simultaneous views, and Surrealism introduced the realm of the dream and unconscious reality. Eventually abstraction totally de-realized painting in favour of abstract objects, colour fields, blank canvases, or even empty galleries.<sup>18</sup> Minimalism reduced compositional complexities to bare form, emphasized by serial repetition and simplicity. (Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin). Conceptual art, while not seen as modernist, brought the idea of derealization to a totalized conclusion, where in the purest form, the work is already complete as an idea in the mind.

The self-reflexivity of art for art's sake, if thought of as a consequence of the narcissistic drive, would lead quite logically to the repudiation of objects, as in

---

<sup>18</sup> Yves Klein's *L'exposition du vide* (Paris, 1958) consisted of an empty gallery.

derealization. The limit point for the satisfaction of the narcissistic drive, while it is in the self-reflexive mode, is seen in the total eradication of objects of representation, which could also include colour as an object, as in the form of an empty canvas or empty gallery. George Steiner states that objects of scientific investigation are given, compared with aesthetic works where “only in the aesthetic is there absolute freedom ‘not to have come to being.’ Paradoxically, it is that possibility of absence which gives the autonomous force to the presence of the work” (1989, p. 204). This is part of the narcissistic drive; only a narcissistic wish, poised as it is against the temporal and spatial demands of reality, can dare to entertain the fiction of an absolute freedom.

Some aspects of this drive are manifest as opposed to latent. The goal of aesthetic purity, for example, is not at all unconscious. What is totally unconscious is that this goal is drive satisfaction. As a drive, the most variable aspect is the choice of objects that satisfy it. One could imagine a skilled work, for example, a Cézanne next to an empty canvas, and ask how we as viewers are able to idealize both of these works – where the manifest intention of one seems exactly to deny that of the other. A psychoanalytic drive theory, however, has no difficulty answering that kind of question, since the aim of a drive can be satisfied in a variety of ways. In modernist art, the drive is satisfied by finding an evolving series of idealizable formats, each idealized for particular manifest properties. Proponents of each movement seem content to denigrate other movements, especially those preceding them. That kind of denigration, we will see, is very strong in the dialectical shift of the entire paradigm of modernism to the postmodern. For most people, empty canvases or empty galleries put too great a demand on their idealizing inclinations. In those cases, the unconscious wish to idealize is too far removed from the

manifest aspects of experience. Most people cannot project their drives and drive derivatives into the “empty situation” because their reality sense is too strong. The colour field painters provide a compromise position here – an almost maximized “pure” projective surface with the affective stimulation of colour still at work, but without the contaminating presence of representational objects as such.

*Colour field painting*

Mark Rothko (1907–1970) (fig. 5), Helen Frankenthaler (b.1928), Morris Louis (1912–1962), Kenneth Noland (b. 1924), Jules Olitski (b. 1922), and Alma Thomas (1891–1978) are the principal colour field painters whose work is especially relevant to this discussion. In their work, abstraction is taken to the extreme degree, where quasi-representational abstraction of objects or ideas is given up in favour of total non-representation. Colour and, occasionally, shape, and line are the only compositional elements. Colour may be regarded as an object that is presented like any other object, but this unnecessarily strains the concept of object, since colour is usually designated as a property distinguished from the function or even the shape of the object. Since the conscious motivation among the modernist painters is aesthetic purity (at least according to Greenberg), then the eventual eradication of even colour accomplishes that agenda. Black or nearly black canvases were painted by Ad Reinhardt (*Black Painting no. 34*, 1964) and by Kasimir Malevich, who claimed to see the face of God in his black canvas. White canvases – as a further development of aesthetic purity – were also painted by a number of abstractionists, such as Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg claimed that his *White on White* series, which was exhibited in 1953 at the Stable Gallery, were “as white

as God” (quoted in Joseph 2000, p. 59). Greenberg was suspicious of these paintings, which seemed to be an apotheosis of formalist modernism, but were taken by him to be closer to the emerging minimalist conception of space. Such a conception concerned itself with the space around the painting as well as the space of the viewer, which, by moving the “...locus of self-reflexivity from the internal dynamic of the work to the viewer’s interaction with it formed a critical stage in the development of a series of critical art practices, leading ultimately to those developments known collectively as institution critique” (Joseph 2000, p. 59). According to Joseph:

Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* differ from their historical avant-garde counterparts as well as from their formalist or minimalist understandings. For as they came to be understood in the summer of 1952, they no longer figure either as the final product of a determinant negation of artistic conventions or as the result of a negation of an abstract or anarchic type. Rather, following from the implications of Cage’s Bergsonism, these paintings had come to be situated at the beginning of an aesthetic paradigm in which difference is conceived not in terms of negation at all, but rather as an ontological first principle, the positive and productive motor force behind the dynamic conception of nature. (ibid., p. 60)

This idea is reinforced by the suggestion that Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning* is a “liberation of that work from limitations of imagery and individual expression and opening it to reception of contingent visual sensations” (ibid., p. 61). The composer John Cage<sup>19</sup> contributed this textual commentary to Rauschenberg’s Stable Gallery show:

No subject  
No image  
No taste  
No object  
No beauty  
No message  
No technique (no why)

---

<sup>19</sup> Cage’s silent performance of a composition for piano is another instance of the empty apotheosis of modernist purity.

## Chapter 4

No idea  
No intention  
No art  
No feeling  
No black  
No white (no 'and')

At least as presented by Cage, Rauschenberg hardly seems to break with the so-called practices of negation of modernism. Here again the underlying drive is the search for a new aspect of idealizability. Joseph's article is a good example of the idealizing discourse that begins to substitute for the object itself – as the “narcissism of small differences”<sup>20</sup> begins to fail to hold up the overall structure of the ideal. Rather than associate Rauschenberg's white paintings with other practices that are quite obviously similar, the discourse invents a new idealized pretence, the creation of a whole new aesthetic ontology.

### *Barnett Newman*

Barnett Newman's modernism is exemplary, both in his visual work and his writings. In *The Sublime is Now* (1948), he set up the sublime /beautiful question by a brief review of the literature on the subject, conventionally represented by Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Hegel. Newman reasoned that the contemporary American artist (The New York School – Newman, Rothko, Gottlieb, Pollock, Still) had no need to derive a sense of the sublime from historical myths, legends, or events. Rather, he claimed the sublime to be immanent in the here and now, and in the artists themselves. “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feeling. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be

---

<sup>20</sup> See S. E. XI, p. 199, XXI, p.114, and XIII, p. 91n.

understood by any one who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history” (1990, p. 173). This eradication of history is an echo of Newman’s own experience – he had destroyed most of his earlier work done in the 1940s.

For Burke, the sublime is an encounter with overwhelming fear – for example, of a raging violent storm – which gives way to awe as danger to the person is seen to melt away. For Kant, the sublime is encountered when something is thinkable by the faculties of reason but nonetheless unrepresentable, such as God or infinity – a conflict between the faculties of reason and imagination. Newman narcissistically puts the (mere) contemporary individual in the position of sublime object, now equal to God, infinity, massive forces of nature, or founding myths. One of his major works is titled *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, reinforcing these themes. (see also fig. 6, where the title *Onement* perhaps links the work to Neoplatonist ideas). The narcissistic drive is expressed in Newman’s work and writing through the idealizing impulse, the fantasy of grandiosity, the self-proclaimed status of the heroic, and the removal from time and contingency.

Newman once said, “When Hitler was ravaging Europe, could we express ourselves by [painting] a beautiful naked girl lying on a couch? I felt the issue was – what can a painter do?” (quoted in Golding 2003, p. 32). But since few artists were painting nude women in that era, what was that declaration about? The statement can be interpreted as evidence of the unconscious force of narcissism, which disavows all possible identifications that might compromise its search for the idealizable aesthetic moment. Sensing that there was no way to fully dis-identify with Hitler, even in the realm of painting, Newman suggested that the only safe expression was a total disavowal of the body. This is related to Adorno’s declaration that after the Holocaust there could be no

## Chapter 4

art. In both these formulations, the aggressive potential of the human seems to search out and contaminate the very core of the aesthetic – even the ideal realm of art has been violated. For Newman, if art is dematerialized and rid of the physicality of the human, perhaps the ideal can be retained.

One commentator who shares in Newman's view of the sublime nature of his work is Peter de Bolla (2001). De Bolla's writing is reminiscent of the declarations about the aesthetic made by Roger Fry, steering a Kantian course informed by Thierry de Duve and Jean-François Lyotard. De Bolla makes the point that although Newman's work is not objectal, it is nonetheless relational (2001). He argues that the viewer is absorbed by the aesthetic experience of viewing, for example, *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, in such a way as to become intensely aware of his/her own position of being a viewer, not being distracted, as it were, by content other than the colour field (and perhaps by the "zip" – a kind of temporal punctuation mark in the field). In other words, the painting calls the viewer into a relation with itself and, one is led to suppose, into a relation with the artist as well. This is still precisely a narcissistic relation, because the content is "reflexivity," and the awareness of relationality is not an awareness of an other's internal world (whatever the internal world of a painting could be said to be), but an awareness of one's own intense awareness of being aware: "I am aware – therefore I am."

### *Greenberg, Fried, Cavell*

Although Clement Greenberg's 1961 essay "Modernist Painting" is familiar to most readers of art history and theory, the paradigm is worth revisiting. "The essence of Modernism lies ... 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.” The self-critical tendency of modernity is in evidence here. “Visual art should confine itself to what is given in visual experience and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience” (Greenberg 1961, p. 755). In this schema, denotative references are outlawed; or, if there is denotation or depiction, it is functionally subservient to form. Malevich had previously written, “People ought to examine what is painterly, and not the samovar, pumpkin, or Mona Lisa” (in Andersen 1969, p. 109).

Michael Fried contributed to another aspect of the Modernist credo – the critique of minimalism based on an extension of his ideas of theatricality and absorption originally applied to eighteenth-century European art. Since modernist art was to remain true to “its essence” in the style of autonomous non-referential work, then the “theatrical presence” of minimalist art and its demands for the relational and conscious presence of the viewer were to be avoided.<sup>21</sup> This supposed theatricality of minimalism now itself looks rather minimal, given the burst of true theatricality that was to follow, which will be discussed in following chapters. The confrontation between modernism and minimalism has continued in a surprisingly active debate since Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood” was written in 1967. In general, Fried supports traditional metaphysical aesthetics in which the optical experience of the artwork involves a “presentness” that engages the viewer in an immediacy that Greenberg (1959 p.81) had also valued. The immediacy of the art work is a consequence of its being unmediated by the contextual meanings of its objectness, which is made easier, of course, when the work itself is non-representational.

---

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Hopkins 2000, pp. 143–49. This strong commitment to modernism is characteristic of Fried’s early career.

## Chapter 4

Jonathan Vickery avoids the “opticality” explanation and finds a more subtle interpretation of Fried. “It seems that for Fried that art’s only intrinsic value is its cognitive function – its ability to mediate a certain kind of self-awareness, and by extension to reveal to us something [of] the nature of cognition itself (i.e. the nature of acknowledgement)” (2003, p.118). Vickery cites the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose ideas on modernist formalism supplement those of Fried.

Modernist art, for Cavell, supplies its own meaning and the conditions of its interpretation vis à vis its “intentionality” ... Meaning is purely constructed out of an “arrangement or juxtaposition” of visual elements. Cavell’s concept of form is equivalent to “syntax”: the words in a sentence or the notes on a musical score obtain meaning only through their relation between the individual elements, plus their force of contrast or mutual affinity. (ibid., p.118)

Vickery explains that this formal aspect is not totally non-referential. There is a sense in which modernism relates to the world of objects, but that is only through the critique, by modernism, of the conventions used in *earlier* aesthetic practice. “Modernist art purges itself of those outmoded or extraneous conventions, ‘abstracting’ itself from the arbitrary authority of routine and established norms, and seeks in perpetuity to explore ‘the limits or essence of its own procedures’” (ibid., p. 120). The failure of minimalist or postmodern work in this view is that such work frequently must be understood by recourse to accompanying theory, and thus fails to complete its own need for syntax, or fails to provide its own meaning and condition of interpretation. Good art, especially good modernist art – for example, the sculpture of Anthony Caro – defines itself against the conventions of the past while being “self-enclosed” and convincing us of its significance through our experience of it. This part of Vickery’s discourse is reminiscent

## Chapter 4

of Bell and Fry, for whom the aesthetic is appreciated by those capable of experiencing it. Vickery also claims there are no normative criteria for the selection of the significant object. Only the internal relations of the work, involving a harmoniousness of the “syntax” and what that syntax does to the viewer in the instantaneous presentness of the experience are important.

This amounts to an updated Kantian aesthetics. In Kant, beauty of the object is not in the object but in the mind’s perceiving the harmony of its own faculties when presented with intuitions (perceptions) of the object. Here, in modernism, we are not concerned with beauty, but significance, and significance is created similarly by a harmony of the internal relations or syntax – in the viewer’s mind – of the object’s aesthetic structure. There is once again a strong sense of narcissism, in which the object sets up aesthetic pleasure by triggering a *self-referential process* in the receiver. That is to say, the process of awareness of such a harmony is awareness, by the viewer, of the pleasure in his own processes rather than awareness of the object. This pleasure seems connected to the Kantian notion of delight in the harmony of the faculties in the presence of the beautiful object. What remains ambiguous, however, is the question of the level, in terms of consciousness, of these processes. If they take place for the most part unconsciously in the modernist subject, using a psychoanalytic point of view, one cannot simply transpose such a concept of the unconscious into a Kantian framework. Nevertheless, the transcendental subjectivisms have already been shown to have narcissism at work within them, and it is not surprising to see these elements recurring in modernism which is seen as a culmination of the art for art’s sake paradigm.

## Chapter 4

### *Flatness*

One of the main artifices of modernism is flatness, since flatness will serve to deny illusionist effects, the effects of real objects in real space. O'Doherty elaborates,

The literalization of the picture plane is a great subject. As the vessel of content becomes shallower and shallower, composition and subject matter and metaphysics all overflow across the edge until, as Gertrude Stein said about Picasso, the emptying out is complete ... The cultivation of the picture plane resulted in an entity with length and breadth but no thickness, a membrane which, in a metaphor usually organic, could generate its own self-sufficient laws." (1986, p. 23)

For Greenberg, the only way for painting to become true to itself, in order to express its own essence, was for painting not only to eradicate the representation function, but also to do away with any other illusionist devices such as the creation of a sense of depth through perspective, layering, or thickness. In his view, Helen Frankenthaler solved that problem definitively by soaking the paint into the canvas, creating "stains" in the fabric rather than applying paint to the surface. In terms of the narcissistic image implicit in this discussion, one can metaphorize that "soaking into" is a further technique of derealizing the object – its corporeality is absorbed by the reflective medium itself.

### The "White Cube"

The term "white cube" seems to have been used first by Brian O'Doherty in a lecture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1975.<sup>22</sup> It refers to the practice of exhibiting works of art in white spaces devoid of interfering or distracting elements. "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The

---

<sup>22</sup> The lecture was titled "Inside the White Cube, 1855–1974."

## Chapter 4

ceiling becomes the source of light .. the art is free, as the saying used to go, to ‘take on its own life’” (ibid., p. 32). The art object is “aurarized,” as it were, simply by being placed in such a space. As pointed out in chapter 1, many gallery spaces today occupy abandoned industrial sites such as garment factories. The space has been transformed from a utilitarian space to an idealized one.<sup>23</sup> The artworks exhibited within are thus rendered timeless and idealized.

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all clues that interfere with the fact that it is art. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. (ibid., p.14).

This kind of gallery space was under development as early as the mid nineteenth century, because it was related to other aspects of modernism emerging in Impressionism and other early modernist practices. The white cube is related, it would seem, to Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* (see p. 175 above), and to other practices involving the use of whiteness, blankness, and absence, all of which allegorize aesthetic purity. The gallery space necessarily evolves with the art itself in order to serve the agendas of autonomy and aesthetic purity. O’Doherty refers to an exhibition by Frank Stella in 1964 at the Leo Castelli Gallery as the paradigm of modernist practice in which there is a perfect resonance between the gallery space and the exhibited work. O’Doherty notes the idealization involved here, but although occasionally using the word narcissism in the discussion, believes the issue to be a primarily a classist issue, as do most commentators.

The white cube has persisted as the preferred type of exhibition space despite its

---

<sup>23</sup> As previously noted, elements of the former function and structure often remain as an aestheticized infrastructure for the function of the new exhibition activity.

modernist associations. There have been a number of claims<sup>24</sup> that the idea of the white cube is subverted by spaces such as PS 1 in Long Island City and the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy. Both institutions support some projects, which, like land or performance art, lend themselves to or require outdoor or non-traditional spaces. However, both institutions also support traditional “white cube” spaces for many of their exhibitions. The “white cube” has been a deliberate choice of venue for contemporary art in most of the hundreds of galleries in New York’s Chelsea district, and two gallery spaces in London are called “The White Cube” and “Inside the White Cube.”

The whiteness of this kind of space functions to eliminate competing visual stimuli. The exclusiveness of the gallery is brought out to some extent by how few works are exhibited – the fewer the better, as if to approach the limit point of having only one work in a large featureless space. These practices enhance the special nature of artwork, pushing it towards uniqueness. The idealization that is thus intensified, along with the promotion of concentrated and undivided attention away from ordinary reality and relationality, are aspects of the narcissism of aesthetic purity also carried over into postmodern exhibition practice.

#### Modernism and the loss of the ideal

Having outlined a history of narcissism, Western subjectivism, and individualism as conditions of possibility of modern narcissism, we can now merge the various streams of the argument. We can see the modern era as being double edged in its impact on visual art. On the one hand, new freedoms, technologies, and philosophies produced a realm in

---

<sup>24</sup> See Charles Saatchi (gallerist and writer), “Understanding the White Cube Debate,” <http://The Art Newspaper.com>, Sunday, January 16, 2005.

## Chapter 4

which visual art became disassociated from the medieval and Renaissance attachments to guilds, which were unsuitable for the new roles of art; it also became disassociated from religious and political patronage, and from pre-determined representational functions.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense “art for arts’ sake” would seem to be carrying out a valid aesthetic program – allowing art to become a humanistic vehicle of individual expression and creativity.

The Kantian paradigm of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm with as firm an ontological grounding as morality and epistemology allows the aesthetic to articulate with those new roles. Other aspects of modernity such as the decline of religion and the loss of the transcendental subject give new energy to the idealizing impulse which becomes displaced to the most likely candidate – the aesthetic.

Further energizing of the aesthetic resulted from a process of decentring “man” in modernity. Just as the earth was shown not to be the centre of the universe or even the solar system, Darwinian theory cast “man” in the replicating system of animal evolution, rather than having been brought about in a special moment in the creation of the universe. These decentrings were only made worse by the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, which showed man not to be master even in the smaller universe of his own mind. Such decentrings can be seen as narcissistic injuries and de-idealizations, which energize the aesthetic realm by displacement, since all the conditions within that realm were suitable for receiving energy released from the de-idealizations.

Yet it was not only the realm of the aesthetic as a cultural structure that was taking on the burden of the ideal. The Western subject that based important aspects of its epistemology and ontology on the interiorist specular model of introspective self-

---

<sup>25</sup> “Unsuitable,” of course, reflects a point of view. I mean to contrast the former association of painting with the chemist’s guild, for example, where commonality reflected the fact that they both ground substances (pigments vs chemicals) with mortar and pestle.

## Chapter 4

reflection, with the loss of transcendentalism and religion, itself became narcissistic. I have suggested, in fact, that subject was narcissistic all along, but disguised within the complex terminologic conceits of transcendental philosophy. Released from those conceits, within the new context of individualism, the narcissistic drive would, as it were, look for a new home. The aesthetic, already primed by the ideals of form and beauty, having given away imitation (*envy* of the ancients and/or nature), was now free to imitate itself, that is, idealize its own manifestations.

Modernism failed to live up to the idealizations it created for itself. We have already noted in the art for art's sake formulation sources for the eventual reaction against modernism – its elitism, contempt for the “common” person, and a sense of detachment that aids and colludes with the exploitative excesses in other areas of modern life, for example, science. Much of the current discontent with modernism stems from a critique of its inadequate political commitments. American abstract expressionists are said to have ignored their European counterparts.<sup>26</sup> Although some of the abstract expressionists and post-painterly abstractionists had important affiliations with the political left, David Hopkins suggests that the modernist movement as orchestrated and largely controlled by Greenberg “was to fuel a mutually self-aggrandizing tradition of painting and art criticism in the 1950s and 1960s,” which was “keyed to America’s postwar imagining of its world position” (2001, p. 29). Although a Marxist early in his life, Greenberg became, in the 1950s, a staunch anti-communist. Hopkins’s critique does more than support my argument of narcissism (by referring to the self-aggrandizing tradition); it also establishes the idealistic position that as an artist Greenberg *should* have held a *different* stance.

---

<sup>26</sup> See Patrick Heron 1966, where this complaint is registered.



## Chapter 4

Why? Peter Osborne writes of two responses to the apparent death of modernism in the visual arts:

... *relief and celebration* at the demise of a repressive and authoritarian artistic purism, whose canon of prohibition robbed art of its pleasure, intelligibility, and democratic function, driving it into the trap of conceptualism where it was forced to deny its own essential nature in order to survive, and could live on only through intellectual gimmickry (a position for which the label postmodernism is often used to cover an essentially anti-modernist agenda) and anger, mourning, and a sense of loss at the apparent betrayal of modernism's critical legacy and the failure to replace it with any convincing or historically sensitive alternative account of art's role, direction, or legitimate procedures in the new 'post' modernist phase." (1991, p. 61)

What is interesting here is that there is a sense of *moral outrage* with modernism involving betrayal, denigration, and failure. What is betrayed, according to Osborne, is art's "essential nature," "critical legacy," "role," and "legitimate procedures." Holding such essentialist notions of the "true" role of art were exactly what modernism was accused of mistakenly claiming. In other words, modernism did not simply give way to new tastes or preferences, it failed to live up to its moral obligation. Art must be charged with an awesome responsibility to uphold an ideal if terms such as these can be used in the wake of an era, a movement, or an ethos<sup>27</sup> to describe its failures. Furthermore, a similar kind of prescriptive discourse is seen in Benjamin Buchloh's suggestion that there are now (in the postmodern present), three paths for art:

(1) reinforcement of Warhol's strategy of erosion of high and low culture, by mapping aspirations of high art onto products and practices of the culture industry.

---

<sup>27</sup> Could anyone imagine an outburst like this in the Baroque, raking the High Renaissance over the coals for its failures? When reading Wölfflin's theory involved in those two paradigms; one becomes aware of what Stephen Melville calls "diacritical contrasts" of the five founding polarities. Difference in style, method, or even motivation is mediated in that theory by quasi-linguistic operations – hardly to be held accountable for moral failure.

## Chapter 4

- (2) reinstatement of traditional roles – i.e. high art
- (3) “transposition of Warhol’s (now re-stabilized) destabilization of the art object onto the framing conditions of representation” (ibid. p.70)

Buchloh states that the third option, which he recommends, “...departs from the assumption that critical intervention *within* the realm of representation is ... the motivating force of aesthetic practice.” Osborne responds to this by noting that “what is characteristic of a lot of recent painting is that it spans the second and third options; hence its inherently problematic status” (p. 70). It is problematic, of course, to the theorist who feels that painting should avoid the second option, that is, “reinstitution of a traditional notion of the aesthetic object” (p. 71). Even though Gerhard Richter’s large abstract paintings of the 1970s and 1980s recall traditional painterly values, Osborne notes that Buchloh claims these works are present as “memory” of past painting, when “gesture could still engender the experience of emotional turbulence, when chromatic veils credibly conveyed a sense of transparency and special infinity, when impasto could read as immediacy and emphatic material presence, when linear formation read as directness in space” (p. 71). Such effects are thus apparently credible or useful only when recalled as memory, or distanced by irony or knowingness about the past representational functions. They should be subservient to the effects that resonate with and demonstrate the so-called framing conditions. They are to “provide us with an ‘immediate insight into the contemporary conditions of painting: to exist between the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle and the synecdoche’” (p. 75). Richter himself, however, and a “lot of recent painting” claim to retrieve traditionalist values in painting, presumably for the simple reason that these values *are* experienced as values by those painters and their audience.

This kind of discourse is a good example of the narcissism of much art-theoretical discourse. Despite countervailing theory, painters and viewers do continue to experience emotional turbulence in response to painterly gestures, and chromatic veils might well continue to convey transparency and infinity. It is a narcissistic strategy to reduce the complexity of art history in the attempt to eradicate the significance of centuries of accumulated aesthetic technique, understanding and enjoyment. There is a paradoxical kind of conservatism at work here in the failure to realize that new painting might well not only retrieve traditional aesthetic value, but might simultaneously also comment on its “framing conditions.” This is certainly true of Gerhard Richter, whose work investigates the framing conditions precisely by breaking the “frame.” Rather than develop one consistent style which allows the work to be framed and thus understood as a “body of work” that can be easily grasped by the market and by critical reception, Richter manages to work in almost every medium and “style.” Yet at any given moment his articulation of a particular aesthetic effect seems simply to use that effect, rather than comment on it, ironically, or as Osborne says elsewhere in the same essay, “knowingly.” In *Betty* (fig. 7) the subject of the painting is traditional; a woman’s head, painted in a realistic style. The colours used and the treatment of the textures of hair, skin, and fabric all belong to an aesthetic of simple beauty. The woman’s face is turned away, introducing a dynamic or almost kinetic aspect to the painting. Her turning away could also be taken to allegorize the critical task Buchloh asks of the contemporary work, in the sense that such a pose does not easily fit in with any traditional representational modality.

I have claimed that modernism suffered an attack for failing to uphold or deliver its promise of the pure and ideal aesthetic product. The attack has followed a more or less

## Chapter 4

typical pattern of retreat after a narcissistic injury; a retreat into denigration (of the entire idea of the traditional aesthetic object) and somewhat conservative retrenchment.

In the art that followed modernism, one can see something of a manic triumph of physicality and eroticism. Manic triumph, along with denigration of the lost object, was described by Melanie Klein as part of the narcissistic response to injury and loss – especially of idealized objects. Such manic triumph after a loss is contrasted with the process of mourning, which involves giving up the object without denigration or a triumph. Osborne suggests there is mourning for the lost ideals of modernism, but the manic burst of activity that will be the subject of chapter 5 suggests the opposite.

There is, however, the hint of mourning in Suzi Gablik's *Has Modernism Failed?*, (1984), in which she bemoans the loss of a moral, transcendent centre for art and contrasts this with the emergence of rampant commercialism. This is the paradoxical legacy of modernism, notwithstanding resistance to commodification within the modernism's avant-garde. Even if the "postmodern" is free to pursue a plurality of ends, there should be some kind of purposeful effort, in her view, to create practices of social responsibility, perhaps even recoup spirituality and a sense of the transcendental. The so-called failure of modernism was that it "bred" the conditions for the current directionless commodification by its retraction from social engagement. The problem here is the fantasy that an activity that is socially engaged could *avoid* commodification – especially since the social order was in the process of evolving into its late capitalist stage. There is a kind of confusion of discourses and expectations. Visual art is being asked to avoid the "evils" of commodification while at the same time being asked for a robust engagement with social life. Social and relational life is unavoidably founded on exchange, in other

## Chapter 4

words, on the economic properties of production, valuation, and exchange of objects. Some systems of exchange might be preferable to others (for example, Marxist), but in any case, that preference involves an ideological choice. The wish that ideology can be avoided (modernism) or that there is a way of steering a course of “uncontaminated” engagement are both idealized fantasies – again, narcissism.

### The “anti-aesthetic”

Another one of the responses to the loss of the ideal is what Hal Foster calls the “anti-aesthetic.” He claims this idea

signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without “purpose,” all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal – a symbolic totality. Like “post-modernism,” then, “anti-aesthetic” marks a cultural position on the present: are categories afforded by the aesthetic still valid? (For example, is the model of subjective taste not threatened by mass mediation, or that of the universal vision by the rise of other cultures? More locally, “anti-aesthetic” signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g. feminist art) rooted in a vernacular – that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm. (1983, p. xv)

The dialectic of narcissism would seem to still be at work here. As a result of disappointment with, or failure of, the ideal, it is replaced by its opposite. If modernist aesthetics failed, why not rid ourselves, in principle, of the very idea of the aesthetic? The idealizations of modernism had reached an intensity that required nothing less than a totalizing revision. This trend was noted in the introduction as a number of “deaths” – the end of art, the end of art theory, the death of painting, and so on. This defensive reaction is only part of the narcissistic reaction against the outrageous moral failures of modernism. In the chapters that follow, we shall also see that while the discourse (theory,

## Chapter 4

art history writing, and art criticism) reacted as though in response to injury, artists themselves reacted with new-found freedom and exhuberance. Theirs is a narcissism also – but a narcissism of Eros.

## CHAPTER 5 - CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE APHANISIS OF MODERNISM

In the visual art of the past four decades, narcissism is expressed in a form dialectically opposed to that which was operative in modernism. Whereas modernism involved eradication of object representation in order to secure the pure aesthetic (a narcissistic fantasy), contemporary practice, in a dazzling reversal, celebrates an almost indiscriminate eroticization of objects, forms, and styles. Here the narcissism is a self-conscious deliberate *use* of the object as immanent – but associated with transcendent and idealized fantasy agendas nonetheless.

Before examining narcissistic phenomena in the postmodern realm of visual art, it is useful to recall those aspects of the metapsychology of narcissism that rationalize the dialectic of narcissism. It was earlier suggested that narcissism had two levels: phenomena as such, and the underlying conscious and/or unconscious fantasies that give rise to those phenomena. These fantasies are brought about by the drive of narcissism. Most of the fantasies are manifested, sometimes paradoxically, in two opposing forms, one of absence and one of presence; hence the use of the term dialectic to describe movement from one form to another. For example, an individual having narcissistic fantasies of self perfection could do so by means of *two* opposing strategies. First, within a life of alienated aloneness in a radically contracted universe, psychologically speaking. The desired state of perfection is achieved at the cost of giving up all or most object relationships, and the individual is able to realize fantasies of perfection precisely because there are few compromises to be made with others, and few challenges by reality to the putative perfection. Second, a state of, or drive towards, perfection could also be

imagined in an intensely communicative setting where others in the relational world are co-opted in the service of supporting the narcissist's perfection. These two narcissisms are seen as having identical aims, but are dialectically related; one is manifested in absence and one in fullness. Idealization can also have negative and positive forms. The idea of these oppositions as operating within a dialectic means more than the mere opposition of form. The psyche is actively instrumental in one position to bring about the other, often at an unconscious level.

There is an aspect of the idea of dialectic as a basic feature of the mind's operation that seems entirely natural within the psychoanalytic model. This concept is captured in the various dualities that Freud used to describe the psychic apparatus, and especially in the basic disposition of the psyche towards ambivalence. For example, the duality of "active/passive" is fundamental to many psychic operations, and notably, these two dispositions are always found together. When thinking of an active instinctual impulse, "its [passive] opposite may be observed alongside of it" ("Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," S.E. XIV, p. 131). Similarly, love and hate share a deep constitutionally structured ambivalence, with both present at some level towards all objects with whom the human engages at a significant level. The first dual instinct theory described the ambivalence involved in love and hate as hate being older than love and arising from the self-preservative instincts, whereas love was derived from the sexual instincts. The interests of self-preservation frequently conflict with sexual interests, however. Freud undertook the revision of this instinct theory when he realized that self-preservative instincts were also ultimately sexualized. Subsequently, the opposition between instincts was framed in a more basic and more archaic manner. "The opposition between life



instincts and death instincts encountered in Freud's second instinct theory tends to root ambivalence even more firmly in an instinctual dualism" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967, p. 28).

The implications of these foundational dualities are that a dialectic is always at play because fundamental opposing polarities are involved within each and every drive process and each and every attachment, whether or not the individual is conscious of both elements of the duality. The extent of one's ability to transcend the conflicts that spring from these dualities is an index, in clinical terms at least, of freedom from neurosis. Apart from clinical considerations, what is of interest here is the notion that we cannot escape from a disposition opposing the one we embrace or acclaim. It is in this sense that the idea of the dialectic has a special relevance in psychoanalysis. Contradiction, opposition, and dualism exist *behind* the defensive conflicts that appear in object relations, and it is at this level that the drive of narcissism is seen to be operative in the aesthetic realm.

Narcissism is thus necessarily imprinted with a dialectic. The narcissism of modernism brings about an opposing regime in its wake. In the following discussion, I will show that not only is there empirical evidence of such a dialectical movement, but I will also develop an account of how and why this dialectic is set in motion. A narcissism of absence in which objects are eradicated must, in effect, do psychic work to keep the object world out. This psychic work involves the denigration of those properties of objects that reveal their processes of being and existence.

A modernist sculpture – one by David Smith, or even a minimalist work by Richard Serra, for example – reveals little or nothing of the raw workings of the matter of which it is made. The steel gives up no hint of the heat, smoke, or dust of its production

or use, no hint of melting, only mute hard gravitation carving form out of space.<sup>1</sup> This work against the evidence of work seems to pile up a huge debt of physicality – not exactly repressed, but as if merely put aside for narcissism to use in the next round. The first hint of a reversal appeared in the work of Jackson Pollock, where the process of *action painting* became central. We see in the “theatricality” of subsequent contemporary *process* all of the melting of material, the marks of the hand, blood, bodies, injuries by tools, shit, sweat, sexuality, death, rage, graffiti, sound, rumblings of the earth, lightning, electricity, speed, and violence that we do not see in the modernist *product*. In architecture, formerly hidden internal function and process is exteriorized and revealed in buildings such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Post-1960s art has a quality of excess, filled with objects and eroticism, resulting in multiple varieties of narcissism. What was deemed “theatrical,” existing along with the pure aesthetic but there put aside, becomes central, with purity being suppressed. There are many examples of identical aims being served in two antithetical ways. If anti-utilitarianism is taken to be one of the idealizing aims of the drive in visual art, we see it in modernism repetitively asserting itself in the avant-garde, numerous examples having been given above. In the dialectical reversal of this aspect of the drive, anti-utilitarianism is still present, but in a dialectically opposite way. For example, gesture and process now become central, as in performance work generally, but this art again resists utility, since performances in those cases are not commodifiable in the same way as modernist objects were.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, classical and Renaissance sculpture could be said also to disguise evidence of the working hand, and since modernism builds upon these previous aesthetic sensibilities, as the culmination of the autonomous object, the point here is to contrast it with what was to follow.

Aphanisis

I have characterized the drives as having an inherent tendency to dialectical change, a kind of instability that is described in psychoanalytic terms as defensive “doing and undoing,” reaction formation,<sup>2</sup> or as pairs of ambivalent states such as love and hate, and active versus passive dispositions. One of the goals of psychoanalytic thinking is to understand at least some of the underlying conscious and unconscious reasons for shifts from one position to the other. The working hypothesis about modernism and contemporary art is that the dramatic changes are explained to some extent by the dialectic behaviour of the narcissistic drive component in visual art. This swing from abstraction to bodily physicality could also be explained by more than empirical evidence, however. Might there also be an anxiety about the eradication of the body through the practices of modernist negation, in the sense of loss of narcissistic gratifications so necessary for the enjoyment of life? The eradication is not only of the body, but of *desire*, since there is little or no evidence of it, for example, in the search for and expression of the pure aesthetic. Ernest Jones introduced the term *aphanisis*<sup>3</sup> to describe the disappearance of sexual desire, a fear he thought to be more fundamental than the fear of castration, and a fear he thought shared by both males and females. Could the eradication of figurative work, bodily themes, physicality, and what I have called “derealization” trigger a collective aphanisis? The exuberant return of the body, blood,

---

<sup>2</sup> Usually, the drive and defence are presented as opposed, with the defence trying to shut down or limit the drive. This formulation is thus not dialectical. In another sense, however, defences are dialectical, because the Freudian concept of neurosis is that even in the defensive operation, a compromise is achieved with partial drive satisfaction. Consider the situation where, for example, a person with a high sexual drive is limited by a reaction-formation defence that expresses itself as a persistent involvement to help others resist sexuality. Even in this non-sexual instructive behaviour, that person could be deriving high levels of stimulation and gratification of fantasy, now disguised as the opposite.

<sup>3</sup> See Jones 1927. The term is currently seldom used, except for a syndrome of psychic blankness, or pseudo-depression in chronic schizophrenic patients. McGlashan, TH in *Schizophr Bull.* 1982;8(1):118-34.

faeces, urine, the masochistic, the abject, the cruel – all are counter-phobic signs of aphanisis. Something similar can be observed clinically in severely depressed persons who self-mutilate, and report that the pain stopped them from feeling dead. Melanie Klein also theorizes the notion of a manic response to loss as a “manic triad” of triumph, mania, and devaluation (of the lost object). All of these elements are present in body art, performance art, and the anti-modernist discourse of the postmodern period.

The argument concerning aphanisis articulates well with the conclusion of the last chapter, in which outrage with modernism’s failures was discussed as disappointment with the outcome of a previous strong investment in modernism’s agendas – a “sour grapes” argument, or Freud’s famous kettle example – I did not borrow your kettle, besides it was broken, and I returned it yesterday. Aphanisis adds yet another component to the disappointment. If modernism failed to deliver the sought-after ideal, its failure was compounded by its having also eradicated or at least seriously alienated desire, leaving a void to be filled by the ensuing visualities and practices. Contemporary art is fraught with a kind of ontological retaliation, with a flood of manifestations of the most raw and physical kind as if to rework the most basic elements of that ontology.

With the concepts of dialectical narcissism, failed modernist idealization, and aphanisis in mind, the “replacement” narcissisms in contemporary art that will be discussed involve: the use of the self as subject of the work, the negotiation of identity, regression to infantile states, abjection, the retrieval of the lost sense of aura, new and covert forms of idealization of the role of the artist, exhibitionism, and sado/masochism. The approach to this post-1960s art is made as much as possible on “its own terms” rather than through a study of categories such as body art or feminist performance art, since it is

## Chapter 5

precisely the presence of narcissism that unifies the very divergent practices of the past forty-five years. In general terms, this art is as idealistic and idealizing as that of high modernism. The ideal is often hidden or disguised, but is almost always detectable in the discourse. On the manifest level, these narcissisms are not involved with aesthetic purity, but often with the impure and abject. Unconscious fantasy involving purity and perfection can be compellingly expressed, however, by the brutishly ugly, abject, or even violent. The dialectic I am here presenting is also suggested in the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful, but the dialectic of narcissism provides a simpler theory with greater application. I will end this chapter with a brief discussion of the beautiful, the sublime, and their relation to the narcissism of contemporary art, but first, in an illustrative fashion, I will support the argument of narcissism in contemporary practice by examining contemporary artistic practice.

### Contemporary practice

The theme of narcissism and art was taken up explicitly in a group show at the California Center for the Arts Museum in 1996 titled *Narcissism: Artists Reflect Themselves*, which included works by Andy Warhol, Chuck Close, Cindy Sherman, John Currin, Audrey Flack, Dennis Oppenheim, Kim Dingle, Yasumasa Morimura, and many others. The text of the exhibition focused on the contradictory history of narcissism, suggesting that “narcissism had to become a condition and then a social vice before it could emerge as anything like a legitimate arena of artistic inquiry” (Welchman 1996, p.16). My argument is that although the exhibition correctly highlights the phenomena, narcissism is not just an arena of artistic inquiry – it *drives* artistic inquiry.

*Use of the self*

A concrete form of narcissism involves the artist's positioning his or her own self, or his or her own body as the subject of the work. The tradition of the self-portrait in painting and drawing dates back to Jean Fouquet (fifteenth century), Dürer (1471–1528), and Rembrandt (1606–1669). In the contemporary scene, the self-portrait is more than one a small facet of an artist's overall practice; it is often central.<sup>4</sup> The artists known as Gilbert and George (Gilbert Proesch and George Pasmore) offer paradigmatic examples. One of their first works, a parodied self-portrait, was a performance called *The Singing Sculpture* (1970) (fig. 2), in which they painted their faces with metallic silver and gold paint and struck robotic poses while miming a music hall song, "Underneath the Arches." They drew attention to themselves by resisting any trappings of the artistic avant-garde – instead, dressing in a curiously conservative style (for artists) of suit and tie, carrying walking canes, and wearing their hair cut short. During most of their careers, they have made their own self-images a constant. Similarly, Bruce Nauman presented himself as a living sculpture in *Human Fountain* (1956), simply a photo of himself with a jet of water spurting from his mouth. Yves Klein transferred his patented blue colour onto a canvas<sup>5</sup> (*Untitled Anthropometry*, 1960) using his own body to generate the form of the work, but we also note the pretence involved in owning (patenting) a colour. In the early 1960s, Andy Warhol urinated on a blank canvas to create *Piss Painting*. He later created a series, *Oxidation Paintings* (1978), in which he urinated on copper plates. The acid of the urine oxidized to create coloured and textured surfaces. These works have significance in their

---

<sup>4</sup> For Rembrandt it was also central; he painted or drew approximately one hundred self-portraits.

<sup>5</sup> Klein patented his ultramarine blue pigment (International Klein Blue –IKB) in the early 1960s.

function of indexing the famous artist “Andy Warhol,” and in that sense are practices of the self. Piero Manzoni (1961) sold balloons containing his breath as *Artist’s Breath*, and infamously sold cans of his own excrement labelled *Merda d’artista*. Each can contained about thirty grams of faecal matter and was priced according to the equivalent value of its weight in gold.<sup>6</sup> In 1964 Carolee Schneeman performed *Meat Joy* with male and female performers, an orgiastic grappling of nude performers with raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes, and pieces of paper. Helen Chadwick, Marina Abramovic, Hannah Wilke, Vito Acconci, Cindy Sherman, and Yasumasa Morimura are all very well known for the use of their own selves/bodies in their work.

*Narcissism and personal identity*

Hanna Segal stresses that one of the major tasks of the artist is to create a world of her own. Even in the project of faithfully reproducing the external world, the artist is in fact using this world to rebuild an inner realm. Segal cites Proust (a modernist writer) as a good example of an artist compelled to create by the need to recover his lost past, and in *Remembrance of Things Past*, he describes the process of his own creativity. “All Proust’s lost loved objects (his parents, his grandmother, and his much loved Albertine) are recaptured and brought back to life. Indeed, according to the Kleinian view, it is only these lost or dead objects that can be made into a work of art. Elstir the painter says ‘It is only by renouncing that one can re-create what one loves,’ implying that a creation is

---

<sup>6</sup> He claimed that the cans contained real shit; when one was opened recently, another can was found inside. The value of this one nearly doubled. Others leaked, and the leaked material was shown to be faecal matter. The fate of the eighty originals is documented in an amusing and thought-provoking documentary by Hugues Peyret, *Chacun sa Merde* (2001).

really a *re-creation* of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self" (1991, p. 24).

The loss of the object and of the subject in modernity stimulated a vigorous attempt to re-find them, as if identity at a personal and collective level needed to be re-established. Gilbert and George offer a model of re-identification with the physical body through a minimal sublimation of the narcissism of regression to a developmental stage. An artist such as Robert Gober also invests his work with issues of identity. Many of his images and objects, such as *Playpen* (fig. 8), are enigmatic and cannot be read through any kind of universal grammar of interpretation. His identity as a gay artist in an age of AIDS is frequently brought into the interpretation of his work, although ultimately his system of symbology is private. The privilege of using a private symbology is a consequence of the narcissistic style of contemporary art. Although it is frequently narcissistic in the sense of working out private issues of identity through public exhibition, it nonetheless has powerful communicative dynamics because of the resonance of unconscious elements in the work with the viewer's unconscious processes. Other contemporary artists such as Markus Lüpertz assert an identity that is strongly determined by narcissistic dynamics (fig. 9).

The word "dithyrambic" in the painting's title refers to Lüpertz's proclamation of the dithyramb as his personal invention and art form. The term dithyramb is derived from the cult of the ancient god Dionysus and signifies a song of praise; for the artist it had associations of intoxication, enthusiasm, and inspiration. In 1968 he published a manifesto, *The Grace of the Twentieth Century is Made Visible by the Dithyramb, Which I Invented*, whose title is not only a display of superb self-confidence by an artist who purposefully promotes himself as a genius, but also suggests that Lüpertz as a painter felt the need to contribute something uniquely his own to the field of painting. (Homburg, 2003, p. 61)



*Narcissism and identity politics*

Other bodily oriented practices of performance and contemporary art address issues such as race, feminism, and social justice. The politics of sexual identity, especially within feminism, have a complex relationship with what I am calling the narcissism of contemporary practice. On a manifest level, issues are addressed and a public is engaged with a seriousness that often involves activism and attempts to increase social awareness and reverse stereotypes. The link to the visual art realm would seem to be somewhat counterintuitive – would activism and social change not be better served by other institutions? Inasmuch as feminism is viewed as an ideology, it will, at least on the psychoanalytic model, generate idealizing forces within it. The link to the aesthetic realm has unconscious dimensions, one of which I believe to be the location of those idealizations in the visual art realm, given its predisposition to idealization. Any cause that chooses the aesthetic route enjoys the cachet of the aesthetic, notwithstanding the apparent demise of the aesthetic as such.

Furthermore, the narcissistic drive, in anthropomorphic<sup>7</sup> terms, could be said to make use of the manifest level of expression of any ideology as a vehicle for its own expression, frequently subverting those manifest intentions. Feminism for example, could and does claim to make use of narcissism for its purposes, inasmuch as at least some American feminists have used exhibitionism to control and /or reverse the dynamics of the gaze, conventionally constructed to favour masculinist agendas. Amelia Jones has defended the practices of Hannah Wilke as a demonstration of a specifically feminist type of *immanent intersubjective* narcissism that redresses the historical inequities of

---

<sup>7</sup> The drive is always presented in somewhat anthropomorphic terms, inasmuch as it is said to have an aim.

*masculine Kantian transcendent narcissism*. In many works (*Exchange Values*, 1978, the series *So Help Me Hannah*, 1978–84, and *Ponder-r-rosa*, 1986), Wilke makes herself available for erotic viewing pleasure. Some radical feminists view that availability as colluding with yet another instance for male opportunism.<sup>8</sup> Jones and other commentators admit the presence of (the woman's) desire, but claim it is there for the purpose of subverting traditional male abuse of the woman's pleasure. My argument here is that the underlying narcissism has already subverted the manifest aspects of situation into its own governance. Thus erotic and sexual components are legitimized by narcissistic operations. The manifest goals of historical and theoretical redress *may* also occur, but more likely than not, *they* are subverted by the partially desublimated sexuality of the scenario.

### *Exhibitionism*

The prevalence of nude female bodies<sup>9</sup> during art actions of the early years of performance and body art makes little sense in the art historical context without including the explanation of narcissistic exhibitionism in a reductive psychoanalytic sense. After all, what was the purpose of protesting the male gaze when to all intents and purposes, in art practice, at least, it had already eradicated itself? The desexualized modernist panels of colour fields, abstractions, deconstructed, and derealized objects reaching an apotheosis of anti-corporeality in minimalism presented few obvious instances of the exploitative male gaze. Since modernist practice was still dominated by men, the issue of

---

<sup>8</sup> Feminists such as Mary Kelley and Griselda Pollock.

<sup>9</sup> While the Gorilla Girls' motto was "Do you have to be nude to get into the Met?" in their infamous challenge to the exploitation of female nudity in art history, it is nonetheless also true that in the early years of feminist performance art, nude actions were the rule rather than the exception.

exclusion of women artists was real enough. But since there were no male artists painting or otherwise representing nude women (except for the occasional holdout such as Lucien Freud), the exhibitionist form of the protest would seem to have been at least half a century too late. The argument could be made that these actions were replying to ongoing sexist visualities in other realms, such as advertising and cinema, but while that is true, it would seem that nudity would simply reposition the female as object, notwithstanding the ironic art-historical intentions. In fact, those intentions would probably have to be spelled out in non-visual terms for the sexist to “get it” indicating that the visual nudity was not in itself a very effective method of education or protest.

The exhibitionistic use of the body might be seen as a crude or blunt rhetorical device<sup>10</sup> for the acquisition or preservation of an identity, with the self-monitoring or self-reflexive function helping to guide it through a process made precarious by the relative absence of other sources of the self. The body of the artist and the body as a subject of representation and discourse was mostly absent in modernism. I have described earlier the “canny” narcissism of Gilbert and George, which can also be seen as a deliberately naïve self-presentation through the use of their naked bodies, anuses, faeces, and urine. This naiveté allows their audience (as representative of the general culture) to react to the derealization they have experienced, by a collective vicarious regression and re-establishment of minimal physical norms as bodies that exist, eat, shit, and piss. The unconscious dimension involves the narcissistic exultation of a regained physicality, as if identity were now secured through the rhetorics of a primitive body language. While a philosopher such as Charles Taylor (1989) might argue for a retrieval of philosophical

---

<sup>10</sup> See Battaglia 1995 for a discussion of the idea that selfhood is emergent in rhetorical practices within culture through advertising, filmmaking, and the rituals of religion and culture.

## Chapter 5

sources of the Western self, the psychoanalytic position taken in this project is that the malaise of modernity is the result of the failure of those sources, and that the aesthetic dialectic of narcissism is evidence of an attempt to recoup idealizations. Contemporary art is thus attracted back to the body rather than to more abstract ideas of the “Aristotelian” good.

### *Regression*

Narcissism is intensely and regressively expressed in the work of Gilbert and George. With the professed intention to make art more accessible to the public, they have been astonishingly prolific since 1970, producing thousands of photographs, charcoal drawings, and collages. They have enjoyed international acclaim, with exhibitions in most of the world’s major institutions, including the Pompidou Centre in Paris. As they did in the *Singing Sculpture*, they continued to use themselves and their own bodies as the basic thematic source. They also used graphicized photographs of their own excrement, for example, in *Flying Shit* (fig. 3) and in the *Naked Shit Series*.

This use of faeces, urine, and their own naked bodies was not a singularity in their practice – it was repeated frequently, culminating in works up to 6 by 12 metres in size. Gilbert and George do not use these bodily products to explore the body’s contingency, vulnerability, or complexity; rather, these products seem to function only as an index of their own (bodily) existence. Of all the possible ways to index the body, their use of faeces would seem to be a test of acceptance. In that sense, it seems to indicate a fantasy of direct *unmediated* acceptance and perhaps love for them and their work. This is narcissism.

In the work *We* (1983) a large, cartoonish cross bears a circle with a face in it at the intersection of the arms. Gilbert and George are in the picture beneath the cross, appearing as a pair three times. According to Wolf Jahn (1989), this work is derived from a mosaic in the apse of the Basilica di Sant' Appollinaire in Classe, Ravenna (A.D. 500). The iconology of this beautifully executed work includes a hand of God suspended above a crucifix in the centre of the mosaic, the hand pointing to the face of Christ at the centre of the cross. Christ is the Eternal Man, at the centre of the universe, and between alpha and omega, the *Salus Mundi*. Jahn comments,

One fundamental difference between Gilbert and George's crosses and those from other cultural contexts is that in earlier times the cross was always used as an image of some transcendental world order ... Gilbert and George represent no microcosm of a macrocosm; they refer to nothing outside themselves; they are simply the crosses the artists have set up. They live and die with their creators, so others may set them up anew (*ibid.*, p. 259).

Here the narcissism of Gilbert and George is supported by the idealization of the commentator, who seems unaware of the absurdity of the comparison of *We* to the mosaic at Ravenna. The unelaborated and undisguised presentation of their faeces and urine as works of art could be rationalized as part of a generalized antimodernist trend. In modernism, the body and certainly its products were devalued as sites of aesthetic meaning. The return of the body, the deconceptualizing, rematerializing, and desublimating impulses of much contemporary art is a welcomed and exciting event. Yet at times the narcissism associated with this return is of a particularly regressed type. Gilbert and George offer their bodily products in an almost touchingly infantile way. They remark how wonderful the public was to accept their art. "They were so warm," said George, "they congratulated us and told us we were courageous to exhibit our feces and our anuses" (Scruton 1988, p. 23)

Gilbert and George always wear the most conservative suits and ties because “that’s how our mothers would respect us.” Despite the tongue-in-cheek, there would seem to be a displacement of shame operating here on an entirely unconscious level, reflecting an unconscious hate of their public anality. Wilfred Bion notes that hated parts of the personality or object world are split off and projected by all personalities, but they are, in principle, able to be withdrawn and reintegrated. The subject and his or her world are filled with these hostile, fragmented, “bizarre” objects. Bion describes how the container (good breast) modifies the toxic, primitive “beta element,” thus projected:

The infant filled with painful lumps of feces, guilt, fears of impending death, chunks of greed, meanness and urine, evacuates these bad objects into the breast that is not there. As it does so, the good object turns the no-breast (mouth) into a breast, the feces and urine into milk, the fears of impending death and anxiety into validity and confidence, the greed and meanness into feelings of love and generosity and the infant sucks its bad property, now translated into goodness, back again. (1963, p. 31)

This is what he called the alpha function. The “bizarre objects” Gilbert and George have created in the form of their art are evacuated into a public that returns them as feelings of love and generosity, at least in their fantasy and in the fantasy of the art world. The difference from Bion’s model is that the relationship between Gilbert and George’s projective identifications and the containing functions of the public is closed and static. In a similar vein, Margaret Mahler writes of the practicing subphase of infant development where the child seems to narcissistically believe that all its productions are of enormous significance and interest to the caregiver.

It is not simply that anality itself indicates a regressed narcissism. The significance of anality depends on its context. In medieval marginalia, for example, there

## Chapter 5

is a plenitude of anality. The anal and scatological cartoons of those manuscripts are frequently witty and serve to balance, critique, or act as *exempla* to the serious subjects of the manuscripts. For Gilbert and George, however, anality is not marginal or an excursus, it has become the centre of their creative lives.

Another aspect of Gilbert and George's regressed narcissism is their belief that elaboration or evaluative selection or rejection is not needed for their work. The following is an extract from an interview that appeared in *Modern Painters* (1988):

DS (Interviewer). I believe you never edit when you've done a series.

George. We would never think of that.

DS You yourselves will accept every one of them as valid?

George. Totally in every single way.

DS Why?

George. Because it comes completely blind, out from the inside of ourselves, then it must be true. Every picture is true. It would be very cruel and stupid to start destroying pictures. (p. 36)

The bland, childlike quality of their speech (even if spurious) leads to two possible effects, both of which signal narcissism. On the one hand, there is an uncanniness, intensified by their robotic stance as *Singing Sculptures*, an *aura* that Gilbert and George create for themselves as living art objects. In Benjamin's (1936) celebrated use of the term *aura*, he described the authenticity that comes from an art object having been endowed with virtual cult and ritual status because of its originality and singularity. This type of narcissism shall be discussed in chapter 6. On the other hand, their declaration that if it comes "from the inside of ourselves, then it must be true" instantiates a less subtle narcissism; here the *aura* involves a disavowal of complexity and cultural intrigue. Furthermore, their claim never to have differences between them – as if they were

mystical twins, two persons with one soul –enhances the uncanniness through the effect of the double.<sup>11</sup>

This idealization of a closed, mirroring system is in turn mirrored by their admirers. Linda Weintraub suggests that “Gilbert and George have sacrificed a normal and individual life for one devoted to the cause of art. These two men have relinquished their lives and become a work of art in the hopes of rekindling the [human] spirit” (1996, p. 76). Wolf Jahn echoes this sentiment:

The sacrifice that Gilbert and George have performed is a general one, because it is for everyone. It liberates Western man from a delusion which led him constantly to dissect and eliminate what lay outside of himself. He was helplessly in thrall to this delusion, which forced him to criticize, demolish, and destroy because this was the only shape of salvation that he could see. (1989, p. 478)

This commentator has assigned a Christ-like role of salvation and liberation to them. Gilbert and George elicit a resonant wish for idealization in the viewers. Their disavowal of complexity, intrigue, and artifice allows the generation of a collective narcissism built up in complex ways by projection and projective identifications.

*Aphanisis, narcissism, and sadomasochistic art*

The artist Chris Burden has performed a number of self-aggressing acts. In a performance called *Gallery Shoot* (1971), Burden had a friend shoot him with a .22-calibre rifle in a gallery space, before a live audience. The manifest content of the work related to the title, as a punning subversion of the high art practice of documenting art works (a gallery shoot), especially in the service of commodification. This subversion is intensified by the further punning reference to “shooting gallery,” thus further confounding “high” and

---

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 1, pp. 54-58.



“low” culture. In another infamous action, *Trans-Fixed* (1974), Burden had his hands nailed to a Volkswagen while he assumed a crucified position stretched out on his back over the roof of the car – ostensibly part of a protest against automobile and freeway culture. In another 1974 performance, *Doorway to Heaven*, Burden pushed two live electrical wires into his chest. The wires made contact and exploded in a shower of sparks producing a short circuit and saving him from being electrocuted. I suggest that here, and in some of the practices that will be discussed, the phenomenon of aphanisis also is a factor. That is to say, aphanisis, the fear of disappearance of desire, could also apply to the aggressive realm as it applies to the sexual. While we usually do not speak of a *desire* for aggression as we speak of desire in the sexual or erotic sense, aggression is a drive, and in psychoanalytic terms, considered as vital, although problematic, in the overall psychic organization. Burden’s masochistic art actions thus are part of a greater unconscious project of conquering the aphanisis of modernism, expressed as I shall now outline, through narcissism.

In all of these actions, some of the types of narcissism already described are encountered, such as use of the artist’s own body and exhibitionism. Additional levels of unconscious (and perhaps conscious also) narcissistic fantasy are also operative in these examples. In the first action, the gallery is assumed to be free from moral censure, and in this case free from legal censure. Behind this assumption are narcissistic fantasies – for example, that the activity is being presented in an idealized realm where moral and legal considerations simply do not apply. This is what often enrages conservatives, who believe moral rules and limitations *should* be in force. Such a conservative response would seem to result from the activation of a strong super-ego, rather than a participation

in the idealizations of the ego-ideal. One assumes that there is a powerful fantasy operative in Burden's mind during this event, and although the content of that fantasy is not available to us, it does seem that he regards this enactment to be beyond the ordinary considerations of life and safety, as if he were invulnerable and, in any case, beyond the jurisdiction of the law. Feelings of invulnerability are narcissistic equivalents.

Such an action, a shooting, carried out in a conventional space would no doubt have resulted in legal (that is, reality) consequences, perhaps even the arrest of the person doing the shooting. Or, one might imagine concerned spectators would have tried to prevent the event from proceeding.<sup>12</sup> The gallery situation protects and sequesters the event although it is directly aggressive. The aggression, however, is disavowed by the narcissism, which is, so to speak, exercising its mandate. Thus the aggression is stripped of its normal impact, and the narcissistic drive governs it. The narcissism here is great enough to override the normal impact of the aggressive drive, and, in fact, to use it in its own service.

---

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Burden and his wife recently resigned from teaching positions at UCLA because of the following situation. "A picture emerges of a crisis that began on November 29 [2004], when in the course of a performance for a class taught by visiting instructor Ron Athey, a graduate student entered a classroom at UCLA's Warner building where roughly thirty other students were gathered. The student, wearing a coat and tie, produced either a gun or a convincing replica of one, put what looked like a bullet into the weapon, spun the cylinder, and held it to his head, Russian-roulette style. He pulled the trigger, but the gun did not fire. The student then left the room; while he was out of view, a shot was heard, at which point he returned, now apparently unarmed. A short discussion ensued between what the witness described as the 'freaked-out' performer and a room full of people who were 'a little frozen and a little scared,' and then the class broke up for the day. This version of events expands upon but is basically corroborated by UCLA's official statement made by assistant vice chancellor Lawrence Lokman, who said that the performance 'raised a number of important issues and concerns for faculty, staff, and students with regard to artistic freedom, safety, and the boundaries of performance art within an academic setting.' He added that the dean of students office and the University of California Police Department were investigating to determine whether the student had used 'an actual gun, or a replica.' Reality did enter the situation, thirty years later, but one suspects only because it was not adequately staged as *an art event*. Burden was reported to have wanted the student punished. The same report states, 'Yet there have been accounts over the years of students attempting to emulate the transgressive character of Burden's early work, attempts Burden himself has reportedly criticized as dangerous and ill-considered.'" *Artforum* (20 January 2005), <http://artforum.com/diary/id=8299>

Narcissism and fetishization were also involved in the reception of the second work; the nails used in this performance were later exhibited in a prominent New York gallery. The dynamic of the fetish always includes narcissism for the following reasons. In classical psychoanalytic theory, the fetish is the substitute for the absent maternal phallus, thus acting as a defensive denial of castration. The only reason, at least in classical theory, that the substitution needs to take place is because the phallus is narcissistically over-valuated (or hypercathected) in the first place. Post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory also understands the fetish in terms of castration, but here castration is meant to be an expanded metaphor for the failed phallic confidence of the fetishist. The fetish mediates a wounded narcissism. It also is seen as a symbol for a forbidden and repressed sexual excitement or relation. In this situation, the fetish is a symbol of a narcissistic relation rather than an anaclitic one, since the latter would have included within its definition the capability of dependence and loss. The fetishized nails that derive from Burden's action promise the viewer/owner access to the idealizations of that action through unconscious identifications that involve sadomasochistic passive and aggressive fantasies, and unconscious eroticization of pain. There is also in this case a naïve idealization of the significance of these protests,<sup>13</sup> again indicating narcissistic investment.

In addition, the fetishism of the nails represents the now-absent performance that cannot be exhibited. Yet that performance itself, as a crucifixion scenario, is an enactment of a Christic identification, so that the nails function at a further level of

---

<sup>13</sup> See Jones and Warr 2000 (p. 102): "Placing himself in a quasi-religious context, Burden presented himself as a modern martyr to contemporary consumerism as represented by the cars in California's burgeoning freeway culture. 'I often think of myself as sort of training for some sort of – you know – outer space programme. I mean, I feel in some way, I've done some of the same things' – Chris Burden, 'Interview with Robin White,' 1978."

fetishism, like relics (bits of wood) of the cross or pieces of fabric claimed to be part of the shroud of Christ. In this sense, Burden's action is a truly grandiose narcissism.

Burden is not alone in sadomasochistic enactments staged in the aesthetic arena. Ron Athey, Gina Paine, Marina Abramovic, Paul McCarthy, Herman Nitsch, Gunter Brus, and Otto Mühl constitute an abbreviated list of artists engaged in these practices. (Violence in visual art is not limited to contemporary practices such as Burden's – Titian's *Flaying of Marysis* comes to mind.) The themes of catharsis, transgression, and redemption are frequent. On a manifest level, these artists provide opportunities for the audience to projectively identify with sadism, masochism, and retrieval of ritual. The following description of a performance by Hermann Nitsch (*1st Action*, 1962) is exemplary:

Nitsch ... was tied to rings in the wall as if he were being crucified. Muehl then poured and squirted blood on to his head, letting it run in thick rivers down his face ... Nitsch aimed at an ecstatic redemption through the powerful emotional experience of the physical contact with blood and by assuming the role of Christ. He replaced the canvas with his body and presented the artist as the locus of his work, whose inscription with bloody paint could generate an internal spiritual healing through the enactment of a pagan-Christian rite. In subsequent actions for a public audience Nitsch used a slaughtered lamb as a literal replacement for the Christ figure. (Jones and Warr 2000, p. 92)

The narcissistic elements of these actions involve the appropriation of Messianic power, appropriation of ritual (as if a meaningful ritual can be generated simply by such appropriations), as well as once again making the focus of the work the artist's own body and self ( a similar 'action' is depicted in fig. 10). The power of conscious and unconscious levels of identification with Christ, that is, through torture of the body and ultimate redemption granted by God in the form of triumph over death, cannot be

underestimated. The enactment of such identifications, furthermore, could not occur in the environment of organized religion, where symbolic equivalents are designed precisely to foreclose the necessity of such enactments. When religion failed to provide a convincing site for redemption, it is not surprising that the idealizing impulse of the visual art world would provide it.

I am also arguing that here as in the sexual realm, aphanisis of modernism has provoked a desperate reaffirmation through the abject and violent. The following is a description of an “action” by Otto Mühl (*Material Action No. 1, Degradation of a Venus*, 1963):

A trough such as bricklayers use has been prepared. This trough is everything: bed, grave, pit, picture, sewer, womb. In it the victim is cut up, submerged and buried. I can imagine nothing significant where nothing is sacrificed, destroyed, dismembered, burned, pierced, tormented, harassed, tortured, massacred, devoured. We must strive to destroy humanity, to destroy art ... all smooth surfaces incite me to dirty them with intensive life. I crawl on all fours over them and throw dirt in all directions. I work until the surface is used up ... When I am in heat I hold all valves open and hurl the whole stench of my soul in people's faces. In this way I bring about redemption of my contemporaries and all future generations.” (ibid., p. 94)

Here is the grandiose theme of Messianic redemption indexing narcissism, but there is also an intense anxiety incited by “smooth surfaces” and by lack of significant aggression (“I can imagine nothing significant where nothing is sacrificed, destroyed ...”). This would suggest that the narcissism here may be directed towards the aphanisis of the smooth and aesthetically cleaned-up surfaces of modernism. Self-mutilating, self-humiliating, and aggressive behaviour is frequently a subject of clinical attention, where a common observation by patients is that whereas they previously felt dead, the action makes them feel alive. Although the term aphanisis is not used to describe that clinical

## Chapter 5

sense of deadness, it would seem to be appropriate. This comment about the clinical parallel is not meant to pathologize performance actions, but rather to help interpret the meaning of these gestures. A sadomasochistic narcissism is interpreted here as a response to the aphanisis of a clean, abstracted, and beautiful aesthetic, all the attributes of modernism.

### Eclectic narcissism

#### *Helen Chadwick*

Narcissism as an agent that works against the extinction of desire could express itself in a variety of possibilities, some of them crude and direct, some of them subtle and delicate. If the former are exemplified by Gilbert and George, Helen Chadwick instantiates the latter. Chadwick worked out aspects of her struggle with her identity also in narcissistic terms (use of her own self and body), but with a sophisticated elaboration. In the Cibachrome photograph *Vanity* (fig. 11), she shows her own nude body, mirrored in such a way as to reveal in the background one of her major installations, *Of Mutability*, an exceedingly complex and beautiful work. A recent film about her life and work shows how she used both her own body and other organic objects to create such works.<sup>14</sup>

Chadwick, who died at an early age, provides the following poetic commentary about her aesthetic intentions, "As if it were possible to resolve the pull of the past, the friction in remembering, and so discover an inherent pattern to existence. A metaphysical conceit, to be 'happy in having understood the causes of things,' has forged this detachment. *As autobiographical subject, I am proposing an order, a narrative of material objects, equivalents for selfhood, within a bounded safe place. The minutiae of personal history are collapsed into an idealized universe, a system of solitary finite masses inside the classical frame of a Newtonian world-view.*" (Chadwick 1989, p. 11, italics mine)

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Art of Helen Chadwick* (2004, UK, 50 mins.), production by John Wyer.

It is particularly the last sentences that resonate with my hypotheses. Not only are the objects of her creation equivalents for selfhood, the “minutiae” of her life are “collapsed into an *idealized* universe.” This is narcissism, but it is important to note that here the self-referentiality bears none of the burden of pathology often ascribed to it and that it is operating on a more complex level than much work involving the body, for example, the regressed narcissism of Gilbert and George, the masochistic enactments of Chris Burden, or the exhibitionistic/voyeuristic dynamics solicited by Hannah Wilke and numerous other feminist body artists.

Chadwick constructed her work around her own body<sup>15</sup> and representations of birds, animals, and viruses, integrating them into pre-existing aesthetic frameworks of baroque or rococo design. In *The Oval Court* she uses photocopies of her body and animal illustrations, combining them with large golden spheres and drawings of pillars crowned with photocopies of leaves and illustrations of her own face to create an environment of stark beauty – simultaneously formal and organic, dead and alive, solipsistic and related. She says of her photocopying techniques:

Out of the copier, no longer separate from other things, I am now limitless. The essential elementary self is gone, evaporated into a vigorous plurality of interactions... Pleasure and pain are simultaneous in the illusory frame of this place, free from the dimension of shame and guilt. Neither solace nor promise, as Eden at the beginning and Jerusalem at the end, mark the polarities of time, for there can be no arrival here. The boundaries have dissolved, between self and other, the living and the corpse. This is the threshold of representation, not quite

---

<sup>15</sup> She used her body in other complex narcissistic ways. For *Piss Flowers* (created during a residency at the Banff Centre, Alberta.), she and her partner urinated in the snow. The holes left in the snow were somehow cast into forms that became the basis for sculptures she called *Piss Flowers*. In the film (see footnote 15), it becomes clear that, unlike the previously mentioned piss works by Andy Warhol, this work involved her and her partner’s sexuality. The resulting work is narcissistic on the level of using and exalting her “base” bodily functions, yet it is also relational in a quirky kind of way.

real, not exactly alive, but the conscious implicate depths of reflection” (ibid., p. 29).

Components of narcissism are clearly expressed here through a fantasy of an ideal personal universe, escape from shame and guilt, and an escape from limitation.

Boundaries are dissolved in the depths of reflections that gather and bind beginnings and endings, alpha and omega, and the living and the dead.

### *Marina Abramovic*

A number of complex narcissisms are present in the work of Marina Abramovic. In *The Biography* (1992), she uses her own nude body in a performance work. She is positioned on a kind of perch and surrounded by a halo of light, arms outstretched to give the appearance of Christ on the cross. A large python is draped over her body and arms. Dogs are snarling over a pile of bones on the floor. The noise of the dogs is picked up by microphones on the dogs' collars and amplified into the auditorium. In this performance Abramovic is not only appropriating the Christ figure, but also that of a Minoan snake goddess. A psychoanalytic reading of the crucifixion scenario usually renders it in Oedipal terms, as Freud's understanding of Christian mythology is entirely centred on the displacement of a patriarchal religion (Judaism) by the dynamics of a "sonship" religion, and the eventual reconciliation of father and son through Christ's death. By appropriating two of the most startling and significant icons of Western civilization (the Christ crucified and the Minoan snake goddess), *The Biography* becomes grandiose, and narcissism is more relevant in *this* performance of the crucifixion than is Oedipal conflict. Abramovic here narcissistically completes a transformation of Christianity into entirely feminine (feminist) terms. There are other narcissisms here – fantasizing a repairing of



the wounded Christ, identifying herself as a founding principality of Western civilization, and enacting a fantasized union with Christ or God are all possibilities. In another performance, Abramovic actualized this replacement – as a Pietà – with the dead Christ (represented by her partner, Ulay). The colour scheme is daring and outrageous; as Virgin Mother she is dressed in bright red, an emblem of sexual passion.

In *Rhythm O* (1974), Abramovic stood by a table and offered herself passively to spectators, who could do what they wanted to with a number of objects and her body. A text on the wall read, “There are seventy-two objects<sup>16</sup> on the table that can be used on me as desired. I am the object.” This situation subverts the superego, which would normally prevent overt objectification and use of a body detached from its subject. By the end of the performance all of her clothes had been sliced off her body with razor blades. She had been cut, painted, cleaned, sexually touched, decorated, crowned with thorns, and even had a loaded gun pressed against her head. After six hours the performance was halted by concerned spectators.

Photographs documenting the event show her to be expressionless, as if utterly indifferent to what was being done to her. Another aspect of saying “I am the object” is that it is a *staged depersonalization*. For Federn (1928), depersonalization represents a massive decathexis of the ego and its boundaries, with the sexual drive having flowed out of the body. He connects this state to narcissism in the sense that the narcissistic scenario represents a moment in which alienation of the libido is similarly demonstrated.

---

<sup>16</sup> The objects included gun, bullet, blue paint, comb, bell, whip, lipstick, pocket knife, fork, perfume, spoon, cotton, flowers, matches, rose, candle, water, scarf, mirror, drinking glass, Polaroid camera, feather, chains, nails, needle, safety pin, hairpin, brush, bandage, red paint, white paint, scissors, pen, book, hat, handkerchief, sheet of white paper, kitchen knife, hammer, saw, piece of wood, axe, stick, bone of lamb, newspaper, bread, honey, wine, salt, sugar, alcohol, rosemary, branch, soap, cake, metal pipe, scalpel, metal spear, dish, flute, Band-Aid, medal, coat, shoes, chair, yarn, leather, strings, wire, sulphur, grapes, olive oil, apple.

## Chapter 5

Abramovic becomes a double of herself, as if she were only the form of herself, such as could be seen in a reflection. The narcissism here involves not only the escape from libido, ego, and superego, but also reflects her own fantasies of invulnerability. Such is the case in another of her fantasized projects, where she proposed a performance in a gallery where she would play Russian roulette –if she shot herself the performance would be over, and if she escaped being shot she would simply walk out of the gallery without further comment or involvement. Here also the narcissism is enormous, since there is no apparent concern for either outcome – narcissism puts her in a realm beyond the emotional contingencies of life and death.

In a series of her performances titled *Cleaning the Mirror I–III*, which became video works, a Zen metaphor of cleaning the mirror (emptying the mind) was the central theme. Chrissie Isles suggests, “Death is the last mirror you look into. So taking away one’s fear of dying is a kind of cleaning of the mirror; a preparation for one’s own death” (in Abramovic 1998, p. 328). Abramovic describes the three videos as follows: *I*. “I sit with a skeleton on my lap, next to me is a bucket filled with soapy water. With my right hand I vigorously brush different parts of the skeleton” (a visual pun – a brush with death). *II*. “I lie naked on a white sheet. A skeleton lies on top of me. I breathe deeply and slowly. The skeleton moves up and down to the rhythm of my breathing.” *III*. “I sit at a table in the Pitt Rivers Museum. The curator of the museum, with his hands protected by white gloves, takes objects out of the glass case (previously chosen by me). He puts this object in front of me. I stretch my hands 5 cm to 10 cm above it. I keep my hands motionless, never touching it, for a period of time that I feel is necessary to establish

communication. We repeat the same procedure until all the objects of my choice have been used” (Abramovic 1998, pp. 330–36).

The first performance had the form of a dream. The condensed elements were: (1) the last mirror is death, (2) death is a skeleton, and (3) cleaning the mirror is like death. For Freud the dream always has a narcissistic underpinning, since sleep is the prototypic narcissistic condition, where the ego gives up its objects and libidinal return satisfies the wish in the dream.

The second performance was structured somewhat differently, since here it appeared to be like a Vanitas painting, in which the living and the dead are juxtaposed in a way that suggests acceptance of an inevitable fate – thus appearing to be anti-narcissistic. Yet there would seem to be an unconscious fantasy of triumphant superiority of (Abramovic’s) life: as she breathed, the skeleton moved up and down as if she were endowing it with life, or perhaps even endowing it with the meaning of sexual intercourse. This performance then became an enacted manic defence against death rather than an acceptance.

#### *Abramovic and auratic retrieval*

In the third piece, Abramovic acted as a conduit of magical powers that she was able to access merely by her presence and the laying on of hands. These objects seemed to carry with them a very powerful aura, in the sense already discussed. The aura defined negatively is the part missing in the mechanically reproduced (art) object, which now lacks any mysticism and contributes to what Walter Benjamin called liquidization of the cultural heritage. In this performance, Abramovic mobilized a collective nostalgia for the

lost auratic experience, and found doubly mystical objects that were both cultic and museologically selected as art. Benjamin's concept of the aura corresponds in many ways to the narcissistic core of much artistic experience. (The connections between narcissism and the aura will be developed in more detail in chapter 6.) For Abramovic, the aura is appropriated within the operation of narcissism, understood as an attempt to unite with primal sources of power and significance, bypassing real techniques, relations, and knowledge. Furthermore, these objects are handled as if animate and dangerous and thus blur the distinction between death and life. They are the recipients of powerful projections of life force, again in an overt and perhaps manic denial of death. The work of Abramovic leads to associative material related to complex meanings of narcissism. Her starting place in these and many other performance pieces is her own narcissistic use of her body. However, *this* narcissism stimulates elaborated and complex responses, as contrasted with regressive types of narcissism.

#### Art theory

Just as there was a tight coupling of theory and practice in modernism (for example, Clement Greenberg's theorizing abstract expressionism), there has been a contemporary equivalent theorizing of body art by commentators such as Amelia Jones (1998). Jones, in fact, provides some support for my arguments in her designation of body art as narcissistic. She refers to the exuberant performances of Carolee Schneemann (*Meat Joy*, 1964) as evidence of a joyful celebration of physical immanence – identifying such liberation as partial fulfillment of Marcuse's project of narcissistic liberation. She also names and defends the narcissism of artists such as Hannah Wilke, who posed topless in

a gallery space with large labial sculptures (*Ponder-r-rosa*, 1986). Jones suggests that Wilke seduces the male gaze, but then by appropriating and enjoying it, gazes back defiantly, deriving power from the narcissistic exhibition of her glamorous body.<sup>17</sup>

Feminists such as Griselda Pollock distanced themselves from many of those practices, claiming that such narcissistic exhibition of the female body merely re-enforces the power of the male gaze, perpetuates sexism and exploitation, and thus could hardly claim to subvert the masculinist patriarchal order. Especially curious is Jones's understanding of narcissism. She writes, "Narcissism – the exploration of and fixation on the self – *inexorably* leads to an exploration of and an implication in the other: the self turns itself inside out as it were, projecting its internal structures of identification and desire outward. Thus narcissism interconnects the internal and external self as well as the self and other" (1998, p. 46). Jones repeatedly maintains that narcissism inexorably leads to the other and to an exploration of the other, and thus it is through narcissism that intersubjectivity is achieved. *This is precisely the opposite of the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism*, notwithstanding her partially correct invoking of Lacanian theory, and notwithstanding her appreciation of the apparently paradoxical nature of narcissistic object relations. Narcissism does not lead inexorably to the other, but appropriates the other to oneself, and, in effect, strives to minimize and, if possible, deny the separateness and difference of the other. In a sense, narcissism is a fantasy about the possibility of a solipsistic existence – after all, the self can never be self-sufficient – but narcissism as an unconscious force strives to make this real nevertheless. Although it is true that all

---

<sup>17</sup> See the introductory essay in Jones and Warr 2000. For a discussion of Hannah Wilke, see "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," in Jones 1998, pp. 151–95.

identifications are narcissistic processes and therefore in a sense relational, this does not make them intersubjective. Freud discussed the constitution of identifications in “The Ego and the Id” (S.E. XIX) where character itself is said to be formed by the narcissistic cathexes of abandoned objects. This does not mean that all operations and attributes of the self are ipso facto intersubjective, however. The latter claim would make the concept of narcissism unnecessary. In contradistinction to Jones, narcissism may be described, among other things, as a drive to use or cathect identifications, initially gained through object relations, *as if* they belonged and originated entirely within the self. Without this illusion we would not think of ourselves as selves at all. Even social constructivists such as George Mead would allow for a self, different from the socially determined personality. “Individual selfhood depends upon reflexiveness – the ability of the subject to be an object to itself” (1977, p. 146). This is not, of course, to suggest the idea of the self that Mead here describes is a “psychoanalytic self,” but rather to emphasize the ubiquity of the notion of a self that is not totally defined by intersubjectivity. “The original mechanism of reflexive consciousness, of selfhood is the vocal gesture. Aware of his own vocal gestures, the individual makes himself an object to himself ... The mechanism of introspection is therefore given in the social attitude man necessarily assumes toward himself, and the mechanism of thought, insofar as thought uses symbols which are used in social intercourse, is but an inner conversation” (ibid., p. 146). Interestingly, Mead chooses the auditory mode to derive a reflexively obtained self rather than the traditional visual mode.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The baby’s early babbling would seem to fulfil this function. The baby seems to derive pleasure from the response of others to its vocalizations, but also it seems to enjoy the sound of its own voice.

It would seem that Jones's desire to put narcissism in the service of intersubjectivity amounts to another form of narcissism, in which the unconscious nature of narcissism itself is denied. Jones furthermore splits narcissism into two: a good feminist version, deployed by certain feminist artists, and a negative masculinist version, deployed by patriarchal modernists. Thus Jones's text itself instantiates quite another kind of narcissism, in her insistence that some works – those that she herself seems to endorse and idealize – are authentic and exemplary reinstatements of the body. This insistence, combined with the fantasized totalized intersubjectivity (she appeals to Merleau-Ponty, who suggests “there is no outside”) in which beings and their productions have no claim to their own interior or their own (fantasized) transcendence, is a precise enactment of what could be called a *narcissism of Eros*. This narcissism is an attempt to split off the unacceptable and cathect *all* the rest in a grand gesture of equalized immanence.

It is also precisely this variety of narcissism that unconsciously permeates much of the body art under consideration here. In the shift from the modernist narcissism that erases the object to the contemporary instinctual reinvestment of the body, we see clearly the dialectics of narcissism at work – the recurrent and persistent demands that narcissistic wishes and fantasies place on whatever is offered by the particular cultural and intellectual milieu. If the object was eradicated in modernist visual art practice, the artist (author) himself was eradicated in late modernism (Barthes; Foucault). The resonance in visual art was a narcissism of absence, a narcissism of death or thanatos. The dialectic of narcissism has, however, returned the subject in the form of the body with a breathtaking directness and robustness.

The drive of narcissism and its function of governance

Grunberger's idea of *narcissism as a drive*, a concept already presented (see chapter 3, pp. 143-148), underscores the often overlooked possibility that narcissism is susceptible to processes of sublimation. This notion is of utmost importance for understanding the function of narcissism in art. In psychoanalytic terms, art has frequently been thought of as a sublimation of the drives of aggression and sexuality. Yet there is little doubt that there is a powerful narcissistic sublimation at work in the core of art as we understand it in modern terms. The tendency in psychoanalytic metapsychology to emphasize sexuality and aggression as drives, while treating narcissism as a secondary issue of identity or of psychopathology, has left a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction that results from the reductive nature of such formulations. The realization that narcissism is in fact a dynamic factor accompanying and even underlying the vicissitudes of sexuality and aggression opens a fresh perspective in the psychoanalytic approach to art. Grunberger suggests that narcissism may and does conflict, especially early in development, with the drives proper (sexuality and aggression), and that it comes to have a complex relation to those drives. He suggests that to some extent the drives of sex and aggression are under the *governance* of narcissism. My model, built on this idea, suggests that visual art has combinations and permutations of the three sublimated and desublimated drives and their derivatives. Furthermore, the formulation provided by Grunberger solves some of the problems posed by disturbed gender relations – because narcissism originates as a pre-gendered fantasy. As a drive that predates the instinctual world and then becomes gendered, at least some of its sublimated components are not gender-related.



In this model, the narcissism could be deconstructed and thought of as involving two moments. The first moment is shared by a great many artistic practices – it provides the sanctuary of the art gallery/museum/studio – and is full of historical paradigms. The second might involve more personal fantasies (in both performer and viewers) of invulnerability, escape from the superego, denial of reality, and fantasies of conquering death as well as fantasies of death. Paradoxically, the second moment may, at a conscious level, challenge the first. In the case of Burden's performance, *Gallery Shoot*, discussed earlier, the action supposedly challenges hegemonic control of the art market and sets out to parody the production and documentation of the commodity art object – in other words, purports to challenge the narcissism of the first moment. But the "privilege" or context for doing so *depends* on the first moment. Other "moments" or layers of narcissism are added at the level of reception,<sup>19</sup> art theory, and criticism.

Similarly, sexual and erotic drives and their sublimations/desublimations are brought within the governance of narcissism. Where the sexual and aggressive components are less evident, narcissism itself becomes more directly visible and is frequently of a more regressed form, for example, Gilbert and George, Bruce Nauman (*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966), Keith Broadwee (*Untitled – Purple Squirt*, 1995), and Paul McCarthy (*Hotdog*, 1974). Where sexual and aggressive components are highly sublimated in combination with a sublimated narcissism, the resulting work (for example, that of Chadwick, Abramovic, and Morimura) is complex and visually fascinating, and

---

<sup>19</sup> The issue of reception has been alluded to, but not discussed in detail. The narcissism of reception is involved in its most simple form in the desire to own the unique art object. Such objects, even when they function as ironic or even satirical devices such as Piero Manzoni's cans of *Merda d'artista*, mobilize idealizations and gratify wishes for the auratic. More complex forms are involved in the support of institutional forms of idealization. I have also suggested that artists such as Gilbert and George mobilize the dynamics of idealizations in groups, groups that are often bound together by the resonance of unconscious wishes for new forms of transcendence. The issues involved here suggest the need for further study.

involves important reworking of cultural themes. It stimulates fantasies involving simultaneous expression of all the drives.

### The beautiful and the sublime

In art history, the themes of the sublime and the beautiful weave in and out through changes of style and practice. The two categories are in no way “robust” in any kind of complete way that would require works to be either sublime or beautiful. In a schematic way, the references already made (chapter 4, p. 176 and this chapter, p. 199) suggested that the traditional opposition between the beautiful and the sublime is illuminated by the formulation of the narcissistic drive. Female beauty, for example, would seem to be presented traditionally as a quality of a part-object, stripped of functional complexity, and rendered powerless except by the intimidating power of the idealization of that beauty. Beauty, differentiated from the sublime by Burke as well as Kant, could be seen psychoanalytically as a split-off realm serving defensive purposes best described by Kleinian theory. By maintaining a split-off realm of goodness, perfection, and happiness, the threat of real sexuality, aggression, envy, and death are kept at bay. The beautiful presentation requires aggression to be split-off and repressed, and the erotic is highly sublimated and controlled under the governance of narcissism. The sublime, on the other hand, brings the aggressive fantasy close and refuses to tame it with erotic fusion, but allows for narcissistic identification with the sublime object. In modernism, Barnett Newman’s claims to the sublime are seen as driven by the core aesthetic motor of narcissism, but so are those versions of the so-called contemporary sublime. The sublime is created by a profound, but temporary, challenge to the beautiful, where the threat of the

real presents itself momentarily before dissolving in safety. Thus a raging sea can be seen as sublime, but only from a vantage point that proves to be safe. The beauty of the sea in its seeming infinite might is always “contaminated” by the presence of its inherent violence, while a beautiful experience of the sea would have been created by a split-off representation in such a way as to avoid awareness of danger. While there would seem to be no overarching theory explaining this alternation of the beautiful and the sublime, no sequence of doing and undoing that would explain why art has gone through periods of valuation of the sublime, or denigration of the beautiful, such as has happened recently, the theory of narcissism in art at least suggests a significant bridging dynamic component. That is to say, the drive of narcissism is ever present, and can derive satisfaction from the modalities of either the beautiful or the sublime.

\*\*\*

I have suggested that in modernism progressive derealization proved to be a viable context for wishes for aesthetic purity to take hold, resulting in a narcissism of absence. Other factors involved were the increased sense of modern self-reflexivity, subjectivism emptied of its philosophic transcendence, and structuralist-influenced erosion of subjectivity in general. The apotheosis of modernist purity was said to be a totalized transcendence of absence resulting in artworks bled entirely of memory and desire. Aphanisis, the fear of lack of desire was then posited to be the factor that would turn the dynamic around to the dialectical opposite – a narcissism full of Eros and aggression.

## CHAPTER 6 - THE NARCISSISTIC UNDERPINNING OF THE REGIMES OF VISION

### Culture and its scopic regimes

The issue of the *regimes* of vision in Western culture has been thoroughly debated and theorized in the past few decades by Hal Foster (1988), Martin Jay (1988,1993), Jonathan Crary (1990), Rosalind Krauss (1988, 1993) Norman Bryson (1988) Jacqueline Rose (1983) Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1984) and John Berger (1972).

The term “regime,” although it could refer simply to the conditions under which a process takes place, has distinct connotations of governance and control of those conditions. The idea of a regime of vision is meant to distinguish physiological conditions of visual perception from the social conditions of seeing. Such regimes influence both the reception as well as the production of works of art. Clearly the concept of scopic regimes has a great deal of relevance in the understanding of the impact of visual imagery because it describes the fact that perception is a semiotic process, and thus the meaning of groupings of signs in both the form and content of visual art works is mediated by the social meaning of those signs.

I will also show that visuality is shaped by psychological factors (understood psychoanalytically) that operate in a generalized way somewhat like a regime, but unlike a regime, are probably constant across time. I have in mind the idea that narcissism as a drive not only manifests itself in the form and content of much modern art, but that at an even deeper level, visuality itself has drive components. This immediately suggests an already existing concept, the Freudian idea of scopophilia. For Freud, scopophilia is a drive, since there is pleasure in the satisfaction of looking. But at least in the “Three

Essays on Sexuality”, this drive is limited to the sexual pleasure of looking at the genitals (voyeurism), or exhibiting them to the visual inspection of others (exhibitionism) (S.E. VII, pp.125–245). The drive can be sublimated “in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals to the shape of the body as a whole” (ibid., p. 155). Although Freud claims the eye to be an erotogenic zone (ibid., p. 169), it is clear that *visuality per se* is not regarded as a drive, but that vision is a principal initial excitatory pathway for the sexual drive.<sup>1</sup> Sublimation of sexuality, in its simplest Freudian formulation, is the basis for visual art. The idea to be developed here is quite different. Since narcissism itself is conceptualized as a drive, its effects, derivatives, and sublimations, as well as its governance of the other drives all participate in the psychological structuring of *visuality*. The empirical evidence for narcissism in much of the visual art and art theory of modernity has already been presented. This chapter sets out to add another level to the way in which narcissism is involved in *visuality* in general – as an underpinning to scopic regimes.

Discussions of scopic regimes often centre on “Cartesian perspectivalism” and “Baroque” *visuality*. In the former regime, space comes to be organized by orderly lines of perspective, vanishing points, and horizon lines with discrete detailed objects placed in the space. This space is meant to be a translation of three-dimensional reality onto a two-dimensional plane. The claim is made that this particular organization objectifies and de-

---

<sup>1</sup> Freud’s thinking on *visuality* is complicated. At times he could be seen as aligned with an anti-visual thinking, inasmuch as he replaced *looking* at patients (hysterics) and theatricalizing them as he had witnessed Charcot doing, with *listening* to patients. His connection to the visual, however, remained strong, and he theorized that the desire to know, the epistemophilic drive (*Wisstrieb*), was derived from the infantile wish to see. But this is not a drive in and of itself – it serves sexual curiosity. There was also a strong link between the formation of culture and *visuality*, as outlined in “Civilization and Its Discontents” S.E. XXI where he asserted that man’s attaining upright posture was a result of the triumph of vision over smell.

## Chapter 6

eroticizes the space, as well as promotes a spectator who is alienated from his/her own emotional relation to the representations (see Jay 1988). By contrast, the Baroque scopic regime in Wölfflin's scheme is painterly, recessional, soft-focused, multiple, and open.<sup>2</sup> In Buci-Glucksmann's language (1984), it is dazzling, disorienting, and ecstatic. In much contemporary art, there is a baroque sensibility which leads to interest in and appropriation of baroque iconography and the creation of eroticized complex spaces that are not organized along perspectival principles.<sup>3</sup>

The following description reveals some idea of the regime's putative control of visuality in the case of Western "Cartesian perspectivalism":

The convention of perspective which is unique to European art and which was first established in the Early Renaissance, centers everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light traveling outward, appearances travel in. The conventions called these appearances reality. Perspective makes the single eye the center of the visible world. Everything converges on the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. (Berger 1977, p. 16)

Martin Jay agrees that the Cartesian perspectival regime came to "symbolize a harmony between mathematical regularities of optics and God's will" (1988, p. 6). Thus perspectivalism became a "regime" because it was linked to God, adding a divine justification to the perspectival way of representation.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Wölfflin 1932. Note that Wölfflin himself did not use the phrase "scopic regime." He referred to empirically derived pairs of stylistic elements of the works in Renaissance and Baroque painting and drawing, but did not suggest visuality itself could be encoded as a "regime." He did, however, capture the notion of a vision or way of seeing that took the form of overarching psycho-social constructs.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Baynard, 2005, p. 85.

Although perspectivalism is still the best way of *reproducing* visual perception, its use is nonetheless a *choice* about how to think of and represent experience. Jay also points out that:

Cartesian perspectivalism has in fact been the target of widespread philosophic critique, which has denounced its privileging of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world it claims to know only from afar. The questionable assumption of a transcendental subjectivity characteristic of universalist humanism, which ignores our embeddedness in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty liked to call the flesh of the world, is thus tied to the “high altitude” thinking characteristic of this scopic regime. In many accounts, this entire tradition has thus been subjected to wholesale condemnation as both false and pernicious. (ibid., p. 10)

Jonathan Crary develops a critique of perspectivalism through a discussion of the camera obscura – a device which was precisely homologous to the idea of knowledge passing through a focused epistemological gateway into the objectifying, disincarnated mind. Thus it is not merely an apparatus, but signifies embeddedness “in a much larger and denser organization of knowledge and of the observing subject” (1988, p. 31). This organization includes its use as a central epistemological device in Descartes’s *Dioptrics*, in Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*, and Leibnitz’s critique of Locke. Crary cites Richard Rorty’s observations on the implications of the camera obscura model: “Richard Rorty has pointed to Locke and Descartes as key figures in establishing this conception of the human mind as an ‘inner space in which clear and distinct ideas pass in review before an inner Eye ... an inner space in which perceptual sensations were themselves the objects of quasi-observations’” (ibid., p. 32). For Crary, perspectivalism based on the camera obscura is a strong regime, and is responsible for an account of a truly alienated human subject.

It should also be suggested how closely the camera obscura is bound up with a metaphysic of interiority. It is a figure for the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual but who is also a privatized isolated subject enclosed in a quasi-domestic space separated from a public exterior world. It defined an observer who was subjected to an inflexible set of positions and divisions. The visual world could be appropriated by an autonomous subject but only as a private unitary consciousness detached from any active relation with an exterior. The monadic viewpoint of the individual is legitimized by the camera obscura, but his or her sensory experience is subordinated to an external and pre-given world of objective truth. (ibid., p. 33)

Crary claims that the discovery of “specific nerve energies” by the German physiologist Johannes Mueller led to the collapse of the camera obscura model. The doctrine of specific nerve energies refers to the fact that different nerves, while utilizing the same mode of “electric” transmission,<sup>4</sup> produce different sensory effects; in principle, an external stimulus is not necessary to cause a sensory effect if a given nerve is stimulated electrically as opposed to being stimulated by its normal sensory organ. Thus if the optic nerve is stimulated electrically or even by pressure on the eyeball, light will be seen, even when there was no light activating the retina/optic nerve from the outside. Crary claims that this phenomenon put the body into a constitutive stance with respect to perception rather than a passive one, and led to the modern “mobile” observer, one with the “thickness” or opacity and carnality of vision based in the body. It also “eradicating distinctions between internal and external sensation, so that interiority was drained of the meanings it had once had for a classical observer, or for the model of the camera obscura” (1988, p. 40).

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, this is a complex electrochemical transmission involving the sequential depolarization of the nerve membrane, polarized in the resting state by a sodium ion “pump.”



*Interiority versus "metaphysics" of interiority*

Crary's formulation contains a crucial contradiction. He correctly notes that since different sensory modalities are served by one type of nerve transmission, the ability to distinguish different modalities would implicate the body in sensation in a new way. The phenomenon of sensation is pushed back from the sensory organ surface of the body to the interior of the brain, especially with respect to inter-modal integration. This does establish the body as an agent, actively participating in the constitution of sensation. But if the distinction between internal and external sensation is eradicated, it is in the sense that all sensation is internal, that is to say, it is not the eye that sees or the skin that feels, but the brain. This is already a kind of interiority, which immediately sets up the possibility that what we see may be less shared with others than if it were simply processed at the less complex level of the sense organs. Of much more significance was the eventual discovery that all types of perception were also contingent on psychological dispositions. A complex psychoanalytic notion of "psychological dispositions" cannot exist without interiority. While ideas (perceptions, sensations) may not pass in review before an inner "Eye," it is clear from the studies of perception, memory, and even pain that they pass through exceedingly complex inner processes. Optical metaphors for those processes have been replaced by psychological and psychoanalytic constructs.<sup>5</sup> What people hear, see, feel, or experience is contingent to a significant degree on these psychological states and processes.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, the idea of a regime of vision must also be re-interpreted to take account of models of the mind informed by psychoanalysis.

---

<sup>5</sup> And, of course, by computational models.

<sup>6</sup> Perceptual studies confirm this. For example, seeing images of violence before testing responses to apparently neutral images dramatically increased the violent content seen in the apparently

Attacks by Crary and other theorists on Cartesian perspectivalism would seem to present the issue of scopic regimes in an overly definitive and almost paranoid way. For them, perspectivalism lines up objects on a grid that acts as a device for placing, defining, and objectifying them, indicating the presence and intention of metaphysical justifications of totalized control by an alienated subject “detached from any active relation with an exterior” (see Crary, quoted above). This is not merely a rhetorical exaggeration, but seems to express the idea that since the regime, like any other cultural phenomenon, is a social construction, it is to be held accountable in some way for its undesirable effects. The problems with perspectivalism are made more reprehensible because it is claimed to naturalize the point of view of transcendental subjectivity characteristic of universalist humanism. The tendency is to suggest that substitution of an “embodied” or “enfleshed” vision is corrective. With this new emphasis, metaphysics, interiority, and transcendence are all conveniently removed. The view of what the body is, in this preferred regime of vision, is really the crux of the matter.

Psychoanalysis claims embodiment requires a concept of interiority. The problem with Crary’s critique is that it seems to aim for an embodied vision just as psychoanalysis would, but denies the interiority necessary for an embodiment that is not merely another object mixed up in a matrix of interactive sensory machines. While our public body *images* are for the most part culturally and socially constructed, psychoanalysis distinguishes itself from a sociology of the body. The drives and the unconscious are not in themselves constructed by the social environment; on the contrary, they are

---

neutral test image. This kind of process takes place normally although unconsciously (projection) and requires interiority.

responsible for much of it. To hold any other view of the drives and the unconscious is to dispense with psychoanalysis, a strategy typical of historicist critiques of psychoanalysis.

If Crary reaches the wrong conclusions about interiority, Joan Copjec (2002) complicates the argument put forth not only by him, but by numerous other authors, that Renaissance perspectivalism was the basis for an alienating subjectivity. Copjec claims that Lacan and psychoanalysis have been misread on the issue of perspective and its relation to the gaze, especially by film theorists. According to Copjec, film theory sets out to deconstruct the abstract idealized observer, aligned eventually with modernism, but also aligned with ideological masculinism. The problem with occupying the subject position of such an abstract ideal observer is the ease with which he can then reify his own philosophical or political structures of reality (and power). Such a subject may then claim these structures to be backed by the very order of reality. This order of reality (metaphorized by perspectivalism) is really Order with a capital "O," connected as it originally was, as we saw, with God. In fact, even if God is left out of the picture, so to speak, a humanist view of this regime fares no better; the humanist position is itself flawed, because the perspectival scheme naturalizes such a position and inflects it with authority.

According to Christian Metz,

quattrocento painting or of the cinema itself [which] insists on the role of monocular perspective (hence of the *camera*) and the "vanishing point" that inscribes an empty placement for the spectator-subject, an all-powerful position which is that of God himself, or more broadly of some ultimate signified. And it is true that he identified himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at and whose stationing (=framing) determines the vanishing point. (1982, p. 49)

For Metz, the fact of the spectator's being placed in that all-powerful position is also the reason for critique, since the camera is always an instrument of ideology, and the spectator tends, in identifying with the camera, to merge his own "powerful" viewing position with the implicit ideology of the camera (the film institution, and so on) so as to naturalize the point of view being presented. In more banal terms, this is the "reality effect" of cinema, which is heightened by the effect of what Metz calls the cinema's scopopic regime. This regime depends on the absence of the object seen, along with the especially rich effects cinema also provides (sounds, spectacles, close-ups, long shots) of those objects that are not present.

Interestingly, Metz also notes that the conditions of the signifier and the spectator are such as to give cinema the dynamic of the primal scene, and hence the significations come to act as fetish. The idea of the primal scene and fetish immediately reference the body and introduce a sexualized dimension to the signifier – meaning, in other words, that in cinema at least, the perspectival regime is *not* as disincarnate as it might at first appear.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> There are other important tensions in the concept of the perspectival regime. Alternative spaces are created both by Uccello and Leonardo – more homogenous and spherical than linearly perspectival. Michael Kubovy (1986) claims that Renaissance canvases can be viewed from positions other than the "imagined apex of the visual pyramid" (see Chapter 4, pp. 53-64) and that the rules of perspective are mere concomitants or exigencies of perception, not of a kind of metaphysical significance accorded them. Furthermore, if each spectator has a privileged viewpoint, then the so-called transcendental world-view is dispersed and it disappears. Jerry Salz (2005) writes, "In fact, nearly every great artist, even Canaletto, played with the rules of space to fit their own needs. Leonardo cooked up some of the weirdest space ever in the *Last Supper* (everyone in the painting is a different scale). Raphael used multiple horizon lines. Dürer, Tintoretto, El Greco and Rembrandt used two or more spaces at once. In the Sistine ceiling Michelangelo shifted spatial principles at will and even painted reverse perspective ... Art historians have discerned as many as seven viewpoints and five horizon lines in Veronese's *Marriage at Cana* (1562-3)" (p.30).

## Chapter 6

Copjec goes further, arguing that the “ideal observer” is not even implied by perspectivalism, and that Lacan sees an *embodied* observer in perspectivalism. The error of attributing the ideal abstract observer to perspectivalism resulted from mistaking the geometry of perspectivalism to be Euclidean, rather than projective. The difference is crucial. In Euclidean geometry parallel lines never meet, but the perspectival scheme of representing them to meet at the vanishing point is a *projective* geometry of representation, in which the observer is implicated. The observer is, in effect, *in* the perspectively derived picture, as a demand of her presence in it to render nature (where parallel lines do not meet – at least in our planetary space) into a form that makes sense to the embodied “eye-bearing” human. This would seem to “naturalize” it exactly along the lines film theory claims it does, with the result that the ideology brought to the screen is accepted as truth by the viewer. Copjec, however, is making a different argument, that although the observer is in the scheme and is, of course, subject to influence, this is already an *embodied* viewer.

How does Copjec define an embodied viewer? In chapter 2 (p. 92) I included a long quotation from Copjec, which is relevant here. The embodied subject is one in whom consciousness and the primordial or earliest “body” ego is formed by the drive and for whom the primary content of that consciousness is the body. Thus the subject is never at the mercy of ideology to the degree claimed by the Foucauldians. After all, is not the central claim of “Civilization and its Discontents” that civilization is a thin veneer, a pallium, riding uncomfortably on the deeper layers of the drive? This is not to deny the effects of socialization, but to emphasize that Freudian psychology theorizes that two levels of process are always at work to mediate experience. One level involves the ego,

and its scanning operations, integrating perceptions into secondary process operations, that is, into gestalts that are here conceptualized as regimes of vision. This operation involves conscious and pre-conscious levels, and may trigger the operation of unconscious defences, whenever threatening drive gratifications are present. The scopic regime, as a description of the general condition of visual space is, in psychoanalytic terms, a manifest level of representation.

At a more latent level, the drives are continuously operative. The narcissistic drive, clearly evident in the art we have so far considered, could be said to underpin the scopic regime in the sense of being the component of desire in this visuality. This changes the notion of the scopic regime from a description that classifies it as only the effect of ideology, to one that is psychoanalytically informed. The scopic regime emerges from the operation of the drives. In the perspectival regime, the drives of sexuality and aggression are not much in evidence and therefore at the manifest level, the regime's effects *appear* to be disembodied and narcissism is strongly manifested in the creation of an ideal space given the attributes of God himself. Underneath, however, the perspectival regime is as embodied by the drive as is the baroque, to which we now turn.

### *Baroque regimes*

In many ways, today's (postmodern) "regime" is baroque (see Buci-Glucksmann 1994), given not only the interest in Baroque art per se,<sup>8</sup> but also the interest in rehabilitating or appropriating baroque texture, depth, and sensibility into contemporary work. Baroque vision is closer to the tradition of the sublime and thus linked to desire rather than

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, the exhibitions *Going for Baroque* (The Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, 1995–96) and *Baroque Re-Visions* (Vienna, October 1996)

## Chapter 6

rationalized representation. “Indeed desire, in its erotic as well as its metaphysical forms, courses through the Baroque scopic regime. The body returns to dethrone the disinterested gaze of the disincarnated Cartesian spectator” (Jay 1988, p. 18). This assessment would certainly apply to the most Baroque painter, Caravaggio, as reflected, for example, in his painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601).<sup>9</sup> (fig. 12) If the current visual orientation is more willing to engage with the body and with objects in the sense that there is less distinction between subjects and objects, an “entanglement” (to use Mieke Bal’s word), or an “enfleshed vision” (to use Merleau-Ponty’s idea), does so because of a change of regime from Cartesian to Baroque.

Mieke Bal thinks of the Baroque (the historical Baroque) as a period in which more than changes of style took place.

During the Baroque, the awareness of point of view led, for the first time in Western history, to something we now call self-reflection, a self-consciousness of the human individual. This in turn led to irony in the modern sense, an irony that does not type-cast the incommensurable other, as in caricature of types, but includes the self in the critical representation of another who is thereby commensurable. This represents a crucial transformation in the relation between the Western subject and the world around her. The primary characteristic of a baroque point of view is that the subject becomes vulnerable to the impact of the object. (1999, p. 28)

If the narcissism underpinning the Cartesian regime was expressed in terms of the ideal, God-like, representational space, it then “finds” a new manifestation in the Baroque – self-reflexivity. For example, Piero della Francesca’s *The Flagellation* (1469)<sup>10</sup> is a superb example of the first kind of idealized space (fig. 13), whereas *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* is not only a narrative of the doubt of Saint Thomas, it allegorizes the

---

<sup>9</sup> See Bal (1999) for a discussion of the way in which certain discursive readings of art work in a reverse sense of historical causation to bring those works into being.

<sup>10</sup> Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

## Chapter 6

Baroque scopic regime itself. In this Caravaggio painting, and his work in general, the scenario is a close study of illuminated detail, carnal presence, and intertwined forms. It is not the space in which the scene is set that arrests us, as it is in Renaissance perspectival tableau, it is our act of seeing these revelations that we become aware of. This pleasure of the eye is not exactly the Freudian scopic drive, where it serves sexuality *per se*, but rather the visual satisfaction of a drive – the drive of narcissism – here bringing objects close, cathecting them, and binding them into a self-system of secret reflexive ownership.

The baroque visuality reflects, then, a turn from the representation of the object world “out there” by means of a rationalized optical grid, to a visuality that is informed by a self-aware corporeality. This vision brings the eye back to its location within the folds of the body, to a robust curiosity that the distancing Cartesian observer could never capture. The presence of desire in visuality is always problematic, however, and Jacqueline Rose (1988) notes that in effect there is no workable psychoanalytically informed theory of vision. If we can take the idea of the contemporary baroque as an umbrella term for the collectivity of all the alternatives to Cartesian perspectivalism, Rose notes that even there, there is no robust model in which sex and aggression reflect what we know about the enfolded postmodern subject. The “optical unconscious” of Rosalind Krauss, the “schizophrenic” model of Jameson, and the “paranoid” visual subject of Bryson are all depleted of full dimensions of sexuality and aggression because of a process of “innocenting” (Rose’s term) of both the psychic and the sexual that occurs when the psychic is evoked as part of the visual model.



It would seem that what Rose is calling “innocenting” is conventionally called “repression.” It is the presence of the drive which renders the perceiving subject as bodily, but this aspect *seems* to disappear in the perspectival regime and even in the “contemporary baroque.” Why would this be true? Why would no visual model manifest full dimensions of sexuality and aggression?

The hypothesis that narcissism is a strong drive in the visual art of modernity provides some answers. As it has been developed here, the drive of narcissism to some extent governs and controls the other drives (see chapter 3). Thus only the idealizable aspects of those drives tend to be manifestly expressed, along with the direct or sublimated drive of narcissism itself. For that reason, it must seek absolutely to avoid the representation, the theory of representation, or the scopic regime that presents the full spectrum of sexuality and aggression, because were it to do so, the possibility of idealization would have to be given up. A good example is the representation of beauty – sexual and erotic components when present in the beautiful image are stripped of problematic aspects such as aggression, pain, limitation, and contingency. A scopic regime thus will never be representative of all the drives in a fully “enfleshed” way; it will always “innocent” or repress important aspects of sexuality and aggression.<sup>11</sup>

If we return to Mieke Bal’s theme of self-reflexivity within the Baroque, we can see the reason for the difficulty with many of the ideas concerning the scopic regimes.

When self-reflection focuses on the making of representation itself, point of view seems to bite its own tail: it becomes a point of view on ‘a point of view.’ As moments of heightened self-reflexivity in the late twentieth century have

---

<sup>11</sup> The closest we have come to a full simultaneous expression of all the drives occurs in some body and performance art where there are strongly eroticized, aggressive and narcissistic components in desublimated actions. This phase in art has been somewhat short-lived, however, and there is now a strong return to formalist ideas in many quarters, painting and “relational” art, to which I shall turn in the concluding chapter.

## Chapter 6

suggested, however, such a predominant, perhaps even exclusive focus on the making of art can easily become a narcissistic self-enclosure, a self-aggrandizing, myopic gaze” (Bal 1999, p.28).

The argument of this project is that not only can art become narcissistic, it *is* narcissistic at a core level of motivation. Scopic regimes are explanatory devices operating at a manifest (as opposed to latent) level, not to be dismissed, but not to be mistaken for latent (unconscious) forces also at work. Scopic regimes are, in this view, one of the ways to describe the possibilities open to narcissism, given the constant erosion of the ideal in any regime that is “in power” at any given time.

What we have then, is a “disembodied” perspectival regime (disembodied yet embodied in the sense of being constituted “from below” by the bodily narcissistic drive), which produces a type of ideal representational space, and the more obviously “enfleshed” vision of the baroque scopic regime. These two principal scopic regimes or visualities are each driven by narcissism, and each can be noted to have, if not a one-to-one correspondence to modernism and contemporary art as discussed earlier, at least some strong relations by virtue of the dialectic of narcissism that binds them together. Perspectivalism as a regime that represses corporeality (notwithstanding Copjec’s observations) in order to create an idealizable ordered space has obvious connections with the idealized space of modernism. Both are gridded spaces, controlled by aesthetic objectives that inhere in the grid itself. Insight into this aspect of the grid is provided by Rosalind Krauss (1986).

The grid summarizes all [these] texts: the gridded overlays on cartoons, for example used for the mechanical transfer from drawing to fresco, or the perspective lattice meant to contain the perceptual transfer from three dimensions to two; or the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships, like proportion; or the millions of acts of enframing by

which the picture was reaffirmed as a regular quadrilateral. All these are the texts which the “original” ground plane of a Mondrian, for example, repeats – and, by repeating, represents. (p. 1063)<sup>12</sup>

Krauss argues that the grid, a metaphor for picture surface, is claimed by each avant-garde artist as the device by which his/her originality is demonstrated. Modernist artists, in particular, attempt to discover that form of the grid which guarantees purity. “All those terms – singularity, authenticity, uniqueness, originality, original – depend on the originary moment of which this surface is both the empirical and the semiological instance” (ibid., p. 1063). Rather than signifying originality, however, the grid signifies an endless repetition. For Krauss, Sherrie Levine’s “theft” of the idea of the original<sup>13</sup> puts an end to the pretence of originality – grid and all. Krauss’s connection of the “perspectival” grid and the modernist grid is of obvious utility for my argument. More than that, however, she links the grid, which is really also a way of depicting the regime of vision we have narrowly called perspectivalism, to the terms (singularity, authenticity, uniqueness, and originality) that once again invoke our description of narcissism.

If the scopic regime of perspectivalism is linked to modernism, both by means of the “grid” and by means of the narcissistic underpinnings, are the baroque scopic regime and contemporary body and performance art similarly linked? The baroque regime as just presented has exactly the elements of corporeal self-reflexivity that we observed in the previous discussion of the narcissism of contemporary art (chapter 5). There, we saw the

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Harrison and Wood (1993) See Krauss 1986, pp. 151–70 for the original.

<sup>13</sup> This refers to Levine’s appropriation of established artists’ works by exhibiting copies of them as her own. For example, she cast a urinal like that famously exhibited by Duchamp. This work, *Fountain* (1991), is cast in bronze, however (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis). Similarly, she photographed Edward Weston’s photograph of his son Neil, signed it and exhibited it as her own. This work could be thought of as original as Weston’s, since his photograph is already a copy (of reality). One could ask, are both works originals, or both copies?

## Chapter 6

aphanisis of modernism, driven by the exhausted ideal of the grid, provoke the return of narcissism in the bold, en fleshed self proclamations of contemporary art.

### *The dialectic of regimes*

The move of the dialectical dynamic from modernism to contemporary art is now seen to occur also in the broader form of change from perspectival to baroque visualities. At the manifest level, the perspectival regime and modernism's grids distance and idealize the space, allowing narcissism to be expressed in an apparently non-corporeal way. The second type of narcissism which I have identified in body art and other "post" modernist practices clearly does not rely on the distancing feature of visibility in quite the same way, since it has been characterized as an eroticized (but nonetheless narcissistic) cathexis of many objects (practices). These erotic cathexes are not, it is to be remembered, particularly favourable to or celebrative of sexuality in viable object love. The closeness is more apparent than real, and the supposed intersubjectivity is more rhetoric than actually relational. I will make a few comments about the current "relational art" in the conclusion.

### The acoustic and the visual

Thus there are two levels to the scopic regime. The underlying level is the narcissistic drive, that is, a more or less unvarying component of vision itself, and the manifest level, which involves the expression in a sublimated or secondary process form of that drive, as well as manifest evidence of the other drive in the varying iconography and iconology of different cultures and different visual practice styles. The question may be asked, why

## Chapter 6

does the narcissistic drive seem to have a particularly strong expression in the visual modality? The Narcissus myth cast in visual terms reveals a fundamental insight into an essential feature of sensory modalities. Echo, the representative of the acoustic modality, is full of desire and relationality. Sound is the modality where there is a true “entangling” of subject and object. Every modern person has had the experience of listening to good quality sound from earphones that create the astounding sensation of the musicians or instruments being in one’s own head. McLuhan commented, “Acoustic space is all touch and interplay, all resonance and sympathy. Acoustic space is like the relationship of mother and child, which is audible-tactile, sound and touch” (1996, p. 51). There is no equivalent in the visual modality, which instead, forces distance and position in space to be established in a manner distinct from stereo/acoustic modalities (at least in humans). The resulting sense of objects in space is an essential feature of vision and not a mere convention. It may, of course, be a convention to use perspective or to not use it, or any other possible kind of organization in the production of representations of visual experiences. Such conventions, which contribute to regimes, are layered on top of the visual narcissistic drive.

This drive works at a more essentialist level within vision, and draws out vision’s inherent distancing tendency that objectifies experience into the subject/object distinction, a requirement for narcissism to have meaning.

### Scopic regimes and their cultures

This chapter began with the topic “Culture and its scopic regimes,” which focused on the general disposition of various writers to regard scopic regimes as an effect of culture and

## Chapter 6

to theorize them through cultural analyses. Here I draw attention to a methodology that presents a *reversed* emphasis, namely, that the scopic regime creates the culture. This is the project of Peter de Bolla (2003), who argues that the particular regimes of looking in eighteenth-century Britain created a culture of visuality, a culture that has in many ways persisted, especially in one of its important functions of helping to create modern subjectivity. The first step of the argument is the recognition that by the eighteenth century, “the neutral Cartesian subject of empiricism began to be challenged by more complex articulations of subjectivity that were no longer able to separate absolutely and without remainder the observer from the observed.” (ibid., p. 75). In other words, optics goes only so far. The nature of visuality began to be worked out in the social and cultural manifestations of the viewers, producers, critics, and even architects of public exhibitions spaces. The immense popularity of paintings as aesthetic objects during this era generated two accounts of seeing – two regimes. The first one, the regime of the picture, constructed on the “demand” of the *picture* to be seen through what the viewer already knew, and the second, a regime of the *eye*. This second regime involves a phenomenology of seeing and induces a process of identification (an affective process) in the viewer. (The “eye” is not to be confused with what Rosalind Krauss critiques as “retinal.”) De Bolla connects this notion with Hogarth’s idea about a kind of looking that occurs from “within the object, as if the eye were placed inside the object looking out toward the viewer” (ibid., p. 25). The amalgamation of aspects of both of these is combined to produce a third regime that de Bolla calls the *sentimental look*.

De Bolla derives evidence for this look from a study of exhibition practices such as those undertaken at Vauxhall Gardens, where in a large estate with formal gardens,

## Chapter 6

works of art were exhibited and sold in the gardens or in the many temples, pavilions, and halls. De Bolla's main argument is that the flood of people into venues such as this constituted an entire culture of visuality. More than that, the visibility of the persons participating in that situation figured strongly in the creation of their actual subjectivity. These venues created a "socioscopic" environment in which

The *here* of vision, how perception feels to the subject, creates one of the most intense sensations of being a subject: vision takes place inside me; it is I who see. The *there* of visuality, however, seeing as others see, seeing ourselves as others see us, gives us the impression of being a social subject, of being in the plane of representation, being represented: it is the world that is available to be seen, and I am over there, a part of that world. Being blind to either the here of vision or the there of visuality necessarily results in some form of dysfunctional subjectivity, just as excessive indulgence in either may result in narcissism or voyeurism. (emphasis mine) (ibid., p. 86)

De Bolla argues for a retrieval of the sentimental look, as a balanced subjectivity for a contemporary model. What the sentimental look, which he opposes to other "scopic techniques" such as the "gaze" or the "glance," might be in contemporary terms is hard to imagine. What is of interest here is the image of a culture in that brief period in eighteenth-century Britain, which was so obsessed with the visual as to constitute its identity in that visuality. We could be said to be similarly obsessed with the visual, with technologies of image making, manipulation, transmission, and reproduction. Our own visuality is strongly reflexive, however, composed of images of ourselves engaged in our imagery of ourselves engaged in imagery ... in a *mise en abîme*. Our identity is now bound up in watching images of how in 1969 we watched on television the first man on the moon, the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, or images of how we watched the images of the destruction in 2001 of the twin World Trade Center towers, and equally

how we watched ourselves gathered in New York's Central Park in 2005 to be part of the spectacle of Christo's latest project, for those of us who were there became part of the art work itself.

De Bolla suggests that in modernity we find one of the foundations of our identity in the visual itself. While he wants that foundation to participate equally in the "thereness," or relationality as in the "hereness" or self-referentiality, he recognizes the tendency to swing to extremes of narcissism or voyeurism. My argument is that there is no way art can be made to balance relationality with "self-indulgence" – that belongs to normative enterprises such as therapy. The narcissistic core of art may participate in the social or the relational, but the idealizing impulse will subvert the relational or social sooner rather than later.

#### The aura and its relation to the regime

The aura is discussed at this point because it has a very precise connection to the idea of the regime of vision. If the regime is a collection of consciously recognizable rules for organizing space and the visuality pertaining to it, the aura is an effect that resists the regime, since it depends for its effect more on the uniqueness of the work and the sense of the uncanny it evokes. One can have a very strong sense of the auratic power of a minimalist work by Sol Lewitt and then be fascinated by a work, very different in manifest motivation, subject, technique, and social context, for example, by William Burroughs.<sup>14</sup> The aura cuts across all styles and genres. In the introduction (pp. 10-11) I

---

<sup>14</sup> Burroughs is, of course, better known for his writing, such as the underground classic *Naked Lunch*. His visual work, in contrast, is somewhat banal, consisting of repetitive forest green foliar patterns transferred to the canvas by stencils. Nonetheless, the work carries a strong aura, related undoubtedly to Burroughs's cultic fame.



suggested that the aura can be considered as a manifestation of the narcissistic drive. I will briefly review the origin of its importance in art historical and theoretical discourse.

The “aura” is one of the most frequently used concepts in art theory, proposed by Benjamin in 1936. It is worth stating the fundamental aspects of the concept.<sup>15</sup>

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence ... and ... the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition ... Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of ritual – first the magical then the religious kind ... In other words the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.

Benjamin goes on to say that art “sensed” the approaching crisis of reproducibility and reacted with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*. But along with art for art’s sake came technological developments that Benjamin equates with progressive future possibilities for art that is emancipated from auratic notions of authenticity.

The ritualistic cultic function relied on authenticity through maintenance of “distance.” Non-auratic art is accessible to the masses; this art breaks the boundaries of high and low, breaks down hierarchies. “Instead of being used to point to transcendence, to ‘unapproachability’ and its connotations of unbreachable boundaries, the new art is

---

<sup>15</sup> A less well-known of the aura by Benjamin states: “What, indeed is the aura? A strange spectre of space and time: the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, one follows a mountain range on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow over the onlooker until the moment or the hour participates in its appearance – that means to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch” (“A Short History of Photography,” 1931, p. 378.)

## Chapter 6

'based on another practice – politics" (Kuppers 2001, p. 37) One of the principle issues in contemporary art theory and history is the examination of art's social relevance.

Modernism, with vestiges of the aura and art for art's sake, was demonized in its avoidance of social relevance, and Benjamin's essay were cited as a founding documents for the needed revision of art in new social and political roles.

The aura has persisted, however. In the introduction I drew attention to the intensification of the demand for the aura as it was humorously described by Warhol. Foster also draws attention to the recrudescence of it in the work of Jeff Koons. One would expect it to be absent, if Benjamin were correct, in the work of pop art. Koons's double-decker vacuum cleaners encased in Plexiglas now occupies a central position in the new MoMA (*New Shelton Wet/Dry Double Decker*, 1981), with as strong an auratic presence as any cultic object in the collection.

Petra Kuppers (2001) also suggests that the aura is sought after, and that there is no evidence to suggest its disappearance. She refers to Peggy Phelan as retrieving the aura in "vanishing" performance art – "the unmarked, nonincorporable aspect of performance art still enthral the spectator by virtue of what Lacan would call the spectator's desire to see the other looking back and recognizing the self" (ibid.. p. 38).

Phelan notes that "the disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who always longs to be remembered" (1993 p. 147). Kuppers's argument is that the "masses" continue to look for something – "again and again [they]... incorporate works of art" (2001, p. 40). She suggests that through the idea of the Lacanian desire to be seen, the modern spectator who encounters the work of art may not find the aura there, but the aura is really a

description of the state of the spectator. It represents the “inability to fill the void in the subject in search of recognition” (ibid., p. 40).

I want to read this as an expression of desire, not only the desire to incorporate, as Benjamin puts it, but an incorporation that aims at completion rather than accumulation. There is no need to gaze transfixed at the work of art and be awed by the weight of its tradition. Now, since loss and inability to fill are the driving forces of the spectator, the masses “absorb” art (see his discussion of architecture). The auratic encounter can be distracted, fleeting, fast. Its function – to grasp desperately at the “unapproachable,” the fulfillment – is the same as it ever was. The tradition is alive: the Lacanian subject with the blind spot, or, to put it differently, the Hegelian unhappy consciousness aware of its inability to be for itself, has survived the decline of the aura as it adhered to the “authenticity” of the product. It has moved on: the aura is now in the specific encounter between the person and the mass reproduced product. But closeness is never truly possible: as Benjamin writes again and again about closeness, the examples he provides speak of desire rather than consummation. (ibid., p. 41)

If we look back to the original description of the aura, we see that Benjamin linked it to uniqueness, distance, and to the core values of magic, ritual, and religion. Furthermore, he saw that its guarantor becomes art for art’s sake. These connections confirm the idea, already presented, that the aura is another aspect of the narcissistic drive. Benjamin would not have guessed its ability to re-emerge with the commercial mass-produced object, because he understood the power of the aura to be connected with traditional production. However, traditional production with its distance and uniqueness are only some of the conditions of idealizability that give rise to the aura. But uniqueness can be created non-traditionally by the narcissistic drive, which is plastic enough to transfer to cultic figures whose interventions are powerful enough to generate an aura around their work, experiences, or objects they manipulate.

## Chapter 6

### Narcissism, scopic regimes, and the aura as *l'objet petit a*

Tradition, ritual, and magic giving rise to the aura in the original sense disappear with the advent of mechanization and mass production. The idealizing impulse of narcissism, inherent in those original effects of the aura, does not disappear, however; it re-invents it. The regime, as a theoretical construct, functions as a secondary process container for the restless drive, a drive that taps into the most primal and powerful components of psychic life. The aura is the halo of this idealization surrounding the unattainable object. In fact, it is not an object at all, it is *l'objet petit a*. *L'Objet petit a* (Lacan, 1978) can be said to be the object cause of desire, that is, however, not an object of desire. As such, it is the gap in the constitution of subjectivity that represents the desire of the Other, the difference between the gaze and the look, or that aspect of the experiential world which cannot be assimilated because it is in the Real. Narcissism, operatively, is the claim to appropriate or control *l'objet petit a*. As such, visually speaking, it basks in the gaze and it celebrates the fantasy that triumphs over dependence and need.

\*\*\*

In this chapter I have been focusing on aspects of visuality that index narcissism through the scopic regime and the aura, which thus also assert the anti-relationality of visual art. In the last chapter I shall discuss Relational art and its claim to promote relationality and a new paradigm of art and its connection to the everyday world.

## CHAPTER 7 - NARCISSISM AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

The legacy of the critical historians of art

The art historian Michael Podro (1982) suggests that the “critical historians of art” (Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Riegl, Panofsky, and others) can be classified into two groups: one which concerns itself with the autonomy and irreducibility of art, that is, a formalist group, and another which is interested in its context. The first group is more or less aligned with Kantian aesthetics, which holds art to be thought-like, contemplative, and concerned with autonomy, while the second is associated with Schiller (1795). Schiller attacked the Kantian dualism of reason versus perception (feeling), and Podro argues that Schiller “disengag[ed] the self from identification with either” (1982, p.13). This allowed art to be seen as part of social life, almost a “symptom” of the social, and highly context bound.

The idea of a social aspect of art has been made more precise by Richard Wollheim (2001), who distinguished among three separate types of connections between art and society: the causal, the expressive, and the parallel. The causal type of art history postulates that the art of a society appears as it does because of deeper underlying causal factors within the organization of that society. Marxist art history belongs to this category since it reduces the phenomenon of art to economic causes, and/or critiques capitalist art on the basis of capitalist economics. Expressive approaches are less reductive and suggest that the work of art may reflect or express some important social theme or value. David’s “Napoleonic” paintings express political points of view, but in this model, they

are not necessarily products of that political regime. The third kind of connection is based on parallels between form and content of some works of art and the forms and the principal preoccupations of the culture.

The first description seems the least compatible with the argument being developed here, since in that paradigm, the artwork is an epiphenomenon of economic factors. In the current discussion, although art can express social conditions, themes, and values, it is seen to have a relation to the social that is not fully captured in Wollheim's terms. Wollheim views art as an artifact distinct from the social process, and therefore can be studied by asking questions about why it was produced by the social order. Instead of thinking of the work of art in that way, I am here proposing it to be an expression of the three drives of sexuality, aggression, and narcissism, and their derivatives and sublimations. When sublimation occurs, *the drive necessarily expresses itself socially*. In that sense it is not produced *by* the social order – it is always already *in* the social order.

What is intended here is a breakdown and re-synthesis of the Kantian/Schillerian dichotomy. The aesthetic impulse is drive-like because it is bound to the narcissistic drive, and in that sense begins as an autonomous individual set of fantasies. However, it is expressed into or elaborated into the social realm – as a sublimation or directly as a drive expression. Because it is elaborated into the social realm, it takes on properties of reality, as any drive must do to a greater or lesser extent. The sociological observer takes these reality properties to be the full extent of the phenomenon. The psychoanalytic observer, however, tries to sense or interpret the meaning of the core, or what Anton Ehrenzweig (1970) has called the “hidden order” of art. This does not mean that the

layers around the core are any less important, but because they exist always in relation to the powerful central and frequently impenetrable forces of the drives, their derivatives, their sublimations, and the defences against them (like the orbitals around a nucleus), their full meaning must always be seen in relation to that core. They also have meaning apart from that relation, however, which is precisely why there are so many varieties to experience. In the visual art realm, these layers, agendas, or manifest levels may be seen to have a range of functions: decorative, political, pragmatic, playful, and religious, and like any other human activity they have a range of normal, defensive, neurotic, or psychotic features when considered from a normative point of view.

The relation between the drives and such agendas may be complex, with one layer of motivations employing another at unconscious levels. A political agenda might use the inherent idealization of the aesthetic realm to bolster its cause. For example, one aesthetic presentation of issues in the anti-nuclear debate of the 1980s consisted of a floor display of thousands of cone-shaped objects representing nuclear missiles. The impact was achieved by the sheer number of objects in the gallery setting, where they borrowed aesthetic appeal from similarity to minimalist/serialist practice. Accompanying the work was a photodocumentary publication titled *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* (Del Tredici 1987). One might argue that the energy spent on this project would have been more effective in the actual political arena, rather than in the idealized context of the “white cube.” The political project, however, benefited from the borrowed idealization of the aesthetic realm.

One objection to this line of reasoning would be that the assumption that the so-called actual political arena is different from, or should be different from, the aesthetic

one, is itself an ideological position. In other words, the two traditions noted in the opening paragraph have reinserted themselves into the discussion. The tension between the formalist and the social views of art is very persistent, and the remainder of this concluding chapter will explore some aspects of that tension.

As I have argued, pre-1960s *modernist* art was in general considered non-relational, and the narcissistic drive underpinning it was characterized as a narcissism of absence. We have seen that much of the art after 1960 seemed to undergo a qualitative change in favour of intersubjectivity, relatedness, involvement with life, sexuality, and the organic – a “baroque” sensibility and a strong anti-formalism. Nonetheless, this social involvement was also cast as narcissistic, keeping in mind the apparently contradictory aspect of “narcissistic relations.” What has not been discussed in the spectrum of post-1960s art, however, is the relatively recent orientation termed “relational art,” which is manifestly socio-political in its aims.

Relational art: Corrupted Marxism or a new paradigm for art?

This orientation is associated with Nicolas Bourriaud,<sup>1</sup> the author of several books on relational art (2002, 2004). A number of curators in Europe, such as Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barbara van der Linden, and Bourriaud, view relational art as if it were located in a laboratory setting; the art is a work-in-progress, is in perpetual flux, and can be shaped in an interactive open relation to the audience, the audience being envisaged as a community. Works are often functional or semi-functional. Bourriaud identifies artists

---

<sup>1</sup> Bourriaud was one of the co-directors of the Palais de Tokyo, a EUR 4.75 million renovation of the Japanese Pavilion from the 1937 Paris Exposition. The “laboratory” open-ended style of contemporary work at the Palais is paradigmatic of the relational orientation.



## Chapter 7

such as Maurizio Cattelan, Rikrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, Liam Gillick, and Pierre Josef as relational artists.

A somewhat corrupted Marxism serves as a theoretical underpinning for relational art, at least in Bourriaud's presentation of it. Marxists critique capitalist production because of the dissociation of exchange value from use value. The argument is, in its simplest form, that in a political economy, the producers (workers, the proletariat) of goods become alienated from their work since it is appropriated by the capitalist/owner, whose profit from selling the product causes further alienation between the classes, since that profit benefits only the owner class. The owner/capitalist has no incentive to improve the workers' conditions nor any real connection to the use value of objects, but responds only to the market. Market forces, later to be metaphorized by Keynes as the "invisible hand of capitalism," direct the distribution and production of goods in ways that further alienate classes from one another, producers from consumers, nature (and natural resources) from civilization (actual needs), and so on. Bourriaud refers to Marxist theory in the following way:

The difference between artists who produce works based on an object already produced and those who operate *ex nihilo* is one that Karl Marx observes: there is a difference, he says, between natural tools of production (e.g. working the earth) and tools of production created by civilization. In the first case, Marx argues, individuals are subordinate to nature. In the second, they are dealing with a "product of labour" that is capital, a mixture of accumulated labour and the tools of products. These are held together by exchange, an interhuman transaction embodied by a third term, money. The art of the 20th century developed according to a similar schema. (2002, p. 11)

Bourriaud cites Duchamp's well-known ready-made bottle rack sculpture<sup>2</sup> as an example of how art may bring capitalist accumulated labour and process value into the sphere of art, by recycling the object. He suggests that Duchamp found kinship with the merchant, and that the consumer thus becomes producer. In this context, Bourriaud also notes Marx's example that a dress really becomes a dress only once it is worn. While these attitudes may be compatible with Marxist ideas, they miss the central critique almost entirely, and Bourriaud ends up seeming to endorse capitalist production, as long as the definition of production is widened. An artist whose work Bourriaud feels is significant is Sarasi Kusolwong.

*With Everything NT \$ 20 (chaos minimal)*, 2000, Sarasi Kusolwong heaped thousands of brightly coloured objects onto rectangular shelves with monochromatic surfaces. The objects – T-shirts, plastic gadgets, baskets, toys, cooking utensils, and so on – were produced ... in Thailand. The colourful piles gradually diminished as visitors of the exhibition carried away the objects for a small sum; the money was placed in large transparent smoked-glass urns ... What Kusolwong's arrangement clearly depicted was the world transaction ... commercial exchange. (2001, p.26)

Bourriaud criticizes American pop artists such as Warhol, Oldenberg, and Rosenquist for exploiting capitalist iconographic material, whereas he claims that the European (and in Kusolwong's case, Indonesian) relational New Realists are more interested in the "collective" use of forms (ibid., pp.11–24). Bourriaud's preferred visual presentational model is the souk, flea-market, or recycling depot. Other artists that interest him are those who appropriate existing works, mix and match art works with cultural objects and signs, much as a DJ mixes or a musician "samples." For example, in 1996 Rirkrit

---

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack/Egouttoir (or Porte-bouteilles)*, 1914/64. Readymade: bottle rack made of galvanized iron, 59 x 37 cm. Original lost.

Tiravanija incorporated works by Olivier Mosset, Allan McCollum, and Ken Lum. Jorge Pardo has displayed pieces by Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen, and Isamu Noguchi in his installations. Bourriaud refers to the tendency to “remix” work as “postproduction.” “[These] artists who insert their work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work” (2002, *n p.* 56).

Another main thrust of Bourriaud’s ideas involves making art more accessible by, for example, opening the museum or gallery during hours when people are more likely to be free from work or other duties. The presence of artists at exhibitions and interchange between the artist and his/her audience is also promoted and considered integral to relational aesthetics. A general stance of anti-commercialism and anti-capitalism is also characteristic of these ideas, as is the promotion of the everyday as opposed to the idealized aesthetic object.

This orientation is allied with a cluster of ideas which privilege reception, diminish the role of the genius/author/creator, and involve the search for a subject suitable for the (utopian) vision of a society unmediated by the corrupting reifications of rationalist individualism. Claire Bishop, in a recent review article on relational aesthetics, sums up the collectivist orientation of Bourriaud:

Bourriaud argues that the art of the 1990s takes as its theoretical horizon, “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” (R.A. p. 14).<sup>3</sup> In other words, Relational art works seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated collectively (R.A. p. 18) rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption. The implication is that this work inverts the goals of Greenbergian modernism. Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous

---

<sup>3</sup> R.A. refers to Bourriaud’s (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*.

work of art that transcends its context, Relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. (2004, p. 54)

According to Bishop, one such relational artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija, has become “one of the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit, and his work has been crucial to both the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory, and to the curatorial desire for ‘open ended,’ ‘laboratory exhibitions’” (ibid., p. 58). In one of Tiravanija’s exhibitions, the contents of a gallery’s administrative office were moved into the exhibition space<sup>4</sup> (this included the director who then worked in the public space). The artist also set up a working kitchen in another part of the gallery space, and cooked a vegetable curry or pad thai for gallery visitors (fig. 14). The utensils, waste food, or other objects became part of the art work. In another situation, he reconstructed a simulacrum of his New York apartment within the gallery space and lived there, interacting with the museum-goers, who had full access to this space twenty-four hours a day. A recent retrospective of Tiravanija’s work at the Museum Van Beuningen in Rotterdam<sup>5</sup> consisted of three empty rooms and an accompanying audio guide scripted by Bruce Sterling, Philippe Parreno, and Tiravanija himself. The visitor listened to descriptions of his works to date, including the ones cited above. The merit of this work is said to lie in its promotion of relationality, dialogue, and interconnectedness, and openness to ideas and thoughts rather than in connections to objects.

Bourriaud considers relational artists to be seriously engaged in politically significant art. Bishop interprets in the following way:

The interactivity of relational art is [therefore] superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a social form capable of producing

---

<sup>4</sup> Exhibition at the Project Room, New York, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Koelnischer Kunstverein, 1996.

positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect. (2004, p. 62)

Bishop points out that Bourriaud's defence of relational aesthetics is indebted to Louis Althusser's 1969 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," where the idea is presented that culture, as an ideological apparatus, does not merely reflect society but produces it. Thus a critique of institutions is not adequately achieved by merely avoiding their framing procedures, but those who produce images must interrogate the ideological bias they invest into their images. In other words, the image itself must be treated as a social relationship. Bourriaud, however, literally assumes that a naive and staged enactment of harmonious relations, openness, and an anti-hierarchical stance constitutes a viable and significant political act. Bishop and others such as Rosalind Krauss are critical of this movement, because the sought-after relationality is literalized in such a way as to make its success tautological. Indeed, it is tautological, because the actions that end up being the subject of these works are either self-reflexive – hence achieve no critique whatsoever – or they are social and in-the-world at such a basic level as to further side-step critique.<sup>6</sup>

There are additional problems with the way in which relational art is claimed to offer political commentary and emancipation. Clearly, as soon as one claims to emancipate, the question becomes, emancipate whom from what and by what "emancipatory" ideology? Furthermore, as Bishop points out:

---

<sup>6</sup> Bishop sees the work of Santiago Sierra in its disruptive potential as relational in a way that tests its aims against stated assumptions. Thomas Hirschorn also engages the viewer relationally without literalizing the relation in such a way as to make it tautological.

It is [Umberto] Eco's contention that every work of art is potentially "open," since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music, and literature to have foregrounded this fact. Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those that require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception. (2004, p. 61)

Bishop also notes that

Tiravanija's work has occasioned some of the most idealized and euphoric art criticism of recent times: his work is heralded as not just an emancipatory site, free of constraints, but also as a critique of commodification and a celebration of cultural identity – to the point where these imperatives ultimately collapse, in the institutional embrace of Tiravanija's persona as commodity.<sup>7</sup> (ibid., p. 57)

This idealization identifies much relational art as instantiating the kinds of narcissism that have been noted thus far. Relational aesthetics brings to the forefront the utopian aspect of socialist motivations, which derives from a weakened residual Marxism. As such, relational aesthetics demonstrates the operation of the narcissistic drive, which in its dialectical action finds a new variation – a new position within the constantly changing manifest surface of visual art practice and exhibition method. All the elements of narcissism are present; the star-system idealization, the personal exploitation of high visibility, and the pretence of important social change through the quasi-ritualistic enactments of elitist-designated minutiae.

Relational artists have taken the gestures of artists such as Marcel Duchamp as models in their recycling and appropriationist methods. This appears to be in the service of democratizing and levelling the field of art values, since many of Duchamp's works directly challenge the ordinary dynamics of capitalist commodification of the art object.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Kraynak 1998, pp. 26–40).

Again, there is a consistency with Marxist thinking here, since such levelling procedures would seem to eradicate class differences and the elite aesthetic sensibility. Marcel Duchamp invented 'rendez-vous art' by "arbitrarily ordaining that, at a certain time of the day, the first object within his reach would be transformed into a readymade" (Bourriaud 2002, p. 29). In that vein, Robert Barry "announced that at a certain moment during the morning of 5th of March 1969, half a cubic meter of helium was released into the atmosphere" (ibid., p. 29). On Kawara proclaimed as art the gesture of sending letters to people telling them he was still alive. Bourriaud considers these gestures significant because the artwork is brought into existence by the witnessing activity of the public, and in differing ways follows Duchamp's lead in establishing the consumer as producer.

In my view, Bourriaud fails to take account of how the varieties of narcissism involved in relational art actually reinforce, rather than critique, authorship, individualism, and the capitalist subject. Much of the significance of Duchamp's original action depended on his cult status, on the willingness of the art community to endorse the gesture as brilliant, subversive, and ultimately the basis for further nominalist acts. Each of these aspects is highly invested with narcissism, as is the original gesture of having simply designated, or as Bourriaud says, *ordained* (indexing a theological idealization) that the first object within his reach would be a readymade – that is, a Readymade Art Object. The term "readymade" is itself revealing. If the relational artist wanted to re-connect us with the use value, to undo the effect of exchange and capitalist added value, then the readymade ought to be called alreadyused. The underlying fantasy,

however, seems to be that the object is there, as if *ready and waiting* for the Duchampian ex cathedra promotion to the status of art object.

The relational artist might claim to have gone further than Duchamp, by freeing us from the object itself, since the experience of the gesture or performance is all there is. Interestingly, as Bishop points out, this brings us full circle back to the intention of the artist, a necessary component for the gesture or performance to have any form or meaning at all. Yet it was precisely the intentionality of the individual artist that was supposed to be eliminated in favour of the idea that “meanings are elaborated collectively.” An examination of what the collectivity actually brings to the process is revealing. For example, another relational art situation is described as follows:

When you walk into the gallery, there is a display that allows you to pick what pages you want from the catalogue and then you can bind them together yourself. This approach immediately puts the viewer in the position of creator, acknowledging Beuys’ message and setting the context for the show.” (ibid., p. 30)

At some level there is an idealization of the apparent democratization offered here. This formulation is made to seem significant by linkage to Beuys, but surely this gesture is so trivial as to mock and denigrate the participant, as if a mere exercise of preference, a trivial one at that, is perhaps all the viewer is capable of.

The artist Devora Neumark offers the following description of one of her works, which I presume belongs to the relational motive.<sup>8</sup>

*One Stitch at a Time* honours intimate spaces of speaking and listening, seeing and being seen within the home, as a recognition of community engagement and the larger social construct. As an artistic intervention, it is an invitation to participate in making art and in the process of exploring patterns of being and communication. Guided by the wishes of my hosts, I am fabricating with the process of crochet a specialized item that suits their home or lifestyle. It is in the selection and dedication to any

---

<sup>8</sup> The descriptions of her work are taken from her website: [devoraneumark.com/](http://devoraneumark.com/)



particular article and the investment of care, time and energy that we mark it as significant. Through that labour and the time of exchange with the hosts, something is also marked within me. An investment into self and other, into creating pathways to communication and an exploration of the personal domain as a social imperative.

The project also relates to my grandmother who passed away recently. She was this figure of gentleness in my life who sat crocheting one blanket after another, tissue-paper holders, everything. She was the one person who could listen without passing judgement. So when I literally take residence in the people's homes, I hope I am that image of the grandmother, inhabiting a space of gentleness.

Another work is called *The Art of Conversation* (2000). This was a durational street intervention held at the corners of Ontario Street and Frontenac Avenue in Montréal within the group project sponsored by the Ville de Montréal titled *D'un millénaire à l'autre: Neuf interventions artistiques dans des espaces extérieurs à Montréal*.

*The Art of Conversation* was based on the intimate art of conversation. Living room furniture was temporarily installed outdoors every Tuesday between 12:00 and 16:00 over a period of ten weeks during the Summer of 2000. Participants in the conversations were those who came across the work accidentally, those who were directed toward it through word-of-mouth and publicity, and invited visitors. This participatory process is a key component as the work was not meant primarily as a viewing experience. In the deliberate blurring of roles – invoking a question of who is the audience and who are the performers – is a statement about the capacity for each and every one of us to be history makers and authorizing agents of individual and collective memory (ies). The domesticated setting was not simply a stage or theatrical device, it served as the place/space where direct embodied interaction and communication became possible. Conversations touched on a number of central issues including trust and what happens when it is broken, childhood memories and the way in which they play their part in adult life, decision making and the notion of choice.

After setting up my living room furniture on the street, I would engage with passersby in conversations about home, belonging, family, the continuum between private and public, domestic abuse and political terror, exile, comfort, and anything else that was suggested, or came up. Often people would bring objects from their own homes to “decorate” the living (room) space. One woman who would frequent regularly, brought a

painting she had done and hung it on a nearby tree for the duration of one sitting.

My father joined the sitting one Tuesday and was visibly upset and uncomfortable throughout his visit. When I asked him a few days later what was it that disturbed him he told me of how sitting on the couch in the middle of the street had triggered a memory that he had long ago forgotten. When he was a little boy growing up in Russia, he was the one in his family to be responsible for closing the curtains every Friday night before his mother would bench licht (light the Sabbath candles). As it was forbidden to openly practice any form of Jewish ritual, the consequences of being caught were known to be quite severe.

Sitting in the living room space created nearby the Metro Frontenac, he recalled how one Friday night he had forgotten to attend to closing the curtains. The lit candles were seen by a neighbour who promptly informed the local authorities. My father, along with his parents and siblings, were then evicted from their home and were not allowed to return for quite some time. All of what they had was locked into the house leaving them no access to any of their belongings. This is what was making him so uncomfortable while he was sitting in the “art of conversation” setting.

The impact of this re-remembering and the consequences of his telling have been resonant and reverberant for us all. He has long carried his sense of fear, guilt and anger around this incident without being aware of how it has influenced and affected our own home as I was growing up and still affected the home he shares with my mother. With this telling something was able to shift.

It is the nature of creativity to offer (sometimes unexpected), moments of healing and connection. The art of conversation as a durational performative intervention was a site for many such connections and discoveries.

Of course, no one would argue that creativity might offer moments of healing and connection. Here, interestingly, the story of how the father had unwittingly triggered an eviction, a situation of real and painful deprivation, is made more poignant by the staged self-eviction into the street in Montreal. What the artist seems to be unaware of, or in any case does not specifically address, is a basic psychological understanding of the event.

Did the sight of furnishings in the street trigger the father's memory? If so, had the artist unconsciously identified with the idea of eviction? Was there any sense of irony in her self-imposed eviction – or, indeed, in her failure to recognize it as a scene of eviction – which clearly was the meaning for her father. While the setting provoked the recollection of a repressed memory, the reason it did so had little or nothing to do with the fact that *it was devised as art by an artist*. Contexts that are conducive to such moments might occur almost anywhere and in almost any circumstance. There would seem to be no defining criteria to distinguish why such acts should be designated as art, forcing one once again to ask the clichéd question, “what is art?” Here it is nominal, although guaranteed also by the sponsorship of the city of Montreal. Like Tiravanija's actions, the work exists in a microtopia, occurring in a situation of consensual and pre-arranged criteria of what constitutes communication, and involves an intense idealization of the artist's role as a mediator of the public confessional gesture now definitive for contemporary life.

Another relational artist, Ben Kinmont,<sup>9</sup> contracts to photograph himself washing his dishes and matching this photo with one of the “receiver” washing his/her dishes. The works are paired as a diptych, all aspects of the overall exchange are documented, and an archive of the entire exchange is created.

Archivizing the trivia of life is an idealization, in which the mundane is aligned with procedures of high art. More important than a collapsing of high and low is the pretension of the high, but in a manner than seems to disavow it. The result is that the

---

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.adaweb.walker.org/context/artists/kinmont/bkO.html> A similar project was called “I'll wash your dirty dishes.” Munich 1994. Description of the project: Volunteers wearing jumpsuits with the lettering “...” arrive at your door and wash your dishes. The details of all the transactions, communications are “archivized.”

idealizing impulse is recouped more strongly even than so-called high art. After all, even “high” art is generally archived only after some modicum of success or importance is achieved and the work’s status as art has at least been institutionally guaranteed, which suggests to those practitioners of the “high” the need for archiving and documentation.

#### Socialist concerns of relational art: residual Marxist idealization

The idealizations inherent in the narcissism of relational art are related to idealizable components in Marxism, frequently mediated by residual agendas of the Frankfurt School. Marxism as an “ethical” philosophy must be distinguished from other widely supported versions of Marxism, such as Bolshevik-Leninist communism, and those socialist-democratic movements that began in Europe in the late 1800s, some decades after Marx’s earliest writings.<sup>10</sup> The Frankfurt School arose in the context of European socialist<sup>11</sup> ferment. While the predominant view in the nineteenth century supported the concept of individual liberty and opportunity, socialist movements<sup>12</sup> advanced opposing views in favour of collective well-being.

My purpose here is not to sketch in any detailed way how socialist thought came to play a part in art history and theory, but rather to suggest how the basic Kantian/Schillerian tension, when injected with the Marxist intellectual tradition, helps us understand recent relational trends. The years between the two world wars marked a

---

<sup>10</sup> Although Marx’s earliest manuscripts date back to 1844, they were first published in 1932. Marx and Engels published *Historische-kritische Gesamtausgabe* in 1927, and Lenin also published his ideas that same year.

<sup>11</sup> The term “socialist” first appears in the writings of the industrial reformer Robert Owen in the 1820s.

<sup>12</sup> Included among socialist and social-utopian thought are the Saint-Simonians, Charles Fourier (1845), and of course, Karl Marx. In 1848, Marx, by that time having been expelled from France and then living in England, wrote *The Communist Manifesto* and participated in the organization of the Communist League.

variety of connections and disconnections between the agendas of modernism, realism, and the avant-garde. This period also focused and intensified the ideological conflicts of fascism, communism, and what could be loosely called liberal capitalism. There are complex interconnections between these two triads.

In Russia, artistic and literary institutions came under state control following the revolution of 1917. Both abstraction and realism were explored, but developed in the context of an ambivalent relation to the central power apparatus. Malevich, having roots in cubism, primitivism, and futurism, in 1916 announced a new movement he called Suprematism. (see Andersen 1969). This art form was abstract, with the square becoming Malevich's signature motif. Malevich claimed it as a new realism – “a painted surface is a real living form” – but it was nonetheless non-objective and therefore seen from the point of view of traditional aesthetics as abstract. Malevich came under criticism, however, since within Russia, abstraction came to be seen as the paradigm art form of capitalism. Social Realism became the preferred orientation, officially sanctioned by Stalin himself. In Europe and America, the Russian avant-garde assumed the role of a primary model form of revolutionary art. Some Marxist painters and critics were supportive of abstraction in its socialist associations and connotations, but at the same time critical of its bourgeois capitalist connections. Other Marxist or communist parties were at first directly supportive of Stalinist propaganda and its implication for art, which became aligned against both abstraction and surrealism. Abstraction could thus be aligned with modernist autonomous capitalism or with its ideological opposite. A large red colour field painted by Barnett Newman in New York could index capitalist art, while a black square painted by Malevich in Russia could index the ideological contrary.

Surrealism became identified with elitism, since the theory of the unconscious that was central to surrealism brought out an individualist aspect that was antithetical to the socialist aims of communism. On the other hand, surrealism, as a principal avant-garde movement, inveighed against the established order of the capitalist work ethic, and attempted to combine Freudian and Marxist ideas. In Mexico, muralist art as championed by the Marxists Diego Rivera and David Siqueros, was an art said to be truly of and for the people. This art introduced yet another tension into the picture, since Rivera and other Mexican socialist painters were sympathetic to the banished Trotsky. In other words, there is no way of matching any art form of that period strictly with any ideology, or put otherwise, there is no way of registering the triad of modernism, realism, and the avant-garde in a consistent way upon that of fascism, communism/socialism, and liberal capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

The Frankfurt School, founded in 1923, became in effect the ideological home of intellectual Marxism in Europe. Here, with the emergence of "Critical Theory,"<sup>14</sup> there was a move away from "vulgar Marxism,"<sup>15</sup> inasmuch as Critical Theory was devoted to re-examining the relation of Marxism to the major intellectual traditions, for example, its Hegelian roots, its connections with existentialism, and its relations to rationalism. Members also researched the implications of Marxism on visual and literary aesthetic

---

<sup>13</sup> A similar difficulty is encountered with Futurism. Founded by F. T. Marinetti in 1909, this movement was devoted to the speed and violence potential of the machine, as a trope of destruction of tradition in language and image production and use. Futurism was enormously influential in cubism, Russian avant-garde art, and graphic design in the West. Yet Marinetti and other futurists supported Mussolini's fascism, at least until 1920.

<sup>14</sup> Critical theory as such begins with Horkheimer's becoming the director of the Institute.

<sup>15</sup> "Vulgar Marxism" is sometimes used to designate the most reductionist uses of Marxism.

## Chapter 7

theory, music, anti-Semitism, as well as widely ranging topics of contemporary culture and sociology. In that function, the Frankfurt School and other groups of intellectuals interested in socialist thought became distanced from emerging Stalinist totalitarianism. Members of the school were dispersed during the war and the school was disbanded in the 1930s, to be re-established in New York after the Second World War.

The Frankfurt School and its New York reincarnation (The New School for Social Research) became important sources for Marxist ideas that have survived in North American academic art history and theory. The emigration of members of the Frankfurt School to New York and California is not the only reason for its influence in America; it is also because of their greater openness to modernist culture, even if only to critique it. That critique did not see culture or art as autonomous transcendent realms. Moreover, the spontaneous creativity of the individual subject, although a necessary element in art, was always subsumed under the historical and social conditions of his/her subjectivity. Martin Jay has commented on the specifically Marxist aspect of the Frankfurt School's views on art:

What distinguished the Frankfurt School's sociology of art from its more orthodox Marxist progenitors, however, was its refusal to reduce cultural phenomena to an ideological reflex of class interests. In Adorno's words, "the task of criticism must not be so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather decipher the general sociological tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves" (1973, p. 178)

Jay also suggests that where the Institute diverged most strongly from the Leninist and Lukácsian tradition was in the idea that art acted as a preserve "of that human yearning for that 'other' society beyond the present one. 'Art,' wrote Horkheimer, 'since it

became autonomous, has preserved the utopia that evaporated from religion” ... “the utopia of art transcends individual works” (ibid., p. 179). Jay observes:

...until social contradictions were reconciled in reality, the utopian harmony of art must always contain an element of protest. “Art” Adorno wrote, “and so-called classical art no less than its more archaic expressions, always was, and is, a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and otherwise, no less than it reflects their objective substance.”(1973, p. 179).

Thus there was a strong utopian theme, and even when there was a motive of protest, it served utopian goals. This utopian aspect was also brought out strongly by Herbert Marcuse (1955, 1969), who hoped to undermine the Promethean/Oedipal model (upon which capitalist mass consumer society is based) by the vision of a social order of pleasure based on the radical perverse dynamics of a kind of Orphean/Narcissistic retrieval of primal existence. These utopian currents within the imported Marxism of the Frankfurt School are of particular interest in the context of the current project.

One wonders whether these utopian themes link up with repressed idealizations implicit in repudiated Hegelianism and/or Enlightenment optimism regarding the social contract. The American situation has provided a compromise solution in which liberal Marxists who had escaped from both totalitarian fascist and totalitarian communist regimes were offered a Marxism that demanded virtually no committed adherence to organized ideology, but provided a basis for a critique of capitalist modernity. The New Left, from which this critique took place, influenced strongly by Marcuse, could simultaneously find utopian dimensions within the Frankfurt School’s Marxism, while living within the idealizing climate of visual aesthetics that I have already outlined as spanning the greater part of modernity. Jay states, “From its very beginning, independence was understood as a necessary prerequisite for the task of theoretical



innovation and unrestrained social research” (1973, p. 5). Independence and autonomy are, of course, among the most valued aspects of the capitalist utopian vision. That this has taken place within the context of a capitalist society is perhaps an historical irony, but perhaps not as great as the fact that the Frankfurt School itself was made possible almost entirely by the very substantial funding provided by the capitalist Herman Weil, whose son Felix Weil supported numerous radical ventures in Germany in the early 1920s.

What I have intended to convey in this brief summary of the Marxism of the Frankfurt School and its derivatives,<sup>16</sup> is the sense that idealized socialist values as they pertain to the aesthetic realm exist in a state of tension with “capitalist” values such as autonomy. If Marxist aesthetics ultimately found most fertile ground in Europe and America, it is by virtue of the freedom to do so. Similarly, if relational art sets out to promote the notions of human exchange, or even to recapture a non-exploitative notion of use and use-value, it seems to do so entirely within the parameters that also favour the continuation of the institutions that they are critiquing. That is to say, relational art, whereas its goals are social, seems to be unable to avoid tapping into the dynamics of idealization that characterized modernist art, namely, the cult of the artist, the need for an autonomous art institution with which to promote the agenda, and the assumption of

---

<sup>16</sup> Marxist and socialist critique has survived in the academy, often clustered around socialist critics and writers such as T. J. Clark, the group at the prestigious journal *October*, many members of the Whitney program, and in Britain, around publications such as the *New Left Review*. Various interest groups and movements (identity politics, feminism, environmental activism) have effected a loose association with Marxist ideas for a variety of reasons, usually having to do with opposition to so-called pan-capitalism and commodification. At the same time, the art market and art institutions in general have enjoyed an expansion of unprecedented magnitude in the past four or five decades, diluting and/or corrupting the effect of those critical voices.

## Chapter 7

criteria that enable an elite group of initiates to distinguish what is and what is not “legitimate” practice.

### Dialectic of the boundary

The idea of the continued maintenance of an “inside” and an “outside” group of artists, practices, criteria, or canon is precisely what relational art seeks to eradicate. This issue will now be explored briefly from the point of view of the dialectic of the boundary, a concept already raised in the introduction.

Here we come up against what I want to call the dialectic of the boundary. Borders such as those between art and non-art, or fiction and reality, do not disappear as easily as theorists of the post-modern suppose. They exist, instead constantly under the sign of their own disappearance. (Burger, 1991 p. 5)

This quotation was referred to in the introduction to signal the problem of idealization. Burger had raised the issue of the dialectic of the boundary with respect to Andy Warhol and Pop art, and this issue was then contextualized within the dynamics of the continuing search for the idealizable object/experience. The problem of the boundary becomes extreme in relational art. The more there is a merging of art with life, the more hidden the demarcation seems to become, since “life” will, by its relative vastness, overwhelm art totally. Residual connections with the art institution function as the markers of this hidden demarcation.

These residual connections have unconscious components active in the “dialectic of the boundary” which contribute to the functioning of relational art. Consider that in more traditional realms of art, throngs of people continue to crowd daily into the Louvre, almost desperate for a glance at the *Mona Lisa*, or the *Venus de Milo*, as if willing to

## Chapter 7

admit their total inability to comprehend what they have seen. Their enjoyment is more or less contingent on an experience of being transformed in the face of the transcendent, or put in more crude terms, they *wish* for the experience of being dumbfounded. For this experience, the boundary between art and non-art is very strongly drawn. Could it be the case that the continued over-idealization of many canonical works of art is absolutely essential for the supposed erasure of the boundary in the “relational” realm? Since billions of people eat food several times each day, “eating food prepared by Tiravanija” becomes either absorbed into the billions of meals because it is a trivial instance among those billions, or it is claiming a distinction. The distinction is not that eating or preparing food is an aesthetic activity, although, of course, it can be and frequently is highly aestheticized. Rather, the distinction lies in the action of dissolving the boundary that exists for the “other” realm of mainstream traditional art, upon which the protest depends for its meaning. The act of dissolving, as Burger points out, draws attention to the boundary, thereby re-establishing it.

### Parasitic idealization

I postulate an unconscious bridge between the strong protest on the one hand and the submission to the ideal on the other. This bridge is a series of idealizations and denigrations, unconsciously linking the practices of high art and those of relational art. One could easily imagine the enthusiastic lover of Italian Renaissance painting utterly denigrating Tiravanija’s concept of art, posing the weight and prestige of centuries of scholarship, the history of the attendance of millions of admirers, the aura, and perhaps a true personal appreciation of the complexities involved in his/her own response to the

paintings, against the de-skilled and de-sublimated gestures of much of relational art.

The relational artists and their apologists equally might denigrate the canon, seeing it as a collection of objects that indexes colonialist, classist, and sexist values. The relational artist, by bringing the everyday into the gallery, claims to bring art to the level of the everyday, but unconsciously, of course, brings the everyday up to the level of art, and is parasitic on the idealizations of the institution. Interestingly, food is never allowed into the traditional gallery exhibition space. These pairs of practices of idealizations and denigrations link these orientations at an unconscious level and supply additional evidence for narcissism.

The purpose of the discussion here is not to side with one way or the other, but rather to attempt to understand the dynamics of narcissism in the issue of aesthetic and artistic demarcation. The total dissolution of boundaries is unlikely, if the argument I am developing here is correct, because the underlying drive, by definition, asserts its mandate by creating new areas of idealization or re-asserting old ones, albeit at times in unconscious ways.

The brief discussion of Marxism at the beginning of this final chapter could serve as an anchoring point for understanding much relational art in terms of a kind of idealized abstract simulation of subversion. Clearly, Bourriaud has expressed the intention of continuing to critique the capitalist use of the object, and the capitalist form of the human relationship. Reproducing the marketplace within the gallery, however, as Kusolwong does, means that the critique itself is lost, unless it becomes clear to the uninitiated observer what is critique and what is object of critique. The problem is made worse by the apparent “subversion” of many aspects of capitalist production, such as the

use of corporation-style advertising, simulation of corporate icons, or outright mass market simulation in order to promote anti-capitalist critique.

Marx thought there was an alienation and exploitation of the producer, whose labour in the production of an object had little relation to the capitalist's action of re-selling the product in the market. He had no way of knowing how many more alienating steps would be introduced in the process – he could hardly have envisioned market researchers, advertising, promotional strategies, niche markets, international co-production, ultra-specialized outsourcing, discounting, giant chains of mass retailing outlets, product simulation (for example, Rolex knock-offs), robotics, recycling, built-in obsolescence, manufacturer liability, consumer advocacy, internet sales, sales taxes, luxury taxes, toxic products controls, bootleg media, to name only a few additional potentially alienating steps in the product's journey to the consumer.

Yet these complexities are enjoyed and employed by relational artists in an indiscriminate manner, with no apparent concern for the boundary between critique and use. For example, artists set up make-believe companies, such as Ingold Airlines, Servaas Inc., or Premiata Ditta, travel agencies, or import-export agencies which model professional activity as a device for artistic production.

When Fabrice Hybert exhibited at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris in February 1995, all the industrial products actually or metaphorically contained in his work, as directly dispatched by their manufacturers and earmarked for sale to the public through his company 'UR' (Unlimited Responsibility) he puts the beholder in an awkward position ... Through his import-export activity dealing with seating bound for North Africa, and the transformation of the Musée into a supermarket, Hybert defines art as a social function among others, a permanent "digestion of data," the purpose of which is to rediscover the "initial desires that presided over the manufacture of objects." (Bourriaud 2001, p. 37)

The subversive potential of these actions is more imagined than real, and requires an explanatory intervention, since the action itself is deliberately indistinguishable from the object of its critique. What is active, however, is a naïve idealization of the significance of the critique. Bourriaud also draws attention to the importance of “conviviality”:

“Rirkrit Tiravanija ...has explored the socioprofessional aspect of conviviality, by including in the *Surfaces de reparation* show (Dijon, 1994) a relaxation area intended for artists in the exhibition, equipped in particular with a table football game and a full fridge” (ibid., p. 32).

What is interesting in relational art is the sudden and remarkable departure of irony – that stock in trade of former critique. For example, in Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0* series, the work is predicated on her knowledge that the strategy of telling people they can do what they wish to her with the objects available most certainly involves multiple levels of conflicted awareness. If she knows what will happen, and the audience also knows, the critique plays on the ironic meanings of “research on the body.” One senses that Piero Manzoni “knew what he was up to” when he marketed cans of his own excrement. There has always been a question of whether the cans contain real shit. One can that was opened revealed another similar can inside. Whatever the facts may be, Manzoni had a sense of playful deception. In the current relational work, not only does the de-skilled strategy continue – for example, in Kuselwong’s display and “sale” of objects – but these works are presented with a disarming directness and a seeming utter lack of irony. This identifies the bridge to idealization, as I have already suggested, since one of the hallmarks of narcissism is a more or less total inability to ironize displays of corrective instruction to others, which is here represented by the high

## Chapter 7

moral ground of changing the world. By contrast, many of Cindy Sherman's film stills achieve a critique of representation through a subtle exaggeration, an ambiance of staginess, or ironic quotation that produces a discomfort in the viewer and alerts him/her to the presence of critical elements.

### Narcissism of relational art

There might be a case for claiming that relational art is the most narcissistic form yet encountered in this study. Not only do individual artists use their own lives, persons, and careers as the art object, they also simultaneously disavow the deeper connections to the objects and practices they recycle. The common pathway for the disposition to recycle would seem to be the idealization of a de-skilled appropriation of skills that others have perfected. This suggests a subtle but envious attack on the original producers. There is also a marked idealization and exaggeration of the social impact of these actions in the suggestions of "microtopias," "reparation," "unlimited responsibility," and so on.

Interestingly, Bourriaud does not disavow a wish for some kind of transcendence. "Sacredness is making a comeback, here, there, and everywhere. In a muddled way, we are hoping for the return of the traditional aura; and we don't have enough words to shut down contemporary individualism" (2002, p. 60).

## **CONCLUSION**

**The empirical evidence for narcissism**

The principal concern of this project has been to argue for the consistent and central presence of the drive of narcissism in the art of modernity. The claim is that very disparate motivations, styles, and critical positions have all in one way or another participated in variations on the themes of idealization, perfectionism, and anti-relationality, even when the manifest content and form of the work involve a vigorous de-idealization, a disavowal of the very idea of an aesthetic realm, and an embrace of social and political concerns. In empirical terms, narcissism was shown to be present in visual art in the following ways:

- 1) In the art for art's sake idea as the first significant move away from utility, social concerns, religious function, towards idealized self-reflexive expression.
- 2) In the representation of the Narcissus scenario, and the theme of reflection or reflexiveness as a formal analogue of the theme of narcissism.
- 3) In the use of the artist's self or body as subject/object of the work, that is, in the narcissistic substitution of the artist for traditional subject matter other than in the tradition of the self-portrait.
- 4) In the formalist denigration of the object world and its denigration of the representing function of art (as imitation of reality).
- 5) In exhibitionistic/voyeuristic practices.
- 6) In the self-reflexive aspirations of modernism's search for the pure aesthetic.
- 7) In the self-reflexive use of new media such as video.



## Conclusion

- 8) In art which conveys the unconscious attributes of the uncanny, such as photography and surrealistic art.
- 9) In the very structure of visuality itself.
- 10) In the dynamics of relational art.
- 11) In the exhibition practices involving the “white cube.”
- 12) In the over-valuation of the unique or cultic art object in economic terms.

Narcissism in art was shown to be an effect of the drive of narcissism and its associated fantasies as it permeates subjects and their cultural products.

## Recapitulation of theoretical arguments

This concept of narcissism is framed in terms of a founding fantasy of the subject, bound to the subject's ego in a way that allows it to own and totalize its experiences as if they were truly formed there. This means that narcissism is involved in all those fantasies that express a resistance to the demands of relationality. This does not mean that the subject is ever capable of actually ridding itself of relationality, but that in the fantasy life of an individual, one may act *as if* relations are secondary or even absent. This fantasy is seen as fundamental to the idea of self, and is a necessary basis for the idealizations that are central to narcissism. Clearly, the ideal or idealizability must, by definition, involve the ability to rid oneself of flawed elements, and thus relations with others cannot form the basis for perfection. Relations with others are always flawed in the sense that the negotiations involving ambivalence, difference, and inequality result in compromise and loss. Only the fantasy of an original state of perfection could qualify as a basis for the desired ideal state of

## Conclusion

perfection. Understanding how intense this fantasy is, and how it operates unconsciously, even in the guise of relationality, requires a robustly subjective psychoanalysis. This point cannot be too strongly emphasized, notwithstanding the brief sojourn of psychoanalysts such as Lacan into structuralism, a methodology that is over-emphasized<sup>1</sup> in attempting to understand his thought. I have taken the position that the very ability to fantasize the conditions of narcissism has the effect of contributing to the constitution of the non-structuralist, non-sociological, and indeed, non-post-structuralist subject.

This narcissistic subject of psychoanalysis was claimed to become manifest only when conditions of possibility were developed in Western subjectivist thought and in the socio-political sphere of individualism that blossomed in modernity.

Narcissism, when considered *normatively* from the point of view of one's object relations, may reach psychopathological proportions. In the discussion of narcissism as a drive central to the aesthetics of modern art, however, we attempt to suspend normative considerations in order to understand the drive's actual operation – including areas otherwise judged as perverse, solipsistic, selfish, or grandiose.

Any psychoanalytic approach to cultural phenomena suffers certain methodological stresses, especially if the psychoanalytic method is said to be applied to an area of study. Here, I have attempted not to *apply* it, but simply to let psychoanalytic theory and experience bring about associatively new perspectives. The principal stress involves using clinical terms such as narcissism in non-clinical

---

<sup>1</sup> See Laplanche 1987: "There was a time when Lacan extolled the role of linguistics as a 'guiding science' (this was the heyday of structuralism), but fortunately he later came to realize that a psychoanalytic linguistics would be very different to what linguists understand by the term linguistics" (p. 44).

## Conclusion

contexts. The narcissism of visual art is not a mere anthropomorphism, but it reflects the presence of the drives that pervades all cultural phenomena. There are compelling reasons for having taken Grunberger's idea of narcissism as a drive as a model, and a bonus for having done so is the fact that as a drive, the concept is easier to use in the non-clinical situation. Narcissism as a description of the quality of object relations, the conventional usage, is obviously more difficult to re-visualize as an aspect of aesthetics. The drives, however, pervade not only the object relation, but actions and human cultural products in various degrees of direct expression, and, what is important here, they can be sublimated. Visual art is then conceptualized as the product of the drives, the principle ones being sexuality, aggression, and narcissism, as well as the derivatives and sublimations and de-sublimations of those drives.

The art of modernity explored with respect to the narcissism hypothesis was divided into two groups, modernist and contemporary art, based on descriptive and chronological differences. The 1960s mark the transition from modernism to contemporary practice, with the focus in the latter category being on body and performance art. Modernist art was considered as an apotheosis of the art for art's sake legacy, immediately suggesting the self-reflexivity of narcissistic dynamics. Narcissism in that case was expressed through a progressive de-realization of the aesthetic object, especially in painting, allowing the claim of aesthetic purity to be made. Purity was related to other fantasies involving self-sufficiency, self-creation, and idealization, and identifies the formalism of modernism as related to the general narcissistic strategy of denigration of the object.

## Conclusion

I suggested that the lack of libidinal (and aggressive) objects in favour of pure form in high modernism might have had the effect of creating the anxiety of aphanisis. If so, the rush of erotic, sadistic, and masochistic objects and products following modernism would be an understandable response of what I describe as the dialectic of narcissism. Even without aphanisis, the concept of narcissism is already dialectic, that is, it will operate in one mode to insure idealizability and perfection with an anti-relational claim of self-origin, and then in the opposite mode, will embrace objects with intense apparent relationality. This second mode is *apparently* relational, because the object is mined for its support of the idealizing fantasy rather than for its actual utility. In contemporary body and performance art, this narcissism is full of objects and libidinal energy, but the objects are frequently the artist's own body or self, and/or explorations of the world that end up being self-reflexive or used for narcissistic purposes. Thus, even the relational aspects of that art are subverted by the underlying narcissistic drive, in the service of achieving new forms of idealization.

Finally, the narcissistic phenomena of modernism and contemporary art were seen to emerge as a kind of condition of vision itself. The two principal scopic regimes may be described either as a grid (perspectival or modernist), placed as it were, on the production and reception of visual products, or, as folded within an enfleshed baroque visuality. These regimes reveal, however, that at a deeper level the drive of narcissism is active – as a feature of the visual modality that is fundamentally different from the acoustic or haptic.

## Conclusion

### Picasso, *Guernica* and the role of narcissism in “political” art

A final question to be considered is whether there is another more “serious” relational aspect to visual art, where social issues are engaged in a less idealized way, and where narcissism in the senses so far considered is less important or even absent.

I will very briefly explore this possibility through an examination of an iconic modernist work – Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), undoubtedly one of the best known works by possibly the best known artist of the modern age. It would be foolhardy to attempt a thorough analysis of this painting here, and the question is really whether there is a serious political engagement in the creation and reception of the work and a way in which the visuality of it does not participate in the narcissisms we have noted thus far.

It is well known that at the time he accepted the commission in January 1937 for the Spanish Pavilion in the upcoming Paris Exposition, Picasso had been working on themes that could in a general way be classified as the relation between the artist and the model, and he himself had been described by his friend and agent as the most apolitical man he had known (see Oppler 1988, p. 53; Kahnweiler 1971, p. 108). The consensus of biographers and critics writing about Picasso and *Guernica* seems to be that this painting is a singularity in his career, in terms of his involvement with a specific socio-political issue. A frequently cited interview by Jerome Seckler (an American soldier who had participated in the liberation of Paris) contains disavowals by Picasso of any consistent political intention or strategy in the employment of symbols common in his work, such as the bull, the horse, suffering women and children. “‘Except in *Guernica*,’ I [Seckler] suggested. ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘except in *Guernica*. In that there is a deliberate appeal to people, a deliberate sense of propaganda.’” (Seckler 1945 in Oppler 1988, p.150). In the

## Conclusion

analysis sketched out in what follows, however, this appeal is shown to be, in almost every respect, contingent on the narcissistic dynamics already outlined.

For Picasso, the issues of fascism were relevant, it would seem, mostly because they affected art. Emily Genauer (1937) reporting for the *New York World Telegram* on the occasion of the cocktail party that celebrated the opening of the Spanish Pavilion filed the following report:

The Spanish struggle is the fight of reaction against the people, against freedom, he [Picasso] said, my whole life as an artist has been nothing more than a continuous struggle against reaction and the death of art. How could anyone think for a moment that I could be in agreement with reaction and death, against the people, against freedom? In the panel I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death.

In the whole world, the purest representatives of universal culture join with the Spanish people. In Valencia I investigated the state of pictures saved from the Prado, and the world should know that the Spanish people have saved Spanish art. Many of the best works will shortly come to Paris and the world will see who saves culture and who destroys it.

As to the future of Spanish art, this much I say to my friends in America. The contribution of the people's struggle will be enormous. No one can deny the vitality and the youth which the struggle will bring to Spanish art. Something new and strong which the consciousness of this magnificent epic will sow in the soul of Spanish artists will undoubtedly appear in their works. This contribution of the purest values to art will be one of the greatest conquests of the Spanish people. [sic] (In Oppler, p.225)

The issue, as Picasso seems to see it, is about the conflict between the forces of repression and the "purest values" of art. This struggle is seen as a magnificent epic.

Picasso, if the report is accurate, views the tragedy in terms of a loss of art values.<sup>2</sup> This

---

<sup>2</sup> While Picasso's actual words are not treated in a journalistically acceptable way, the piece at the very least reflects a *perceived* view of Picasso's priorities, which also reinforces the related point that reception reduced the ability of a great artist to express a political view, unaffected by the ambient climate of idealization.

## Conclusion

would seem to be the result of Picasso's idealization of art, which placed art values in a position of primary importance to the victims of Guernica, who surely must have been more concerned with their loss of safety, family, home, security, health, and peace.

If Herschel Chipp (1988) is correct in his description of how the commission for the Spanish Pavilion evolved, the Guernica theme did not appear in Picasso's work until four or five months after he had accepted it. During the early phases of working out ideas for the painting, Chipp shows that Picasso was working on the theme of the artist and model in the studio, in this case the passionate relation he had with Marie-Thérèse. The various *Studio*<sup>3</sup> series dealt with the following themes and issues:

By 1932, Picasso had become increasingly obsessed with the theme of the artist and the model as his relationship with Marie-Thérèse intensified and her face and figure came to dominate all his work. (ibid., p. 59)

The Sculptor's Studio of March and April 1933, a magnificent series of forty-five etchings, is a virtual documentation of their life in his sculpture studio at Boisgeloup just outside Paris. In touching scenes they are depicted side by side, gazing intently at the art they have created together or engaged in amorous play on the studio couches. (ibid., p. 60)

The transformation of these images and the introduction of aggressive material emerged in the next four years:

...when a Minotaur, who at first closely resembles the sculptor, takes over his role ... The brute aspect of the beast gradually surfaces and overcomes the semidivine character of the artist, and in several dramatic encounters the Minotaur at first woos and then attacks and violates the model (figs. 15a, 15b). He pays for this transgression in the arena where he loses his life at the hands of a youthful matador, who resembles the artist himself in the earliest series. The studio theme is therefore much more than a depiction of the artist at work – it is a glorification of his private world where he creates and enjoys his art and pursues amorous adventures with his model. (ibid., p. 60)

---

<sup>3</sup> *Sculptor's Studio*, March and April 1933; *Painter and Model*, 1933; *Studio I–XI*, 1937.

## Conclusion

The mural that eventually became *Guernica* was begun in the form of various sketches as late as twenty-four days before the opening of the Exposition, and constituted a continuation of the studio theme in the series *The Studio VI* to *The Studio XI*. The various motifs and symbols already used in earlier works were re-deployed along with new motifs apparently derived from the ongoing exploration of the studio theme. Chipp notes:

It may be puzzling indeed that in view of the clearly politicized purpose to which the pavilion of the Spanish Republic was dedicated Picasso could have thought of monumentalizing his private life in his featured mural. Yet most of these pencil sketches suggest that at the time his plan was to devote his great mural to the ivory-tower existence of an artist enamoured of his way of life and the charms of his women ... by nature he was unable or unwilling to focus the full power and resources of his art on partisan political issues. (p. 66)

What is suggested in this comment is that Picasso did indeed think of monumentalizing his private life, again in keeping with the ideas we have seen repeatedly in the art examined so far, that in the visual art of modernity, the drive of narcissistic self-exposition is strongly expressed.

Picasso began work on the mural on 1 May, five days after the bombing of the city of Guernica by German and Italian fascist forces.<sup>4</sup> Guernica was a symbolic centre of the Basques, and although there had been significant Basque resistance, here they offered no opposition to the bombardment. The only significant military target in Guernica was the Renteria Bridge, which, despite three and a half hours of sustained bombing of the city, was not hit. Many thousands of citizens were killed or injured. It is likely that Picasso's outrage at this massacre stimulated him to begin the work on the mural, now to be titled *Guernica*.

---

<sup>4</sup> General Franco was aided in the Spanish Civil War by both the Nazis and the Italian fascists.



## Conclusion

The stages of the evolution of *Guernica* were documented by Dora Maar, one of Picasso's mistresses. Picasso did not represent the tragedy with images of the bombing, but with a seemingly allegorical symbolism of aggression and victimization, the bull, the Minotaur, the wounded horse, the dying woman and dead child, intertwined bodies, warriors, spears, references to the bullfight arena, toreadors, wounds, screaming people, falling and fragmented bodies, bull-man, man-bull, and atavistic imagery derived from his own explorations as well as from classical sources. Picasso, however, denied too concrete a reading of the bull as a generalizable symbol for fascism.

The bull, I [Seckler] said, must represent fascism, the lamp, by its powerful glow, the palette and the book all represented culture and freedom – the things we're fighting for – the painting showing the fierce struggle going on between the two. "No," said Picasso, "the bull is not fascism, but it is brutality and darkness." (Seckler 1945 in Oppler 1988, p. 148)

The painting referred to here is in fact not *Guernica*, but *Still Life with Black Bull's Head* (1938). Nonetheless, this question came up repeatedly in Seckler's interview, but Picasso suggested that only in *Guernica* was there a sense of political intention. This may be the resistance that artists often manifest when confronted with readings of their work that would in some way tie it to the here and now, thus reducing its potential for immortal, non-contingent, or non-contextual meanings. This suggests the personal narcissism of the artist, which may well have been a factor with Picasso. In any case, Picasso resisted political readings: "If I paint a hammer and sickle people may think it's a representation of Communism, but for me it's only a hammer and sickle. I just want to reproduce objects for what they are and not what they mean" (ibid., p. 150). I interpret this *denial of the semiotics of imagery* to be precisely what I have suggested is the narcissistic core of

## Conclusion

modernist art. The fantasy here again is an experience mediated only by personal private meanings and characterized by an escape from utility, in this case political utility. This suggests a further dimension to the narcissistic fantasies in visual art, in that the visual experience is in some way resistance to entry into the symbolic order.

The serious student of *Guernica* has a wealth of studies to consult when faced with the project of understanding the form and content of the work, but I will refer only to a specific part of one such study to illustrate a methodology that applies to many of the studies. This methodology reveals that one of the most important ways of interpreting *Guernica* is by understanding Picasso's psychic processes. This is not the same as a biographical study, such as the one by Mary Mathews Gedo (1980) which relates Picasso's iconography to the [romantic] crises in his life. Frank D. Russell (1980) takes the approach of a projective analysis in analyzing the final appearance of the bull in *Guernica*. About the eleven bulls in the studies leading up to *Guernica*, he comments,

In the study dated the first of May the bull is delightful but idiotic from one end to the other, a veritable wretched Ferdinand. On the second of May he gallops placidly across the scene, his face elongated into a prim fastidiousness as though consciously dissociating himself from the untidiness of the foreground. On the eighth of May the bull's power is stood up as a helpless cipher, too witless or phlegmatic to pick up his hooves or lower his horns, while on the ninth the animal is as startled as anyone else at the general wreckage – and intelligently concerned (if undecided, perhaps of his next move). On May eleventh the intelligence is kept up, a classical meditateness in place of the immediate awareness of disaster; this Minotaur in reverse is more contradictory than ever, and epitomizes the two-sidedness of Picasso's bulls, one general character from the neck up, another from the neck down (ordinary human condition that is). On May nineteenth the beast is part livid monster, yet heaves with a just outrage; one comes to find a sensitive consciousness behind these dislocated yet controlled lips and anguished brows – wrong, once again, for a symbol of the murder of *Guernica*. (pp. 59-60)

## Conclusion

The sequence of studies seems to be an attempt on the part of Picasso to achieve an appropriate affective response to the subject matter – the bombing of Guernica. All of these descriptions are projections of one sort or another of human attributes, and come to act as clues for deciphering Picasso himself. Much of the scholarship around Picasso's work functions in the same way, the interpretation involving an attempt to understand the personal symbolic universe of Picasso, the idealized artist/genius, spoken of earlier as the "semidivine" artist (Chipp 1988, p. 60).

What emerges, even in this very brief encounter with studies of *Guernica*, is the following: Picasso was represented as primarily involved in a self-reflexive way with the situation of the artist (himself) in his condition of creation (the studio) and his own affective life. There is a documented reluctance to give up this preoccupation, and when he did so, it would appear that the resulting transformation involved *Guernica* nominally and superficially. The underlying symbology, derived from his ongoing personal struggles, amorous preoccupations, and intense interest in visual aesthetics, became a political statement by virtue of being designated as such by others, and its main political impact derives from his enormous personal fame.

In terms of the general features of formalist modernist work, I have already identified why it shows evidence of the narcissistic drive. Flatness was an effect valued in the attempt to achieve aesthetic purity, since flatness registered "honestly" with the two-dimensional picture plane. Cubism flattens out space since multi-dimensional views and surfaces are presented in the same plane.<sup>5</sup> Each of the surfaces presented is itself flat.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cubism is conventionally divided into two phases: Analytical Cubism lasts until 1912 and is devoted to a studied, almost monochrome, analysis of three-dimensional forms translated onto the picture plane without resorting to illusionistic devices to

## Conclusion

*Guernica*, and generally speaking cubism itself, is an early manifestation of the de-realization that was to intensify later, in which the de-realization and flatness were devices in the service of aesthetic purity, which I claim derives from the narcissistic drive.

These formal devices diminish the impact of *Guernica* in terms of transmitting any emotional response relevant to its political subject matter. Rather, elements which are fragmented, flattened, layered, and angularly rotated emphasize compositional relations within the piece itself. In fact, in various commentaries concerned with the development of the full-sized work through its many states (eight were documented by Dora Maar), the analysis is about the compositional transformations that took place.<sup>6</sup> This is to be expected, of course, but the result is a work that is, in its aesthetic role as a modernist work, unable to carry the intense emotion that, for example, a work titled *Young woman mourning student shot at Kent State University, May 1970* is able to evoke (fig. 16). Ellen Oppler includes this photograph among a number of other examples depicting victims in situations of abuse of power (see Oppler 1988, p. 83). While the rhetorical power of a photograph is here perhaps unfairly compared with that of a painting, I would argue that the impact of *Guernica* is due largely to the impact of the fame of Picasso. Oppler also offers a comparison with Nicolas Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1629) and Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents*

---

create a three-dimensional matrix, whereas Synthetic Cubism enlarges the technical repertoire of surface treatments with collage and increased colour.

<sup>6</sup> For example, this commentary accompanies State IV: "From the point of view of composition, the newly simplified foreground begins to function more integrally with the strong black-and-white patterns of the upper part of the painting. The increasing dark-light contrasts now generate a brilliant illumination on certain faces as if this were a night scene" (Chipp 1988, p.126).

## Conclusion

(1611). These, and the nearly forty other paintings on this theme,<sup>7</sup> evoke a strong emotional response, relatively undiluted by the narcissistic features I have claimed emerge in the modern era. One could undertake a comparative study of these many paintings on the same theme, and note the strengths and weaknesses of their rhetorical achievements. For example, in Poussin's work, a huge, brutal soldier is holding down a baby by stepping on its neck in preparation for killing it with his sword, whereas in Valerio Castello's *Massacre* (1656) a heroic space frames a circle of stylized aggressive gestures of mothers, babies, and soldiers around a central pair of figures – a strongly muscular soldier pulling an infant away from its mother with one hand while the other hand, bearing a sword, is raised to kill. The semiotics of the gesture in the Poussin painting suggest contempt – crushing an insect – while in Castello's painting the gesture is heroic, despite the obvious inequality between victim and aggressor. The impact of these works, while obviously influenced in some ways by ad hominum considerations,<sup>8</sup> nonetheless can be more easily identified as contingent on the properties of the works, taken on their own terms, compared with the impact of Picasso's work, derived as I claim, largely from narcissistic idealizations.

This necessarily brief study of *Guernica* does not, however, illustrate that social concerns can never be central to visual art. They can, but in modernity, the work of art expresses these concerns *through* the narcissistic maintenance of creative individuality

---

<sup>7</sup> Based on the New Testament narrative (Mathew 2:16) of Herod's decree to kill all children under two years of age in Bethlehem.

<sup>8</sup> Considerations related to the status of the painter, his accepted market worth, and so on.

## Conclusion

and communication rather than through effective intervention in the social/relational sphere itself.

Iris Murdoch presents a similar idea:

[Art is] ... far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy and theology and science. The pierced nature of the work of art, its limitless connections with ordinary life, even its defencelessness against its client, are part of its characteristic availability and freedom. The demands of science and philosophy are extremely rigorous. It is just as well that there is a substitute for the spiritual and speculative life: that few get to the top morally or intellectually is no less than the truth. Art is a great international language, it is for all. Of course art has no formal "social role" and artists ought not to feel that they must "serve their society." They will automatically serve it if they attend to truth and try to produce the best art. (1977, p. 86)

This observation is full of its own idealizations, but it reinforces the idea that art is a substitute for the spiritual and points out that art is always relational even when it is not engaged in a formal "social role."

Lukács, the fantasy of transparent relationality, and the centrality of narcissism

We have traced the idea of narcissism in the West from founding myth to its manifestations in the art of modernity. In the pathway that created conditions of possibility for its expression, narcissism was in many ways accepted as a vital part of private and social life, and not unexpectedly, when one thinks of it as a drive involved with the preservation of the ideal. By definition, it is a drive involved with resistance to relationality, and thus to the social, but interestingly, even the profoundly social theory of Marxism has a utopian idealistic impulse within it. We could turn to the writing of Georg Lukács, whose ideas have powerfully influenced much of the utopian aspirations in Europe and America, to trace in one final way the trajectory of the tension between the

## Conclusion

private and the relational in aesthetics. His 1933 essay, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (in Lukács 1971, pp. 83–222) is a dense analysis of the notion of reification – partially presented in the following extracts:

Marx describes the basic phenomenon of reification as follows: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.” (ibid., p.86)

and

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality “made” by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its “laws,” his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while “acting” he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of the events. The field of his activity thus becomes wholly internalized: it consists on the one hand of the awareness of the laws he uses, and on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events. (ibid., p.135)

The reality referred to here is the entire Western Platonic tradition with its antinomies of subject and object, thought and action, freedom and necessity, individual and society, and voluntarism and fatalism. Lukács explains that the problems of this entire tradition, including, most centrally, those of the economic conditions wrought by it, arise from the appearance of the commodity form, which appears only when the supply of production comes to exceed the amount of consumption. This beginning of exchange of commodities “originates not within primitive communities, but where they end, on their borders at the few points where they come in contact with other communities. That is where barter begins, and from here *it strikes back into the interior of the community,*

## Conclusion

*decomposing it*” (emphasis mine; *ibid.*, p. 85). Once the commodity structure takes hold, and the relations between humans based on it become reified, the entire social edifice is determined to move along the path to fragmentation. The fragmentation of the object of production (that is, the object is no longer unified – its qualities as a commodity have nothing to do with its qualities as a use-object) entails the fragmentation of the subject and the social organization as well.

The purpose of this outline is to suggest the possible analysis of the fantasies that lie behind the basic assumptions of Marxism, as a way of concluding and also of bringing us back to the starting point of this study. It would seem that the Marxist vision in its influential Lukacsian form stems from an anxiety about the element of exchange in human relations – “*it [barter, exchange] strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it.*” As long as the pre-capitalist community was able to contain its productions within its own sphere, these anxieties were not apparently the same as when otherness, in the form of encroaching groups, set the social order on the path of alienation and reification.

The fantasy seems to be that there could be a social arrangement in which exchange is not merged into the “way things are,” is not “reified” and thus unmediated, but rather that exchanges could be entirely determined by “use intention.” This would require total transparency of all members of the society both in terms of their needs and their capacities. Such a transparency would be equivalent, to all intents and purposes, of eradicating difference. Persons might have different needs and capacities, but these would be mere quantitative idiosyncrasies rather than substantive qualitative differences. This is a profoundly idealistic fantasy, and perhaps one could say a profoundly



## Conclusion

narcissistic fantasy, since it involves the eradication of difference, and of the need to cope with the drives.

In modernity, the capitalist tradition provided the support for the varieties of narcissism we have seen to be emergent, but a narcissistic project of an even greater intensity is present at the base of capitalism's principal ideological opponent. Had the latter ideology prevailed in the West, it would seem assured that a narcissistically based aesthetic would also have emerged.

Lukács also opens up a space for the continued idealization of art, however, even though "in art we find the same unbridgeable gap between subject and object that we find confronting us everywhere in modern life"; only in art is the relation between man and environment expressed in "an appropriate and unproblematic way" (ibid.). The "inner perfection of the work of art can hide the gaping abyss" (ibid., p. 158) within the bourgeoisie's two reified versions of contemplation: idealization of "great men" or naturalized views of the world.

It would seem that even in the Marxist/Lukacsian project of total disarticulation of the Western capitalist/rationalist tradition, there is a special place for art. The claim has been that this idealization within, for, and about art is ineradicable, since it is strongly determined, as modernity unfolds, by the narcissistic drive.

In conclusion, I want to note several ideas that suggest further work. One of these is the question of a more precise articulation of the relation between narcissism and subjectivism, as well as between narcissism and the intersubjective impulse that has followed the interrogation of subjectivism.

Another study would explore more links between the narcissism thesis and other

## Conclusion

art historical methods; to show how the function of narcissism dovetails with other accounts of creativity. I also question whether the burst of narcissistic manifestations in body and performance art of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s could also be considered as a response to the future, given fantasies and realities of reconfiguration of the body, reproduction, and our basic relation to what we have called the "natural world." Could narcissism be seen as more a response to the anaphasis of increasingly rapid dissolution of traditional societies, and in important ways, increasing sense of loss of the body itself? While the future will undoubtedly look nothing like our cyborgian fantasies, there could also be the exercise of imagining what narcissism might be about in such scenarios.

Finally, I hope I or someone else will be stimulated to clarify difficult issues in what I called the narcissistic underpinning of the regimes of vision. I remain convinced that vision has "attracted" the drive of narcissism and hence the well-rehearsed critiques of visuality for reasons specific to vision and its pleasures.

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1 Dieter Appelt *Der Augenturm* 1977
- Figure 2 Gilbert and George *Singing Sculpture* 1970
- Figure 3 Gilbert and George *Flying Shit* 1994
- Figure 4 Jerome Fortin *Bagatelle 1* 2000
- Figure 5 Mark Rothko *Red on Maroon* 1970
- Figure 6 Barnett Newman *Onement III* 1949
- Figure 7 Gerhard Richter *Betty* 1988
- Figure 8 Robert Gober *Playpen* 1987.
- Figure 9 Mark Lüpertz *Pergola - Dithyrambic* 1970
- Figure 10 Herman Nitsch *80<sup>th</sup> Action* 1984
- Figure 11 Helen Chadwick *Vanity* 1986
- Figure 12 Caravaggio *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*. ca.1601-1602
- Figure 13 Piero della Francesca *The Flagellation* c.1469
- Figure 14 Rirkrit Tiravanija *Untitled (Free)* 1992
- Figure 15a Pablo Picasso *The Minotaur* 1933
- Figure 15b Picasso *The Minotaur* 1933
- Figure 16 Young woman mourning student shot at Kent State University. May 1970.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramovic, Marina. 1998. *Artist Body: Performances, 1969–1998*. Milan: Charta.
- Adams, Laurie Schneider. 1993. *Art and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Adams, Parveen. 2003. *Art: Symptom or Sublimation*. New York: Other Press.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1947. "Theses upon Art and Religion Today." *Kenyon Review* 9 : 155-160
- . 1986. *Aesthetic Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. 1947. *Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Philosophische Fragmente*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Alford, C. Fred. 1988. *Narcissism: Socrates, the Frankfurt School, and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Andersen, Troels, ed. 1969. "Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting." In *Essays on Art by K. S. Malevich, 1915–1933*, pp. 212-214 Vol. 1. Trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin. Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968; New York: G. Wittenborn.
- Andreas-Salomé, Lou. 1962. "The Dual Orientation of Narcissism." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 31:1–30.
- Appelt, Dieter. 1994. *Dieter Appelt*. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.
- Armstrong, Tim. 2003. "Technology." In *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. D. Bradshaw, pp. 158-178 Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Bach, S. 1975. "Narcissism, Continuity and the Uncanny." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 56:77–86.
- Bachofen, Johann Jakob. 1861. *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*. Translated from the German by Ralph Mannheim New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Bal, Mieke. 1999. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Balint, M. 1960. "Primary narcissism and primary love." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 29:6-43.
- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Noonday Press.

- . 1977. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. S. Heath. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Battaglia, Debora, ed. 1995. *The Rhetorics of Self-making*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. 1750. *Aesthetica*. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961
- Baynard, Ed. 2005. "Going for Baroque." *Modern Painters*. April pp. 84-89
- Bell, Clive. 1949. *Art*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Benjamin, Andrew, and Peter Osborne, eds. 1991. *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1936. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*. Ed. H. Arendt. Trans. H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1973.
- . 1931. "A Short History of Photography." in *Classic Essays in Photography* ed. Alan Trachtenberg New Haven: Leete's Island Books 1980
- Berenson, Bernard. 1952. *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Berger, John. 1977. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC; Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bersani, Leo. 1986. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bing, J., Marburg, R., reporters 1962. "Panel: Narcissism." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 10:593-605.
- Bion, Wilfred. 1963. *Elements of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bishop, Claire. 2004. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (Fall): pp. 51-80
- Bordo, Susan, ed. 1999. *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Presses du Réel.
- . 2002. *Postproduction*. New York: Lukacs and Sternberg.
- . 2004. *Playlist*. Paris: Éditions Cercle d'art.

- Bryson, Norman. 1988. "The Gaze in the Expanded Field." In Foster 1988, pp. 87-113
- Buchloh, Benjamin. 1989. "Gerhard Richter's Facture: Between Synecdoche and Spectacle." *Art and Design* 5 (9-10): 40-45.
- Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. 1994. *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*. Trans. Patrick Carmiller. London: Sage Publications.
- Budd, Malcolm. 2002. *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burckhardt, Jacob. 1860. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, an Essay*. Trans. S.G.C. Middlemore. Ed. Irene Gordon. New York: Mentor Books.
- Burge, T. 1986. "Individualism and Psychology." *Philosophical Review* 95:1-2.
- Burger, Peter. 1984. *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1991. "The Aporias of Modern Aestheticss" in Benjamin, 1991 pp. 3-15.
- . 1992. *The Decline of Modernism*. Trans. Nicholas Walker. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Burgin, Victor. 1986. *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*. London: Macmillan.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. James T. Boulton. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, [1968]
- Burke, Sean. 1992. *Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cahoone, Lawrence. 1988. *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Carrier, David. 1991. *Principles of Art History Writing*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Carson, Juli. 2003. "On Critics, Sublimation and the Drive: The Photographic Paradoxes of the Subject." In Adams 2003, pp. 75-100.
- Cavell, Stanley. 1984. *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes*. San Francisco: North Point Press.

- Chadwick, Helen. 1989. *Enfleshings*. New York: Aperture.
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. 1974. "Perversion, Idealization and Sublimation." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 55:349–358.
- . 1985. *Creativity and Perversion*. London: Free Association Books.
- Chilvers, Ian, and Harold Osborne, eds. 1997. *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chipp, Herschel B. 1988. *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clark, T. J. 1995. "Freud's Cézanne." *Representations* 52 (Fall): 94–122. Reprinted in Terry Smith, ed. *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1997]
- Collins, Bradley I. 1997. *Leonardo, Psychoanalysis and Art History: A Critical Study of Psychobiographical Approaches to Leonardo da Vinci*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- A Compendium of Lacanian Terms*. 2001. Ed. Huguette Glowinski, Zita M. Marks, and Sara Murphy. London and New York: Free Association Books.
- Copjec, Joan. 1994. *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . 2002. *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1988. "Modernizing Vision." In Foster 1988. pp.29-44
- . 1990. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Crimp, Douglas. 1981. "The End of Painting." *October* 16 (Spring): 69–86.
- Dalton, Elizabeth. 1979. *Unconscious Structure in 'The Idiot': A Study in Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Danto, Arthur. 1997. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 1963. "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." *Journal of Philosophy* 60:697.
- De Bolla, Peter. 2001. *Art Matters*. London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- . 2003. *Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Del Tredici, Robert. 1987 *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*. Photographs and text by Robert Del Tredici. New York: Perennial Library.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1990. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell.
- Ehrenzweig, Anton. 1970. *The Hidden Order of Art*. London: Paladin.
- Eissler, K.R. 1971. "Death drive, ambivalence, and narcissism." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 26:25-78.
- Empson, William. 1947. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Fayek, A. 1981. "Narcissism and the Death Instinct." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 62:309-322.
- Federn, Paul. 1928. "Narcissism in the Structure of the Ego." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9:401-419.
- Felski, Rita. 1995. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Fichte, Johann Gotlieb. 1988. *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . ed. 1983. *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press.
- . ed. 1988. *Vision and Visuality*. New York: New Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Random House.
- . 1988. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. Trans. Alan Sheridan et al. Ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman. New York: Routledge.
- Fried, Michael. 1965. *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella*. Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum.
- . 1967. "Art and Objecthood" in *Artforum* Summer



- . 1980. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Friedman, J. A. 1988. "The Idea of Narcissism in Freud's Psychoanalysis." *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 15:499–514.
- Fromm, Erich. 1941. *Escape From Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- . 1947. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Rinehart.
- Fry, Roger. 1923. *Vision and Design*. New York and Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library, 1974.
- Freud, Sigmund. S.E. 1953. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey et al. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press
- . 1905. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." S.E. VII. pp.125-231
- . 1911. "Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Function." S.E. XII. pp. 213-218.
- . 1914. "On Narcissism: An Introduction." S.E. XIV. pp. 67-73.
- . 1916. "Lecture XXVI: 'The Libido Theory and Narcissism.'" S.E. XVI. pp. 412-431
- . 1917. "Mourning and Melancholia." S.E. XIV. pp. 237-258
- . 1919. "The 'Uncanny.'" S.E. XVII. pp. 217-256
- . 1920. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." S.E. XVIII. pp. 7-144
- . 1923. "The Ego and the Id" S.E. XIX. pp. 3-68
- Gablik, Suzi. 1976. *Progress in Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- . 1984. *Has Modernism Failed?* New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Gediman, H. K. 1975. "Reflections on Romanticism, Narcissism, and Creativity." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 23:407–423.
- Gedo, Mary Mathews. 1980. *Picasso: Art as Autobiography*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- . 1994. *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giesbrecht, H. V., and J. Vogel. "Search for the Sibling." In *Friendship*, ed. Rita Shulman. New York: International Universities Press (forthcoming).
- Glassman, M. 1988. "Kernberg and Kohut: Competing Psychoanalytic Models of Narcissism." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 36:597–626.
- Golding, J. 2003. "Divide and Conquer." *New York Review of Books*, January 16, pp. 32–35.
- Goldman, Alvin. 1970. *A Theory of Human Action*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Green, André. 1982 *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism*. Trans. Andrew Weller. London: Free Association Books, 2001
- Greenberg, Clement. 1961. "Modernist Painting." In Harrison and Wood 1993 p. 754 – 760.
- . 1965. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1986–93. "The Case for Abstract Art." 1959 in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brien, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenberg, D. 1990. "Instinct, primary narcissism: reform." "Beyond pleasure principle". *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 71:271-284.
- Grünbaum, Adolf. 1993. *Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis*. Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press.
- Grunberger, Béla. 1979. *Narcissism: Psychoanalytic Essays*. Trans. Joyce S. Diamanti. New York: International Universities Press.
- . 1989. *New Essays on Narcissism*. Trans. and ed. David Macey. London: Free Association Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1979. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

- . 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hamilton, Edith, and Huntington Cairns, eds. 1961. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, eds. 1993 *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Hartmann, H. 1955. “Notes on the Theory of Sublimation.” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 10:9–29.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1929. *Selections*. Ed. J. Loewenberg. New York and Chicago: C. Scribner’s Sons.
- Heron, Patrick. 1966 “The Ascendancy of London in the Sixties.” *Studio International* June pp. 280-281.
- Hertz, Neil. 1985. *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Heywood, Ian. 1999. *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hohler, T. P. 1982. *Imagination and Reflection: Intersubjectivity: Fichte’s Grundlage of 1794*. The Hague and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Homburg, Cornelia. 2003 *German Art Now*. London:Merrel
- Hopkins, David. 2000. *After Modern Art 1945– 2000*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hughes, Robert. 1990. *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1952. *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. London: Allen and Unwin; New York: Macmillan.
- Isay, Richard. 1986. “The Development of Sexual Identity in Homosexual Men.” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 41:467–490.
- Iles, Chrissie. 1998. “The Body in Video Installations with Specific Reference to the Three New Video Installations by Marina Abramovic: Cleaning the Mirror I, II, III.” In *Abramovic 1998*, pp. 326-329

- Jahn, Wolf. 1989. *The Art of Gilbert & George, or, An Aesthetic of Existence*. Trans. David Britt. New York and London: Thames and Hudson.
- Jay, Martin. 1973. *The Dialectical Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- . 1988. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." In Foster 1988, pp. 3-27
- . 1993. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jenkins, Iredell. 1968. "Art for Art's Sake." In *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, pp. 108–11. New York: Scribner.
- Jentsch, E. 1906. "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen." In *Psychiatry. Neurology Wschr.* Vol. 8 p. 187 and Vol. 17. pp. 219-220, 226-227.
- Jones, Amelia. 1998. *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jones, Amelia, and Tracy Warr. 2000. *The Artist's Body*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Jones, Ernest. 1927. "Early Development of Female Sexuality." In *Papers on Psychoanalysis*. 5th ed. London: Balliere, Tindall and Cox, 1950.
- Joseph, B.W. 2000. "White on White" *Critical Inquiry* 27, no.1 (Fall): pp. 90 - 122
- Kahnweiler, Daniel-Henry. 1971. *My Galleries and Painters*. Trans. Helen Weaver. New York: Viking Press.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. 1982. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*. Ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1781. *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1966.
- Kanzer, M. 196). Freud's uses of the terms "autoerotism" and "narcissism". *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. b12:529-539.
- Kavaler-Adler, Susan. 1993. *The Compulsion to Create: A Psychoanalytic Study of Women Artists*. New York: Routledge.
- Kernberg, Otto. 1975. *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism.*, New York: Aronson.
- Klein, Melanie. 1952. "The mutual influences in the development of ego and id". *Psychoanalytic Study Child*. 7:51-53.

- Kohut, Heinz. 1971. *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders*. New York: International Universities Press.
- . 1978. *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut, 1950–1978*. 2 vols. Ed. Paul H. Ornstein. New York: International Universities Press.
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1977. “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America.” (Part 2) *October* 4 (Fall): 58–67.
- . 1978. “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” In *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, pp. 43–64. New York: Dutton.
- . 1986. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . 1988. “The Impulse to See.” In Foster 1988, pp.51-85
- . 1998. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Kraynak, Janet. 1998. “Tiravanija’s Liability.” *Documents* 13 (Fall) pp.26-40
- Kris, Ernst. 1955. “Neutralization and Sublimation.” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 10:30–46.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1983. *Tales of Love*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Kubovy, Michael. 1986. *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuppers, Petra. 2001. “The Survival of the Aura: Benjamin’s Desire.” In *Benjamin’s Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura: With the Manual of Lost Ideas*, ed. Lise Patt, pp.37-56 Santa Monica, Calif.: Institute of Cultural Inquiry.
- Kuspit, Donald. 2004. *The End of Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kutash, Emilie. 1982. “A Psychoanalytic Approach to Understanding Form in Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist Painting.” *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 9:167-177.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1968. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- . 1978. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1981.
- Lampl-de Groot, Jeanne. 1975. "Vicissitudes of Narcissism and Problems of Civilization." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 30:663–682.
- Laplanche, J. 1989. *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwood
- . 1987. *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. Trans. David Macey. Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1989.
- Laplanche, Jean, and J.-B. Pontalis. 1967 *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lasch, Christopher. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton.
- . 1984. *The Minimal Self*. New York and London: W.W. Norton.
- Lawrence, Amy. 1991. *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lester, E. P. 1986. "Narcissism and the Personal Myth." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 55:452.
- Levin, C. 1991. "An Essay on the Symbolic Process." Ph.D. dissertation, Concordia University.
- . 2001. "The siege of the psychotherapeutic space. Psychoanalysis in the age of transparency". *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (2) 187-215
- . 2003 "Containing the container: The structure of narcissistic fantasy and the problem of primary undifferentiation". *Israeli Journal of Psychoanalysis*
- Levine, Steven Z.. 1994. *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-reflection: The Modernist Myth of the Self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lindsay, P. and Vergo, P. 1982. *Kandinsky, complete writings on Art*. New York: Da Capo Press
- Loewald, Hans W. 1988. *Sublimation: Inquiries into Theoretical Psychoanalysis*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

- Lukács, Georg. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingston. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . 1981. *Essays on Realism*. Ed. Rodney Livingstone. Trans. David Fernbach. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Lukes, Steven. 1990. *Individualism*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Mahler, Margaret S. 1968. *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1955. *Eros and Civilization*. New York: Random House.
- . 1969. *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Masterson, J. 1981. *The Narcissistic and Borderline Disorders*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- McGlashan, T.H. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. 1982;8(1):118-34.
- McLuhan, Marshal. 1996. *Forward through the Rearview Mirror*. Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice Hall.
- Mead, George. 1977. *On Social Psychology: Selected Papers*. Ed. Anselm Strauss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meissner, W.W. 1981. "A Note on Narcissism." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 50:77–89.
- Merleau-Ponty, Jacques. 1945. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
- . 1964. *L'oeil et l'esprit*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1973. *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Metz, Christian. 1982. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Miller, Jonathan. 1998. *On Reflection*. London: National Gallery.
- Minor, Vernon Hyde. 1994. *Art History's History*. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall.
- Modell, A. 1991. "Review of Sublimation: Inquiries in Theoretical Psychoanalysis." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 60:467–470.

- Murdoch, Iris. 1977. *The Fire and the Sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Naecke, P. 1899. "Normal and Pathological Sexualities." *Archives of Psychiatry* 32:356.
- Narbonne, Jean-Marc 2002 "Action, Contemplation, and Interiority in Plotinus." In *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, ed. Aphrodite Alexandrakis, pp. 3-18 Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Newman, Barnett. 1990. "The Sublime Is Now." In *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, pp. 170-173 New York: Knopf.
- Niebuhr, Rheinhold. 1943. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. New York: Scribner.
- O'Doherty, Brian. 1986. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oppler, Ellen C., ed. 1988. *Picasso's Guernica*: New York: W.W. Norton and Son.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. 1961. *The Modern Theme*. Trans. James Cleugh. New York: Harper.
- Osborne, Peter. 1991. "Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting." In *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* Benjamin and Osborne 1991, pp. 59-79
- Panofsky, Erwin. 1991. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. New York: Zone Books. 1961, 82
- Pauli, Lori. 2003. *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press
- Peyret, Hugues. 2001. *Chacune sa Merde* Lyon: Y.N. Productions.(video)
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Plate, S. Brent. 1996. "Between Cinema and a Hard Place: Gary Hill's Video Art between Words and Images." *Criticism* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2003)
- Podro, Michael. 1982. *The Critical Historians of Art*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Popper, Karl. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: G. Routledge and Sons.
- Rank, Otto. 1914. "Der Doppelgänger." *Imago* 3: pp. 14-20
- . 1971. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Trans. and ed. Harry Tucker, Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



- Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- . 1974. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Rieff, Philip. 1966. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*. New York: Harper and Row; London: Chatto and Windus.
- Rose, Gilbert J. 1980. *The Power of Form: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Aesthetic Form*. Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press.
- Rose, Jacqueline. 1986. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso.
- Rose, Margaret. 1993. *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenfeld, H.A. 1964. "On the psychopathology of narcissism." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 45:332-337.
- . 1971. "Theory life and death instincts: aggressive aspects narcissism." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 52:169-178.
- Rothstein, Arnold. 1980. *The Narcissistic Pursuit of Perfection*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1763. *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract*. Trans. Christopher Betts. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Russell, Frank D. 1980. *Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision*. Montclair, N. J.: Abner Schram.
- Salgado, Sabastião. 2000. *Exodes*. Paris: Éditions de la Martinière.
- Salmon, Wesley. 1967. *The Foundations of Scientific Inference*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- . 1989. *Scientific Explanation*. Ed. Philip Kitcher and Wesley C. Salmon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1998. *Causality and Explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Salz, Jerry. 2005. "Lost in Translation" in *Modern Painters*. April p. 30
- Sartre, Jean Paul. 1956. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von. 1802. *Die Philosophie der Kunst*. Trans Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Schiller, Friedrich. 1795. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
- Schlegel, Friedrich. 1799. *Lucinde and the Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1962–66. *Collected Papers*. Ed. Maurice Natanson. The Hague and Boston: M. Nijhoff.
- Schwartz, Hillel. 1996. *The Culture of the Copy*. New York: Zone Books.
- Scruton, Roger. 1988. "Beastly Bad Taste" in *Modern Painters*, Summer.
- Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seckler, Jerome. 1945. "Picasso Explains." In Oppeler 1988, pp. 145-151.
- Segal, Hanna. 1991. *Dream, Phantasy and Art*. London: Routledge.
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of. 1727. "Characteristicks of Men: An Inquiry Concerning Virtue." In *British Moralists*. Ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.
- Skura, Meredith Anne. 1981. *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Solomon, Robert C. 1988. *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sprigge, Timothy L. S. 1995. "Schopenhauer, Arthur" In *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich, pp. 802-804 Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Spitz, Ellen Handler. 1985. *Art and Psyche*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

- Steiner, George. 1989. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stoller, Robert. 1975 *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* New York: Pantheon Books
- Stern, Daniel. 1985. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1839. *Democracy in America*. Ed. J. P. Mayer. Trans. George Lawrence. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969.
- . 1839. *De Tocqueville's L'Ancien Régime*. Trans. M. W. Patterson Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952
- Tolstoy, Leon. 1896. *What Is Art?* Trans. Aylmer Maude. New York: Liberal Arts Press.
- Trevarthen, Colwyn. 1977. "Descriptive Analyses of Infant Communicative Behaviour." *In Studies in Mother-Infant Interaction*, ed. H .R. Schaffer, London: Academic Press. pp. 227-270
- . 1978. "Secondary Intersubjectivity: Confidence, Confiding and Acts of Meaning in the First Year." *In Action Gesture and Symbol: The Emergence of Language*, ed. Andrew Lock, pp. 183- 229 London: Academic Press.
- . 1979. "Communication and Cooperation in Early Infancy: A Description of Primary Intersubjectivity" *In Before Speech: The Beginning of Interpersonal Communication*, ed. Margaret Bullowa, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 321-347
- Valéry, Paul. 1941. *Cantate de Narcisse*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1950. *Selected Writings*. New York: New Directions.
- Vickery, Jonathan. 2003. "Art and the Ethical: Modernism and the Problem of Minimalism." *In Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen, pp. 111- 128 Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Vinge, Louise. 1967. *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century*. Lund: Gleerups.

- Von Rumohr, Karl Friedrich. 1919. "Italienische Forschung" in *Correspondences. Selections*. (Housed in Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University, Montreal.) Charlottenburg: Munin-Verlag
- Waelder, Robert. 1936. "The Principle of Multiple Function: Observations on Over-determination." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 5:45–62.
- Weber, Max. 1949. *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Trans. and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.
- Weintraub, Linda. 1996. *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society, 1970–1990*. Litchfield, Conn.: Art Insights.
- Weiskel, Thomas. 1986. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Welchman, John C. 1996. "Peeping Over the Wall." In *Narcissism: Artists Reflect Themselves*, pp. 15-24 Escondido, Calif.: California Center for the Arts Museum.
- Whistler, James A. McNeil. 1920. *Ten O' Clock: A Lecture*. Portland, Me.: Thomas Bird Mosher.
- Whitebook, Joel. 1995. *Perversion and Utopia*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe Beardsley. 1987 "The Intentional Fallacy." In *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis, pp. 367-380 Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Winckelmann, Johann Joachim. 1764. *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*. New York: F. Ungar, 1969
- Winnicott, Donald. 1988. *Human Nature*. New York: Pantheon.
- . 1965. *The Family and Individual Development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich. 1932. *Principles of Art History*. Trans. M. D. Hottinger. New York: Henry Holt.
- Wollheim, Richard. 2001. *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting: Art as Representation and Expression*. Ed. Rob van Gerwen. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wyver, John, producer. 2004. *The Art of Helen Chadwick* (UK, 50 mins.). Production: Illuminations.

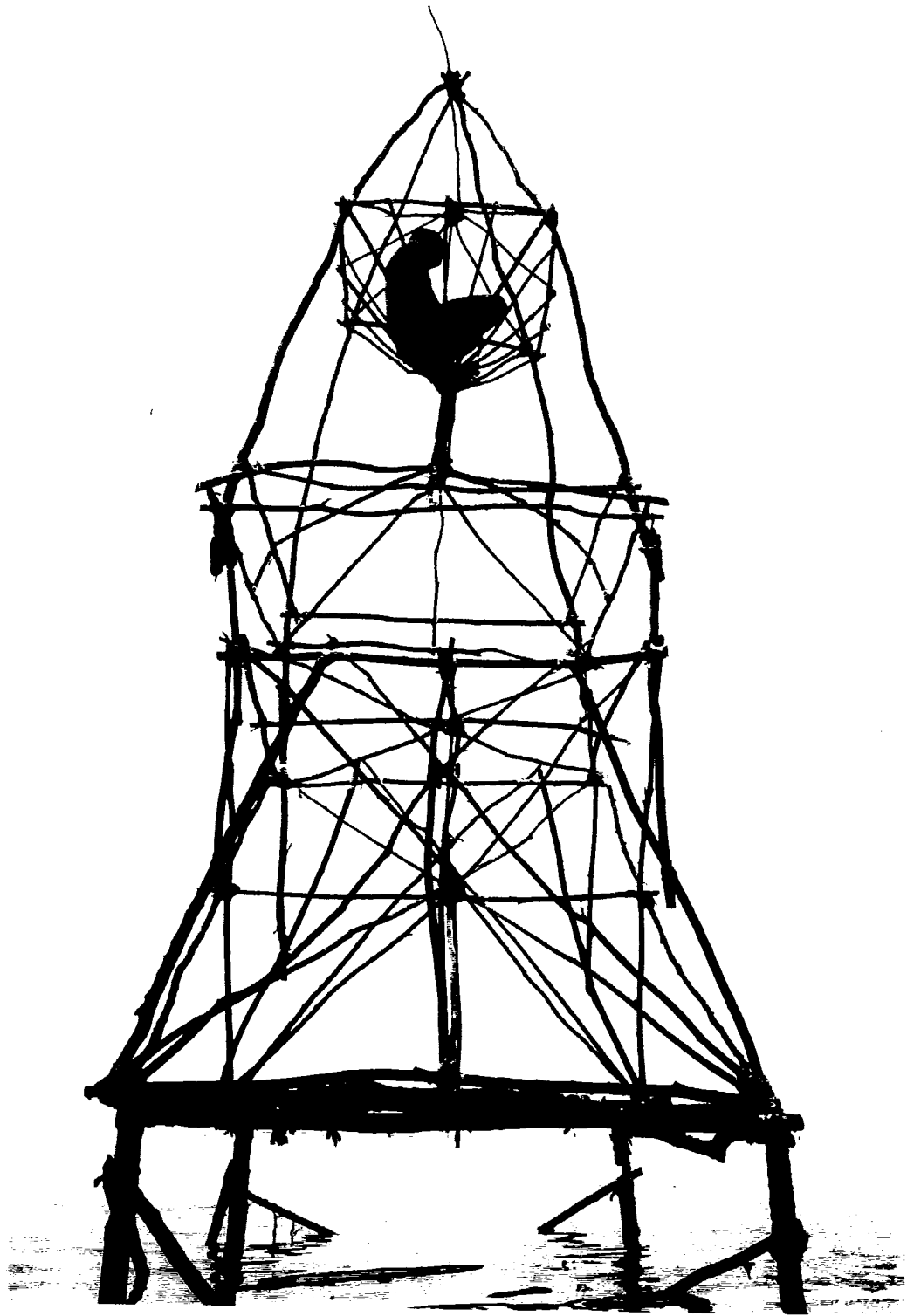


Figure 1 Dieter Appelt *Der Augenturm* 1977 Height 6 meters



Figure 2 Gilbert and George *Singing Sculpture* 1970 ( photograph of performance)



Figure 3 Gilbert and George *Flying Shit* 1994

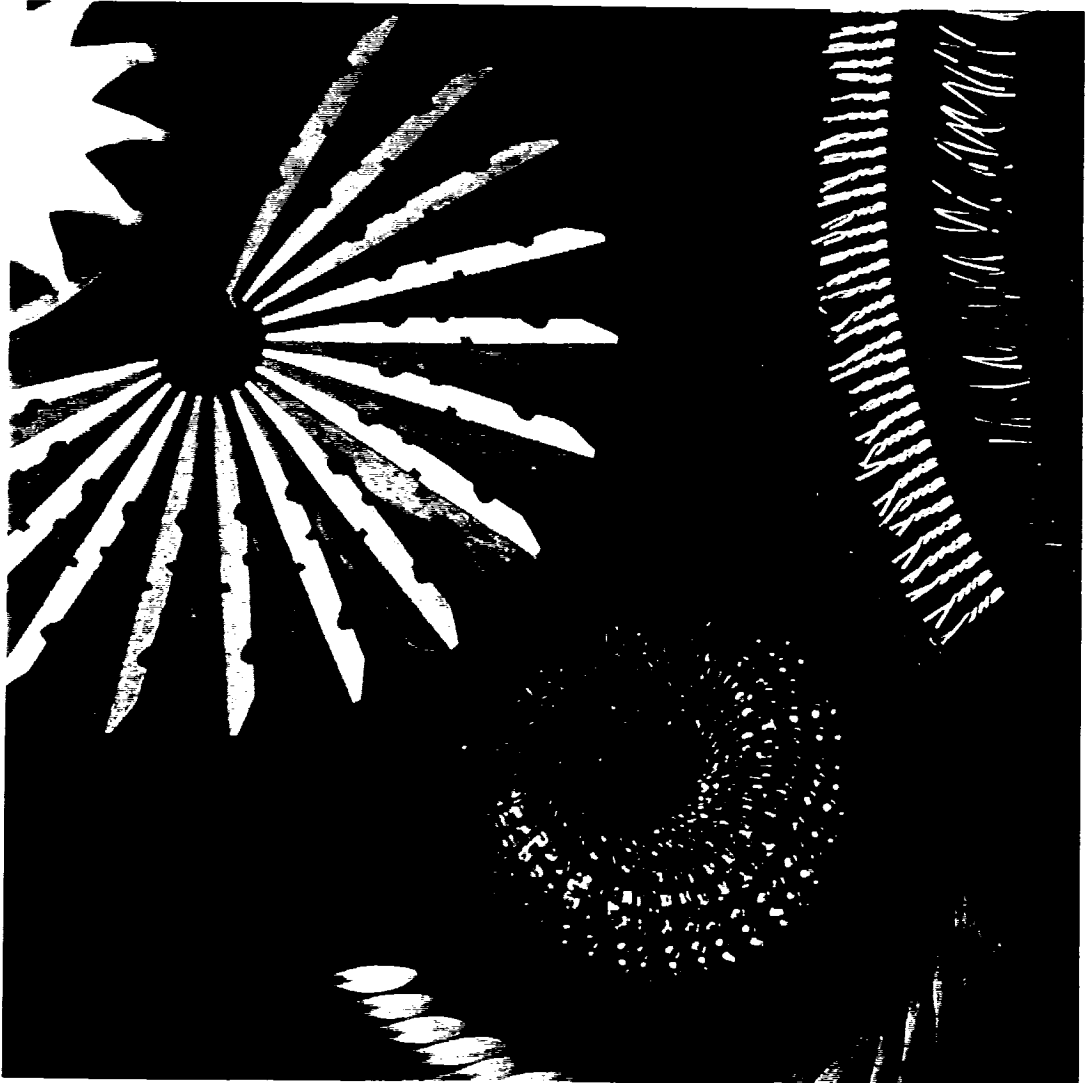


Figure 4 Jerome Fortin *Bagatelle 1* 2000 (perforated tin can lid, clothespins, wire twisters, maple seeds, and spiral wire wound on paper form)



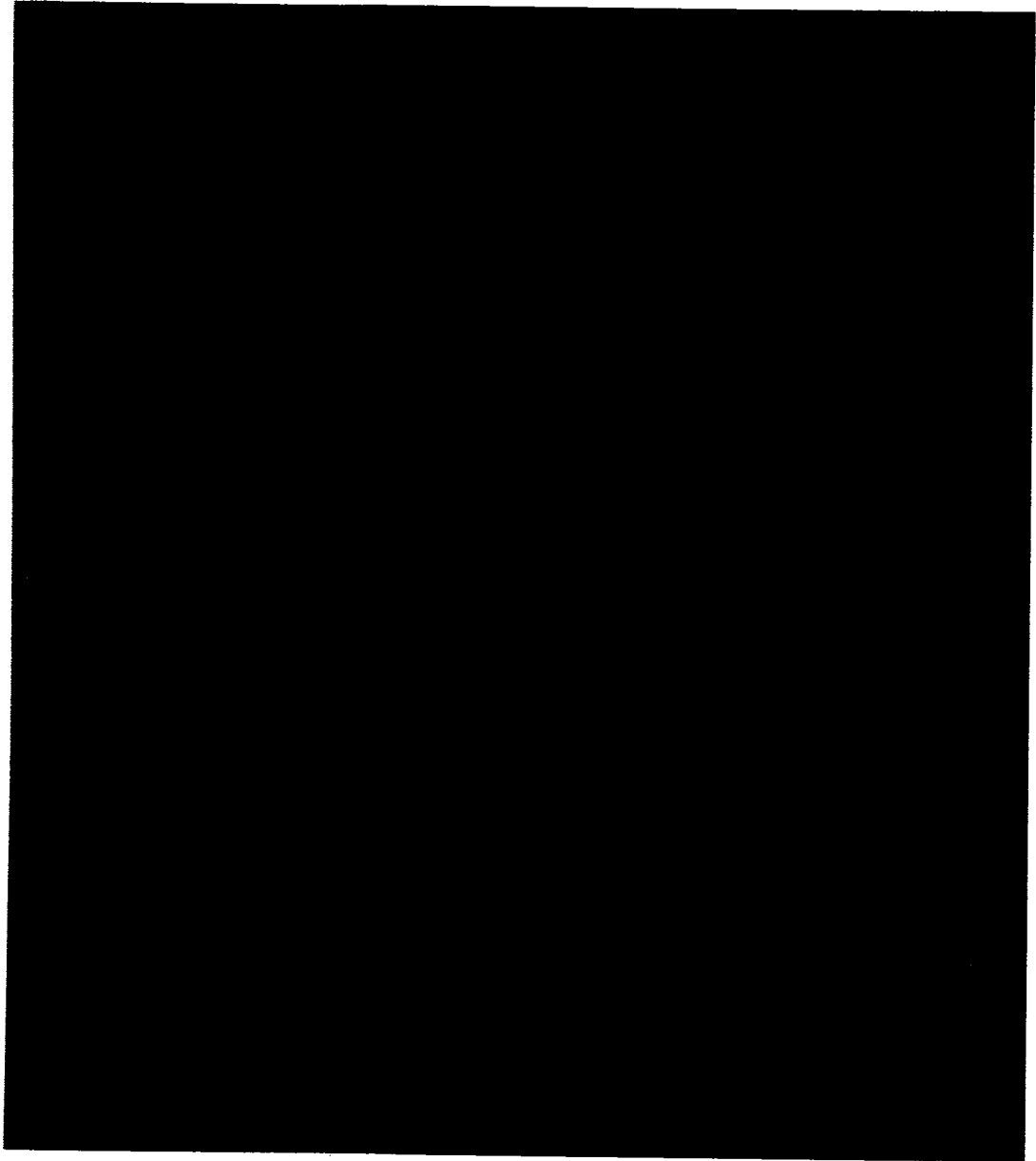


Figure 5 Mark Rothko *Red on Maroon* 1970 Oil 266cm x 239cm

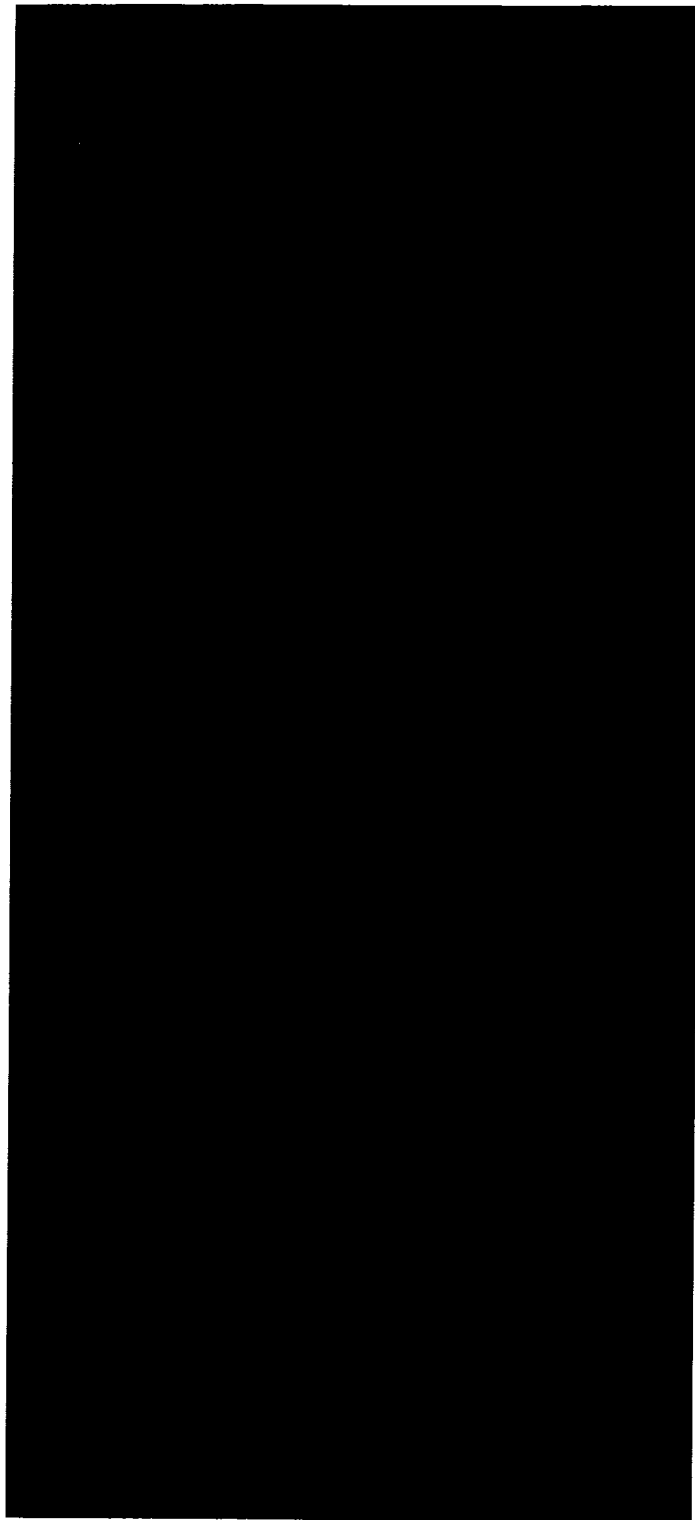


Figure 6 Barnett Newman *Onement III* 1949 Oil on canvas. 182 x 65 cm.

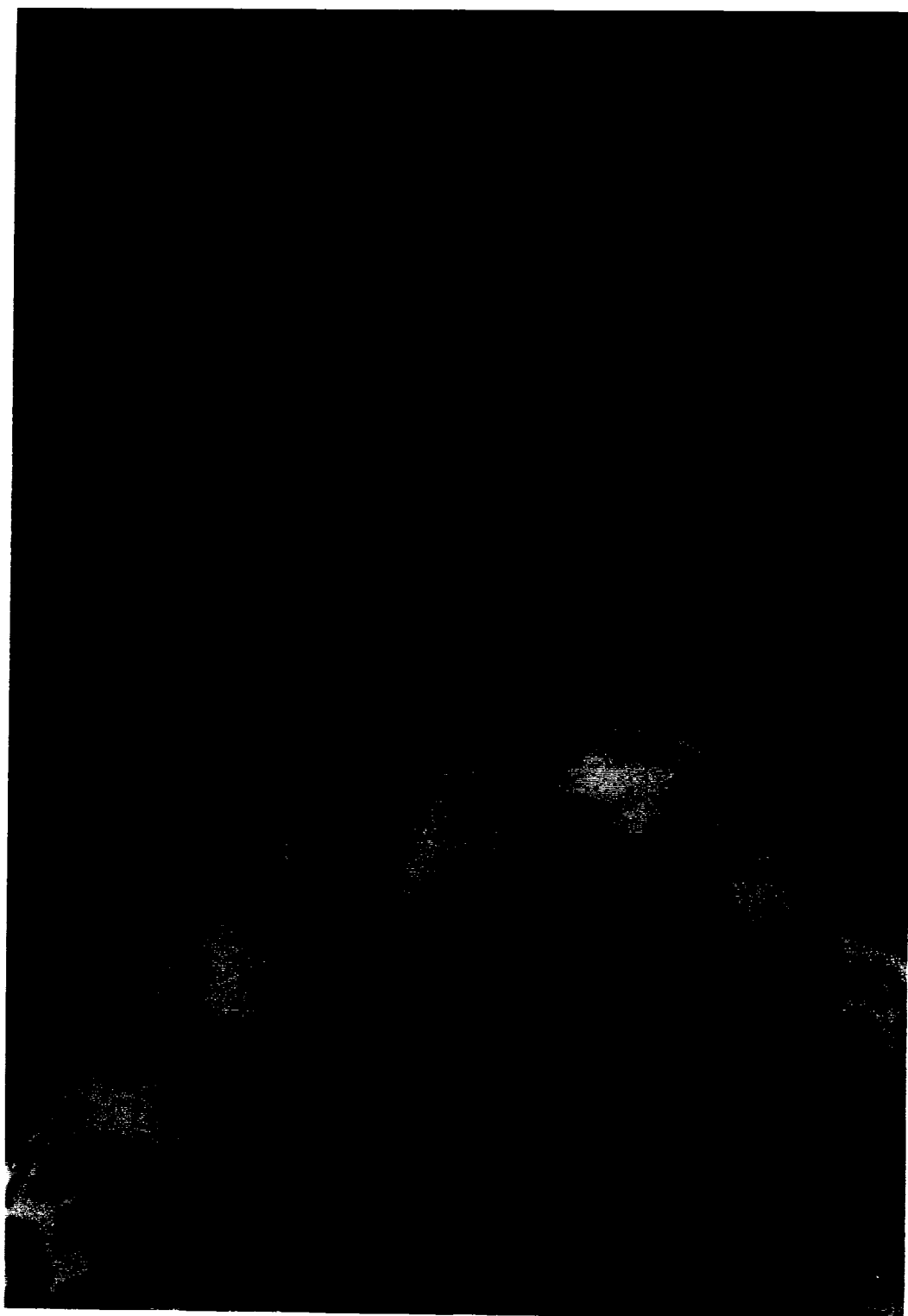


Figure 7 Gerhard Richter *Betty* 1988 Oil 40 x 23



Figure 8 Robert Gober *Playpen* 1987 wood, enamel paint 67 x 92 x 92 cm.

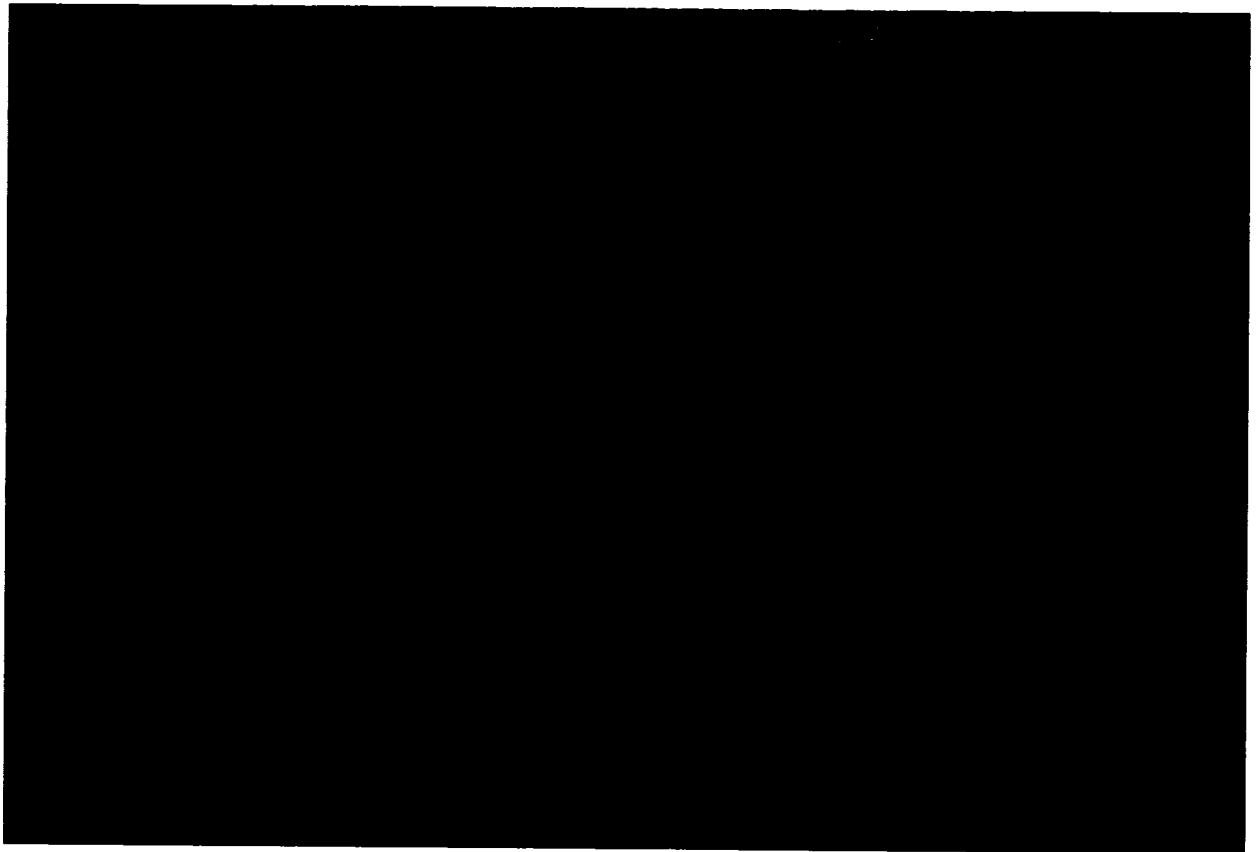


Figure 9 Mark Lüpertz *Pergola - Dithyrambic* 1970 Distemper on canvas 200x296 cm.



Figure 10 Herman Nitsch *80<sup>th</sup> Action* 1984 (photo of performance at Prinzendorf, Austria)



Figure 11 Helen Chadwick *Vanity* 1986 Cibachrome photograph of artist and her installation *The Oval Court* 60 cm x 60 cm



Figure 12 Caravaggio ca.1601-1602 *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* Oil 107 X 145 cm.





Figure 13 Piero della Francesca *The Flagellation* c.1469 Oil and tempera 58.4x81.5 cm



Figure 14 Rirkrit Tiravanija *Untitled (Free)* 1992 Tables, chairs, food, etc. at the 303 Gallery, New York



Figure 15a Pablo Picasso *The Minotaur* May 18, 1933 Etching 29 x36 cm

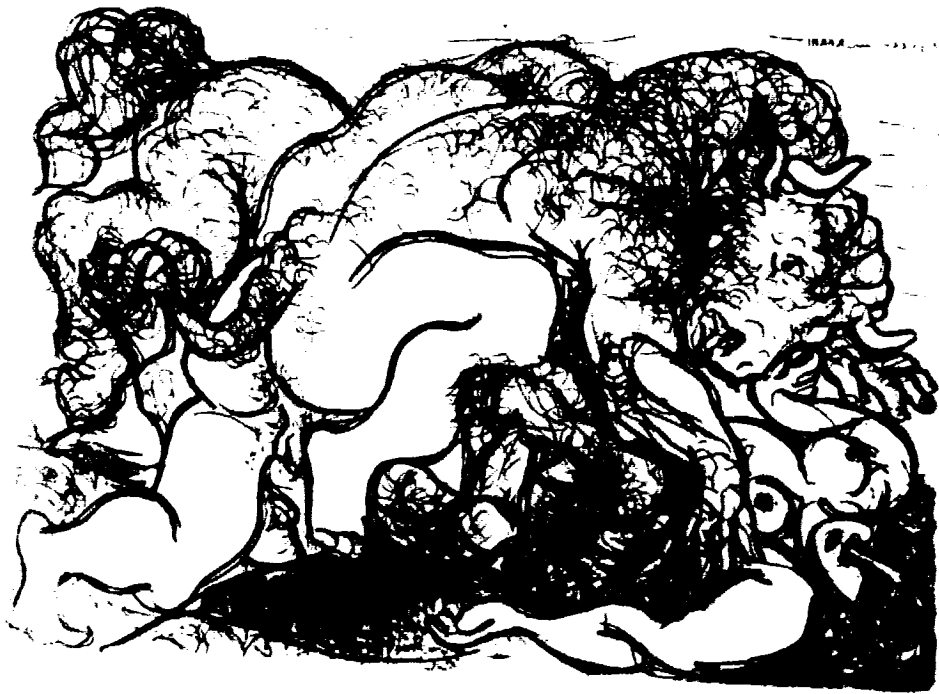


Figure 15b Picasso *The Minotaur* May 25, 1933 Etching 19x 27 cm



Figure 16 Young woman mourning student shot at Kent State University. May 1970.  
Photo by John Filo (Valley News Dispatch, Tarentum, Pa.)