

Greenberg After Duchamp: Postmodernism and the Meaning of Medium- Specificity

Daniel Neofetou

From the late 1930s through the '50s, Clement Greenberg was an incredibly prolific critic whose ekphrastic writing entails an attentiveness to artworks which is rarely seen today. However, he became wholly identified with his more schematic theoretical essays, particularly "Modernist Painting" (1960), written for radio broadcast by Voice of America, and those collected under the headings "Culture in General" and "Art in General" in his *Art and Culture*, the 1961 book of collected essays which solidified his status as the hegemonic interpreter of late modernism in painting and precipitated the Oedipal efforts of the next generation of critics. This next generation made the case that the lens through which Greenberg understood art was outdated and inflexibly narrow, contending that his critical paradigm, ostensibly preoccupied as it was with medium-specificity, was simply insufficient to understand works engaged in the fraying of disciplinary boundaries, the proliferation of happenings, performance and conceptual art, and the production of "texts."

By the time of the emergence of such postmodern art, Greenberg was no longer explicitly championing art which concerned itself with medium-specificity. Indeed, throughout the '60s he had paid little heed to the Minimalists' efforts to intentionally interrogate the ontological limits of mediums.¹ Nevertheless, as we will see, it was certainly the case that Greenberg was overwhelmingly dismissive of postmodernism. In what follows, however, I want to argue that it is wrong simply to characterize this in terms of Greenberg's championing of a purity which was undermined by art that turned its focus to extra-aesthetic concerns. Instead, I will show that it might be chalked up to what is effectively an act of misrecognition on Greenberg's part. We will see that it is possible to claim that, by Greenberg's own lights,

¹ As Thierry De Duve writes in reference to Frank Stella's black paintings, Greenberg did not give his "stamp of approval" to artworks which, *prima facie*, "conveniently illustrated" his teleological account of modernism, since they rendered his "historical description prescriptive, even normative." Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 203–04.

postmodernism does *not* fall foul of Greenberg's criticism, and in fact might be characterized as a continuation by other means of that which met with Greenberg's acclaim in modernism.

I will make my case largely by way of immanent critique of four of Greenberg's essays in which he argues mainly against Pop Art and conceptualism, the modes of art which had gained hegemony in the art world after late modernism and specifically after Abstract Expressionism, in the American context. These essays are "Avant Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties" (1969), "Counter Avant-Garde" (1971), "Looking for the Avant-Garde" (1977) and "Modern and Postmodern" (1980). While these essays span eleven years and three decades, they are quite consistent in their arguments, and thus I will quote from all of them without differentiation.

...

Greenberg's central contention in these four essays is that postmodern art lacked the specific "quality" which had hitherto defined the avant-garde. In each, Greenberg engages in the kind of foray into socio-historical analysis which was no longer common for him and displays remarkable consistency with the precise arguments he made four decades before in his celebrated early essays "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940). Greenberg asserts that modernism might be defined as "an attitude and an orientation to standards and levels [...] of aesthetic quality" derived from "a generalized feeling and apprehending, a kind of distilling and extracting of aesthetic quality as shown by the best of the past."² He argues that modernism came into being by necessity in the 1800s, when "official culture" began to neglect its insistence on the highest standards of aesthetic quality due to "the demands of a new and open cultural market."³ Modernism was thus the "endeavor to stem the decline of aesthetic standards threatened by the relative democratization of culture under industrialism."⁴

In the early essays, the then-avowedly Marxist Greenberg maintained that modernism—or avant-garde art, as he then referred to it—was not only under threat from the comparative accessibility of the products of the culture industry: in its pursuit of aesthetic quality, it had also rendered itself inaccessible even to its erstwhile patrons in the bourgeoisie, and thus it was incumbent upon socialism to defend it. By the 1970s, however, the art which he had been championing in the 1940s had of course gained the patronage of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, for Greenberg, the far more frictionless adoption of postmodern art by the mainstream art world of museums and galleries begged the question of whether postmodernism persisted "in the uncompromising demand for artistic excellence," whether it remained "true to that which constitutes and essentially defines what's been known hitherto as the avant-garde"—a question which he answers in the negative.⁵ As he puts it:

² Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 30.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

When the press, the museums, the governments, and the collectors embrace the likes of Beuys and Christo and Rauschenberg and, for that matter, even Francis Bacon, are the highest aesthetic standards being upheld? Is the classic avant-garde's mission being perpetuated? My own eyes, my own taste, say hardly [...] My own eyes tell me that in point of value or quality the ostensible avant-garde of this time is only ostensibly avant-garde.⁶

For Greenberg, postmodern art accordingly posed more of a threat to modernism than did "easily identifiable philistines" because its challenge to aesthetic standards came from within so-called advanced art. He writes that while "'advanced' used to be coterminous with Modernism," champions of postmodern art "hold that Modernism is no longer advanced enough; that it has to be hurried on, hurried into 'postmodernism.' That it will fall behind if it continues to be concerned with such things as standards and quality."⁷

How, then, did postmodernism differ so grievously from modernism for Greenberg? In these pieces, he is quite vague about what, precisely, constitute the "standards and levels of aesthetic quality" which postmodern art was supposedly rejecting. However, he is somewhat more explicit in terms of *how* postmodern art was rejecting these standards and levels of aesthetic quality. At the time of these essays, Greenberg affirmed that Duchamp remained the paradigmatic figure of postmodernism. He writes that "it was Duchamp alone who worked out, as it now looks, every implication of [postmodern art, and locked it into] what has amounted to hardly more than elaborations, variations on, and recapitulations of his original ideas."⁸

One of the most decisive of these implications, for Greenberg, is the confirmation of what he saw as the philistine accusation that the avant-garde seeks "originality for its own sake."⁹ Whereas, he writes, "genuine originality in art [cannot] be envisaged in advance" and surprises the original artist themselves by "exceeding [their] conscious intentions," in the case of postmodern art

conscious volition [and] deliberateness [play] a principal part [with the artist] resorting to ingenuity instead of inspiration, contrivance instead of creation, "fancy" instead of "imagination"; in effect, to the known rather than the unknown. The "new" as known beforehand—the general look of the "new" as made recognizable by the avant-garde past—is what is aimed at, and because known and recognizable it can be willed.¹⁰

In this connection, Greenberg cites Duchamp's readymades, and specifically the *Bicycle Wheel* and *Bottle Rack* of 1913, as attempts to outdo Picasso's incorporation of non-art objects into his collage constructions, and contends that in the 1960s something similar had happened

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7–8.

among young artists in response to Pollock's drip paintings of 1947-50. While Greenberg had spent the prior three decades arguing against those who took Pollock's drip paintings for arbitrary effusions, he writes that, like these detractors, young artists of the '60s "saw Pollock's middle-period painting as freakish and inartistic, but instead of deploring that, they hailed it."¹¹

For Greenberg, these artists could no more "read" Pollock than his detractors, but they "admired him all the more precisely because of that." In their art they took cues from their mischaracterization of Pollock's drip paintings, rather than from the drip paintings themselves.¹² In this, we can assume that Greenberg is referring to the artistic lineage of Pollock in which the physical act of artmaking, rather than the resultant artwork, becomes paramount, the most canonical results of which Amelia Jones would eventually describe as the "Pollockian performative."¹³

Now, if this were the sum total of Greenberg's argument against the art which had followed Abstract Expressionism, it would be coherent and valid in terms of this limited lineage. While it would require more unpacking (and, as we will see, the analogue with the dynamics of the readymades is questionable), the claim that artists who adopted the gestural aesthetic of Pollock but not his formal rectitude missed something crucial in his art is certainly compelling. Yet Greenberg is of course not simply making this argument, but rather using it as an example of postmodernism's supposed mimicking of the "aesthetic surprise" of modernism.

As Greenberg elaborates, the postmodern artists whom he accuses of following the urtext of Duchamp's readymades achieve surprise through simply "being abreast of artistic times" and thus ensuring that their art presents something unexpected in an artistic context, as opposed to their work's innovation coming "from inspiration and sensibility" which "cannot be thought out in advance," but "can only be felt and discovered."¹⁴ Now, as I noted above, by the time of these essays, Greenberg was no longer schematically championing medium-specificity. Indeed, he even goes so far as to argue, provocatively, for the bucolic realist artist Andrew Wyeth against postmodern art (and analogously claim that the Beatles are more musical than John Cage, and Bob Dylan more poetic than John Ashbery).¹⁵ Nevertheless, Greenberg *does* contend that central to postmodernism's failure to maintain the aesthetic quality of modernism is the fact that, in its fixation on newness for newness' sake, postmodernism intervenes upon "cultural habits and expectations, social ones too, rather than on taste."¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

¹⁴ Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 254-55.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

Reception of postmodern art, writes Greenberg, is “conceived of in relation mainly to nonaesthetic [expectations],” by which we can assume Greenberg means categorial expectations, as the spectator is offered as art something “that’s taken to be, and expected to be, anything but art,” or objects that are reproduced or represented “in incongruous materials or sizes” (here Greenberg presumably has Oldenburg in mind), or made by “affixing incongruous objects to pictures, or from offering reproductions of photographs as paintings,” and so on.¹⁷ Accordingly, Greenberg argues, such art’s fascination is “more historical, cultural, theoretical than it is aesthetic.”¹⁸ And indeed, despite avoiding contrarily advocating medium-specificity in the essays about postmodernism, in a contemporaneous piece from 1983 entitled “Beginnings of Modernism,” Greenberg pointedly reaffirms that what was most decisive in modernism’s “renovation of aesthetic quality by which it justifies itself” was “what happened to the medium [...] the immediate phenomenal substance.”¹⁹

From all of this, then, we can determine two crucial points concerning the standards and levels of aesthetic quality that postmodernism supposedly neglects, on Greenberg’s account. One: these standards and levels are maintained through artistic praxis which is not predetermined and which indeed exceeds the conscious intentions of the artist, while postmodern art is made according to the pregiven goal of creating something scandalous and new. Two: these standards and levels are maintained through artistic praxis which is attuned to sensuous particularity which the artist feels and discovers, while postmodern art concerns itself with how it will be received in its socio-historical context. However, as I will now show, Greenberg’s distinctions are complicated if we interrogate, first, how Greenberg unpacks these distinctions, and second, Duchamp’s own characterization of his readymades in light of these distinctions.

...

We saw above that Greenberg argues that postmodern artists mimic “aesthetic surprise” through the supposedly extra-aesthetic means of presenting non-art as art. However, in the same breath he seems to imply that this is not simply a case of art by fiat:

Duchamp’s readymades [...] showed that the difference between art and nonart was a conventionalized, not a securely experienced difference [...] Since then it has become clearer, too, that anything that can be experienced at all can be experienced aesthetically; and that anything that can be experienced aesthetically can also be experienced as *art*. In short, art and the aesthetic don’t just overlap, they coincide [...] the notion of art, put to the strictest test of experience, proves to mean not skillful making [...] but an act of mental distancing [...]. Any and everything can be subjected to such distancing, and thereby converted into something that takes effect as art. There turns out, accordingly, to be such a thing as art at large, art that is realized or realizable

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36–37.

everywhere, even if for the most part inadvertently, momentarily, and solipsistically: art that is private, “raw,” and unformalized.²⁰

It is possible to read this claim in terms not necessarily inconsistent with Greenberg’s derogatory account of postmodernism as I detailed in the previous section of this article, if one places the accent less on the affective experience implied by designating “anything” as “aesthetic” and more on the supposed dilution of the latter on Greenberg’s terms if everything might be incorporated by it. Thierry de Duve provides such an interpretation of Greenberg’s notion of “art at large” in his book *Kant After Duchamp* (1996), which is perhaps the most significant account hitherto developed of a fundamental continuity between the so-called modern and contemporary in art, also hinging on Duchamp’s readymades.

De Duve contends that Greenberg’s references to the “art at large” of which the readymades are emblematic (he cites Greenberg’s similar discussion in the first of a series of seminars he delivered at Bennington College in 1971) show Greenberg “finally surrendering to the awareness of how uncertain the difference between art and non-art, and thus between artist and non-artist, is.”²¹ For de Duve, the coincidence that Greenberg identifies between “art” and the “aesthetic” points to a very real phenomenon of which Duchamp’s readymades were a pertinent crystallization: that is, the lack of normative standards for art and consequent elision of aesthetic experience (however characterized) and categorial identification of art as such.

As de Duve puts it, “the time is long gone when artistic culture and know-how were transmitted from one painter to the next in the private space of the workshop, and the apprenticeship contract that bound together two generations of painters is a thing of the past.”²² Therefore, writes de Duve, “no padlock restricts access to the profession of modern painter.” He contends that the relationship of spectators towards art was similarly transformed: “anyone, even deprived of taste and culture, was granted the right to judge painting, and was even invited to do so.”²³ Accordingly, for de Duve “the very definition of art becomes a public matter settled by the vox populi.”²⁴ As indicated by his book’s title, de Duve characterizes this state of affairs, of which he identifies Greenberg’s notion of “art at large” as indicative, in terms of a rereading of Kant’s *Third Critique* (for the most part with reference to the “Analytic of the Beautiful”) in light of Duchamp’s readymades. For de Duve, Duchamp’s readymades are “both produced as [works of art] and judged to be [works of art]” by way of “the sentence ‘this is art.’” De Duve claims that this sentence only makes sense “as an aesthetic reflexive judgment with a claim to universality in the strictest Kantian sense.”²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 286.

²² Ibid., 189.

²³ Ibid., 190.

²⁴ Ibid., 192.

²⁵ Ibid., 320.

In the first part of the *Third Critique*, Kant addresses judgments of taste, which differ from the determinate judgments which concern the *First Critique*. In the *First Critique*, Kant sets out to circumscribe all possible human experience by way of determinate judgments which subsume phenomena under empirical concepts according to the categories of the understanding. However, when we designate something beautiful in an aesthetic reflective judgment of taste, we do not make use of such subordinating concepts. In a passage that de Duve cites,²⁶ Kant writes the following:

If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather, we [...] refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis *cannot be other than subjective*.²⁷

Nevertheless, an implicit presupposition of any given aesthetic judgment is that it has “bases that do not have merely private validity and hence are not merely subjective.”²⁸ As Kant puts it in another passage cited by de Duve:

There can be no doubt that in a judgment of taste the presentation of the object (and at the same time of the subject as well) is referred more broadly, and this broader reference is our basis for extending such judgments as necessary for everyone. Hence this extension must be based on some concept or other; but this concept must be one that no intuition can determine, that does not permit us to cognize anything and hence does not permit us *to prove* a judgment of taste.²⁹

Kant suggests that this indeterminate concept which governs aesthetic judgment is, perhaps, “the concept of what may be considered the supersensible substrate of humanity.”³⁰ This supersensible substrate entails the postulate of a *sensus communis*, or common sense, which we presuppose when we make the definitively aconceptual and yet universally binding aesthetic reflective judgement that something is beautiful. Now, de Duve claims that, if we replace the judgment “this is beautiful” with the judgment “this is art,” this notion of a *sensus communis* aptly describes the dynamic that Greenberg identified in his concept of an “art at large”:

²⁶ While de Duve deploys both the Meredith and Bernard translations, all my quotations are taken from the Werner S. Pluhar translation.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 44. Emphasis in original.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 212. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

If [...] we read “art” wherever Kant wrote “the beautiful,” and simply draw the consequences of this substitution [...] The presumed *sensus communis* then becomes a *faculty of judging art by dint of feeling* common to all men and women [...] The artist chooses an object and calls it art, or, what amounts to the same, places it in such a context that the object itself demands to be called art (which means that, if only privately and solipsistically, the artist has already called it art). The spectator simply repeats the artist’s judgement. Anyone can do it; the required skill, the know-how, is nil; it is accessible to the layman.³¹

Despite de Duve’s appeal to “dint of feeling,” affect seemingly does not play a decisive role in this process. Certainly, de Duve argues that the phenomenon which Greenberg refers to as “art at large” is not properly captured by the institutional theory of art advocated by the philosopher George Dickie, for whom what makes something art is the fact that a member or members of the art world have conferred upon it the status of “art.” Instead, De Duve’s account of a contemporary *sensus communis* insists that individuals must judge for themselves in each particular case whether something which they are being offered as an artwork is, in fact, an artwork. However, I would argue that the epistemological dynamics implied by De Duve’s reading of Greenberg’s “art at large” are not functionally different from the institutional theory of art. Thus, he provides a reading of Greenberg’s account of the “act of mental distancing” by which “any and everything” might be “converted into something that takes effect as art” as simply the process whereby audiences accommodate themselves to postmodern artists’ supposedly calculated maneuvers and assent to the proposition that what they are being offered as art by a given artist is, indeed, art.

However, while he denigrates “art at large,” Greenberg in fact seems to mean more than de Duve would have it when he claims that Duchamp’s readymades—and by extension the postmodern art which Greenberg derides—induce or require “mental distancing.” As we saw above, Greenberg contends that the crucial difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the categorial proposition central to de Duve’s account is not decisive in the former. Instead, rather than resting on the novelty of nominating something extra-aesthetic as art, modernism’s “aesthetic quality” is necessarily rooted in particularity and not predetermined. And when discussing “art at large,” Greenberg appears to be arguing that it does in fact provide—if in rudimentary form—the kind of affective experience available from modernism’s “aesthetic quality,” but that postmodern artists disavow this. Thus their art is “sheltered from the pressure of expectations and demands.”³²

Bracketing the unelaborated notion of the supposed inferiority of the aesthetic quality of “art at large,” Greenberg’s claims find a certain resonance with Duchamp’s statements in a 1964 interview with Calvin Tomkins. In this interview, Duchamp indeed disavows any aesthetic dimension of his work, instead claiming that the readymades were essentially arbitrary, when he attests that “the choice of readymades never was a result of aesthetic delectation [...]

³¹ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 312. Emphasis in original.

³² Greenberg, *Late Writing*, 13.



1. Walter Silver, *Paul Jenkins' opening*, 1957. Contact sheet, 7 15/16 x 8 9/16 in., Walter Silver Collection, New York Public Library.

they were not chosen because they looked nice or were artistic or in conformity to my taste.”³³ If this were the case, Duchamp would paradoxically open himself to Greenberg’s accusation of premeditation. He would be indicating that what was decisive in the readymades was the fact that any given object was being presented as art. But when Duchamp further accounts for the supposedly arbitrary nature of his choice of readymades, matters do not seem so clear-cut. Instead, he discusses the process in terms of impulsiveness and a lack of calculation. Rather than describing a premeditated conceptual exercise in proving that anything can be art, Duchamp claims that his interest in chance might be chalked up to “nothing more than [the desire] to get away from things already worked out.”³⁴ Upon Tomkins asking whether Duchamp had “any particular idea in [...] mind” when making *Bicycle Wheel*, it is difficult to understand his reply in terms other than aesthetic delectation. He claims that there was no

³³ Calvin Tomkins and Marcel Duchamp, *The Afternoon Interviews* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

particular idea: “it was just a pleasure to have it in my room [...] It was [...] pleasant for the movement it gave, like a fire in the chimney, moving all the time.”³⁵

Duchamp himself, then, describes the production of *Bicycle Wheel* as a process which was felt and discovered rather than premeditated. Combined with the fact that Greenberg himself admits that the experience of *Bicycle Wheel* is an aesthetic experience, no matter how supposedly raw and unformed, it is unclear how this supposed urtext of postmodernism falls foul of Greenberg’s critiques of postmodernism. I think we can go further, however, and observe far deeper affinities between the dynamics of Duchamp’s readymades, according to Duchamp’s own account, and what we might convincingly argue was always the ultimate referent of Greenberg’s approbation of “quality.” In order to elaborate this, I will first briefly return to de Duve’s (mis)reading of Kant’s third *Critique*.

...

As we saw above, for de Duve, Kant’s claim that the postulate of a *sensus communis* is inherent in aesthetic reflective judgments of the beautiful holds for (post)modern art—and paradigmatically readymades—if the judgment “this is beautiful” is replaced by the judgment “this is art.” In making this argument, de Duve gestures to a list of masterpieces of modern art which initially invoked “disgust or ridicule” precisely because they were deemed not to be beautiful, “from Courbet’s *Stonebreakers*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, and Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* to Manet’s *Olympia*, Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Duchamp’s readymades.”³⁶ In correctly pointing out that these works do not accord to classical ideals of beauty, de Duve proceeds to extrapolate from this insight to make the case, delineated above, that all that matters in “aesthetic” reflective judgements of postmodern art is the nominative gesture of calling something art, at the expense, it seems, of sensorial encounter having any decisive bearing. Indeed, while de Duve argues that Greenberg’s notion of “art at large” identifies a phenomenon best addressed by recourse to Kant, he contends that Greenberg’s own self-confessed Kantianism was misplaced precisely *because* of his attention to the sensorial encounter of art:

Greenberg [...] never disavowed his Kantianism, but he never understood Kant either. He was too much of an empiricist to see that art opens up a transcendental field which “we must indeed occupy with Ideas.” He was an extremely fine phenomenologist, but for that reason, his aesthetics is *empiriocriticist* and not Kantian at all.³⁷

However, I would argue that de Duve’s reading essentially amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, inasmuch as his account still claims to be Kantian. As Jason Gaiger writes, “de Duve confuses the essentially Kantian recognition that the meaning of the term ‘art’ [...] cannot be given exhaustively in terms of a set of defining properties [...] with the (erroneous)

³⁵ Ibid., 53.

³⁶ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 303.

³⁷ Ibid., 322.

claim that ‘art’ is [...] a proper name.”³⁸ The fact that the meaning of the term “art” cannot be detached from particular instances of art in a manner which allows for mechanical categorization does not mean that this categorization is arbitrary in the fashion of a proper name.

Contrarily, for Kant, the criterion for whether so-called “beautiful” phenomena invite aesthetic reflective judgments is whether they command attention on the grounds of their intrinsic intelligibility, rather than in terms of subsumptive conceptualization (and the examples which Kant himself provides for aesthetic contemplation, such as crustaceans and crystals, have in fact perplexed commentators committed to classical ideals of beauty).³⁹ For Kant, aesthetic reflective judgment emphasizes the amenability of nature to human cognition. However, philosophers (mainly in the continental tradition) have long pointed out that this does not account for the difference between objects about which we can make determinate cognitive judgments and those which require aesthetic reflective judgments. Thus, as J.M. Bernstein writes, the relationship between aesthetic reflective judgements and determinate cognitive judgments might better be conceived as the former “underwriting or supplying the surplus of intelligibility that we require of nature and that nature appears to offer us but which is impossible to account for, make intelligible, on the basis of discursive thinking alone.”⁴⁰

Indeed, Bernstein—who has not directly contradicted de Duve’s reading of Kant, but has accused de Duve of missing “the material motive” in modernism⁴¹ (more on which later)—has suggested that we might map a history of Kantian aesthetic contemplation by way of the very artistic shifts which de Duve argues have *invalidated* the centrality of beauty to aesthetic judgement. For Bernstein, “the movement from representational painting, to ‘free’ nature, to romantic poetry, to the realist novel, to modernist art and literature” traces “a history of taste wherein different objects (arts and styles of art) become paradigmatic on the basis of their suitability for aesthetic reflection.”⁴² It is also, of course, a variant of this trajectory which Greenberg drew upon to champion Abstract Expressionism.

Insofar as it entails attention to immanent particularity, then, the aesthetic reflective judgment of the third *Critique* requires precisely Greenberg’s phenomenological approach, which de Duve contends renders Greenberg’s aesthetics as not Kantian at all. Furthermore, it might readily be argued that the attention to the irreducible particularity of the object entailed by aesthetic reflective judgment also draws attention to the irreducible particularity of the subject doing the judging. This is not how Greenberg is commonly characterized. Instead, he is criticized on the basis of his supposedly disembodied spectatorship. Ironically, this is routinely done with reference to his supposed “Kantianism,” which, knowingly or not, is often portrayed essentially in terms of the determinate judgments of the first *Critique*, with critics arguing that Greenberg’s understanding of art implies a spectator taxonomically identifying

³⁸ Jason Gaiger “Art after Beauty: Retrieving Aesthetic Judgement: ‘Kant after Duchamp’ by Thierry de Duve” *Art History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1997), 613–14.

³⁹ See: David Bell, “The Art of Judgement” *Mind*, vol. 96, no. 382 (1987), 230–31.

⁴⁰ J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴² Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 63.

medium-specific elements in a manner which dismisses the particularity of the subject who does the identifying.⁴³

However, as Donald Kuspit acknowledged as early as 1979, Greenberg contrarily gives subject and object “equal weight in aesthetic experience.”⁴⁴ Greenberg at his best provides an account of how, in giving ourselves over to artworks, we are brought back to our embodied particularity all the more emphatically. As Bernstein has put it very well, what Greenberg finds in modernism is

a *formation* [...] of object that, however minimally or fragilely, silhouettes human intercourse with the material world—with eye or hand or body, always an inflection of the size of the body, its upright posture, the hand that grasps with its opposing thumb, the forward look, the eye’s response to distance, color, shape, and form. These ineliminably belong to an anthropomorphic contouring of the world, so the world as lived by a human body that can engage in practices that transcend the fact of embodiment itself. For [...] Greenberg [...] modern art has the unique task of inscribing this anthropomorphic minimum [...], of salvaging the world, including its habitation by emphatically *other* persons, as the forever internal correlate of the material person.⁴⁵

That this is a work of salvaging is crucial here, insofar as it renders binding and determinate subjective experience which is otherwise delegitimated, suppressed or cathected by dominant rationality. As Bernstein writes, the Abstract Expressionist artworks with which Greenberg is most closely associated “[engage] us on the ground of our bodily mortality, which the

⁴³ Amelia Jones, for example, characterizes Greenberg’s criticism in terms of Kantian “disinterestedness” insofar as, concerned solely with “ostensibly pure form,” it veils “the particularities, biases, and investments of the body/self of the interpreter.” Jones, *Body Art*, 76–77. While Jones here maps Greenberg’s criticism onto Kant’s distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful, possibly the most commonly cited evidence of Greenberg’s Kantianism is his own claim that, as “Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic,” modernism “used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting [...]” Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85. From this, it is easy to surmise that the supposed occlusion of the particularities of the subject in Greenberg’s criticism’s preoccupation with “pure form” entails a mode of conceptual subsumption wherein paintings are understood in terms of the extent to which they illuminate their flatness, etc. As Robert Clewis writes, “the claim that Modern art reveals and criticises the conditions of its production constitutes a plainly cognitive, not aesthetic, judgement.” Robert Clewis, “Greenberg, Kant and Aesthetic Judgements of Modernist Art,” *Canadian Aesthetics Journal / Revue canadienne d’esthétique* 14 (2008), 7. However, Greenberg’s other references to Kant belie this analogy, as I have shown at length elsewhere: Daniel Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism: Clement Greenberg and the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 110ff.

⁴⁴ Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 28–29.

⁴⁵ Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 126–27. Emphasis in original.

reigning universals eclipse as a condition for meaning.”⁴⁶ This re-orienting of perception towards human need also allows for a recasting of the notion of a *sensus communis* along somatic and epistemological lines. Despite their ostensible lyricism, “encapsulated in [the objectifications of artistic modernism] is a We, and it is a We that speaks in works, not an I.”⁴⁷

It might be argued, then, that what in Greenberg is often characterized as the championing of the negation of representation and affirmation of medium-specificity was in fact the determinate negation of elements which had become reified and thus did not cultivate a dialectical relationship with the spectator (in Kantian terms, the negation of elements unamenable to aesthetic reflective judgement). Duchamp, in his interview with Calvin Tomkins, makes two points which indicate that we might understand the readymades in similar terms. First, in response to Tomkins’s question as to whether he considers art as a form of magic, Duchamp claims that he does not, going on to elaborate that

the onlooker is as important as the artist. There are two poles, the artist and the onlooker. If there’s no onlooker there’s no art, is there? The artist looking at his own art is not enough. He has to have someone to look at it [...] So the magic part of it—I don’t believe in it anymore, I am afraid I am an agnostic in art, so to speak. I don’t believe in it with all the trimmings, the mystic trimmings and the reverence trimming and so forth.⁴⁸

Duchamp’s refutation of art’s magical properties here does not seem like a positivistic affirmation that artworks should simply be understood in the same way as any other object in the world, which would position him firmly opposed to Greenberg. Instead, the element of magic against which he appears to be arguing is that which demands complete reverence in the face of an artwork, and thus demotes the particularity of the spectator. If we return to his comments about the role of chance in the production of the readymades, we can extrapolate that he hopes they will engender a mode of reception akin to that which meets with Greenberg’s approbation.

We have already seen that when Duchamp claims that the readymades are aleatoric artworks, he means that they were chosen intuitively, rather than randomly. He goes on provocatively to assert that aleatoric art is thus “a real expression of the subconscious.”⁴⁹ When Tomkins retorts that John Cage, then the most famous exponent of chance in art, has “always used chance as a means of getting *outside* his own personality,” Duchamp insists upon the distinction between the personality of Cage’s rational mind and his subconscious, affirming that “the duty of chance is to express what is unique and indeterminate about us beyond the rational.”⁵⁰ Now, if Duchamp is suggesting that his readymades, as aleatoric artworks, also interpellate viewers on the level of what is unique and thus indeterminate

⁴⁶ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁸ Duchamp, *The Afternoon Interviews*, 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 51–53. Emphasis in original.

about them as corporeal subjects, in defiance of dominant rationality, then we have an account of these artworks which characterizes their dynamics as self-same with the dynamics which were the ultimate referent of Greenberg's acclaim.⁵¹

Contemporaneously with the essays which I have been discussing, Greenberg was wont to claim that Abstract Expressionism had itself become reified and hardened into mannerism, certainly since 1964. We have now seen that the stratagems pioneered by Duchamp in the early twentieth century rest on the same dynamics which had led Greenberg to champion Abstract Expressionism in its heyday. Thus, we might claim that if a younger generation of artists had turned to these stratagems when Abstract Expressionism no longer cultivated these dynamics, they had done so not to achieve the empty simulacra of "aesthetic surprise," as Greenberg would have it, but rather because it was through these stratagems that a dialectical relationship between artwork and spectator could still be achieved.

Nevertheless, everything we have seen thus far does not address dematerialization, which is an aspect of much postmodern art often considered to obviate the relevance of Greenberg's critical paradigm more than any other. We might contend that the objectivation of the empirical world's detritus in readymades and Pop Art invokes aesthetic contemplation in a manner fundamentally akin to the works of high modernism. However, in the concluding section of this paper, I want to ask whether similar dynamics might be gleaned in works which, in the words of Benjamin Buchloh, "explicitly insisted on being addressed outside of the parameters of the production of formally ordered, perceptual objects."⁵²

...

To return to Bernstein: in his discussion of readymades he seems to imply that, in fact, the materiality of artworks is crucial for the cultivation of dialectical spectatorship. I have argued that readymades induce such reception attuned to particularity by illustrating a homology between Duchamp's account of how he hopes his readymades will affect spectators and Bernstein's philosophical extrapolations on spectatorship from the implications of Greenberg's criticism. Bernstein, on the other hand, makes the case for the readymades' illumination of particularity from the other direction, as it were. He contends that the "rationally compelling sensuous particularity without external conceptuality" achieved by Abstract Expressionism through emphasis on the elements specific to its medium is "the *generative* idea of the readymade."⁵³ Bernstein elaborates that Abstract Expressionism was "pursued for the sake of

⁵¹ Here, it is important to stress the inextricability of the unconscious from the errant corporeality of the subject which is otherwise subordinated by dominant rationality. It is to this inextricability which Theodor W. Adorno refers when he affirms that there is a "materialist moment which is present in Freud from the very beginning, which is signified by him through the fundamental concept of genital desire." Theodor W. Adorno, cited in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 206.

⁵² Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (winter 1990), 105.

⁵³ Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 213–14. Emphasis in original.

de re sensuous particularity” and yet “rests on [an] arbitrary [...] premise: the convention of stretched canvas to which pigment (or its equivalent) is applied.”⁵⁴ The readymade, Bernstein writes, achieves the former by underlining the latter.

Bernstein illustrates this by drawing a comparison between Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (1947). In the latter painting, debris such as nails, thumbtacks, tops of paint tubes, matchsticks, pushpins and pennies are afforded some sense of particularity in defiance of the reified world by way of their imbrication in the work's “watery swirl” of paint material.⁵⁵ In the case of *Fountain*, the same gesture—the issuance of “the claim of art”—is achieved by signing a urinal with the name R. Mutt, turning it 90 degrees, and placing it on a pedestal.⁵⁶ For Bernstein, readymades are accordingly *Full Fathom Five's* “thumbtacks and pennies and cigarette *without paint or canvas*.”⁵⁷ He contends that, consequently, the notion that readymades demonstrate that “the difference between art and utility [is] just a matter of perceptual attitude” is misplaced.⁵⁸ Instead, Bernstein argues that what is crucial is the fact that “the obdurate materiality out of which artworks are composed reappears as the lost sensuous particular itself—thumbtacks, keys, pushpins, urinal, snow shovel, bottle rack, bicycle wheel, comb.”⁵⁹

For Bernstein, then, dialectical, embodied aesthetic experience depends on the non-rationalized, non-instrumental obdurate materiality of the artwork, even if this obdurate materiality is in the form of extra-aesthetically functional objects which are simply “changed in the slightest degree.”⁶⁰ Yet, I would contend that my argument in this article has shown that one does not have to subscribe to a voluntaristic model whereby the aesthetic perceptual attitude is transitive and arbitrary in order to argue that the sensuous particularity of artworks is, while certainly sufficient, not a necessary means towards the sensuously particular aesthetic experience on the part of the spectator which was always ultimately at stake in Greenberg's criticism.

Certainly, as we saw, the self-exteriorization which constitutes this aesthetic experience, wherein the viewer steps outside of themselves *qua* subject subjectivated by dominant rationality, is emphatically compelled by the palpability of Abstract Expressionism. We have also seen that Greenberg, even after his tacit abandonment of medium-specificity, still harped on the importance of art's “immediate phenomenal substance,” and that this, along with artistic praxis being “felt and discovered,” was supposedly decisive in the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Nevertheless, I have also shown that Greenberg concedes that postmodernism induces an “act of mental distancing,” and I have argued that this chimes with the decidedly “felt and discovered” artistic process behind Duchamp's readymades, his

⁵⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 210–11.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 214–15.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 214. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

comments on which we can interpret as centering the “immediate phenomenal substance” of the spectator. Rather than mimetically responding to the exhilarating corporeality of an Abstract Expressionist canvas, the spectator recapitulates the somatic experience of Duchamp himself in his subconscious selection of the readymades. And if the (intuitively) strategic deployment of everyday objects can invite such embodied perception, why not an ephemeral act, or a process, or the instructions for an iterative procedure?

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the fact that the dematerialization of the artwork does not obviate the relevance of Greenberg’s fundamental critical paradigm is by turning to the work and writings of Adrian Piper, an artist who, unsurprisingly considering her race and gender, was never mentioned by Greenberg to my knowledge, but who came to prominence at the time Greenberg was making his case against postmodernism. Although it is rarely completely unmoored from the visual, Piper’s work is fundamentally conceptual and almost certainly would have raised Greenberg’s ire given that her work’s fascination is ostensibly more historical, cultural, and theoretical than it is aesthetic. However, in the way that Piper anticipates how her work is received, we find a definitive account of dialectical spectatorship.

In a 2013 lecture entitled “The Real Thing Strange,” in keeping with her notorious refusal to discuss specific artworks directly, Piper, who is also famously a Kant scholar, delineates the attitude necessary for an encounter with her work by interrogating the distinction that Kant draws in the *First Critique* between synthesized and unsynthesized intuitions. As an analytic philosopher, Piper is not wont to tease out the aporias in the *Third Critique* which allow us to read aesthetic reflective judgements as symptomatic of an excess irreducible to our extant categories. For Piper, we might comfortably conceive aesthetic reflective judgements as the “the free play of the cognitive faculties,” and she affirms that the territory to which she is gesturing “stretches beyond [the *Third Critique*’s] reach of conceptualization.”⁶¹ However, she deploys Kant’s distinction between synthesized and unsynthesized intuitions in order to make a similar point regarding art’s illumination of those elements of experience which exceed the conceptual subsumption of determinate cognitive judgements.

It is unnecessary to rehearse Piper’s exposition of the distinction here; suffice to say that she affirms that it is a distinction “between those appearances that we recognize as unified objects [synthesized intuitions] and those we merely intuit as spatiotemporally located presences [unsynthesized intuitions].”⁶² For Piper, if one wants to meet her artwork “on its own territory,” it is necessary “to be comfortable with unsynthesized intuitions: with unfamiliar things and happenings and states and presences that confound and silence the mind and decompose the ego”; it is necessary to be comfortable in a “state of vigilant alertness that maximizes receptivity to whatever the real thing strange has to offer.”⁶³

⁶¹ Adrian Piper, “The Real Thing Strange,” in *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016*, ed. Christophe Cherix, Cornelia Butler, and Donald Platzker (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 72–93, here 91.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

Here, then, it is clear that, on her telling at least, Piper's work cannot be accused of the premeditation for which Greenberg indicts postmodernism. Absolutely central to her work—and certainly her most celebrated work during Greenberg's lifetime, for example the *Catalysis* and *Mythic Being* series—is its intervention into “cultural habits and expectations.” However, Piper insists that such works nevertheless cannot be captured “intellectually, by relying on wall labels and museum tours and reviews and other people's comments and discussions and analyses.”⁶⁴ Instead, she contends that they require a mode of reception which feels and discovers, with “direct, unguarded, and sustained exposure to the intuitive presence of the artwork on terms that cannot be talked at all.”⁶⁵ Moreover, Piper is emphatic that the “empirical world... that lies beyond the mind's ability to grasp it,” to which unsynthesized intuitions alert us, includes the “empirical self” of the subject who opens themselves to such unsynthesized intuitions.⁶⁶ Thus, we have an account of the experience of art proximate to Greenberg's account of modernism as I have characterized it in this article, in spite of the ostensible incommensurability of Piper's work with his critical paradigm. It is an account of the experience of art wherein, precisely in its evasion of discursive thinking, an artwork invites and objectivates the experience of corporeal subjects in reciprocity with objects, including their own corporeality, which is dismissed extra-aesthetically by dominant rationality, and thereby indicates the possibility that such a dialectical relationship between subjects and objects may not be so out of reach under changed conditions.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.