

# THE ART BULLETIN

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Iconoclasm was an attack on the real presence of the depicted prototype through assault on the image. Iconophile and iconoclast thinkers in the eighth century, for the first time, considered the image entirely *as representation*. A transformative moment in the discourse of images, it liberated the image from an emphasis on ontology to place it in an epistemological relation to its referent. The impulse to rethink the meanings of images emerged from debates within pre-Christian culture, between Christians and pagans, and between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, deeply influencing the understanding of images in the later Middle Ages and the Reformation.

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The defining image of the Eternal City for more than a century, Francesco Rosselli's monumental engraving of Rome (ca. 1485/87–90), now lost, was a milestone in urban representation. Rosselli's view embodied a new approach to depicting the city that emphasized physical resemblance while conveying a strong sense of urban identity. The success of Rosselli's paradigm, appropriated by generations of later artists, demonstrates the breadth and strength of the print market. The print's history provides a revealing case study of the establishment, transmission, and transformation of a paradigm, and it raises important questions of authorship and innovation in Renaissance print culture.

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Some Chinese artists exploited the spatial and temporal potential of the handscroll format by moving beyond traditional linear readings to experiential readings. Huang Xiangjian, for example, in 1656 composed a pictorial ascent of Mount Jizu in Yunnan Province that lent itself to such a constructed experience. Its reception combined a knowledgeable reading of the artist's picture and inscription with viewers' ability to visualize the mountain's polyvalent topography in full from the summit. This transformative experience culminates in a *daguan*, or "grand view": an elevated, panoramic prospect metaphorically implying the comprehensive understanding of certain enlightened individuals.

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# REGARDING ART AND ART HISTORY

## Unexplained

Richard Schiff

It is this kind of personal, internal image [the so-called body image] that Picasso is portraying here. . . . How Picasso came to that I have no idea at all.—Meyer Schapiro, in “A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art,” 1948; “The Unity of Picasso’s Art,” 1985<sup>1</sup>

The emotion in that picture [by de Kooning] reminds me of all emotion. . . . You can’t specify what the emotion is but are profoundly stirred nevertheless.—Clement Greenberg, in “A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art,” 1948<sup>2</sup>

To what extent should art historians interpret? What does an interpretation explain, and to whom? Does interpretation cater to an ideological program? Is it an honest inference, as objective as possible? Does it amount to speculative invention? Does it project a fantasy, perhaps collective, perhaps personal? It may assume each of these modes. To be effective, the rhetoric of interpretation disguises ideology as inference, projection as invention.

Every art historian, every critic is likely on some occasion to have entered an interpretative dead end. When Meyer Schapiro addressed Pablo Picasso’s configuration of the body, he arrived at a plausible interpretation but could not explain how or why the artist would have conceived of such meaning (“no idea at all”). Lacking contextual evidence, an interpretation threatens to reflect back on the interpreter, exposing not the artist’s interests and desires but the writer’s. When Clement Greenberg faced a painting by Willem de Kooning, a different kind of interpretative failing occurred—or perhaps a strategic success, for in certain situations, no interpretation is a suitable response (“you can’t specify”). Choosing not to identify or typify the felt effect, Greenberg left indeterminate whether the emotion originated in the artist, the art, or the writer.

While preparing an interpretative study of de Kooning’s art—taking into account its cultural context and critical reception, as it seems a historian must—I realized (or perhaps imagined) that this art led me to leave the analytic structure as open as possible, without abandoning elemental coherence. *Between Sense and de Kooning* begins, passes from topic to topic, and ends; but it fails to progress any more than art progresses, at least according to de Kooning, who gave aesthetic progress little credence.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, de Kooning ought to be a favorite of those art historians who, within the academic subculture, experienced the prevailing indoctrination of the later decades of the twentieth century. De Kooning regarded images as products of recycling; he traced his own forms and those of other artists to generate engaging variations. We, too, consider originality, uniqueness, and progress as arbitrary cultural constructions. Yet this skeptical attitude toward normative institutional values has not converted the scholarly discipline to de Kooning’s remedy of intensified sensory experience. Instead, art historians con-

tinue to fix on generalized constructs: cultural trends, intercultural gestures of resistance, and the many alternative mythologies developed through avant-garde practice. Rather than cultivating sensitivity to the randomness of sensation, we detect new hierarchies within a semiotics of sensory experience. Questioning “red,” we seek its meaning as symbol, while neglecting to feel the color itself.

My epigraphs from Schapiro and Greenberg derive from a symposium on modern art that took place in New York in June 1948, organized by *Life* magazine. The Museum of Modern Art made its penthouse available for the gathering, complete with examples of modern painting and sculpture ready to be inspected by a distinguished group of participants. The elephant in the penthouse was abstraction: at issue, whether abstract art could match the expressive, communicative power of representational art, if not surpass it. The primary advocates of the newer forms of modernist practice were Schapiro and Greenberg. Each remained true to his professional niche: Schapiro as art historian offered an elaborate interpretation of Picasso’s abstraction of figures, whereas Greenberg as art critic defended de Kooning’s seemingly “pure” abstraction by refusing to interpret.

Three decades later, Greenberg complained privately that Schapiro, rather than following intuitive insights, seemed compelled to insert an extraneous issue into talk of a painting to generate a scholarly explanation. This amounts to a critic objecting to common practice among historians, then and now. According to Greenberg, Schapiro’s plug-ins included “Marx, psychoanalysis, Schiller on how we see ourselves from inside.”<sup>4</sup> Here Greenberg made an uncharacteristic error in recalling a name; it was not the behavioral psychologist Paul Schiller but the psychoanalytic theorist Paul Schilder, author of *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (1935), a study Schapiro often invoked, though tacitly, as at the 1948 symposium.<sup>5</sup>

Schapiro spoke at length about Picasso’s *Girl before a Mirror* (1932; Fig. 1), providing description selectively, according to his interpretation:

Our knowledge of the human body is not only anatomical; there is also an image of the body . . . full of distortions and strange relationships. . . . [The] so-called “body image” . . . is [the] kind of personal, internal image that Picasso is portraying here . . . [the girl’s] awakening impulses . . . as they seem from the inside. . . . The body is represented both from outside and within, and in the mirror is still another image of the body, . . . three different modes of experience, within one picture.<sup>6</sup>

Schapiro explained Picasso’s distortion as the veridical appearance of a body to itself, while the inventive composition signified multiple psychological perspectives. He then mused over details:



1 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Girl before a Mirror*, March 1932, oil on canvas, 64 × 51¼ in. (162.3 × 130.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim (artwork © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, provided by Art Resource, NY)

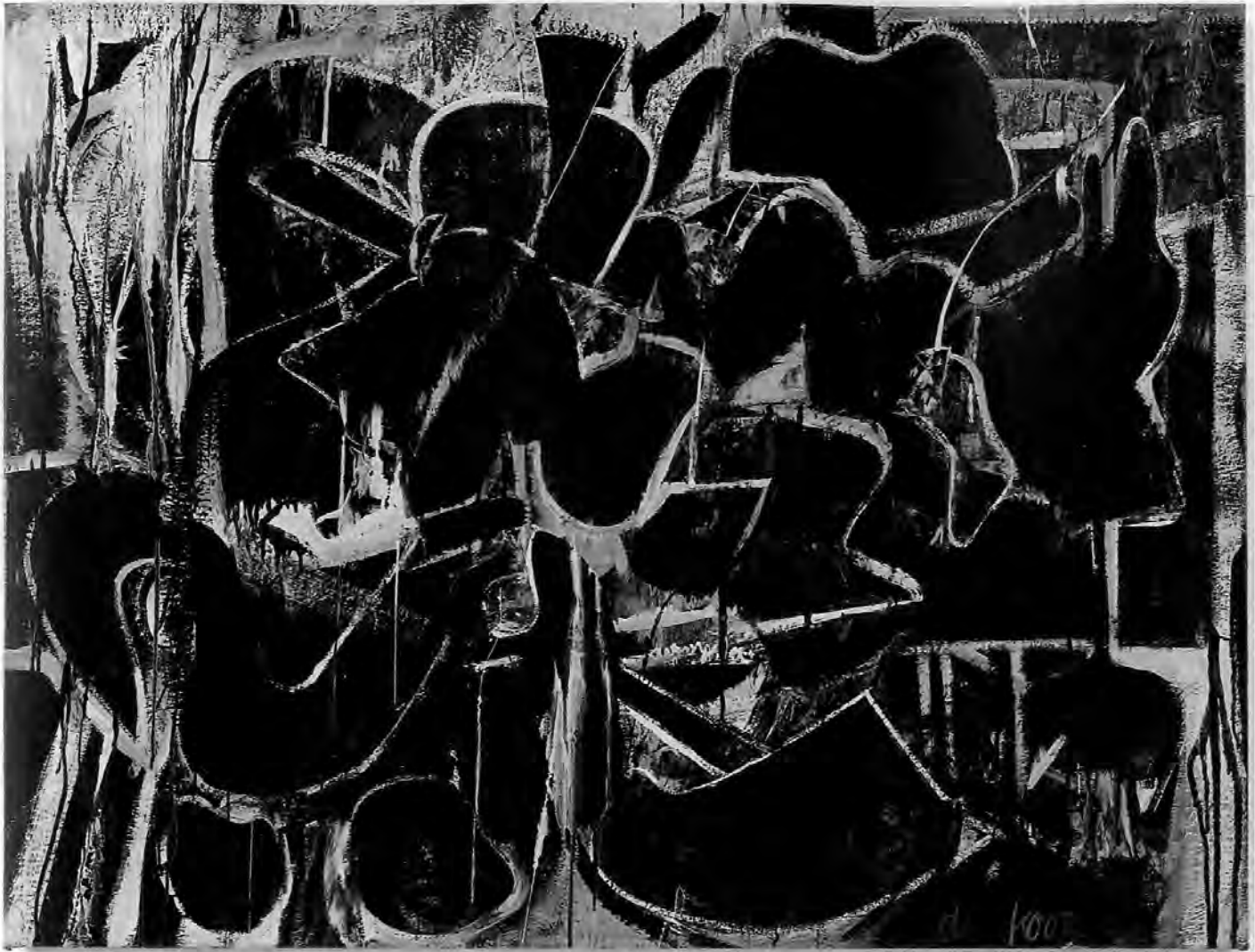
In the face is . . . a moon crescent which occurs elsewhere on the body and there is a large contrast like that of the sun and moon in the relation of the real body and the mirrored body and indeed the moon has a reflected light. Whether the symbolism is deliberate, unconscious or accidental, I would not dare to say; it is at least a metaphor emerging for me.

Signaling a pivot in the interpretation, Schapiro referred to experiencing an enframing metaphor, rather than an open sensation. A translation of semiotic orders was transpiring: visual signs were morphing into verbal signs. The writer moved from felt body image to suns and moons and symbolic form. His interpretation evoked a coherent thematic motivation for Picasso's painting—a guiding idea to guide the artist, if he had had the idea.

I suppose that this metaphorical move counts as establishing a degree of external cultural context—a meaningful theme beyond the specific case of the individual work. This is art history in action, not art criticism, if such a distinction holds (it need not). Another participant at the symposium, philos-

opher Theodore Meyer Greene, responded enthusiastically to Schapiro's intervention. Greene's distaste for abstract art (including the semiabstract work of Picasso) was on record; he had argued that representation affects a viewer more deeply than abstraction.<sup>7</sup> Schapiro would have hesitated to agree with Greene, whereas Greenberg—a closet lover of representation—might have concurred; but such irony is not the concern. Despite being leery of Picasso, Greene accepted Schapiro's interpretation because, for him, it counted as an explanation subject to confirmation. Greene could either see or not see what Schapiro had perceived once Schapiro verbalized it. Feelings come and go, but the articulated word is forever. Schapiro's theoretical hypothesis—the inner body image—and his thematic analysis—the play of sun and moon—fixed Picasso's painting to an intellectual frame, so the philosopher, too, could talk about it.

Eventually, the talk turned to a more resolute type of abstraction. Curator James Johnson Sweeney initiated commentary on de Kooning's *Painting* (1948; Fig. 2), admiring



2 Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), *Painting*, 1948, enamel and oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 56 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (artwork © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, provided by Art Resource, NY)

the composition of its organic elements. Despite the degree of abstraction, he thought he could discern “a crowd, a group of heads.”<sup>8</sup> He was reluctant to leave the painting as the mere materiality of “painting” that its title hinted it was. Greenberg followed, suggesting that de Kooning might be “wrestling with his fears,” but if so, this was not what the vigorously painted surface signified. Greenberg never indicated a meaning. I assume it was not because he lacked an intuition in this instance, but because he worried he would butcher the feeling by articulating it. Critics have their own fears. As we know, Greenberg offered something less than interpretation, a mere reaction: “You can’t specify what the emotion is but are profoundly stirred nevertheless.” To paraphrase: the emotion in a de Kooning stimulates sustained looking, not speaking. The emotion could be de Kooning’s expression; it could be inherent to the painting; it could be the viewer’s projection. Transitive and intransitive, emotion moves a person and simply moves: from one potential origin to another, it transforms.

The problem for the acceptance of de Kooning’s art, both

in 1948 and now, is that Greenberg’s restrained response hardly stirs the Greens of the world. Nor does it inhibit talk about ineffable emotions in paintings, as in Greene’s own commentary: “The mood that [Giorgione’s *Tempest*] expresses is a perfectly consistent mood of reverie and reflective contemplation.”<sup>9</sup> Am I insensitive if I fail to join Greene in becoming dreamy-eyed?

Venturing into art historical territory, Greenberg often backed his aesthetic judgments with analytic exegesis after the fact. He switched from appreciation to interpretation, relying on elaborate contextual metaphors. He associated American materialism with the pronounced materiality of American art, an artist’s homeopathic response to a culture perceived as stultifying and oppressive.<sup>10</sup> Greenberg’s steady commitment to moments of personal sensory and somatic experience proved insufficient to dodge ensuing art historical trouble. In a curious rhetorical twist, Rosalind Krauss converted to a singular form—“the ‘logical moment’”—what Greenberg had inscribed exclusively as plural—“logical moments.”<sup>11</sup> In question was a text of 1945, thematically related

to Greenberg's symposium statement of 1948. His "logical moments" were fictive stages of understanding that an interpreter would impose on the continuity of experience for want of a better analytic device (think of parsing a sentence that has already delivered its message). In this context, referring to *the* logical moment makes no sense.

Like many others, Greenberg argued that analysis breaks unbreakable experience into temporal segments and spatial fragments, logical or not. He posed a challenge to interpretation: "Doesn't one find so many times that the 'full meaning' of a picture [is] most fully revealed at the first fresh glance?" He placed *full meaning* within scare quotes because he was questioning the notion that full analysis yields full meaning, an idea advanced in the study he was reviewing, Lionello Venturi's *Painting and Painters*. In her reading of Greenberg, Krauss seized on *the logical moment*, though this phrase appears nowhere. She presented Greenberg as advocating a timeless, disembodied appreciation of art, reducible to a single point of intellectual acuity, the ever evasive "logical moment." This phantom position belonged neither to Greenberg nor to Venturi, whose argument Greenberg's review nevertheless treated ungenerously.<sup>12</sup> Krauss's interpretative swerve is more severe than Greenberg's, since she in the 1990s was hunting the same critical quarry as he in the 1940s: not the generality of determinate meaning, but the multiple specificities of indeterminate experience. Compelled to gain-say and demythologize what is no more mythological than anything else, an ideologically driven writer will sometimes counter those with whom he or she ought to recognize an affinity. Factual errors and skewed evaluations result. Perhaps the immediate cause is narrow-minded competitiveness.

Greenberg distinguished sensory and emotional experience from more theorized realms of meaning (cultural, historical, psychological). The implication of his critique of Venturi was twofold: first, no analysis yields full meaning, that is, no method or course of analysis successfully excludes alternatives; second, if something like full meaning is to be experienced, it will be intuited only when analysis is lacking. Greenberg's follow-up, rhetorical question underscored the latter point: "Doesn't one find . . . that this '[full] meaning' fades progressively as continued examination destroys the unity of impression?" With the loss of phenomenological wholeness, it would seem that elements of the sensorium drop out of the experience. You may think more, but you feel less. As Greenberg stated, "logic as such"—the reasoned argument of an analytic interpreter—"has very little to do with the experience of art. . . . Books telling you how to look at pictures should generally be read only after you have already learned how by patient experience." Experience is cumulative but nonrepetitive. Greenberg was not arguing for "the 'logical moment'" but, to the contrary, warning of the losses its establishment would entail. Much of the loss may be unavoidable anyway. Exposure to ideological values, standards of objectivity, accepted patterns of speculation, and culturally informed, not-so-"personal" desires—the factors that guide interpretation—already taint "patient experience." For this reason, Greenberg linked innovation to the missteps of socially alienated artists, hardly affected by the stains of culture.<sup>13</sup>

Benefiting from "the instantaneous shock of sight" (Green-

berg's term in 1945), de Kooning ambled through art history in search of arresting images, while he also admired billboards and remained alert to the play of motor oil on pavement and coffee residue in cups.<sup>14</sup> He identified his method as "eclectic by chance"—that is, not a method.<sup>15</sup> His example cautions me to avoid restricting my interpretative judgments to any particular context. De Kooning was elite culture, pop culture, and no culture in one. A selective interpretation promises the world, the one key to all experience, but the satisfaction it generates masks alternative views. When left unfiltered, sensory experience promises nothing; it may be too specific to affect more than a single person at a single moment. Experience moves on. Yet its limited but shocking truth counterbalances our easy indulgence in clichés and willful projections as we choose either to follow prevailing authority or resist it (both positions acknowledge *authority*). De Kooning's art induces the interpreter to mimic the artist de Kooning was: oblivious to authority and its order, respecting but doubting every thought and every sensation. An art historian does well to interpret *short of explaining*. Schapiro's "no idea at all" and Greenberg's "you can't specify" speak to and from experience.

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## Notes

1. Meyer Schapiro, quoted in Russell W. Davenport, ed., "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," *Life* 25 (October 11, 1948): 59; and Schapiro, "The Unity of Picasso's Art" (1985), in *The Unity of Picasso's Art* (New York: George Braziller, 2000), 32. In various iterations of his argument (the symposium statement of 1948, lectures in 1969 and 1973, and a text of 1985), Schapiro applied Paul Schilder's concept of "body image" to Picasso's figures (see below), adding that he could establish no existential link between the art and this contemporaneous theory. I thank Jason A. Goldstein, Michael Schreyach, Wayne Andersen, and Linda Henderson for aid in research.
2. Clement Greenberg, quoted in Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," 62.
3. Richard Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning* (London: Reaktion, 2011).
4. Clement Greenberg to Wayne Andersen, March 9, 1979 (courtesy Wayne Andersen).
5. Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (1935; New York: International Universities Press, 1950). On Schilder's currency, see Lawrence D. Steffel Jr., "Body Imagery in Picasso's 'Night Fishing at Anübes,'" *Art Journal* 25 (Summer 1966): 356 n. 1; and Michael Schreyach, "Towards Pragmatic Painting: Jackson Pollock's Reflexive Potential" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 256–61.
6. For this and the quotation to follow, see Schapiro, in Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," 59.
7. "[I cannot] grant that the expressive potentiality of representational subject-matter is ever ignored in painting with impunity": Theodore Meyer Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 295. For Greene's response to Schapiro, see Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," 59.
8. James Johnson Sweeney, quoted in Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," 62. Sweeney's comments on de Kooning were preceded by some derogatory remarks by Greene on Jackson Pollock.
9. Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, 295.
10. See Richard Shiff, *Doubt* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 117–24; and

- idem, "Homeopathic Criticism," *Common Knowledge* 7 (Winter 1998): 4–13.
11. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 98, 108; and Clement Greenberg, "On Looking at Pictures: Review of *Painting and Painters: How to Look at a Picture: From Giotto to Chagall* by Lionello Venturi" (1945), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 2, 34–35. Except as otherwise noted, quotations in this paragraph and the following two derive from these two sources.
  12. Venturi met Greenberg partway by stressing the primacy of emotion, key to "the meaning . . . of the picture as a whole. . . . We cannot fully appreciate that meaning unless we ourselves have first been emotionally moved. . . . Our interpretation cannot be the 'factual' interpretation the so-called scientists of art are seeking"; Lionello Venturi, *Painting and Painters: How to Look at a Picture; From Giotto to Chagall* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 237.
  13. See Greenberg, "Henri Rousseau and Modern Art" (1946), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 93–95.
  14. Greenberg, "On Looking at Pictures," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 34; and Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 240, 260–63.
  15. De Kooning, "Interview with Willem de Kooning," by Harold Rosenberg, *Artnews* 71 (September 1972): 54.