

# Aesthetic Engineering

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**T**he question of whether art should reflect the realities of industrial capitalism or instead challenge its most implicit assumptions about the ordering of daily life occupied both American and European artists and intellectuals at the turn of the century. The first position, that modern art should submerge itself in the novel technology and production processes of industrial capitalism, has been the guiding premise linking such apparently antagonistic cultural theories and movements as the machine aesthetic of the 1910s and 1920s, the “socialist realism” of Proletcult and cultural nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, and the self-referential Modernist canon of the postwar years. Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel of 1888, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, is an early statement of this idea, depicting a socialist future in which the “cultural lag” behind the impersonal forces of corporate industry has been happily eliminated. For Bellamy, the modern factory system offered new standards of authority and competence that would eventually characterize a socialist culture. If those standards undermined democratic conventions of amateur participation in the creation and enjoyment of art, Bellamy’s response was to urge that such conventions be quietly forgotten. The tenacity of this tradition of cultural commentary is demonstrated in part by the fact that a contradictory current of thought, beginning in the “aesthetic socialism” of William Morris in England and reworked in an American context by Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and James Oppenheim, is today almost completely forgotten. To draw upon the past so as to criticize

contemporary life was, to these writers, a salutary counterweight to the crude reflection theories that have shaped most socialist and liberal thinking about art in this century.

Because of its tremendous influence on American Progressivism, and its early formulation of themes that would be constantly rediscovered by later cultural theorists, Bellamy's novel is a good place to begin an examination of modern assumptions about art and industrialism. Bellamy's twenty-first-century utopia depicts a city-dwelling army of drilled laborer-soldiers directed by an elder administrative elite—"the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise." The novel's brief discussion of art in this technocratic future centers on a musical telephone device that transmits recital music from centralized concert halls to the home of the listener. This introduction of "labor saving by cooperation into our musical service" has relieved Bellamy's socialists of the agonies of having to "endure so much playing and singing in your homes by people who had only the rudiments of the art."

Bellamy's cultural vision was informed by his theory of historical change, in which revolution is replaced by sensible management. Political agitation was to have no part in the effortless evolution that would guide industrial capitalism to socialism; indeed, "the followers of the red flag," with their noisome protests, merely hindered the process of reform. More enlightened individuals realized that the corporate consolidation of the late nineteenth century had as its logical end "a golden future" and therefore shaped their customs, beliefs, and culture according to the needs of monopolized industry. The hierarchical division of labor within the army and factory, in Bellamy's socialism, extends its domain to include all aspects of social and private life. The permanent division of society into employers and employees, the managers and the objects of "industrial evolution," has as its complement a culture based on acquiescence by the many in the artistic dictates of a few professionals.

In a review of *Looking Backward* in the English socialist newspaper *The Commonweal*, William Morris denounced the "unmixed modern," "unhistoric and unartistic" cast of Bellamy's utopian society. In Bellamy's socialism, the same telephone that liberates citizens from the pains of amateur participation in the arts also broadcasts interminable sermons on the improvements of life achieved since the demise of the old capitalist order, the most prominent of which we would recognize today as the credit card, department store, supermarket, and fast food restaurant. Bellamy's insistence on the irrelevance of the past precludes the critical evaluation of the present. Having rejected the presocialist era as barbaric and lacking in the conveniences that surround the good life, Bellamy's telephone preachers deliver a present-tense gospel that makes future change unthinkable. The inhabitants of this militarized state, as incapacitated cultural consumers and dutiful operatives within a gigantic national corporation, find in the my-

thology of unceasing progress an impediment to remembering or imagining an alternative way of life. A manipulated mass fervor for the existing order and collective amnesia stand out as the cultural ideals of this twenty-first-century utopia.

Morris countered Bellamy's ideal of the centralized administration of society by the competent few with a vision of a democratic culture in which men and women would command the skills, knowledge, and leisure necessary to control their own lives. Instead of demanding that cultural traditions incompatible with industrial labor be repressed, Morris attacked the "art-lacking or unhappy labor of the greater part of men" under industrial capitalism as a threat to the survival of art of any kind. In his view, the relentless assault on the worker's historic rights to free time, self-education, craftsmanship, and play, which accompanied the rise of the factory system, resulted in the withering of the "lesser arts" of ornament and decoration in production. Simultaneously, the deterioration of "that tradition which bound artist and public together" in an appreciation of skills and experiences shared over generations forced "high" artists to cater to the fashionable whims of the rich or withdraw into "a language not understood of the people." As an alternative, Morris proposed the reintegration of artistic creation and enjoyment with everyday life, seeking to "win Art, that is to say the pleasure of art; win back Art again to our daily labour."

Like John Ruskin, Morris believed that the medieval craft tradition, which "used the whole of a man for the production of a piece of goods, and not small portions of many men," could inform a future in which work would be infused with the pleasure that comes from the construction of beautiful objects. Morris's writings point to a conclusion that has eluded most of his successors: namely that attempts to make art "catch up" with supposedly autonomous technological and economic developments reveal only a fundamental impatience with art itself, especially when it is made and enjoyed in modes incompatible with hierarchical patterns of social discipline and control.

**T**he most coherent attempts to carry on Morris's explorations in cultural and social criticism in the United States can be found in articles by Bourne, Frank, and Oppenheim in *The Seven Arts*, which during 1916-1917 championed the cause of an American cultural renaissance and socialist transformation until the journal collapsed financially under the war hysteria stirred up by the Wilson administration. For this group, the legacy of American business enterprise was a spiritually impoverished nation incapable of serious culture or critical thought. These writers condemned the conjuncture of ethereal scholasticism and mindless profitmongering in American life as the product of Puritans and pioneers who

shunned cultural creativity and renewal for the exploitation of nature.

This rigid division between intellectual and commercial pursuits was intensified by industrialization, which, according to Brooks, "devitalized" workers while abandoning "the orthodox culture of the world" to "the prig and the aesthete, those two sick blossoms of the same sapless stalk." The lack of cultural traditions of self-understanding in America left intellectuals prey to every passing fashion and fad of thought, ending finally, at the turn of the century, in the capitulation of even the most academic of authors to unabashed celebrations of the real. "The tragic thing," as Frank saw it, is that art "can end by becoming a mere expression of the materials from whose tyranny it rightfully should free us. This, in fact, is the situation that confronts America."

Although this group identified itself with a vaguely defined "Young America," it never lapsed into a superficial apotheosis of the novelties of modern life. Instead, these writers turned to Whitman, Thoreau, and Lincoln, to Ruskin, Morris, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, and to the popular traditions brought to the United States by European immigrants for sources for new democratic cultural ideals critical of corporate capitalism. Oppenheim lamented that the expansion of American political democracy was coupled with a shrinking of the cultural sphere to "largely the work of specialists in expression for specialists in appreciation." "Never was the *machinery* of art more widely and thoroughly distributed," he wrote in a passage reminiscent of Morris. "And never, among a great people, was there less of art."

At the same time that *The Seven Arts* was providing a forum for critics of industrial production and the attempted cultural cretinization of the working class, the journal was also publishing articles by Paul Rosenfeld, Horace Holley, and Willard Huntington Wright, who urged that artists integrate themselves with their surroundings so as to best speak for their countrymen. Rosenfeld exhorted musicians to "the surrender of ourselves" to "the American destiny," a position greatly at odds with the critical stance of the "Young America" group. As editor, Oppenheim expressed in his own work the contradictory tendencies within the journal. The same person who bemoaned the lack of cultural democracy in industrial society could also delight in the exciting energy of America's expanding economy, hoping that an "American Zarathustra" would appear to express the vitality of "the land of Bigness." "The embracing of social experience," which Oppenheim believed characterized the literature of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Milton, should shape the attitude of the modern artist toward his environment.

Not surprisingly, this command that artists submerge themselves in the progressive flow of events rested on the authority of science. Too many artists were really reactionaries, Oppenheim complained. In shying away from technological advances, they failed "to bring man up to the level to which power has been brought" and "to do with man what has been done by nature." Instead, contem-

porary artists should "look to the present, face reality as it is," and "know the new dynamic energies released" by industrialization.

**A**t first glance, the critical writings of Clement Greenberg in the 1940s and 1950s would seem to have nothing to do with efforts to make art a reflection of developments in industrial technology and science.<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, like many of his fellow contributors to the *Partisan Review*, had intellectual roots in the Proletarian Culture movement of the thirties. However, by the time he began his courageous defense of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and other members of the first New York school of postwar artists, Greenberg had decisively rejected the Proletcult position that a socialist art should devote itself to the portrayal of the virile, committed worker idealized in Communist party platforms. Beginning in the early forties, Greenberg based his criticism on the assumption that the achievements of modern culture were threatened from all sides: by the "middlebrow" vapidness of bourgeois art and literature, by the "kitsch" produced for the working class, and by the party-dictated propaganda of both Stalinist and fascist movements. The defense of "vanguard" art in a hostile environment became his first priority, necessitating the professionalization of Modernist aesthetics into a precise, regularized doctrine free of the questionable standards of taste of the party bureaucrats, industrialists, and kitsch-consuming masses. It is in Greenberg's effort to codify artistic Modernism that the tradition of Bellamy, Rosenfeld, and Oppenheim reemerges. The desire to reconcile art with industrial society expresses itself in Greenberg's transformation of cultural radicalism into the administration of a self-referential cultural idiom by a critical elite—in short, into aesthetic engineering.

Modernism, Greenberg argued, must adopt the forms of self-definition characteristic of modern science in order to survive in an inhospitable environment. "Whatever we conclude about the greatness of art in the past," he concluded

<sup>1</sup> The citations from Greenberg's writings are too numerous to be indexed here in footnote form. Readers should consult Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) for an introduction to his work. I have also drawn from original essays published in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Horizon*, and *The Nation*. The letters from Gene Davis to Greenberg are from the Archives of American Art (Detroit), Clement Greenberg Collection. In addition to the writings of Morris and the *Seven Arts* group, three secondary works—Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), and Christopher Lasch, "Modernism, Politics, and Philip Rahv," *Partisan Review* 47 (1980): 183–94—have been of great value in helping me to assess Greenberg's Modernist criticism. Finally, I am indebted to Christopher Lasch, Sheldon S. Wolin, Arlene Shaner, and Christopher Clarke, among others, for their comments and encouragement regarding this essay.

“we shall not be able to lay down limiting or enabling rules for the achievement of greatness in the present or future until aesthetics has become as exactly scientific as physics.” Greenberg fashioned his Modernist theory in these years as a subjectless trajectory of artistic progress resembling cruder variants of technological determinism. In the end, only the critic was capable of summing up the self-enclosed evolution of modern art and of mapping out the exact laws of Modernist development that the young artist should follow. Finally, Greenberg redefined the relationships between critic and artist, and between critic and connoisseur, along lines parallel to the industrial division of labor between administrator and worker.

In all of this, the initial connection between Modernism and political radicalism grew increasingly unclear. As Greenberg put it in 1939, “Today we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.” Greenberg was eventually engaged solely in the management of that “living culture,” reserving for critics like himself the right to speculate about its significance or purpose. In the meantime, artists would be left to the obedient execution of Greenberg’s aesthetic theory. Members of the American art audience, ever mindful of the latest art review, would rehearse their favorite critic’s ideas as proof of their sophistication, thereby debasing the connoisseur ideal and making ridiculous any claim of communion between the artistic “vanguard” and the “masses.” A body of cultural theory ostensibly socialist and anti-Stalinist ended up recreating, in a new artistic form, the industrial division of labor that supported both advanced capitalism and the “really existing socialism,” becoming—in Frank’s words—“a mere expression of the materials from whose tyranny it rightfully should free us.”

**A**n article published in a 1947 issue of the British journal *Horizon*, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” illustrates many of the characteristics of Greenberg’s work as a whole. There Greenberg described the exhaustion of the Parisian art scene by the mid-1930s, the glorification of “middlebrow” culture by America’s dominant class, the elaboration of early Cubism’s “hard-headed” Modernism by Jackson Pollock and David Smith, and the difficulty of relating “this high conception of contemporary art to our own lives” in the United States.

The essay begins with a statement of the dependency of the contemporary American artist on “that vivacious, unbelievable near past which lasted from 1905 until 1930” in Paris. The poverty of American culture forces its artists to “live partly by time transfusions” from an artistic moment that “only Hitler could definitely terminate.” America has lost its provincialism, Greenberg argues, but what

has taken the place of cultural isolationism is the fashionable self-cultivation of the middle class, whose knowledge of art is "a kind of travelogue patter." Mass education has produced a notion of sophistication as "something that belonged inevitably to a high standard of living as personal hygiene." Traditional forms of high culture, therefore, are in danger of disappearing.

In the face of the rise of mass culture and the subjugation of fine art by the "cash-nexus," the French Impressionists and their successors withdrew into the private space of bohemian life to reflect upon the new industrial order. Greenberg writes that these artists accepted that order's premise that "modern life can be radically confronted, understood and dealt with only in material terms," turning it against the assumptions of bourgeois society. "From now on you had nothing to go on but your states of mind and your naked sensations, of which structural, but not religious, metaphysical or historico-philosophical, interpretations were alone permissible." It is materialism, "or positivism," that characterizes for Greenberg such "hard-headed" artists as Cézanne, Gris, Picasso, Léger, Miró, and Brancusi. "Here, as in all great periods of art, scepticism and matter-of-factness take charge of everything in the end."

The great painter of American urban experience for Greenberg is Jackson Pollock, who alone fuses the French heritage of "Picasso's Cubism and Miró's post-Cubism, tintured also with Kandinsky and Surrealist inspiration," with the "violence, exasperation and stridency" of American life. The matter-of-factness of Pollock's art lies in his treatment of the medium, "his concern to maintain and intensify . . . the strong point of late Cubism." A European culture devastated by war is revived by the violent energy of the American city, with its "lonely jungle of immediate sensations, impulses and notions." Similarly, David Smith's constructivist steel sculpture "reflects American industrialism and engineering" in its materials and technique.

The problem facing American culture is that of creating an environment in which an art of "balance, largeness, precision, contempt for nature in all of its particularity" can thrive. Greenberg castigates the Museum of Modern Art and the art dealers of Manhattan's Fifty-seventh Street for having ignored those Greenwich Village artists "who live in cold-water flats and exist from hand to mouth." Mesmerized by the Parisian school in its decadence, the New York cultural elite has shunned the young Americans studying under the German exile Hans Hofmann. Hofmann's "radical discrimination between what is pertinent and permanent in the art of our times and what is merely interesting, curious or sensational" has helped to create a "climate of taste among at least fifty people in America" (including, presumably, Pollock, Smith, and Greenberg himself) "that cannot be matched for rigour and correctness in Paris or London." Greenberg's task as a critic was to convince MOMA, 57th Street, London, and Paris of this fact by the consolidation of European Modernist aesthetic theory in the United States and

by the establishment of the young New York painters as its only legitimate heirs.

Looking back in 1957 on the circle of American artists associated with New York's Eighth Street in the 1930s, Greenberg emphasized their isolation from and relative indifference to the aesthetic standards of art dealers and museum directors. "Fifty-seventh Street was as far away as prosperity," and the Museum of Modern Art was a place to study Picasso and little more: "You did not feel at home there." Gorky, de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock, and all the rest experienced the official hostility to avant-garde art that had characterized the attitude of the French Academy toward the Impressionists. But as Greenberg wrote in 1948, "The alienation of Bohemia was only an anticipation in nineteenth-century Paris; it is in New York that it has been completely fulfilled." Greenberg's search for patronage for these artists, and his postulation of a future reconciliation of culture and society—of the artist and the public—reveal the roots of much of his theory of Modernism in the Progressive tradition, in the machine aesthetic of International Style architecture, and in the positivistic "Marxism-Leninism" of the Stalin era.

The relationship of art to labor, and of the artist to a capitalist society, has been a major question to Marx and many Marxists, as well as to Progressives. It is no surprise, then, that Greenberg should examine the possibility of a future rapprochement between the "advanced" artists and the masses in his writings, for the separation of these two groups plagued intellectuals and artists committed both to Modernism and to some form of socialism. A two-part essay in *Commentary* on "The Plight of Our Culture," published in 1953, is Greenberg's most significant formulation of a possible resolution. Ostensibly a review of T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, the article explores the relation of high culture to class society.

The essay rehearses many of Greenberg's familiar themes about art in industrial life. The commodification of art under capitalism has produced the "middlebrow" pseudo-sophistication of the middle class, the kitsch of the masses, and the complete isolation of the avant-garde, here described as "the 'cadre' that has led the fight for aesthetic truth, high standards, continuity with tradition, and against the utilitarian ethos during the past century." While Eliot saw the revival of an aristocratic class as a necessary defense against the cheapening of cultural standards in industrial society, Greenberg finds in the technological advances of that society the possibility for establishing high art on a new basis.

Eliot's argument leads Greenberg to reconsider Marx's treatment of "base and superstructure," for it was Marx who had most clearly addressed the antagonism between art and capital. According to Greenberg, Marx believed that "science and industrial technology would eventually make it possible for society to

render social differences unnecessary and put the dignified leisure required for the pursuit of high culture within reach of everyone." The gains of modern society in mass education and relative economic amelioration are not therefore to be eliminated by a reversion to aristocracy. The problem of art and labor is now inexorably tied up with the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution.

Under capitalism, the rich are no longer exempt from labor. "Puritanism has won a lasting victory. Work has now become the main business of life and the ground of reality for all classes of industrial society." Even leisure had been infected by the work ethic, becoming now a "passive state" dedicated at best to "distraction and vicarious pleasure" rather than to cultural creation. But instead of advocating the obliteration of this distinction between work and leisure, between labor and art, Greenberg ends up endorsing the collapse of art into labor as necessary to the social achievements of a technologically advanced society. The solution to the precarious existence of the Modernist artists is that of "making work itself the main sphere of culture—that is, of integrating it with culture *without* sacrifice of its efficiency."

The flawed reasoning that runs throughout Greenberg's work finds its clearest expression in this proposal. For here Greenberg celebrates the capitulation of artistic creativity to the dictates of industrial efficiency in the name of a technologically induced socialism. Greenberg's meager discussion of how such a project might be undertaken (a footnote suggests the work of the International School architects as an example) reveals the theoretical and moral poverty of his argument. Praising the introduction of high culture into the workplace through modern architecture and design, Greenberg notes that this trend has "benefitted from the growing realization on the part of industrial experts that cheerfulness and comfort can be as essential to efficiency as the more literally functional qualities of a building." Greenberg effects a reconciliation of art and labor that provides only a veneer of graciousness for a system that he himself has condemned as inimical to a high level of cultural activity. In doing so, he has transformed his bohemian cadres into the aesthetic-relations managers of advanced capitalism.

Greenberg's theory, with its faith in the inevitability of technological progress and the inviolable standards of industrial efficiency, is firmly within the Progressive tradition of cultural criticism. Thorstein Veblen lauded the "expression of economic facility or economic serviceability in any object" as the basis of the new culture of the rising class of engineers. "The canon of beauty in the spirit of functional design," he wrote, "requires expression of the generic." Veblen's description of the new consciousness required by the reign of the engineers might have alerted Greenberg to the dangers of such an ideal. For Veblen, the "intelligence" demanded of the worker in modern industry "is little else than a degree of facility in the apprehension and adaptation to a quantitatively determined causal sequence." Veblen suggested that the worker adapt "that matter-of-fact temper

which recognizes the value of facts as opaque items in the mechanical sequence.”

This acceptance of the “opaqueness” of the production process, strikingly similar to Greenberg’s notion of the supposed “materialism” of the “hard-headed” Modernists, has implications that were fully understood, not by Greenberg, but by Morris. Because he recognized that the ideal of “apprehension and adaptation” demanded of the industrial worker was little more than a parody of intelligent thought, Morris concluded that “we must begin to build up the ornamental part of life—its pleasures, bodily and mental, scientific and artistic, social and individual—on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully, with the consciousness of benefiting ourselves and our neighbors by it.” Morris remained absolutely opposed to the aesthetics of benevolence offered by enlightened managers, comprehending as Greenberg never would that culture and society will remain forever estranged so long as the assumptions underlying the modern factory system are left unchallenged.

What is perhaps most disturbing about Greenberg’s theory, which was intended to salvage both modern art and the socialist promise from reactionaries like Eliot and from Prolet-kitsch devotees on the Communist left, is its unreflective relation to its own past. Despite his break with party-approved models of “committed” art, Greenberg retained the technological determinism and vanguard elitism of Stalinized Marxism. Although Marx consistently denied the autonomy of technology from the social relations of production, Greenberg’s inheritance from orthodox Marxism-Leninism is a facile technological utopianism, in which “cultural lag” explains the apparent failure of culture to keep up with industrial progress. The reconciliation of art and labor, then, involves bringing art up to date with the latest in machinery.

Greenberg has written that “some day it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism,’ which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism,’ turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.” That transformation never entailed a thorough-going critique of the origins of American “anti-Stalinism” and the postwar cult of the “advanced” intellectuals in Progressivism or in Stalinism itself. The failure to carry out such a critique makes Greenberg’s answer to the “plight of our culture” another sorry example of what Raymond Williams has described as the “moral decline of socialism”—“its failure to sustain and clarify an alternative human order.”

**E**very one of them,” Greenberg wrote of the early Abstract Expressionists, “started from French art and got his instinct for style from it; and it was from the French, too, that they all got their most vivid notion of what major, ambitious art had to feel like.” For Greenberg, the Parisian Cubists had irrevoc-

cably liberated painting from its previous dependence on literature. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the medium of painting was considered as an obstacle to the transmission of the artist's religious, historical, political, or philosophical message—of literature. The avant-garde painter of the nineteenth century, however, was forced to turn away from a hostile world. The “escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society,” became the key to the survival of good painting. The revolt against the rule of literature entailed the acceptance “of the limitations of the medium of the specific art.”

Fortunately, the Impressionists and Cubists could find this new aesthetic on the self-reliant ideal of scientific inquiry. By asserting the ultimate two-dimensionality of the picture plane, “pictorial art reduced itself entirely to what was visually verifiable.” The self-referential character of Modernism is part and parcel of a scientific age's “increasing faith in and taste for the immediate, the concrete, the irreducible.” It was this that the “hard-headed” Picasso and Braque understood when they destroyed the Renaissance illusion of depth perspective in their initial Cubist works. Greenberg's antiliterary aesthetic, justified by the scientific disavowal of the transcendent, means for him that “all experience is sanctified, all we can know is the best we can know.” “Scientific method alone asks that a situation be resolved in exactly the same kind of terms in which it is presented,” and it is this method which undermined traditional notions of form and content in painting. For the content of modern art would be modern art itself.

Greenberg's treatment of the artists of the first New York school focuses entirely on their allegiance to the self-contained Modernism begun by the Cubists. Pollock and other painters are praised for their attention to the painting surface, their assertion of its fundamental flatness, and for their evolution away from easel to “all-over” painting. While the easel painting still provides a small window on a painted world, in the Renaissance manner, the all-over painting, by its huge size and its denial of anything that might call attention away from the medium, causes a “dissolution of the pictorial into sheer texture, into apparently sheer sensation, into an accumulation of repetitions”—all qualities that “speak for and answer something profound in contemporary sensibility.”

With this analysis, Greenberg constructed a fantasy of artistic evolutionary progress that corresponds to the myth of the unceasing technical improvement of modern life. “The avant-garde believes that history is creative, always evolving novelty out of itself. And where there is novelty there is hope.” Greenberg's criticism celebrates the modern fragmentation of thought into “sheer sensation” simply because it is new. Pollock's art, for example, may seem incomprehensible and ugly at first, but “in the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty.” Those educated in Greenberg's aesthetics, one step ahead of their competitors in the art market or their fellow museum-goers, will recognize the

iron laws of avant-garde history at work, making sure to spread the news. Somewhere in all this, in the cult of novelty, in the assumption that painting is a search for an as yet unachieved ultimate flatness, in the application of scientific method to artistic creativity, and in the evolutionistic idea of aesthetic progress, the artist and his work have been lost.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 1960s, with the growing acceptance among America's cultural, financial, and political leaders of abstract art, painters like Louis, Olitski, Noland, and Stella tried to further the movement toward self-referential flatness that Greenberg saw beginning in the first New York school painters. The publication in 1961 of *Art and Culture*, a collection of Greenberg's essays during the forties and fifties, established him as perhaps the most influential art critic in America, a friend to many New York painters and an individual enmeshed in the institutional art world of galleries, dealers, museums, universities, and journals.

Greenberg's importance to the development of Gene Davis, among many other painters during this period, is revealed in a series of letters from the artist to the critic. One from 1962 is particularly telling.

I hope that you do not think less of me because I seem to go along so passively with your suggestions. Believe me, I have a mind of my own and take suggestions from very few observers of my work. If you are as great a critic as I think you are, then who the hell am I to resist your suggestions when they make sense to me. I have the feeling that if I had been exposed to your influence as early as Ken [Noland] and Morris [Louis], I might be farther along than I am today. What was it that Oscar Wilde said—"if an influence is strong enough, embrace it."

A year later, Davis mailed Greenberg a copy of an angry letter he had written to the editor of *Art International* but never mailed, in response to an article critical of Greenberg. Davis defends him as "the first art critic in history to have exerted a *major* influence on painters. This is unique, for influence usually flows in the other direction, from artist to critic."

This switch in the usual artist-critic relationship *was* unique. Without challenging Davis's originality as an artist, it is possible to read his letters as a sign that

<sup>2</sup> It is important to head off anticipated criticism by stating that Greenberg's interpretation of the first New York school is not the only possible one, or necessarily the most appropriate one. At the very least, a comprehensive analysis of that school's painters would have to come to grips with Pollock's politics and his interest in psychoanalysis and American Indian art, Newman's anarchism, Rothko's religious approach to painting, and the difficulties inherent in sustaining European artistic traditions in the postwar United States—all questions omitted in a discussion of their works as mere components of Modernism's formalist evolution toward two-dimensionality.

Greenberg's version of Modernism as a self-propelled evolutionary tradition culminates finally in the demotion of art to the carrying-out of principles elaborated in the aesthetic planning office. Greenberg's Modernism strips artists of their autonomy just as that autonomy, defined as the "escape from ideas," is proclaimed. Painting becomes a striving to achieve in paint what someone else has *written* about painting. Tom Wolfe is right on the mark: "The new order of things in the art world was: first you get the Word, and then you can see."

**W**hat philosophy elaborates, art will propagate and adapt for propagation, and will thus fulfill a higher social office than in its most glorious days of old." Such was the conclusion of the great nineteenth-century prophet of scientism, Auguste Comte, who wished to divest art and other forms of consciousness of the dangerous temptations of free speculation and imagination. Art had an essential role in the Comtean system, in which a class of positive philosophers would direct the scientific reconstruction of society, leaving to the masses the execution of its plans and the careful recording of immediate surface phenomena as sources for future positive syntheses from above. Artists would no longer stir up utopian and fantastic flights of mind and soul with their works, since these would simply be aesthetic representations of scientific philosophy, but would instead inspire society's masses to accept their lot in the new order.

One hundred years after Comte, Clement Greenberg emerged as the positive philosopher of Modernism. Urging artists to "escape from ideas" by restricting their sights to the "immediate sensations, impulses and notions" that constitute the random data of modern life, Greenberg simultaneously created a self-enclosed doctrine of Modernist art independent of the work of particular artists and accessible only to the art theorist and critic. Greenberg directed artists to the rendering of the "visually verifiable" and the matter-of-fact while monopolizing for himself any consideration of meaning, values, or direction in aesthetics. Unconsciously, Greenberg fulfilled Bellamy's blueprint for cultural expertise in an administered society, in which the experts' cult of the immediate present and its baubles streamlines mass participation in industrial production. Comte rightly recognized that this approach to artistic creation "can produce no bad effect"—i.e., stimulate no unsettling spirit of critical inquiry or play on the part of its viewers or practitioners—because it "will be exerted in the direction pointed out by scientific labors."

It is in regard to this Comtean reconstruction of aesthetic theory and practice that the writings of Morris and the "Young Americans" at *The Seven Arts* still have enormous relevance. These writers' specific recommendations for the form and content of artwork, their fascination with artisanal handicrafts and Whitmanesque poetry, may hold only limited interest for artists, writers, and

cultural theorists today. What does demand reconsideration and further elaboration in their work is their refusal "to lower ourselves; to become . . . the creatures and symptoms of unchartered forces," as Frank wrote in a characteristic attack on the cult of the "American Fact" induced by technocratic modes of thought. Frank believed that man achieves through art "that sense of unity and *at-homeness* with an exterior world which saves him from becoming a mere pathetic feature of it." Neither an "escape from ideas" into unintelligible particularity nor a servile identification of art with the "progressive" tendencies of industrial production and technology is an ingredient of Frank's aesthetics; both paths lead to the extinguishing of creativity through acquiescence in the "American Fact." Rather, Frank envisioned an American artistic renaissance invigorated by the tension between social reality and those elements of personality, culture, and everyday life that were threatened by and resisted that reality: love, religion, utopian images of self-government and solidarity among producers, creative and self-directed labor, popular folklore, and democratic ideals. As its farewell editorial explained in 1917, *The Seven Arts* set itself the task of "interpreting and expressing *that latent America, that potential America* which we believed lay hidden under our commercial-industrial national organization." In the wake of Greenberg's artistic modernization theory, and the ascendancy of the aesthetic engineers, that task remains incomplete but no less compelling.