

# 4

## The Dogma of Conviction

David Raskin

ART HISTORIANS, EVEN THOSE OF US interested in issues and problems of modern art, believe that works of art describe reality in some way or other. On an idealist basis, Michael Fried argued in 1964 (and still believes) that modernist art's self-reflexivity "has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience—that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness."<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss developed a perspectivist alternative to Fried's perfectionist claims, seeking, as she characterized her project in 1993, to show how modernism's deictic aesthetics hides its social and political ramifications: "'My' modernism is, of course, another name for a discursive field that, like any other field, is structured. The set of concepts that grids its surface not only organizes the facts within it but determines what, by their lights, will even count as facts."<sup>2</sup> A third conception of our reality, one that develops art's social agency, is exemplified in the following remark from 1982 by T. J. Clark: "For me a strategy of negation and refusal is not an unreasonable response to bourgeois civilization since 1871, and indeed it is the ruthlessness of negation which lies at the root of what I admire—certainly what I feel is still usable—in modern art."<sup>3</sup> Although there are many other voices worth learning from, Krauss's transient contexts make room for nearly all of them, and it seems to me that few would seriously dispute that this eminent trio and their methods for meaning could get to what matters to most of us today, for better or worse.

What I particularly like is that the three have covered the breadth of modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism, from mimesis to

abstraction. Fried championed Frank Stella in 1966, Gustav Courbet in 1990, and photography in 2005; Krauss explained from Auguste Rodin to Michael Heizer in 1977, surrealism in 1993, and installation art in 1999; Clark celebrated Courbet in 1973 and mourned for all of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in 1999. As everyone who reads their voluminous writings knows, it is hard to argue against any of them, even as they have made it necessary for us to take stands in relation to their achievements. Just try to talk about minimalism without engaging Fried or Krauss. Where would any conversation about Édouard Manet go without Clark or Fried? If push came to shove on the nature of modern art, how could we choose among them? And yet. . . . How did we make our choice? We made it because one of the three fits each of us best, not, I believe, by argument alone, but by the feel of the argument. Their sense of self and world built through art suits ours, not, I venture, because we have the right to believe but because we have the will.<sup>4</sup>

In this investigation I am not especially interested in testing the inner dynamics and particulars of the complex positions Fried, Krauss, and Clark elaborate. I instead would like to focus on the fact that each uses art to postulate a relation between self and world (regardless of whether the art, the self, or the world is seen as contingent). Fried's "life itself" pinpoints the stakes of his conceptions, and so too does Krauss's misuse of the artist Donald Judd's phrase "what the world's like" and Clark's hyperbole: "Call it the Body, the Peasant, the Economy, the Unconscious, the Party, the Plan. Call it Art itself."<sup>5</sup> Each in his or her own way asks art to carry metaphysical weight and serve an epistemic function (even if the lessons art is supposed to teach are ultimately skeptical ones). In every instance, they assign art an exegetical role in our past, present, and future; but as this unexamined privileging has permeated the discipline, it has degenerated into partisan politics, with aesthetics and critique squaring off in an endless stalemate over art's value.

Aesthetics versus critique is, I believe, a paralyzing dichotomy that has captured both today's plurality and our thinking about art over the past few decades, trapping us within a closed system. As recently as 2004, one younger scholar wrote: "Indeed, in the face of the onslaught of catastrophes that have come to define our contemporary moment, it is not entirely surprising that writers who unequivocally reject the validity of critical artistic practices should call instead for a pathos-infused, humanist

—I  
—O  
—+I

aesthetics.”<sup>6</sup> Others, too, seem caught up within this aesthetic and critique continuum, even as they helpfully search for a solution to its implications. Two of them asked, “In compiling this collection [devoted to the dyad and from which I quoted the above contention], whether discussions of the aesthetic might incorporate, rather than simply negate, a criticality that has traditionally been the terrain of the anti-aesthetic.”<sup>7</sup> One proposal (again, from the 2004 collection) is to compromise between the fixed alternatives, suggesting that the Duchamp effect passes beyond the found object in artists like Mary Kelly and Gabriel Orozco, which has in turn generated “an aesthetic beyond the pleasure principle . . . that breaks the self-critical circle and opens itself to wider issues of subjectivity and sociality, loss and memory, love and death.”<sup>8</sup>

I also wish to break the circle and want wider issues from art, but when I remind myself what objects and phenomena are, I know that the love and death I project on them are mine alone, that they are an occasion for my memory or loss, my sociality or subjectivity. But when I give in to the promise of art, to the strengths and weaknesses of my own convictions (as I do when I choose among the trio), I remain as trapped within the structure as before, finding exactly what I desire. I am arguing that in placing art between self and the world, whether we are commanding aesthetic experience or critical information or seeking to negotiate these alternatives, we are making two conjoined mistakes that lead to dogma and stagnation. We are dividing values from facts and using art to grasp reality.

Behind aesthetics and critique is the antirealist assumption that the perception and conception of our world requires a representational interface. In 1991 Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson phrased the idea this way: “Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs.”<sup>9</sup> Whether antirealism is overt in approaches dedicated to context or tacit in appeals to intuition, we should be aware that it is the residue of seventeenth-century metaphysics and epistemology, which held that a medium of some sort was needed to bridge the gap between the material body or world and the immaterial mind or soul. During the past several centuries, from Rene Descartes to Daniel Dennett, various names for this go-between have included “impressions,” “sensations,” “experiences,” “sense-data,” “phenomena,” “stimuli,” and “qualia.” In dualist accounts, these intermediaries are construed as immaterial mind processes; in monist versions, they are considered identical with the

electrical or veridical activity of a physical brain.<sup>10</sup> In either instance, whether we are talking about Cartesian theater or social heterophenomenology, representationalism opposes a type of natural, realist position that our conjunctive conceptions and perceptions are enmeshed in an emerging and material world. (Readers will note that this “natural” realism first introduced by Edwin B. Holt and the “new realists” in 1910 does not entail the old-fashioned metaphysics of direct or “naive” realism with its fantasies of positive fixation.)<sup>11</sup>

In discussions of art we may not favor terms like qualia or stimuli, but sensations, sense-data, phenomena, and experience were favorites in art writing of the 1960s and 1970s and have retained some of their usage; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an authority for both Fried and Krauss, wrote the singular “quale.”<sup>12</sup> That was a period when the problem of the relationship among perception, conception, and art dominated one kind of polemics in the United States. Critics and artists enmeshed in the broader social turmoil unwittingly invoked one version or another of the interface (antirealist) formulation in making judgments of art’s ethical values. The best-known instance of antirealist thinking is Clement Greenberg’s formalist intuition: “Quality is ‘content.’”<sup>13</sup> And for Greenberg’s quality, we could substitute Fried’s conviction (“Nothing short of *conviction* . . . matters at all”), Krauss’s position (“What I must acknowledge is not some idea of the world’s perspective but simply my own point of view”), and Clark’s opposition (“The medium has appeared most characteristically as the site of negation and estrangement”).<sup>14</sup> Here are three differing registers that place art as a medium between ourselves and our world. The buzzwords that signal each metaphysic are never used as systematically as they are in philosophy of mind—I nominate “conviction,” “point-of-view,” and “negation,” respectively, as possibilities—but my point is that we ask these words to *buzz*. But this is all antirealist convention—a truism from Martin Heidegger could serve as a slogan: “Only where there is language, is there world.”<sup>15</sup>

Here Clark is right when he objected in 1983 to “metaphysical buzzwords [that] seem to provide the ground on which the more persistent, not to say strident, appeals to ‘intuition’ rest,” though he had only Fried’s in mind.<sup>16</sup> I should also note that Clark came close to making my central point about antirealism in contrasting his commitments with Fried’s (though it now appears they admire each other’s ideas): “The mistake [the priority-of-perception thesis] makes is in its notion of what close

—I  
—O  
—+I

reading *is*: the question being whether it is an exclusive and intensive focusing, a bracketing of knowledge, a giving-over of consciousness to its objects [this is Clark's assessment of Fried's transcendent position], or whether successful reading is a mobilization of complex assumptions, commitments, and skills, in which the object is always being seen against (as *part of*) a ground of interest and argument [the view Clark advances].<sup>17</sup> But while Clark's method is close to a natural, realist one, it is his dualism that belongs to the betweenness of antirealism; Clark's is the position that Hilary Putnam calls "Cartesianism *cum* materialism" in his *Dewey Lectures* (he is referring to John R. Searle and Daniel Dennett, especially).<sup>18</sup> In short, "against (as *part of*)" is a structure that disguises the rhetorical conjunction by presenting it as a parenthetical insertion, seeking to hide the "and" that belongs to the intermediary "against" by figuring it as identical with the external world "(as *part of*)." It is here that Fried was correct when he observed a mirror of nature in Clark's dialectics: "According to Clark, on the other hand, artistic modernism must be understood as something like a reflection of the incoherence and contradictoriness of modern capitalist society."<sup>19</sup> What Fried also noted, though he did not phrase it this way, is that Clark's principles also contain that old formalist ideal of judgment, that the "work of art could," in Margaret Olin's words, "validate its representation within perception itself."<sup>20</sup> (On this point I should mention that every time I watch the Open University program that records Fried and Clark standing in front of Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings and debating "pictures" and "picturing," I am convinced that they believe that a medium is an intermediate.<sup>21</sup>)

Given Fried's overt commitment to traditional metaphysics and Krauss's to their antithesis, it is easy to follow their antirealist trails, which lead to the division of the work from its sensible or cognitive report. But because materialism, even of Clark's dialectical sort, is often conflated with realism and sometimes even with positivism, the distinction turns on the nature of the secure foundation for knowledge of the world. In this sense, I would like to stress that however we tell a work of art to communicate, we are assigning intermediary standing to its physics, construing material in representational terms—as a "mode of cognition" to use Krauss's phrase or in the post-Marx (Althusserian) phrasing of Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, as "mythical rather than rational."<sup>22</sup>

In pressing my natural, realist claims, consider how unremarkable the antirealist alternative has become. Fried, for instance, believed in 1965

(though in 1998, he wrote that he never had a stake in opticality as modernism's defining characteristic), "The materiality of [Pollock's] pigment is rendered sheerly visual, and the result is a new kind of space . . . in which conditions of seeing prevail rather than one in which objects exist."<sup>23</sup> Krauss, for her part, claimed in 1993 that "the liquid gesture was perhaps the most efficient in that in one and the same stroke it canceled and testified, like the graffiti mark, like the clue. Twombly had decoded Pollock's gesture one way, Warhol in another. In the late 1960s when Robert Morris was to consider the logic of 'Antiform,' he would decode it yet a third."<sup>24</sup> And Clark, in the most recent of the efforts quoted from here, apropos of the colonization of experience by bourgeois consciousness, argued, "The roundabout character of my descriptions does not derive so much from Pollock's paintings' wild uniqueness as from their ordinary (strictly representative) distance from the world they were part of. Abstract painting intended to set the world aside. And therefore it truly is difficult to think at all of *Number 1, 1948* as belonging to a social body."<sup>25</sup> Here is art writing's linguistic turn in its various manifestations, canonized.

At the risk of belaboring the issue, let me once again say that whether we know it or not, any division we make among our self, art, and world commits us to the position that any beliefs about actuality that we think we have never come directly; they instead always arrive shaped through some sort of intermediary, representation, or picture. In the anti-realist mindset, truth coheres to theoretical propositions. As Arthur Danto explained forty years ago: "Art, in its way, reveals the world in the respect that, between the work of art and the world, there has to be a gap or distance of just the sort which exists between language and the world, or between science and the world."<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that antirealism like that of Danto, and that of Fried, Krauss, and Clark, is serious, because it tries to answer the challenge posed by skepticism, the view that we cannot know the world as it is with any sureness; it solves this problem by nominating apperception as reality, and though this is no small achievement, it is a dubious one.<sup>27</sup> There is no reward in this order for what Terry Eagleton called the tough work of "argument, evidence, experiment, investigation," some of the empirical and scientific strategies that acknowledge that there can be no escaping point of view while never making facts a function of "culture," one name we give the signifying system by which we make sense of the

—-I  
—-O  
—-+I

world.<sup>28</sup> As was the case with aesthetics versus critique, the only rationale for subscribing to one metaphysic over any other or to none at all is faith alone. (Clark rightly noted with respect to Fried, “The intuition *is* the religion—not a very satisfactory one, I should imagine.”<sup>29</sup>) I am arguing that it is the use to which we have put art by positioning it as a medium between ourselves and our world that results in the division of facts from values; this division colors art with creed, and it is our faith in art’s special status that stills life’s currents.

This stasis is easiest to see in Krauss, since she herself told us that contexts determine facts, but it is perhaps less common to see speculative thinking in all its post-structuralist presentations and on which her perspectivism depends as being in itself a value system designed to construct and deconstruct cultural facts. Here can be nothing but a deferral to propositions.<sup>30</sup> How else, other than by moving from values to facts, would a contextualist commitment attempt to forward any vision of social reality, even if one characterized by displacement? With Krauss it is facts peeled from personal values, or, as she suggested in 1972, “I must acknowledge not some idea of the world’s perspective but simply my own point of view.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, the idea of a self that her private values authorize is not a pleasant one; the dystopian project has entailed moving from point of view to point of view, promulgating a terrifying mis en abyme that prevents the individual from adhering in experience.

Fried is little different. For him, important art (especially painting) is made by an artist engaged in a particular ontological problem made pressing through his or her historical awareness of and competition with the works of the recent past that matter. Though this heuristic is complex, it plays out in his art criticism from the 1960s in Fried himself judging the rightness of the artist’s proffered solutions, and in his writings about art’s history, with Fried himself matching contemporary assessments and assertions to those artistic ambitions. In Fried we have Krauss’s points of view projected as Fried’s autonomy, an anchorite first built in the 1960s whose ultimate security has been the aim of decades of his history writing. (He would offer no objection here, because he has never abandoned his construal of art as an ethical endeavor, as he wrote in 1996: “In any case, Manet’s modernism, with respect to the issue of beholding, consists precisely in the doubleness of its relation to the Diderotian tradition: on the one hand, marking the close of that tradition by insisting as never before on the ‘truth’ about painting that the tradition had come about to

deny or forestall; on the other hand, demonstrating by example that there could be no mere laying bare of that ‘truth’ and therefore no entire extinguishing of that tradition.”<sup>32</sup>) Fried’s hermeneutics are fully dependent upon the force of his persuasiveness, and it is with a sense of his achievements that in 1998 he proudly divided values from facts (inadvertently repeating a quotation that he had translated from French somewhat differently in 1965): “As I realized only recently, preparing to teach in a seminar. ‘A man is judged by neither intention nor fact but by his success in making values become facts,’ Merleau-Ponty wrote.”<sup>33</sup>

Clark again presents a slightly dissimilar case, if only because the ambition of a careful materialist history is to puzzle out the complexities of the world’s social particulars, which should entail the interpenetration of facts and values. It is here that I would like to suggest that it is dialectic itself that creates the gap between ourselves and our world. Though its adherents sometimes present it as an empirical endeavor it is in practice a rhetorical one.<sup>34</sup> This status can partially be seen in its loose grammar, which uses the key word “negation” as a logical principle, an antinomy, a description, an agent of development, and an explanation. If dialectics were actually empirical or scientific, the contradictions that are held to produce negations would never be accepted in the first place and would never exist to produce the supposed antithesis and never lead to any transcendent or materialist sublation. Even for a natural realist, contradictions are never overcome; they instead eliminate the working hypothesis from contention precisely because its lack of viability fails to help us survive as best we might. Admitting contradictions in values abandons any pretense to truth and reality, because the logical contradictory itself—the “Some S are not P” that contradicts the “All S are P”—lets us deduce every possible premise whatever. As Karl Popper explained in his criticism of this style of thinking, “We therefore convey with such a contradictory theory—nothing. A theory which involves a contradiction is entirely useless, because it does not convey any sort of information.”<sup>35</sup> By conveying nothing that can be refuted, dialectics are one type of historicism, the theoretical elevation of description to explanation and prediction, which establishes values first then facts, as with Fried, as for Krauss, as in the system of aesthetics and critique.<sup>36</sup>

When we take instead the natural, realist view that our conjunctive and disjunctive experiences are the content of a developing material and immaterial life, of the indivisibility of facts and values, we describe a probability that weaves the carpet of “perception, understanding,

—-I  
—O  
—+I

representation, verification, and truth,” in Putnam’s circle of life.<sup>37</sup> This social fabric lets us proffer knowledge claims that are accountable to the material “facts” we continue to discover, refine, and reject through the difficult work of empiricism and science while testing the convictions by which we must live our lives.<sup>38</sup> Our only reality is a duration of past, present, and future relentlessly subjected to falsification.

The practical consequences of natural realism in art, in stripping art of its special standing as a medium, are at least threefold. First, we should not be misled by a terminological confusion with stylistically realist art, such as that by Courbet or Manet. Mimetic ambitions are deeply antirealist in a philosophical sense: When pictures work through beholding, their commitment is to illusionism, to demanding materials are lodged in any abyss of signification. Realism lets art reject an untenable dualism. Second, our commitment can no longer be to aesthetics or critique, since the foundation for reality can never be the ideal or the material. William James with his common sense proposed reality to be a single substance in flux and with his poetry called this unsure foundation for actuality “the stream of my breathing.”<sup>39</sup> Third, the most far-reaching consequence is that aesthetic indivisibility is also human indivisibility from other people, trees, streams, and rivers, New Orleans, Darfur, the Middle East, and so on in a relentless list. We have no choice but to act locally and globally for the mutual well-being on which our shared existence depends.<sup>40</sup> In this natural, realist order, the world is behavior, events, and affairs only; it can never be modeled, represented, or known in any abstract manner.<sup>41</sup> Instead, our emerging lives take shape in the process of attempting to build consensus, a mandate for affiliation that guides and reforms all faces of lived existence, from the individual to the collective. Truth and reality correspond and cohere in a universe we have no choice but to build together.

This evolutionary maxim has no place for the self-important topography of modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism, and it has no time to waste with aesthetics and critique. Yet our open and deflationary works of art can remain rich. “As I have said for several years,” Dan Flavin wrote in 1966, “I believe that art is shedding its vaunted mystery for a common sense of keenly realized decoration. Symbolizing is dwindling—becoming slight. We are pressing downward toward no art—a mutual sense of psychologically indifferent decoration — a neutral pleasure of seeing known to everyone.”<sup>42</sup>