

The death of sensuous particulars

Adorno and abstract expressionism

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'Hell is the denial of the ordinary.'

John Ciardi, *The Gift*

1. This essay will engage in three distinct tasks simultaneously. first, it will form a light introduction to the philosophical aesthetics of T.W. Adorno. Second, it will reconnoitre a reading of abstract expressionism in Adornoesque terms. Adorno's aesthetics is usually read as the philosophical counterpart and thinking-through of high modernism: of Berg and Schoenberg in music, of Beckett in literature. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously, was to be dedicated to Beckett. One, if not the, distinctive feature of Adorno's philosophy is that, rather than being an *a priori* discourse about its objects, it contested the aeons-long claim of reason to self-sufficiency, the claim that philosophy could command the world from the height of reason, universality, method; and he did so by explicitly making or letting his philosophy become beholden to its other – art. It is not just that Adorno thinks philosophical concepts are realized or fulfilled or find evidence for themselves in art practices, but rather such high modernist practices provide, however temporarily, the condition of possibility of there being philosophy at all. To say that these practices are the condition of possibility of philosophy should be taken as equivalent to saying that they provide the condition of possibility for us being or becoming self-conscious about who we are, what the world we inhabit is like and how those two fit together. If Adorno had turned his attention to art, to painting and sculpture, he would have, could only have, deployed the resources of abstract expressionism for his purposes. His quintessential 'Europeanness' did not permit him to recognize in this very American art the same type of claiming that he found in European composers and writers. finally, these two tasks will be choreographed in relation to T.J. Clark's recent reconstructive essay, 'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism'.¹

2. Presupposed in what follows is the thesis that reflective or second-order practices like art and philosophy operate a closure on the basic terms supportive of meaning in a culture and submit them to 'tests' for coherency and consistency that are supplied by the fundamental principles of the practice in question. Philosophy submits the meaning-complexes of everyday practices to the demands of conceptual coherence, while art submits them to the requirements of two-dimensional representation through drawing and painting. Philosophy and art, then, are reflective articulations of first-order, everyday practices of meaning. They operate on first-order meaning complexes through selection, purification and closure. Philosophical or artistic closure should be considered as doing for domains of meaning what natural science's abstractions, idealizations and closures do for causal contexts. Philosophical and aesthetic closure permit the isolation of the inference structures operating invisibly in the open vista of the everyday. So, for example, the most stringent attempts to narrate empirical existence in the modern novel show that everyday life no longer possesses narrative coherence through time, and hence that the modern self is fragmented or decentred in painful and troubling ways. Analogously, that painterly representations of the natural world appear naive or kitsch or sentimental when directly representational and only attain artistic authenticity when they are abstract – as, for example, with Richard Diebenkorn's post-abstract-expressionist 'Ocean Park' series – says something about the availability or non-availability of the natural world to us that is hidden in and from everyday life. This is the sense in which art and philosophy are their own time apprehended in representation and thought respectively.²

3. There is only one really plausible alternative to this view, namely, that philosophical and artistic practices are, well, just different practices, different language games from the language games of everyday life, and hence while these different language games are certainly *contiguous* with one another, and hence mutually inform one another through leakage and the grafting of elements from one discourse into and onto another, no regimented relations between the practices exist. One can imagine Wittgenstein or Lyotard or Foucault making such a comment. In one respect this is true; art practices certainly have their own grammar, techniques and history. Further, they can be about, in the weighty sense of that term, more than just 'seeing'. They submit other elements of the everyday to artistic treatment. Art practices can be used to interrogate the role of the unconscious or memory or history or alienation or gender or ethnicity or religious belief. But what makes art practices matter here is that there are elements of these phenomena that are bound up with 'seeing' in its austere and wide sense – with perceiving, representing, and the limits of perceiving and representing; and hence with the way in which these phenomena are articulated in (or for) the domain of the visible.

4. But this is equivalent to saying that we are, always already, invested in art; that its tracking of the possibilities of the visible is a tracking of the meaning of the visible world for us. This type of investment in art must, *sotto voce*, be hovering in the borders of Clark's thought since for him the question raised by abstract expression is its insistence: we seem unable to let it go, to make it a thing of the past. At least for now, abstract expressionism appears to have a hegemonic grip over our (visual) comprehension of visibility, over what belongs intrinsically to the visible and what not, over the proper that belongs to perceiving. For Clark this is troubling to the extent that until abstract expressionism becomes a thing of the past art cannot, meaningfully, confidently, routinely, carry on. Abstract expressionism is the shadow towering over the present that will not let art go forward, but keeps contemporary art stuttering, hesitant, failing, sucking everything into its orbit and evacuating its possibility – like a black hole.

5. Clark, correctly, aligns this anxiety about the shadow of abstract expressionism with Hegel's thesis that art has become for us a thing of the past; articulating this thought with the idea that the progress of art contributes to the disenchantment of the world. Clark's bold thesis is that modernism 'is the art of the situation Hegel pointed to, but its job turns out to be to make the endlessness of the

ending bearable, by time and again imagining that it has taken place...' (DAE, 25). Hence, until abstract expressionism can end, art cannot end (again), and hence the business of making ending bearable (again) cannot be relaunched. To bring an end to abstract expressionism would be to show that its disenchantment of previous art was still enchanted: imaginary, fictitious, a work of anthropomorphism, a projecting onto the screen of the visible world merely imaginary significations. In so far as we remain in the grip of abstract expressionism we remain enchanted and the world will appear enchanted, thus regressing from its uniquely modern standpoint. This enchantment of the world, the one accomplished by abstract expressionism, would, Clark avers, play into the hands 'of that *general* conjuror of depth and desirability back into our world – that is, the commodity form. For the one thing the myth [*sic*] of the end of art made possible was the maintaining of some kind of distance between art's sensuous immediacy and that of other (stronger) claimants to the same power' (DAE, 25).

6. While well taken and raising the correct issues (the end of art, the disenchantment of the world, and the relation between aesthetic enchantment and commodity fetishism), Clark's account needs to be contested. Hegel believed that with the coming of modernity art would become, had already become, a thing of the past because modernity arises through the discovery that the world is a human one, that God becomes Man, and that Man was but a cipher for community. (The descent of the Holy Spirit is the coming-to-be of the religious community as the bearer of the meaning of religion, and, in time, the recognition that there is only community – however fragmented and dispersed it is.) Once this occurs, then the articulation of subject and substance, the individual and her ground, could no longer be representational, a work of picturing, since the ground of human existence is now individuals in relation to one another, in relation to their communities and their essentially open histories. Meaning could be indefatigably representational – picture thinking – only when the ground of existence was assumed to be outside the subject, in God, or, what is the same, His history: in a remote (past) origin or a remote (future) telos. Once there are only historical communities without determinate origins or ends, then metaphysical meaning can no longer be represented in pictorial form. Hence, the primacy of philosophy and the prose character of the modern world for Hegel. So, in Hegelian terms, the disenchantment of the world meant the process of overcoming the religious enchantment of the world, with this process being accomplished once the relation of self to ground became an uncompletable reflective process of (communal or collective) self-grounding.

7. But, in ways that Hegel did not foresee, the disenchantment of the world has miscarried precisely by *carrying on*, infringing on and destroying those very relations of community and history that he thought the achievement of modernity had secured. Hence the progress of disenchantment, the work of countering anthropomorphic projections, carried on to the point of undoing the very relations among persons, and among persons and the natural world, that it had in the first instance made possible. Through progressive disenchantment, 'the destruction of gods and [secondary] qualities is [equally] insisted upon.'³

8. 'Nature is ceasing to be divine, ceases to be human... We must bridge the gap of poetry from science. We must heal the unnatural wound. We must, in the cold reflective way of critical system, justify and organize the truth which poetry, with its quick, naive contacts, has already felt and reported.' The author of these sentences is not Adorno, but the young John Dewey, writing in 1891.⁴ There is, however, only a sliver's distance between them and, for example, Adorno's 'But although art and science become separate in the course of history, the opposition between them should not be hypostatized.'⁵ What the instrumental rationality exemplified by natural science begets, and what is socially borne into everyday life by industrialization and technology (for Dewey), and by the ever-expanding domination of exchange value over use value, the ever-expanding commodity form (for Adorno), is the disenchantment of the world, the creation of an unnatural wound, a diremption, between human nature and nature. This wound is unnatural, or contrary to nature, because the human animal is a part of the natural world. In raising ourselves above it, in making the world an object of representational knowing (cognitively), and exchange value the measure of all worth (practically), all subjective response to the world, and thus the world as it gains its constitutive sense in its *appearing* to human subjects, is qualified, curtailed, elided to the point of disappearance, to the point where worldly things become mere fungible props for an allegorical system whose truth is number and quantity. The cultural crisis generated by science, technology and capital is a crisis of subjectivity and meaning; the disenchantment of the world is the proximate and ground cause of this crisis. However inarticulately, this is also the view of the matter taken by the abstract expressionists.

9. *The mechanism of disenchantment is abstraction: 'Abstraction, the tool of enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates*

*them.'*⁶ Abstraction is the negation of a concrete item in its givenness, and its (re-)identification in terms of some more abstract feature or quality, some mark, it shares with other items. Abstraction takes effect through analysis – the fragmentation of the given in order that its multiple features can each be identified by a common mark – and synthesis – the recomposition of the particular through its now fragmented elements. Science abstracts from sensuous givenness and re-identifies objects through their measurable features. Capital abstracts from use value and labour power, and synthesizes through exchange value and labour time (which prepares labour to be a commodity). The rationalization of society abstracts from intersubjective practices of meaning and synthesizes through function and system. This continuation of disenchantment, the indefinite recruitment of ever more domains into the grasp of an indifferent system of commensuration, reaches down into everyday life and tendentially robs it of subjective qualification.

10. Heidegger, in considering what it means for the Rhine river to become, essentially, a 'water power supplier', comments: 'In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrosity that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that speaks out of the two titles, "The Rhine" as dammed up into the *power* works, and "The Rhine" as uttered out of the *art* work, in Hölderlin's hymn by that name. But it will be replied, the Rhine is still there in the landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.'⁷ The object, the Rhine, and so nature as a whole, but also, *mutatis mutandis*, manufactured things, artefacts, are no longer there as objects that can be seen; we can have no *experience* of the object perceptually or discursively since it has been removed from *itself* by the sway of the abstract universal. Enlightenment, progressing through the work of abstraction, is the sacrifice of the sensuous particular to the universal. As Adorno sums up the situation: 'The marrow of experience has been sucked out of the concrete. All experience, including experience that is removed from economic experience [including, then, aesthetic experience – JB], has been emaciated' (AT, 46).

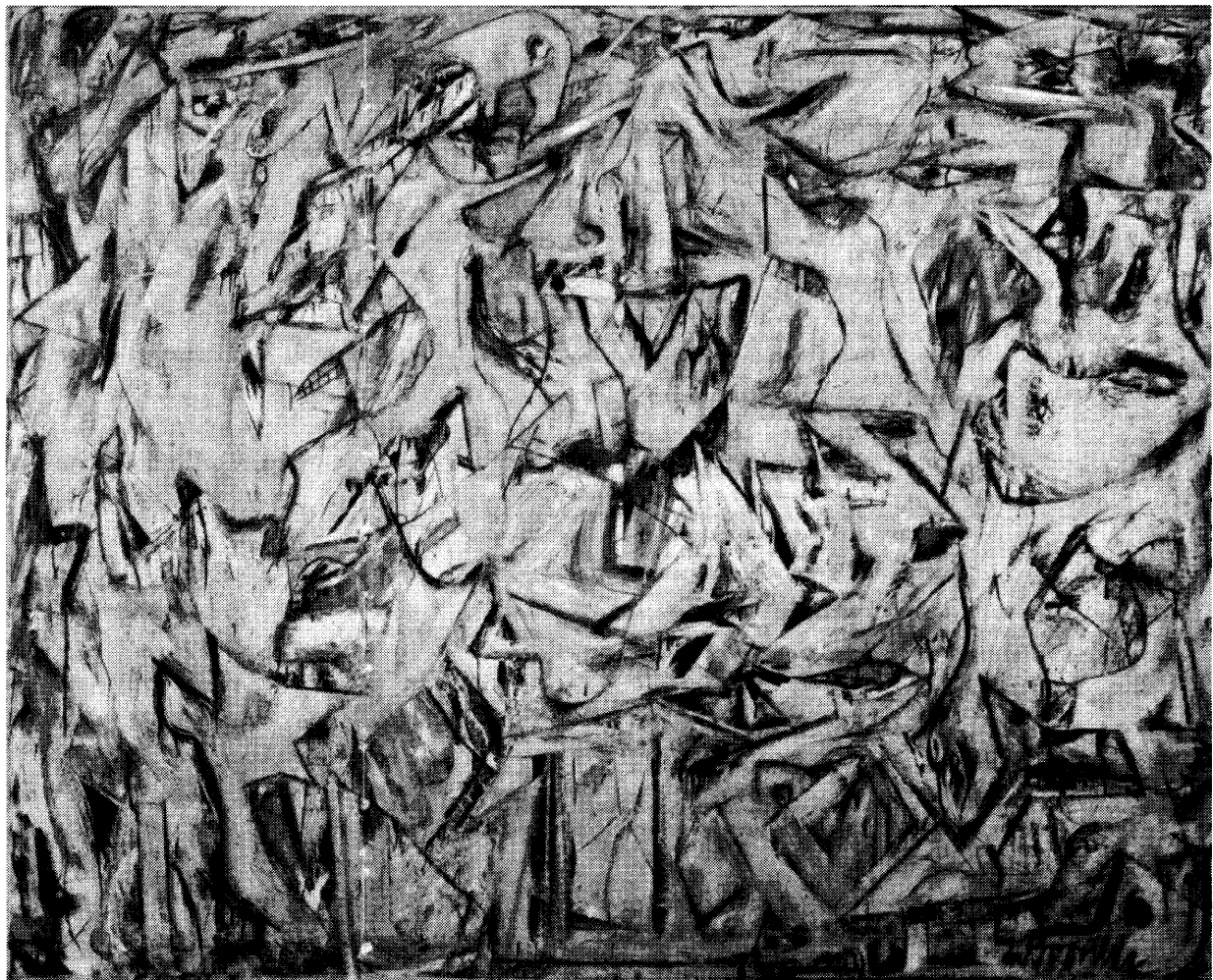
11. For Adorno progressive disenchantment has an ironic structure: the universal – whether scientific, economic or societal – was to be the means through which the world was appropriated for the sake of human ends: happiness, freedom from fear, equality and liberty. Now, the mechanism, the means, have slipped from the

noose of the ends and become universal themselves, vanquishing the ends. The instrument has become the master of the master; we now the slaves. But the instrument is simply a blown-up, articulated, congealed aspect of human subjectivity (means–end rationality in its complex materializations); the stamping of the world by the instrument is making it a mirror of our subjectivity, making the world ‘for us’. In becoming uniquely ‘for us’ the world became no longer ‘for us’ at all, and we no longer for ourselves. To say that the process of abstraction removes the object from itself must include the thought that it removes us from ourselves; it eliminates subjectivity from the subject.

12. Abstract expressionism combats societal abstraction with artistic abstraction; abstract expressionism combats societal disenchantment through the further disenchantment of art. ‘What is vaguely called abstract painting’, Adorno contends, ‘preserves traces of the tradition it destroys. We get a glimpse of this continuity by contemplating traditional paintings. To the extent to which we detect in them images rather than replicas of something, they are “abstract”. Thus [modernist] art

consummates the eclipse of concreteness, whereas reality refuses to face up to this fact, even though it is in the real world first and foremost that the concrete is no more than a mask of the abstract, that the determinate particular is no more than a representative and mystifying example of the universal which is identical with the ubiquity of monopoly capital’ (AT, 46).

13. One way of taking abstraction might be through understanding representational art as mythologized and anthropomorphic, as a mimesis of the projection of human needs, interests and desires onto the object world, and thereby in need of demythologizing. Abstract painting, following in the footsteps of Cézanne and passing beyond the abstractive achievements of analytic and synthetic cubism, would then be understood as operating in precisely the same way as mathematical physics, as its parallel formation, by reducing the visible to the conditions of visibility – above all, colour and space. So painting would become an essay on the visibility of the visible without reliance on the props of objects locked into the circuit of meaning defined by interest and utility. Such a (Greenbergian) conception of



William De Kooning, *Excavation*, 1950. (Art Institute of Chicago)

art would thus construe art's disenchanting as continuous with rather than opposed to the rationalization of experience. I suspect that this is the kind of disenchanting function Clark has in view for art, and why he considers those (like Adorno?) who see art re-enchanting as 'false friends' (DAE, 25). But the experience of abstract expressionist works cannot be contained by the scientific view, in part because it cannot account for abstract expressionism's long shadow – these works, despite everything, continue to matter to art and to life. There is (re)-enchantment in them in the sense that they remain obstinately particulars that are not subsumable under any universal. They demonstrate that sensuous particulars can mean, can be hypnotic objects of attention, apart from and in defiance of any form of identifying mechanism other than the one their sheer presence insinuates.

14. The claim of abstract works, at their best, is that of a sensuous particular as indicative of what sensuous particularity could be: having weight and salience, mattering, in itself. This 'in itself' opposes the universal 'for us' of rationalized society, including all previous art. This tallies with the kind of abstraction such painting enacts: its abstraction from genre, representation and symbol, but also from 'memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth' – the 'devices', as Barnett Newman called them, 'of Western European painting'.⁸ Once universals have become subject to the doubt that they are merely 'for us', there for the sake of control and so mirrors of the subject, then any art which participates in the given universal, no matter to what good end, denies the worth of the painting itself. Through abstraction the work is set free (made autonomous) in order to claim for itself. In this respect, in opposition to all the chatter about God, transcendence and theology in abstract expressionism, Rothko's famous statement about the 'intimacy' of these artistic mammoths appears just right: 'I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass... However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command.'

15. It is the achievement of sensuous particularity that distinguishes abstract expressionist works. Our inability to abstract from them, except with respect to what sensuous particularity itself might mean, gives them their specific kind of objectivity. To attend to De Kooning's *Excavation* is to discover resources for meaningfulness exhausted by what appears before the eye. The painting itself is the end, it seeks identity only with itself and is its

own 'subject'. These particularist motives are established through its overall structure, its lack of centre, standpoint or perspective; and through the spontaneity of the painting that appears to escape De Kooning's will, only to find a fragmented integration through the canvas as a whole. A heightened freedom and order are here in terse harmony. Part of the continuing enigma of *Excavation*, like *Night Square*, is how little it offers the viewer in sensuous terms, how its scribbles of red, the hints of yellow and blue, tell us, as the paintings of Franz Kline do, how much is to be refused in its 'appeal', its claiming, how the painting turns its back on us, on sensuous immediacy and art, and yet commands. Nothing we thought we desired or might desire is here, and yet... So now, if only 'this' painting matters, then mattering itself can have its 'origin' in something sensuous and particular, in what is ephemeral, finite, transient. Such a view of mattering speaks in favour of the ordinary, of finding the ordinary, the everyday satisfying because 'uncanny', something for us through its being beyond command.

16. Clark conflates the issue of particularity, and hence the fact that 'this' artist has only 'his' art on which to rely (and not tradition), with the equation of art and lyric – 'the illusion in an art work of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own' (DAE, 48). The assumption behind Clark's identification is that particularity and universality, particularity and meaning, are incommensurable, and hence so are the claims of the individual subject with respect to the objective world. Hence, 'the illusion' and, worse still, the 'its own' of the singular viewpoint. Adorno perceives modernist art as contesting that separation: 'The purist – and hence rationalist – separation of intuition and conceptuality fits in nicely with the dichotomy of rationality and sensuality which society imposes, in fact and in ideology. Actually, by its objective existence art should criticize in effigy that separation. As it is, the separation is confirmed by the fact that art is confined entirely to the sensuous extreme. The falsehood opposed by art is not rationality per se but the rigid juxtaposition of rationality and particularity' (AT, 144; see also 201). Art's confirmation of the duality is the confirmation of the diremption outside art. Its confinement to the sensuous extreme is the confinement of its articulation of rationality and particularity to art, to semblance. If modernist art were lyrical it would be a celebration of the now-defunct individual. While artistic modernism achieves its objectivity through extreme individuation, 'enshrined' in its objectifications 'is a collective We' (AT, 338; see also 240).

17. Because sensuous givenness and particularity have been the victims of rationalization, then it is unsurprising that 'in significant works of art the sensuous shines forth as something spiritual...' (AT, 21). This spirituality, this transcendence, does not point to anything beyond the material world, although it does point beyond our empirical world. The relation between immanence and transcendence, what counts as immanent and what counts as transcendent, is historical. To endow sensuous immediacy with a 'sense' of meaning is to claim for sensuousness a commensurability with meaning and rationality that existing rationality refuses. Pollock's *Lavender Mist Number 1* has twisted fragments of dripped lines of black painting interweaving with, scoring and cutting the translucent yet opaque surface of blue, pink and white. The illusion that the surface of the painting does not coincide with the surface of the canvas is everywhere disrupted by the way in which that illusory surface is consistently cut into and etched, like a scalpel randomly slicing through innocent flesh.⁹ The vectorial drips provide the otherwise optical field with a tactility that has the effect of embodying the eye of the viewer, of making the experience of seeing the painting an experience of being embodied, as a condition of viewing, without the painting at any point or moment denying its condition of being a surface. That a sensuous, fragmented *surface*, a surface that robs the viewer of perspective and orientation with respect to it, like the De Kooning, can nonetheless hold the (embodied) eye, gives back to sensuous immediacy a potentiality for statement as such. This, I think, and nothing else, is what fascinates us with this canvas, the enigmatic delight that it is not *purely* decorative – although doubtless it soon will be.

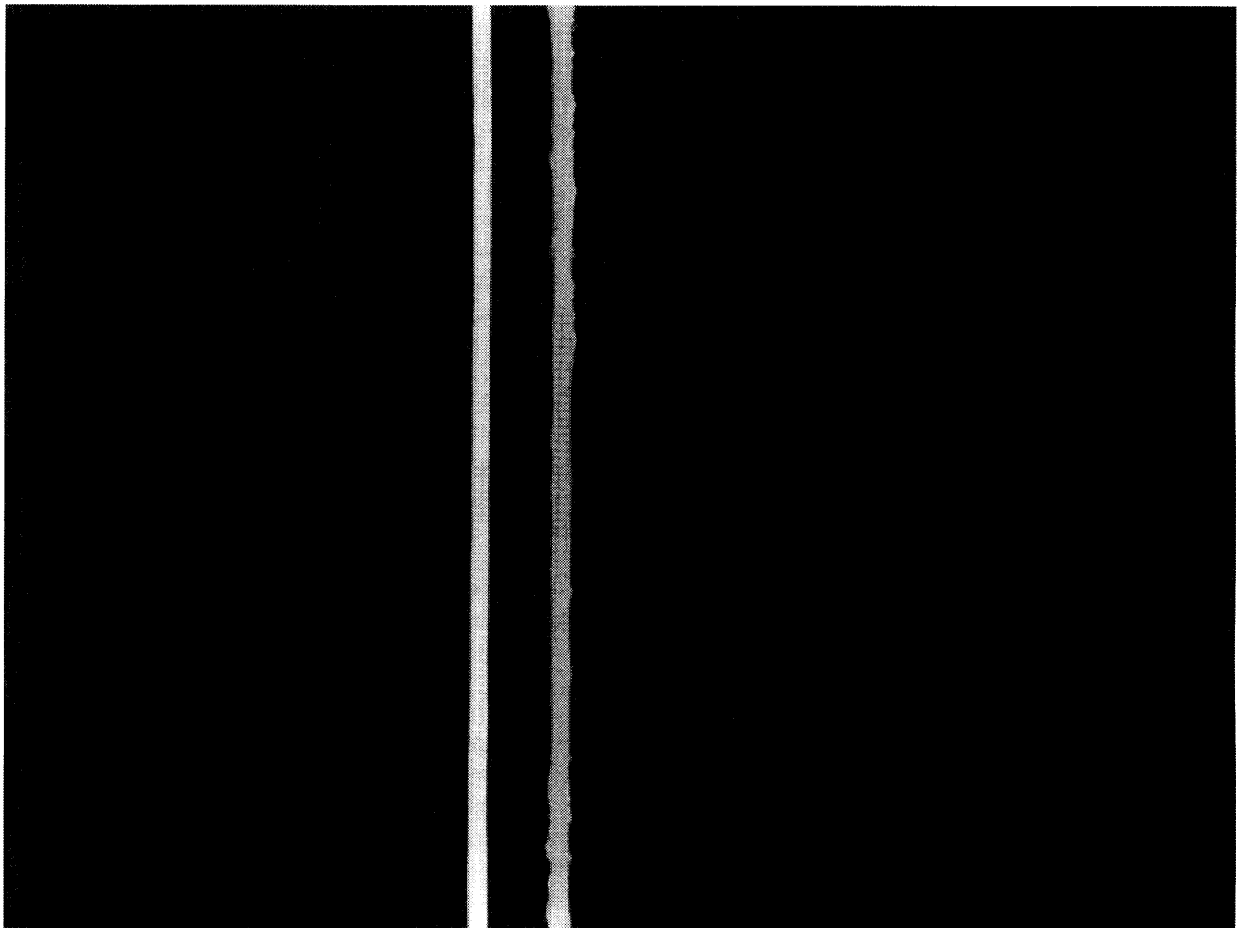
18. To say that sensuous immediacy is capable of holding our attention, of engaging the embodied eye, of so suggesting meaning, is equivalent to saying that meaning does not unconditionally derive from intention, will, desire – the mental or, what this is sometimes taken as equivalent to, the established conventions – and that it resides in the material/natural too. In tracking this thought we are broaching the way abstract expressionism contests the diremption of nature and human nature. Consider a typical Newman 'zip' painting: say *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. All we have is the red colour field and the five zips, yet everything we need in the way of a semantics (the colours themselves) and a syntax (the work of the zips) is here: the zips, the minima of negativity in a field, 'become' syntactical by their division and thus 'make' the field a proto-semantics. Of course, Newman offers us a very classical geometrical syntax in the central square, only to contest it with the

unbalanced and dissonant zips that break up the two wing fields. The apparently dissonant zips augment the classical syntax, supplying it with a power of articulation that its concern with harmony and balance disallows.

19. In this account the following ratio is assumed: syntax is to semantics as abstraction is to expression. With this ratio in hand, the needed articulation of the meaning of the terms 'abstract' and 'expressionism' begins to come into view. In abstract expressionism (we must hear this concatenation of terms as oxymoronic) the dual dimensions of meaning are folded into the material medium. Because even those Newman works that do not explicitly employ classical geometric syntax insinuate it, remind us of it through its abridgement, the apparent risk of his canvases, and hence their power, is limited. We are never quite sure if we are responding to a novel sensuous syntactical-semantic formation or being reminded of the classic one; if we are spectating on the purely sensuous appearing of the minima for an intelligible world or seeing an illustration of the conception of how such a world is possible. Newman is almost a conceptual artist.¹⁰

20. Nonetheless, beginning from Newman it is not difficult to understand why Adorno operates with a dual-axis conception of language. Adorno labels the two axes: sign and image; concept and object; rationality and truth; and, most tellingly for us, communication and expression. These two axes condition one another, and hence require one another. They are ineliminable and irreducible. However, while they can be coordinated, they naturally pull in opposite directions, and hence must forever remain in a state of tension which permits of no ideal resolution.

21. In the 'communication and expression' version of Adorno's analysis the term 'expression' condenses the formula 'expressing oneself ... about something' into a single complex dimension. That matters, since for Adorno the 'aboutness' of language cannot be detached from the subject's embodied response to the object world. This moment of response features in more standard accounts as the 'resistance of the world' in innerworldly experiences. In accordance with Enlightenment ideology, this resistance is usually rationalized as 'the given', 'empirical significance' or, most familiarly, the moment of falsification in testing procedures – the theory of fallibilism.¹¹ Fallibilism is the instrumental reduction of subjective response to the limit case of falsifying expectations, the reduction of experience (*Erfahrung*) to experiment. There is reason



Barnet Newman, *The Promise*, 1949. (Adrian and Robert Mnuchin)

in this reduction, but it is the reasoning of instrumentality itself. Innerworldly experiences resist language not merely negatively but essentially in that they resist *full* or *unconditioned discursivity*, the linguistic exchange of meaning without remainder.¹² And they exceed full discursivity because our bodily response to things, our seeing, feeling and hearing them, is forever *dependent* upon, forever beholden to, forever in debt to things, in just the way Adorno conceives his philosophy as indebted to and beholden to art. The moment of dependence in language, which instrumental discourse attempts to surmount, master and leave behind, is recorded as, amongst other items, sensation, image, feeling and expression, the somatic moment Adorno entitles 'mimesis' or 'affinity'. This dimension of meaning can be presented (for response) but never represented (exchanged), and hence from the perspective of full discursivity is a moment of silence. Full discursivity does not hear the silence; the language of abstract expressionism makes somatic silence articulate and unavoidable. It is, in Adorno's phrase, a language without signification.

22. Because abstract expressionism aims to reveal its material medium as 'unowned', not subjective, but the point of affinity between subject and object, it urges

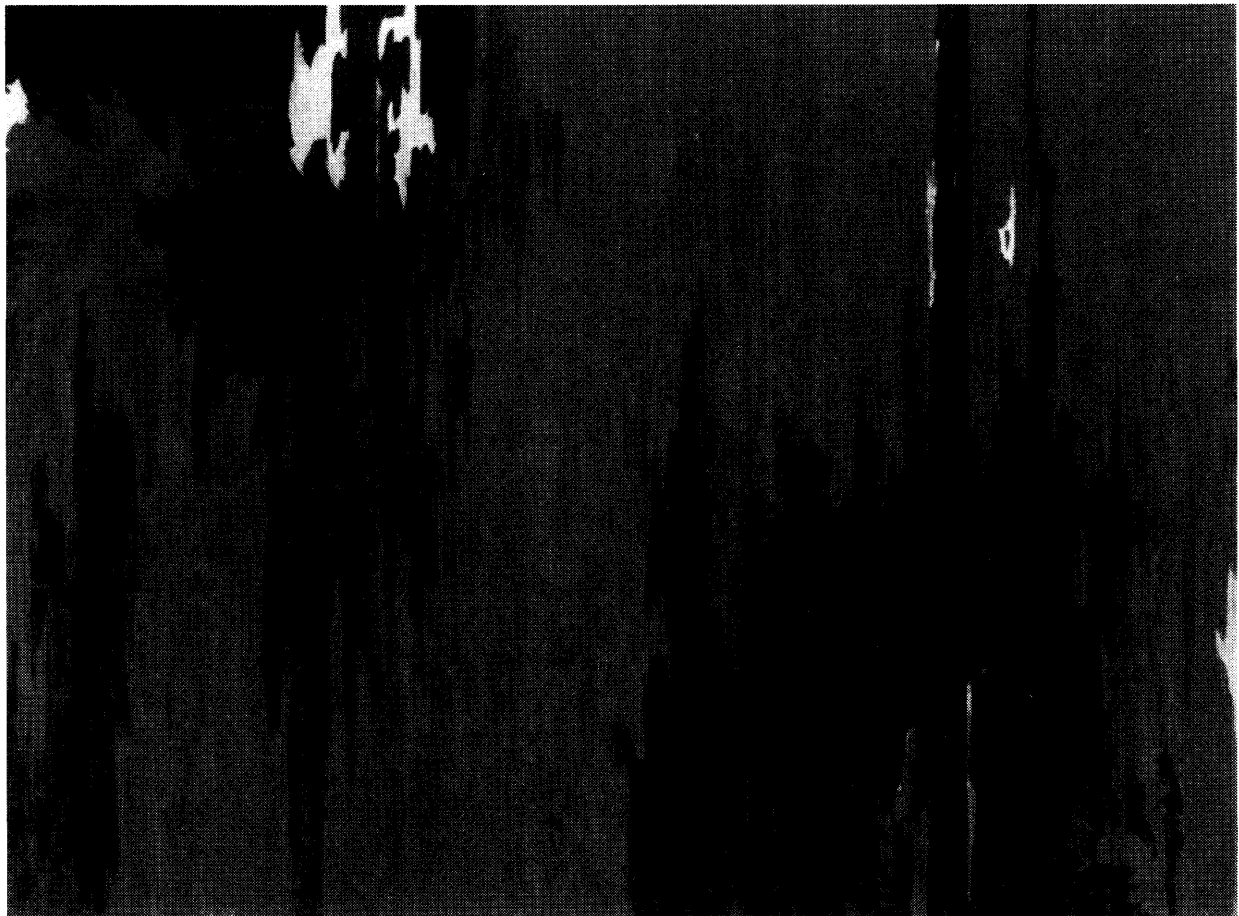
colour not as a 'secondary property' of things but as primary, as objective as measurable properties. Because the colour elements of nature are themselves articulate in these canvases, they portend a renewed *language* of nature, a language without signification and without speech (AT, 117). It is, thus, not an accident that Gottlieb's late 'bursts' should have developed out of his earlier pictographs, or that we should associate the calligraphic biomorphs of Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series with the central accomplishments of the colour field painters. In all, however differently, the presentation of a non-signifying language of nature – 'writing', as Adorno sometimes calls it – is pivotal (see AT, 141, 182). The routine construal of Pollocks as presenting a 'baroque scrawl' (DAE, 35) simply underlines this point. For us, and for now, Adorno believes, 'the more religiously works of art try to stay away from naturalness and from imitating nature, the more they approximate nature'; aesthetic objectivity is the reflective capture of 'nature's being-in-itself' (AT, 114). To say that this capture is reflective and reflexive is equally to say that such images of nature are critical and negative, not sheer (re-)presentations. Hence, Adorno's qualification: 'Works of art state that there is an in-itself, but they do not spell out what it is' (AT, 114).

23. We should distinguish two ways in which we can detect the will and intentions of a painter in a canvas: the first is the effort of composition, in integrating 'these' materials in just 'this' way; the second in our sense of contrivance, an awareness that a gesture is there in order to produce a certain effect on us. We can align these two artistic wills with Michael Fried's categories of 'absorption' and 'theatricality'.¹³ Clyfford Still's paintings strike me as almost always theatrical and lacking absorption: all those highly contrived jagged edges – suggesting leaf, bark and fire – breaking and fragmenting the colour plane. It is a technique for producing the effect of sublimity on the viewer, for theatrically preserving aura, for providing his works with consummate 'exhibition value' (AT, 66–7).

24. If we configure the three themes so far sketched – the employment of further aesthetic abstraction to counter both empirical and artistic abstraction, the connection between abstraction and sensuous particularity, and the idea of an enigmatic, non-signifying language of nature – we have the raw materials to engage with the central worry and claim of Clark's paper. He hopes that, by means of coming up with a new term to describe and evaluate the specificity of abstract

expressionism, the historical blockage it represents for contemporary art can be loosened. The concept he thinks best captures abstract expressionism is 'vulgar'. It is, he thinks, an advantage of this term that it points in two directions: 'to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very makeup, some telltale blemish, some atrociously visual quality that the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries; and to the object's existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality that have still to be defined, but are somehow *there*, in the word even before it is deployed' (DAE, 28). Clark appropriates for himself the idea that the 'abject object' side of vulgarity reveals it as 'one of the forms of death', or 'death mingled with life', and hence with abjectness itself (DAE, 32). He associates the 'existence of the object in a particular social world of tastes and styles' side of vulgarity with abstract expressionism being an expression of petty-bourgeois taste, of the bourgeoisie deploying petty-bourgeois taste as the guilty façade for the failure of bourgeois ideals to be realized (DAE, 36).

25. I take it that the vulgar is a replacement term, the successor concept to the sublime. Sublimity was always a negativity in relation to a standing measure. The



Clyfford Still, *Untitled (PH-968)*, 1951–52. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

idea of the 'modernist sublime' tokened the moment of dissonance in autonomous art, the moment of negativity through which such art declared its departure from the canon of the harmonious, the beautiful, the tasteful.¹⁴ Vulgarity's contented transgression of good taste makes it a plausible successor to sublimity; it also makes Clark's innovation less startling or radical than it sounds at first blush.

26. For this very reason, it is not necessary to contest the credentials of vulgarity; on the contrary, the term's inner relation to sublimity makes it eminently usable in order to help *explain*, and to that extent *vindicate*, our inability to make abstract expressionism a thing of the past. Its long, vulgar shadow is an accomplishment of nearly as high an order as its proponents wished and claimed.

27. In building his case for the abject vulgarity of abstract expressionism, Clark approvingly cites a description of Rothko's work by Clyfford Still: 'When they are hung in tight phalanx, as he would have them hung, and flooded with the light he demands that they receive, the tyranny of his ambition to suffocate or crush all who stand in his way becomes fully manifest... It is not without significance, therefore, that the surfaces of these paintings reveal the gestures of negation, and that their means are the devices of seduction and assault. Not I, but himself, has made it clear that his work is of frustration, resentment and aggression. And that it is the brightness of death that veils their bloodless febrility and clinical evacuations' (DAE, 34). The 'death' in question here refers not to the explicit references to it that Rothko, but not he alone, was wont to summon into his art for the sake of profundity, but the precise 'death' which belongs to the execution of the paintings themselves, to abstraction.

28. As a hint about where Still's prescient passage might lead, let me instance a corresponding passage from Adorno: 'When cruelty rears its head explicitly and directly, as it does in modern art, it thereby validates the thought that in the present age art can no longer rely on its *a priori* ability to transform cruelty into form because reality has become overwhelmingly powerful. Cruelty is a result of the self-reflection of modern art, which despairingly realizes that it would find itself in the role of a henchman of the powers that be, if it were not cruel but



William De Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950-52. (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

conciliatory instead. Cruelty emerges in its naked form in works of art as soon as their spell begins to lose its hold. The mythical cruelty of beauty has its counter-part in the phenomenon of the irresistibility of art works...' (AT, 74). I note, parenthetically, that this cruelty, this moment of anti-art, which is just the moment of abstraction itself, is the key to the connection between De Kooning's pure abstractions and the assault on art and spectator alike in his 'Woman' paintings. A constant temptation and fate for abstract expressionist works is that they might lose their moment of cruelty and anti-art, that they might lose their abstraction, their negativity, and become either dull and familiar ('neutralized' is Adorno's term) or sweetly beautiful (as *Lavender Mist* has probably already become). Scrap the bravura: De Kooning knows the danger and finds resources even more disturbing than Soutine's carcasses to enact the moment of abstraction itself. That these moments are themselves 'representational' focuses the anti-art moment of abstraction, the fact that its negativity is poised against both society's and art's own abstract universality. However misogynist, De Kooning's 'Woman' paintings are properly death masks, abstract expressionism's painterly *memento mori*.

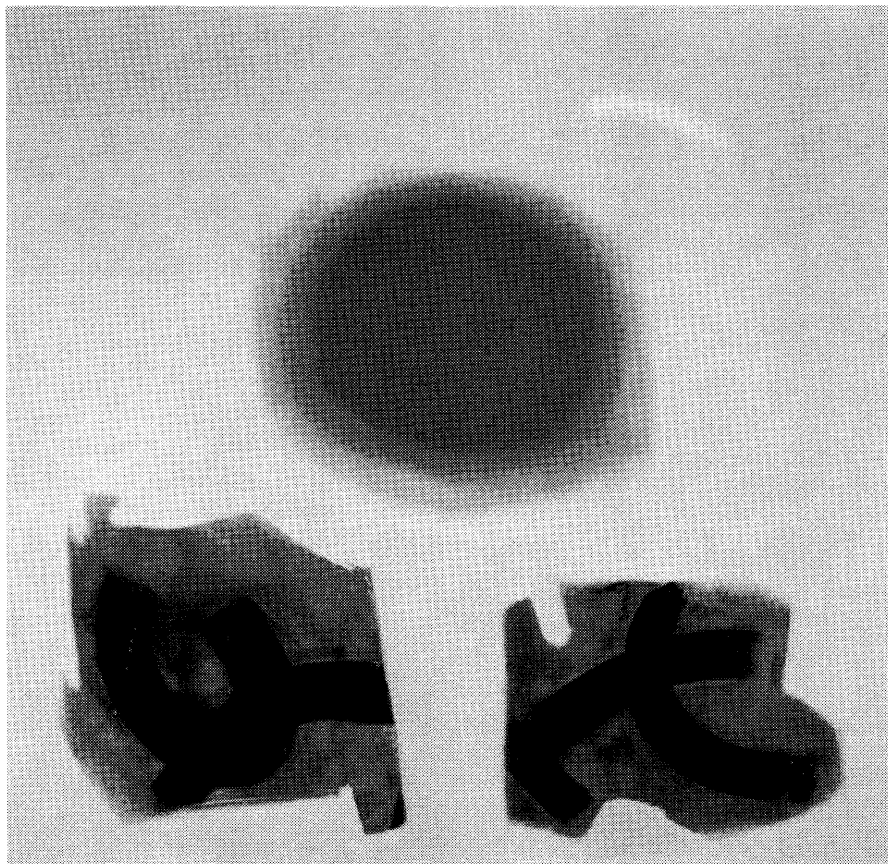
29. As Still correctly notes, and Clark fails to pursue, it is the 'gestures of negation' that belong to the paintings which determine their vulgarity. At issue in these 'gestures of negation' is the meaning of abstraction itself, and hence of the cost involved in overcoming the disenchantment of art and world through its continuation – that is, through a further work of disenchanting further negations. Art cannot avoid the progressive disenchantment of the world that has occurred outside art; if it sought to obtain authenticity and authority for itself by summoning dead gods and dead meanings into its precincts, it would rightly be accused of naïveté or anachronism. But almost all mentionable constructions of meaning are subject to this stricture, including both previous aesthetic forms and the sorts of archaic or primitive images from the collective unconscious to which abstract expressionists themselves liked to refer. One now can be charmed by Klee's or Gottlieb's pictographs, but their conventionality, mythicity, is unavoidable. Authenticity without cruelty is no longer possible. De Kooning's parodic woman is the cut of the scalpel applied with a smile.

30. If there are no positive meanings outside art that can be cited, then art will be forced to cite itself, the fact of its continuing, without anything to support that self-citation

other than works. What such works allow us is *the experience of the absence of experience*. But that experience is one of semblance, illusion. It refers to nothing in the world. To be so locked in semblance – 'the new as a longing for the new', so necessarily not new, but always already old – in itself makes modernist art abject. It equally yields to a certain posturing about 'art', a self-aggrandizing gesturing, which becomes internal and intrinsic to a practice that intends, promises more than art. For the promise of meaning, the promise of *human* happiness, to be lodged in the space of aesthetic illusion, in messing about with bits of paint on canvas, is outrageous and ludicrous. Abstract expressionism invites and shoulders the burden of this promising, becoming heroic, self-serving, self-important, fatuous and kitsch all at the same time. The constellation of these concepts – vulgarity itself, perhaps – configures the meaning of the present, not of art alone.

31. 'Aesthetics today,' Adorno states, 'is powerless to avert its becoming a necrologue of art' (AT, 5). This conception of the death of art is quite other than Clark's 'making the endlessness of ending bearable' since the latter takes the disenchantment out of the world to be emphatic, that is, to be a situation in which our 'inability to go on giving Idea and World sensuous immediacy, of

a kind that opened both to the play of practice[,] would itself prove a persistent, maybe sufficient, subject' (DAE, 25). For Clark our 'inability' to provide an articulation of Idea and World is enough, an intrigue of its own. What speaks against this intrigue is that the fit between Idea and World that is wanting is that between human subjects and everyday objects – including other subjects. Hence the question, the problem of sensuous immediacy, what is proper to art, is invested with a significance that art's first disenchantment, viz., its becoming autonomous from the demand of re-presenting the religious absolute, can hardly have prepared it for. As Adorno notes, 'it was only fairly recently, namely



Adolph Gottlieb, *Excalibur*, 1963. (Whitney Museum of American Art)

after art had become thoroughly secular and subject to an internal technical evolution, that art acquired another important feature: an inner logic of development' (AT, 4). This inner logic of development is nothing other than 'dialectic of enlighten-ment', that is, progressive demythologization through the sacrifice of the particular to the universal. Art becomes the polar opposite of the abstract universal by continuing this process inversely: it sacrifices the universal to the particular through the universal (technique). If this is the process of which abstract expressionism is a potential concluding moment, it is that moment because even sensuous immediacy itself must, in time, come before the court of negation. Yet, to give up on sensuous immediacy would be, for all intents and purposes, to give up on art, what made works compelling *as* works of art. Hence, abstract expressionism's long shadow: *we* cannot give up on sensuous immediacy without giving up on the claims of sensuous particulars *überhaupt*, and yet if post-abstract expressionism is to avoid regression, then it can only go forward by cancelling the medium of art itself – which to a certain extent is exactly what has happened. It is this happening itself, the happening of happenings, minimalism and conceptual art, that has, in fact, *kept* abstract expressionism alive despite the cultural neutralizations it has undergone. The inner artistic necessity of 'carrying on' suffers the counter-thrust of the claim of sensuous particularity, a claim raised strictly in virtue of its painful or playful absence; this makes the 'carrying on' itself belated, a work of belatedness. 'Art will not survive if it forgets sensuousness, just as it will not survive if it gives itself over to an external sensuousness that is divorced from its real structure' (AT, 389).

32. Adorno's brief way with this thought about the dialectic of abstraction is to claim that its mortality could be art's content (AT, 5). His longer way is this: 'If art were to discard the long demystified illusion of duration and incorporate into itself its mortality, *out of sympathy with the ephemeral, which is life*, then it would live up to a concept of truth at the core of which is time rather than some enduring abstract essence. Just as all art is secularized transcendence, so all art participates in the dialectic of enlightenment. Art has faced the challenge of dialectic by developing the aesthetic concept of anti-art. From now on, no art will be conceivable without the moment of anti-art. This means no less than that art has to go beyond its own concept in order to remain faithful to itself. Hence, even the idea of the abolition of art is respectful of art because it takes the truth claim of art seriously' (AT, 43; emphasis mine). The cruelty of abstraction, its cutting into the flesh of sensuousness in

order to enact such sensuousness, engages us on the ground of our bodily mortality, which the reigning universals eclipse as a condition for meaning. The disturbance, distress, suffering of the material surface – just that – that these canvases perform (on and to us) are a way of calling back and voicing sensuous reality in its mortal coils, of recalling or inventing an experience of depth or transcendence that hangs on nothing more than our bodily habitation of a material world in which all things pass away. That all this might (must) transpire within the frame of petty-bourgeois vulgarity, through canvases unable to rid themselves of the 'telltale blemish' or tackiness and kitsch, is the minor materialist miracle that engraves the moment of abstract expressionism as still our own. The long shadow of abstract expressionism is the persistence of the need for art; what such art promises, but is impotent to realize, is that the need for art – the *precise* need to which abstract expressionism is a response – can disappear because its promise was realized.

33. That there is a need for art here and now is how art becomes entangled with commodity fetishism. Clark would like a situation in which the enchantment of art and the enchantment of the commodity could be firmly distinguished. For Adorno, in so far as commodity fetishism continues to reign, no such separation is possible. On the contrary, works of art are 'absolute commodities; they are social products which have discarded the illusion of being-for-society, an illusion tenaciously retained by all other commodities' (AT, 336). That abstract expressionism's commodity character should adhere to the vulgarity of the petty bourgeois has everything to do with this art's unique self-importance and impotence. The progress of capital has made even the bourgeoisie petty bourgeois. Vulgarity is the death's head of self-deceived bourgeois optimism.

34. In survey: the above account of abstract expressionism told of how its abstractions, over-allness and largeness fed particularism, how its connecting of colour and writing fed a relation to nature, and how the linking of particularity and nature fed an objectivity and transcendence. This characterization of abstract expression-ism enjoins both the thought that disenchantment has become dir-emption and that under existing conditions abstract expressionism appears to be a definitive response to our social impasse in painting. The question raised by this defence of abstract expressionism is not where might art go from here; who cares? But where might we go from this desolate place, and how on earth are we to get there?

Notes

1. *October* 69, pp. 23–44. Reference in the body of the essay to this text will be abbreviated DAE. References to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, hereafter AT, will be to the translation by C. Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984. This paper was originally given as a lecture at The Slade School of Art in February 1995. I want to thank Michael Newman for that invitation and his promptings to get me to talk about some art works. For ease of reading, I have let the essay remain in its slightly informal lecture format.
2. See AT, pp. 6–11; and Lambert Zuidervaat, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*, MIT Press, London, 1991, pp. 152–4.
3. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings, Seabury Press, New York, 1972, p. 8.
4. John Dewey, 'Wondering Between Two Worlds', quoted in John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, University of Chicago Press, London, 1994, p. 4.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 7.
6. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 13.
7. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1977, p. 16.
8. 'The Sublime is Now', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds, *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 574. The essay was originally published in 1948.
9. Some of what I think about *Lavender Mist* is influenced by Rosalind Kraus, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, London, 1993, esp. p. 307. Her central concerns in her discussion of Pollock, the shift from the vertical to the horizontal and the play of gravity, were originally broached by Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, Oxford University Press, London, 1972. Throughout, however, I have been more than influenced by Adorno's thesis that in modernist art meaning and causality are (still or re-) combined. This thesis is at the heart, I would argue, of any adequately materialist epistemology or account of meaning. finally, it is worth recalling here what remains the best starting place for reflection on modernist painting and the surface, Richard Wollheim's 'The Work of Art as Object', in his *On Art and the Mind*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1973.
10. This angle on Newman was already suggested by Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', *Art International*, 7/8, October 1962, pp. 24–32.
11. For a renewed critique of the myth of the given which still serves to prop up the duality of meaning and materialism, see John McDowell's lucid *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, London, 1994. McDowell, naturally enough, is primarily concerned with demonstrating that the space of reason must reach out all the way to the object. Adorno works the other side of the same fence: if there is meaning all the way out (or down), equally there is object and materiality all the way in (and up). Adorno's materialism is not anti-idealist, but a nuanced inflection of idealism. Bald naturalism of coherency theories like Quine's and Davidson's are, from an Adornesque perspective, equally forms of 'identity thinking'.
12. For a useful critique of the ideal of pure discursivity, pure communication without remainder, see David Bell, 'The Art of Judgement', *Mind*, 96/2, 1987, pp. 221–44.
13. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980.
14. This modernist reading of the meaning of the sublime is a leitmotif throughout my *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992.
14. This is rapid shorthand for an immense historico-philosophical problem. From the beginning of modernity the themes of sensuousness, and so sexuality and mortality, have been relayed through a fragmentation and splitting of the female body, and thus through cruelty and negativity. This begins, at least, with Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'. For these beginnings, see Francis Barker's *The Tremulous Private Body*, Methuen, London, 1984. I presume that the relatively immediate precedent for De Kooning's 'Woman' series is to be found among Picasso's women, certainly the viciously ironic *Ma Jolie*.

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