"The Trouble with Clem, or Thoughts on Teaching Greenberg"

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"To be just, or fair, which is to have its raison d'etre, criticism must be partial, passionate, political; it should be exclusive, but it should be written from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons."

Charles Baudelaire, Salon of 1846

"The lesson is: When it comes to art, always be ready to be surprised by anything and to be satisfied and exhilarated by surprise. The lesson is to want unwelcome surprises. And I think this is the way in which to get the most from art, whether new or old. …"

Clement Greenberg, Bennington Seminars, 1971

I. Introduction

Several years ago I read curator and critic Robert Storr's detailed critique of Clement Greenberg. According to Storr's lively and compelling account Greenberg achieved the status of "The Wizard of Oz of Formalism, commanding the allegiance of a host of curators, historians, dealers, and critics, he has issued edicts, sanctioned movements, and punished recalcitrants from behind the screen of his connoisseurship."

The trouble for me was that I—then an MFA student—learned how to *dis*like Greenberg before I truly had much of an understanding of the critic's considerable body of work itself—or in fact what there was to recommend it in

the first place. I had known previously that Greenberg was a name closely associated with Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, a movement certainly temporally distanced from my own experience, yet when going off to college as an undergrad (as a matter of fact at RISD almost 20 years ago) I was as influenced by Franz Kline as Andy Warhol (not to mention punk rock graphics and old Marvel Comics.

To fast forward quite a bit, I'm trying these days as an assistant professor of art history to configure a meaningful way—or various ways—of teaching Greenberg's work and do justice to its real value both as historical documentation and intensive criticism—without resorting to simply rehearsing the pretty drastic debates surrounding this material for so long. These critical (and even sometimes personal) exchanges are a significant part of the story yet what's at stake here is pretty different when you are in a 21st century classroom rather than a late 20th century barroom.

One of the significant problems in evaluating Greenberg's work is the fact that he was such a polarizing figure in the artworld for many years, such that many of the responses his writings elicited conflate aesthetic and personal disagreements. Seemingly everytime new material by or about Greenberg is published a chain reaction of commentary ensues, going back and forth across the Postmodern vs Modernist camps. One of the last of these exchanges occurred on the publication of the 1998 biography by Florence Rubenfeld, perceived by many of Greenberg's friends and associates to be an unflattering and almost grotesque portrait.

The deficiencies of the formalist approach itself are dramatically clear, largely through its exclusionary tactics such as the treatment of extra-pictorial

information as superfluous, whereas very often the best works of art criticism today tend on the contrary toward an inclusive attitude toward the surrounding social and political context. The loud eclectic cacophony of 1960s-80s art seemed almost destined to leave Greenberg's formalism aside. Fluxus, performance, body art, earthworks, video, activist art, and installation among other strands of contemporary practice are in multiple senses beyond the scope of Greenberg's criteria for even "minor" (or novelty) art.

Many of the seminal art critical essays of the sixties and seventies act as vehement responses to Greenberg's stance, including Lucy Lippard's "Eccentric Abstraction", Lawrence Alloway's "Systemic Painting", and Leo Steinberg's "Other Criteria." By the 1980s, the move towards commenting on the Death of Painting by several "Postmodernist" writers, as well as the burgeoning emphasis on diversification of media in the visual arts can be seen as an extreme counterpoint to Greenberg's modernist/formalist approach. Greenberg is today a spectral presence, still haunting much writing on modern and contemporary art, even if now relegated often to deep background.

II. Greenberg's Biography and Criticism

Before I get too far along here however, I should probably relate some of the most relevant biographical material concerning the critic himself. Clement Greenberg was born in 1909 in the Bronx, New York City, the eldest of three sons born to Lithuanian Jewish parents. His father was a successful merchant and later a manufacturer. Greenberg attended Syracuse University (A.B. '30) studying languages and literature, and later worked as a civil servant. A precocious young artist he later claimed that he could draw "photographically"

and paint "passably." He studied at the Art Students' League in 1925, and a dozen years later he began drawing frequently from models at a WPA studio, in the process meeting the artist Lee Krasner, later to marry Jackson Pollock. (I think this first-hand experience of trying to make images—however limited—is very significant in terms of Greenberg's later criticism.)

Throughout the 1930s, Greenberg had been steadily increasing his efforts to write seriously, among them short stories and poems and occasional criticism. In 1939, the *Partisan Review* published one of his earliest and now most famous essays, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," his first attempt to theorize the manifold differences between the "high" art made for a select few and the burgeoning importance of mass culture. The following year he became an editor at the same magazine and he also began a stint as the regular art critic for *The Nation* from 1942-49.

During that period Greenberg emerged as an admirably eloquent writer of clear, crisp prose which still presented considerable demands and challenges to his readers. He frequently used his incisive comments to discuss art of a period in general, dismissing and promoting artists—even entire movements—with one or two pithy, brisk sentences. This can also be extremely infuriating to encounter, as when in discussing Russian Suprematist and Italian Futurist works in 1942, he writes "All have documentary value but are meager in aesthetic results."

By the late 1940s, Greenberg had argued strongly for the artists of the New York School, principally Jackson Pollock, of whom he stated in a January 1948 review:

> In this day and age the art of painting increasingly rejects the easel and yearns for the wall. It is Pollock's culture as a painter that has made him

> so sensitive and receptive to a tendency that has brought with it, in his case, a greater concentration on surface texture and tactile qualities, to balance the danger of monotony that arises from the even, *all-over* design which has become Pollock's consistent practice. …I am certain that *Phosphorescence*, whose overpowering surface is stalagmited with metallic paint, will in the future blossom and swell into a superior magnificence; for the present it is almost too dazzling to be looked at indoors.

Greenberg also had great acuity in his descriptions of the enormous isolation of American artists of the 1940s, stating (the previous year)

> It is still downtown, below 34th Street, that the fate of American art is being decided—by young people, few of them over forty, who live in cold-water flats and exist from hand to mouth. Now they all paint in the abstract vein, show rarely on 57th Street, and have no reputations that extend beyond a small circle of fanatics, art fixated misfits who are as isolated in the United States as if they were living in Paleolithic Europe.

The really captivating aspect of his late 1940s and early 1950s criticism is that he is writing on an extremely high level, informed by his knowledge of the best painters and paintings of the time in NYC, and his brief essays erupt into bursts of description and analysis that seem almost of a piece with what was emerging from the artists' studios as he discovers (in his words) a:

> hallucinated uniformity. Uniformity—the notion is antiaesthetic. And yet the pictures of many of the painters named above get away with this uniformity, however meaningless and repellent the uninitiated might find it. This very uniformity, this dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of similar units of sensation, seems

> to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility. It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other.

Greenberg conjured some memorable and evocative critical phrases, such as "homeless representation," stating "I mean by this a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones." This critical term was fashioned by Greenberg to describe the works of both Willem DeKooning and Jasper Johns. [SLIDES}Passages taken like snapshots from throughout Greenberg's prolific career can still serve as models of diligent criticism, in which close observation is coupled with lucid description. From [Morris] Louis and [Kenneth] Noland (1960):

> Louis spills his paint on unsized and unprimed cotton duck canvas, leaving the pigment almost everywhere thin enough, no matter how many veils of it are superimposed, for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath. But 'underneath' is the wrong word. The fabric, being soaked in paint rather than merely covered by it, becomes paint in itself, color in itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the color.

Greenberg famously privileges vision and opticality, he really seems driven to *see* the work, and when certain works don't "deliver" (to use his sort of shorthand) he dismisses them. He cannot abide the increasingly conceptualist modes of artmaking in which visuality is often nearly beside the point, or a strictly marginal concern. Thus without being able to literally "SEE" the work he remains unable to devise an appropriate response. Without surrendering to the

primacy of vision, it's as if the work doesn't exist, or perhaps even more accurately in Greenberg's assessment *should not* exist!

`Greenberg considered much such conceptually directed art after the postpainterly abstraction he favored of the early 1960s to be "novelty" art. He similarly used almost interchangeably the terms "far out" and "Good Design"—in his words something to "rise above—to refer to the art movements emerging in the wake of the new representational Pop Art, and its abstract corollary, Minimalism. It has been commented on repeatedly that it seems odd that Greenberg was so hostile and dismissive of Minimalism, which could be viewed as a real culmination of the idea of a self-critical art purged of direct reference to the outside world and still fashioning itself as emphatically abstract, flattened geometric forms, albeit displayed as three-dimensional plinths, boxes, and objects. In his well-known essay from 1967 entitled "Recentness of Sculpture", Greenberg comments: "Minimal art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else. Its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered. … There is hardly any aesthetic surprise in Minimal art, only a phenomenal one of the same order as in Novelty art, which is a one-time surprise."

Instead Greenberg became a longtime advocate of the sculptor, Anne Truitt, who prefigured Minimalist aesthetics with her geometric wood and aluminum sculptures of the early 1960s. Greenberg seemed to respond strongly to Truitt's work perhaps due to its clearly handmade and formally ambiguous character. He writes in 1968:

> Her stepped boxes, ranging in size from that of a footlocker to that of a chiffonier, immediately posed the question of whether they were art, only

> to solve it in the next instant with their painted surfaces, which acted and did not act as pictures. In the painting of these surfaces Truitt was strongly influenced by Barnett Newman. Rectangular zones of darkish color were usually, but not always, kept in subtle contrast by the suppression of the value (light-and-dark) differences between them. The success of the given piece depended on how its various silhouettes and surfaces, and chromatic divisions of surface interacted. It was hard to tell, in Truitt's art, where the pictorial and where the sculptural began and ended.

Most considerations of Greenberg have to deal with the aspect of sight and vision in his writings pretty closely. Greenberg in the broad scope of his criticism after abstract expressionism seems to search for a strangely disembodied almost floating chroma, somehow fashioned through maintaining a relation to the traditional attributes of painting but expressing a kind of tension with the strictures of the medium itself. The description of Louis's process above is an example of this tension.

"Modernist Painting" also from 1960 is the most often cited essay in terms of fulfilling Greenberg's expectations for the extended modernist project of painting: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Along with this sentence, almost excruciatingly compressed in space given the complexity of this formulation, another statement is frequently used to characterize Greenberg's guiding principles: "Because flatness was the only

condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."

Greenberg had much earlier studied with the painter Hans Hofmann, that is to say, he attended three lectures in 1938-39 and however brief these encounters may have been, they made an enormous impact on his outlook toward the visual arts. Hofmann was well known for his idea of the "push and pull" enacted by compositional elements, according to their respective values and hues and scale, within the two-dimensional picture plane. Hofmann's stated that "painting possesses fundamental laws. These laws are dictated by fundamental perceptions. One of these perceptions is: the essence of the picture is the picture plane. The essence of the picture is its two-dimensionality. The first law is then derived: the picture plane must be preserved in its two-dimensionality."

This argument in its structure, cadence, and force cannot be underestimated in its importance to Greenberg, attempting to fashion a framework for viewing contemporary painting of his own. This sort of notion along with Hofmann's firsthand knowledge of Kandinsky and Matisse, as well as his being the first of the New York School to make "splatter" or "drip" paintings in the early 1940s further emphasize how much Greenberg learned and adapted from Hofmann.

III. Teaching Greenberg

I'm trying to develop a rough set of guidelines for my own use in teaching Greenberg and I would like to give a brief description of each of these self-

determined through for the most part trial and error stipulations. They follow here:

(1) Do not use "Modernist" Painting *only* when assigning a reading from the critic, as it is a distillation of his thoughts on modern art for a radio audience created after more than two decades as a working critic of art and literature. One of the tremendous faults of only reading a statement like Modernist Painting as a representative essay is that it (like many of Greenberg's later essays) shifts focus from a succinct description of current painterly practice toward a kind of generalized historical trajectory the critic espouses, and without any specific works of art used as support for his arguments, they tend toward a kind of abstract genericism, and the sense of future possibilities seems less evident. I tend to enjoy his work from the late 1940s outlining the "Crisis of the Easel Picture" or many of the short exhibition reviews that were his forte, or perhaps 1955's "American Type Painting," which has really wonderful moments critically such as speaking of the *terribilita* in DeKooning or the gothic in Pollock.

(2) Do not speak only of the *late* Greenberg and the debates over his legacy first. As one MFA painter I know scolded me, his writing becomes tainted by the (heavily critical, I admit) "soundbite" version I have occasionally presented in class. To my mind it's a bit like listening to a Elvis Presley's "Aloha from Hawaii 1972" before being aware of the 1955 Sun Sessions. Greenberg was a critic who dwelt in the realm of surprise and hope and

belief in the significance of art. Thus without traveling even a short bit down the long road in which Greenberg transformed in many people's view from self-criticism to self-parody it would make a mockery of his achievement.

(3) The comparison between Greenberg and his contemporary rival Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) can be useful but only to a point. For example a colleague of mine teaching post-war art once told me that his discussion of the contradictory discourses around the New York School essentially ended up boiling down to "Greenberg bad … Rosenberg good". Today the prevailing notion is that Rosenberg's 1952 essay "American Action Painters" (commenting on DeKooning although without naming him) in which the notion is put forth of the painting as site of psychic struggle or arena ends up the more cogent argument in terms of later happenings, performance, and intermedial artworks which soon followed. (much of which Rosenberg had as little liking for as Greenberg). In my own opinion, Rosenberg is a less interesting writer and definitely less committed to examining the visual phenomena in art, although his criticism spawned several provocative notions such as the "tradition of the new" or the "de-definition of art." (When I have divided students into Greenberg and Rosenberg camps in seminars, frequently and somewhat unexpectedly Greenberg carries the day.

(4) It is ultimately a fruitless waste of time to try to get Greenberg involved as a posthumous commentator on the sort of art he either

loathed or had no particular feeling for. (ie: I can't imagine that he would be terribly fond of Maurizio Cattelan or Damien Hirst) Why not perhaps more helpfully read his arguments within the specific context in which they were intended: modern painting from the mid-19th to mid-20th Century. That said, the "name game" is one often tried out particularly by interviewers of Greenberg in his last decades, trying to figure out if something indeed caught his attention after such painters as Louis, Noland, and Olitski. Surprisingly, he said very positive things about Anselm Kiefer.

(5) Responses from students to Greenberg's work have been surprising, varied, and unpredictable over the course of teaching his work the past several years. I will not readily forget a very young painter who became enamored with the painterly techniques of Kenneth Noland, one of Greenberg's favorite artists. Suddenly at the point of the final class presentations, he unfurled a large quasi-Noland in the front of the room to intiate some discussion of Formalism in relation to the work. Or I remember a sequential artist—that is to say a creator of comics or graphic novels if you prefer—who used Greenberg's comments on media in "Modernist Painting" to support her arguments in defense of comics as a specific and cohesive medium.

(6) Greenberg's politics and his shift from a Marxist-Socialist Trotskyism to a more centrist viewpoint has been used to unfairly condemn and

dismiss his writings—as if there was a kind of one to one equation between aesthetic and political conservatism.

(7) Use the internet! The internet is helpful for finding archived articles, debates, etc on Greenberg's work. The Portland Museum of Art has a site with examples from Greenberg's art collection, which it recently purchased, and one site even has a streaming video of one of the critic's many public lectures. How odd to be viewing this rather anti-technological critic as a ghostly apparition on the information superhighway.

Conclusion, or A final quote

In a 1969 interview—and this is a point which he continued to reiterate frequently—Greenberg stated: "There are of course, more important things than art: life itself, what actually happens to you. This may sound silly, but I have to say it, given what I've heard art-silly people say all my life: I say that if you have to choose between life and happiness or art, remember always to choose life and happiness. Art solves nothing, either for the artist himself or those who receive his art."

This has a curious ring to it, when you might compare Fluxus artist Ben Vautier's text piece reading "I don't want to do art. I want to be happy." Or Marcel Duchamp's job title used to introduce him at a symposium in 1958, "mere artist." Or Gerhard Richter's belief that art cannot save the artist or the viewer from the horrors of the world. Or the attempts of such different artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Yoko Ono, or Linda Montano to incorporate life

into their art and vice versa. The gap—almost a Canyon—between life and art remains but it became the task of many of the artists Greenberg held in lesser regard to try and negotiate and communicate the unexplored terrain of this dramatic fissure.