

»Form« and »finish« in modern painting

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This paper is concerned with a group of paintings made earlier this year by Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, the artists whose work is issued under the name of Art & Language. Each is approximately 180 cm high by 120 cm wide. The paintings belong to a sub-series within the longer series which Art & Language have called *Hostages*. Since December 1989, all the paintings given this title have been based on a simple and consistent landscape motif.¹ An uneven row of poplar trees is seen within a relatively featureless field, receding diagonally or running parallel to the picture plane according to the variations of a simple perspectival scheme. The horizon line is marked with indefinite, painterly traces which casually signify a hedge. The paintings are individuated by effects of light and weather, though the pictorial atmosphere thus established appears rather as a conventional aspect quoted than as a natural property directly expressed. These are the token materials of landscape as an alienated genre – a genre abandoned by the critical interests of Modernism and rendered bathetic by the conditions of modernity. To those familiar with his paintings of the 1890s, the motif of the poplar tree inescapably evokes the work of Monet, and thus refers, albeit laconically, to the last moment in western art when the identification of intentional human content could be made consonant with a comfortable concept of nature.

In the works with which I'm primarily concerned, each painting is divided vertically. The landscape motif occupies only a certain proportion of each canvas. The remainder is painted in a single flat colour. As components of the initial design, these vertical areas may be seen as wholly decorative and non-naturalistic, as forms of reference to those types of (principally American) abstract painting which have been conventionally associated with metaphysical profundity, or as figurative devices of a sort familiar from the works of Degas and Matisse, where they serve to qualify the spectator's psychological experience by framing a scene or by distancing an imaginary viewpoint. In the *Hostages* it is not clear whether it is landscape or painted band that is practically and conceptually basic. Are the vertical bands to be read figuratively, or are they to be read as abstract incursions into basically

1. *Hostages XXIV-XXXV* were exhibited at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, from 6-31 March 1990. The present sub-series commences with *Hostage XXXVI*. *Hostages XXXVI-XLV* were shown at the Basel Art Fair in June 1990, by the Lisson Gallery, London.

figurative paintings, or are the *Hostages* basically abstract paintings in which landscape motifs appear as forms of ironic quotation?

The nearest surface of each painting is comprised of a sheet of glass. The glass ends just short of the unframed edges of the canvas and is fixed by screws driven through the canvas into the support beneath. Over large areas of each painting the glass adheres directly to the paint-surface; or rather the paint is pressed up against the glass and spread out by pressure from behind the canvas to provide an intermediate layer between canvas and glass.

Various forms of evidence thus mesh to establish the appearance of the recent *Hostages*: what remains legible of the token landscape and of the evacuated illusionistic world it proposes; the literal surface of paint with its decorative incident and its own cultural and artistic associations; and the spectator's own phenomenal environment, reduced to a pattern of half-reflected highlights and shadows, for it is a further effect of the procedure here employed by Art & Language that the glass is made practically and conceptually inseparable from the canvas, so that not only its immanent properties of hardness and transparency but also its content of reflections become part of what each painting connotes. It seems that the possibility of the aesthetic is almost cancelled out by the visual noise of the circumstantial.

To view these paintings is to be caught between levels of representation in a world of conflicting descriptions. They are evocative as illusionistic and richly decorative paintings may be. But they are also literally slab-like and weighty. They are broadly figurative but their figurative components merge without significant transition into areas which read as literally flat. The discriminating tones and colours of referential detail blur into seemingly accidental pattern. The fictive and pictorial depth of the perspective schemes extends uneasily in face of the very different kinds of spatial disjunction established between the landscapes and the areas of flat colour, and in turn between these and the literal planes of paint, canvas and glass. We might sum up our experience of these paintings by saying that their literal aspects and their figurative aspects tend to converge and to coincide. To put it crudely, to see them as pictures – and thus as potentially open to all the complexities of the pictorial – is not to rule-out or to suspend the possibility of their being seen as slab-like objects, inviting associations with the »three dimensional objects« of the American Minimalists at one extreme and with the polished surfaces of commercial décor at the other. On the other hand, that a given surface is seen as a literal surface of glass and paint does not rule out the possibility of its also being seen as representational – a point to which I shall return later.

I claim no originality for the observation that pictorial illusion is a thoroughly dispensable condition of representation. On the other hand, there is no cognitively significant representation in visual art without some form of

reference to *pictorial* representation. What I wish to emphasize is the apparent importance to the effect of these specific paintings *both* of their literal and obdurate physical presence and of their figurative and unsettled pictorial properties. Prompted by these works of Art & Language, I suggest that some significant aspect of the modern in painting may be discovered in the relationship between literal objecthood on the one hand and suspension of finish on the other. What's required for this to be the case is that the operative conditions of both objecthood and finish should have some critical bearing upon the ways in which we are accustomed to represent – or to picture – the world to ourselves. I believe there is a category of paintings of which it might be said that some significant lack of finish – some intentional refusal of customary modes of termination of both technical and psychological activities – is a significant condition of their formal integrity and their qualitative presence. »Category« is perhaps too strong a term. What I have in mind is rather an aspect discoverable in many notable paintings of the modern period, though to differing degrees, barely noticeable in some, inescapable and crucial in others.

If I am right, that Art & Language's recent paintings bring the literal and the figurative into a critical coincidence is not so much a mark of their originality, as a testimony to the painters' engagement with conditions which have been pervasive and persistent. In art as elsewhere, the conditions of both making and seeing are historical and ideological. In fact, I suggest that the generation of tension and paradox in the relationship between literal form and figurative form – form which is the form of some pictorial illusion – has been the defining evidence of self-critical activity in painting for at least the past century and a quarter. Not, of course, in all painting. To identify self-criticism in these terms is to impose a form of evaluative qualification. I am talking of modern painting, or, more specifically still, of that tendency within nineteenth and twentieth-century western painting which is identified as modern in Modernist theory and criticism. I'll rephrase the generalization accordingly: what tends to define self-critical activity in painting as specifically Modernist self-criticism is that it leads to some unaccustomed tension or paradox in the relationship between literal form and figurative form.² This is to say that while there may be many other factors determining upon the relative quality

2. I have in mind here Michael Fried's essay, »Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings«, first published in *Artforum*, New York, vol. 5 no. 3, November 1966. In this important statement of late-Modernist aesthetic principles, Fried considers the relationship between literal shape and pictorial form as a crucial issue for the preservation of quality in modern painting. For Fried, as for all critics in the mainstream Modernist tradition, the sine qua non of aesthetic achievement is the victory of the noumenally »present« over the physically »literal«. In considering form as both a more practical and a more *provisional* concept than Fried allows it to be, I mean to modify the terms of his argument and rather to suggest that it is the persistence of a *dialectic* between the (meanings of the) figurative and the (meanings of the) literal that secures the continuing possibility of painting as a form of art.

of a modern painting, no painting can be entirely successful as a *modern* painting if some such tension is not successfully established – and established in terms of the psychological experience of competent spectators. (We may note that such a qualification will tend to relegate those fashionable forms of post-Duchampian post-Modernism in which modes of aestheticization of mere commodities are treated as forms of psychological or cultural game.)

So far we are on familiar ground: the ground of Clement Greenberg's »Modernist Painting«,³ for example, or of Richard Wollheim's »The Work of Art as Object«⁴ – essays now 30 and 20 years old respectively. Lately, such canonical statements of Modernist aesthetics have been reconnected to some of their own forgotten or suppressed antecedents in the literary theory of the earlier twentieth century – to the work, for example, of Shklovsky, Bakhtin and Benjamin – and given a new if cloistered lease of life in a fashionable form of Art History. The New Art Historian now effortlessly acknowledges the status of art as device, the social and material character of the sign, and the role of the artist as producer. He is also alert – formally at least – to the persistent presence of the contingent within the black heart of the universal. The Postmodern, it has been discovered, is not Modernism's cultural successor, but rather its intellectual sibling, if not its virtual parent.

Let's return, then, to the origins of the Modern in the already Postmodern: to Manet's *Olympia*, say, and to the establishment of that difference vis-à-vis its evident comparatives – such as Cabanel's near-contemporary *Birth of Venus* – which identifies *Olympia* as a modern work. This is a painting which was seen at the time of its first exhibition both as flat and as unfinished. It was derogated as a sketch, an *ébauche*. We might say that Manet did enough to secure reference to the form of such paintings as Cabanel's, and to the range of forms to which such paintings themselves referred, but not so much as to deliver up what such paintings were supposed to deliver in the way of opportunities for unreflective enjoyment – which is to say not enough for the imaginative and realistic activity of looking to be entirely overwhelmed by the distractions of a figuratively-enabled fantasy. In the eyes of the normal contemporary spectator Manet stopped before he had finished – before the barrier of the literal surface had been sufficiently penetrated by the plastic effects of figurative form to permit a confusion of figuration with fantasy.

Significantly, the view that the *painting* was unfinished tended to coincide with the judgement that the *woman* was both deformed and immoral. That's to

3. First published in *Arts Yearbook IV*, New York, 1961; reprint in C. Harrison and F. Francina eds. *Modern Art and Modernism*, Harper and Row, New York and London, 1982.

4. First published in *Studio International*, London, vol. 180, no. 928, December 1970; second version included in R. Wollheim, *On art and the Mind*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1973; edited version included in C. Harrison and F. Orton eds., *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, Harper and Row, 1984.

say, an ethical judgement on the means of representing was mapped more-or-less directly onto the represented. In the unrequited gropings of fantasy the woman was damned as grotesque. To put it another way, if Manet's painting could be seen as incompetent – if its stylistic features could be seen as accidental – then the represented woman could also be dismissed as a kind of accident. *Olympia* – or rather Victorine – was thus dispossessed of critical intention and of imaginary agency, and reduced to the status of a person for sale. She was an image to be refused.⁵

Of course, Manet is now seen as vindicated. We accept Victorine as a model of the modern woman – an appropriate subject for feminist biography – while those kinds of technical abbreviation which the nineteenth-century spectator took as evidence of involuntary incompetence we now accredit as the means of expression of an intentional and critical regard. The painting is an image of refusal. Indeed, by the turn of the century, avant-garde observers were already identifying the technical signs of this refusal as the very conditions of form in its modern guise. In that Modernist critical tradition, Cézanne's notorious doubt – his compulsive staving-off of the moment of figurative individuation and completion of his formal motifs – has been seen as a measure of ethical virtue and a guarantee of aesthetic interest and merit.⁶

The history of modern painting abounds in examples of the kind of tension I have in mind. In the works of Degas and Matisse, for example, moments of apparently casual suspension of modelling typically occur just where our attention is otherwise most thoroughly absorbed by passages of painterly mimesis, of pictorial narrative and of figurative embodiment. Measured against the conservative standard of an absolute iconic correspondence, these are moments of disruption, discontinuity and distortion. But it is by means of such devices that the painter recalls us to the worked surface in all its manifest facticity, inviting the engagement of our imaginative capacities and powers of discrimination with the painting as an intentional object, and disqualifying those tendencies to unreflective fantasy and self-projection which are licensed by the business-as-normal of modern culture.

These are not just the tricks of the modern painter's trade. I believe that a powerful form of necessity attaches to the deployment of such devices. Indeed, they are the typical marks of that qualitative distinction which we intend in designating works as »modern« rather than merely »contemporary«. They

5. The view of Manet's *Olympia* as a form of refusal derives from the work of T.J. Clark and has been elaborated in the discussion which that work has generated. See Clark, »Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia* in 1865«, *Screen*, London, Spring 1980 (edited reprint in Frascina and Harrison 1982); P. Wollen, »Manet, Modernism and the Avant-Garde«, *Screen*, Summer 1980; M. Baldwin, C. Harrison and M. Ramsden, »Manet's *Olympia* and Contradiction«, *Block*, No. 5, Middlesex, 1981; Clark, »*Olympia's* Choice«, in *The Painting of Modern Life*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985.

6. See M. Merleau-Ponty, »Le Douce de Cézanne«, 1945, in *Sens et non-sens*, Paris, 1966.

function like metaphors of cognitive alertness, rousing us from the state of »aesthetic impotence and insensibility«⁷ which is our normal condition, and instigating those complex forms of mental process through which critically pertinent aspects of our conscious existence are made actual in our experience as spectators.

Let us be clear. What we are concerned with here are the technical *effects* of art – the effects and their ethical implications. We are asking not simply how it is that paintings work upon the viewer, but also why it is that their working in this specific way seems to be – or to have become – indissolubly associated with qualitative presence. This is to ask how form contingently becomes meaning, which includes both the question of what it is that pictorial form is made of and refers to and the question of how pictorial style and finish are perceived.

Answers to such questions have normally been pursued within the social history of art, but the social history of art has proved itself relatively insensitive to the complexities of pictorial effects. It may be more fruitful to look for answers in the conversation and conduct of the studio, where critically to consider the form of a painting is both to consider its success in referring to what it is figuratively and conceptually made of and also to consider the conditions of its being finished. These questions are addressed by the painter in practice and empirically, in front of the thing being made and in exploration of its manifest or latent effects.

For the purposes of argument I distinguish two different modes of self-critical assessment, which go to two different ways of understanding the concepts of effect and of effectiveness. In the first, the artist scrutinises the painting for confirmation that an intended and envisaged effect has been achieved – and that the painting is therefore finished. In the second, what the artist hopes to discover in the possibly completed painting is something that he or she did not already know. What he requires of the work is that it should be that which he could not have envisaged; that its effect be other than what he could have intended. And he will only know that he must stop when he sees that he does not understand how to go on.

In practice, these two forms of self-criticism will rarely be distinct. In reviewing his work the artist looks for a match with intention, anxiety or whatever. He may not recognise it when the match is achieved. He may believe he has achieved it when he hasn't. But the latter form of self-criticism is the one which has been associated with the development of modernist art – or, at least, with the prevailing idealisation of that development. One thinks of

7. The phrase is taken from J.N. Findlay. See his »The Perspicuous and the Poignant«, in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 7 no 1, January 1967; reprint in H. Osborne ed., *Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 1972.

the priority which Picasso accorded to »finding« rather than »searching«,⁸ or of Pollock's view of the emerging painting as a being with a life of its own.⁹ On the other hand, in the long-standing dialectic between Modernism and Realism, Realism has traditionally been associated with a purposive grasp on the world, with knowing what one was seeing and doing and with there being an examinable end to which that seeing and doing was directed. From the perspective of Realism thus defined, the apparently restless iconoclasm of the Modernist has been seen as individualistic, asocial and elitist. From the perspective of Modernism, on the other hand, the ethical commitment of the soi-disant Realist masks the moral complacency of the propagandist, for whom pictorial imagery and form must always be transparent, effective, and properly finished. Though the propagandist's work may partake of the apparently unfinished style of an *ébauche*, say, or of an informal montage, that style will always turn out to have been standard cultural currency. What Modernism has shown is that there can be no Realism deserving of the name without a critique of the immanent logic of iconography and of conventions of imagery; that the possibility of going-on and of learning entails a continual and vigilant unfixing of the grounds of descriptiveness and correspondence in pictures, and a continual scepticism and resistance in the face of demands for effectiveness.

It is certainly true that vigilance of this order is inconsistent with an elitist indifference to the mechanisms and tendencies of the broader culture. It is also true – and particularly so since the emergence of abstract painting – that Modernist art has been tarred with the brush of unpopularity, which is to say with failure to conform to predominant conventions of visual identification and individuation. Modern art has not been popular – of that there can be no doubt. It would be a serious mistake, however, to assume that that tendency to formal autonomy and to abstraction which is celebrated in Modernist theory entails a disengagement from the culture at large. On the contrary, what is evident from the actual paintings of Malevich and Mondrian, of Pollock and Rothko, even of Stella and Noland (through it is not generally evident from reproductions of those paintings), is that the critical tension between figurative form and literal form is tuned to a high pitch in the best abstract art. The abstract painting is nothing if it is not also a virtual object, which resonates in the world of other objects, other surfaces. For the pioneers of abstract art, the critique of the figurative connections between paintings and the world – the

8. »In my opinion to search means nothing in painting. To find, is the thing ... When I paint my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for ...« P. Picasso, from an interview with Marius de Zayas, published as »Picasso Speaks«, *The Arts*, New York, May 1923.

9. »When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of »get acquainted« period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through...« J. Pollock, statement in R. Motherwell and H. Rosenberg eds., *Possibilities*, New York, Winter 1947/8.

critique, we might say, of a trivial realism-as-correspondence – was a necessary condition of art's actual realism. This strengthening of the connection between paintings and other things renders the achievement of aesthetic distinctness and quality all the more poignant. But the poignancy does not lie in the achievement of the aesthetic as a value independent of the social. On the contrary, given the nature of the artist as producer, it is precisely as the representative of the moral and social culture at large that the canonical abstract painter is revealed in his work. He is revealed, that is to say, as troubled by the appearance of the human world, by his own implication in that world of appearances, and by the forms of significance which forms of appearance may be made to reveal.

With the emergence of abstract art, the question of finish came to occupy not simply an important but a central position in the business of practical self-criticism in painting. Or rather we might say there was an increasing tendency to equate practical self-criticism with keeping the figurative at bay on the one hand and with preserving the possibility of aesthetic life on the other. For Malevich and Mondrian the question »Is this painting finished?« must often at the beginning of abstract art have been of such moment as to absorb not only the self-critical question »Is this good enough?«, but also the ontological question, »Is this a work of art?« For any of these questions to be answered in the affirmative it was not enough that the painting appear well designed and balanced. On the contrary, the condition of the emergent abstract work's being accorded the status of a work of art was that it should be unforeseeable and inexhaustible in experience as painting may be but as design is not. Barnett Newman is supposed to have deliberated for some eight months in 1948 over his *Onement I*, presumably waiting to be sure in his own mind that no further work was required to transform what he had made into a painting.¹⁰ I don't mean to overdramatise or to overdignify the matter of the artist's deliberations upon his work. The neurotic demand for self-reassurance no doubt plays as large a part in the painter's practice as in anyone else's. On the other hand, I don't think that Newman was waiting to be satisfied that *Onement I* was finished. On the contrary, only the impossibility of its termination could have assured him that it was a work of art he had produced and not simply a well-designed object.

As for Pollock, in his last years it seems that he often had to do damage to his own work, as it were to *unfinish* it, in the attempt to retrieve it from the world of the already recognisable, the finality of established taste. In the years from 1952 to 56 his frequent failures to redeem his own work read as the signs of a tragic disenablement or defeat. Since Pollock, painting which presents itself too securely as complete has either tended to look bureaucratic and

10. As reported by T. Hess in *Barnett Newman*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, June 1972.

self-important or to disappear without aesthetic remainder into the world of mere design.

Though Modernist theory has not generally addressed the question of form and finish in quite the term I have used, it has made much of the requirement of newness rather than mere novelty, of the »challenge to taste« associated with this newness, and of the importance to both of the factitious painted surface. Unlike the social history of art, Modernist criticism has been remarkably successful in drawing attention to works of interest, and in putting spectators on their mettle before them. It has furnished relevant discussion of significant technical characteristics, and by one means or another it has maintained a continuing agenda of moral uncertainty. The problem with this theory and criticism, however, is that it has tended to autonomise the developments it has observed, speaking of what painting has had to do and not of the conditions under which agents have had to act, nor indeed of the contingent determinations upon the act of looking. »Why«, we ask, »does painting get flatter, form less plastic, finish less securely defined?« And Greenberg replies (with some justice), »Because otherwise the art will not be good enough.«¹¹ But if we ask why this flatness, this formlessness, this indefiniteness should be or have been necessary accompaniments to the achievement of aesthetic quality, such answers as we get refer us back not to the historical conditions of our experience as subjects, but to the specialised and supposedly objective competences of painting itself. We are in need of some theory of change and development in art which speaks not only of what artists do and have done, but also of how that doing is determined in a world which is also the world of the spectator.

It's time to return to the paintings of Art & Language. I wish to reexamine the strange dual character of the *Hostages* and in the process to suggest how the tendencies we've been observing might be reconnected to some actualities of social existence and thus in part explained. In particular, I want to concentrate on the implications and effects of the bizarre technical procedure by which the production of these paintings is distinguished.

There are three principal stages to the making of the recent *Hostages*. Firstly the basic composition of landscape and vertical plane is transferred from a preparatory drawing onto canvas. Certain areas are marked out on the drawings by configurations of black lines. These are composed by graphic deformations of the letters S-U-R-F, signifying »surface«.¹² In the process of

11. See, for instance, T. Evans ed., »A Conversation with Clement Greenberg«, *Art Monthly*, London, (three parts) Feb, March, April 1984.

12. This convention was first employed by Art & Language in a series of works of 1974-5 exhibited under the title »Dialectical Materialism«. See C. Harrison, »The Condition of Problems« in *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991; »In the first panel of a typical work from the series, a number of indices signifying points of depth is mapped onto a configuration taken from a sample of Constructivist graphics. Certain areas of the same

enlargement onto canvas these areas are covered with masking tape. At a second stage, this tape is removed and the composition is continued and completed, but now using much thicker paint over the previously masked-out sections. The third stage occurs while this thick paint is still wet. The glass is applied over the painting and screwed down into the wooden support. The canvas is then loosened from the stretcher, a steel bar is inserted between the canvas and its plywood backing, and the wet paint is spread out behind the glass, forming runs and patterns which are relatively controlled but also relatively unpredictable. By this process an apparently complete or finished figurative scene is apparently blotted and smeared. Across much of the picture surface the material components of the illusion – the patches of coloured paint – are rendered literal and flat.

Or flat, at least, from the standpoint of that sophisticated culture within which the illusion of the poplar trees is perceived and its referential character understood. In fact, as their illusionistic surfaces are smeared and spoiled, the paintings also invoke a different culture, a differently positioned viewer. This is a viewer for whom the very smearing and spoiling establish representation. In the culture which this second viewer represents, illusion and reference are familiar properties of synthetic surfaces. They are to be found in the slippery effects of kitsch abstract art, in the laminated decor of up-market boutiques, or in the hygienic surfaces of expensive bathrooms. This is a viewer for whom decorativeness is a value at odds with the culture of high art. From his imaginary point of view, it is those few remnants of the original figurative scheme which remain undisturbed – the touches of paint which still signify branches, ground and sky – that read as literal, factitious and unfinished.

These paintings do not address or accommodate themselves to one viewer or the other, nor do they avail any moral grounds on which to distinguish between them. What they establish is that forms of conflict attend inexorably upon the aesthetic. If this is contingently true in the world we know, it is probably also true of any world we can now sensibly envisage. This is the intuition which is set in play as these paintings are worked over, changed and unfinished. By this process of unfinishing, Art & Language draws into the play

configuration are designated as 'surface' and are marked out as such by reiterations of the abbreviation 'Surf'. The second panel displays a printed text. This addresses the nature of Art & Language work and dialogue, questions of ideology, learning and language. The separate sections of text are variously marked with those indices which appear on the graphic panel alongside. The suggestion made in this work is that there is a possible 'reading', of the dialogical text which is a kind of picture; i.e. which amounts to a mapping of its surface and depth upon one synchronous surface. The work will also sustain the corollary that there is a possible 'viewing' of the graphic image which quantifies its formal ingredients by reference to a linguistic text. In the recent *Hostages*, the configurations to which the letters S-U-R-F are made to conform are taken from canonical examples of abstract art, from the graphic idealizations of town-planners, from the ground-plans of would-be Postmodernist museums and from such-like attempts to give modernity a proper *shape*.

of artistic genres and effects the dangerous and transforming substance of a culture with no regard for art. The apparent damage gone to the figurative schemes – the atmospheric landscapes – is not simply a matter of avant-garde cancellation or iconoclasm, though it is significant that a tradition of artistic iconoclasm has persisted within the margins of the Modernist mainstream. Rather, what is involved is a purposeful refusal to the spectator of the possibility of certain normally accredited modes of experience and understanding. The semantic hiatus leaves us with work to do. To recognise the painting for what it is – to be able to represent it to ourselves – is to look not simply through the iconic conventions of artistic culture, but rather to look in the face of those conventions into an unaesthetic world, or rather into a world unamenable to aesthetic ratification and control. This world is evoked in Art & Language's *Hostages* by both the literal and the figurative components of their surfaces. It is also present as a form of visitation in those reflections of the viewer's actual situation which are visually indissoluble from the artistic materials.

There is of course a risk that no aesthetic remainder will be left by the process of unfinishing, or that none will be recoverable through the welter of reflections. But I think this is a kind of risk which has to be taken if art is to survive as a critical presence in our culture. It is a realistic requirement of modernism that the substance of the aesthetic be found and worked in face of the unaesthetic. If paintings do not establish their meaning by reference to something other than other paintings – texts by reference to something other than other texts – if there are not some actual materials being worked upon in culture, then there can be no non-arbitrary and non-aesthetic criteria of success and failure, nor any dialectic of form and finish. That we experience the relations between the figurative and the literal as problematic is a testimony to our cognitive vitality in face of the world. In the end, this is why painting matters.

To paraphrase Greenberg – though to conclusions other than his – I speak here not of commitments or of programmes, but of the apparent mechanisms shaping art's modern development as these are noticeable in a retrospective view. The evidence suggests that any dominant modern order will attempt to represent and to administer the aesthetic as a kind of bureaucratic certainty – to stabilise the relations between the figurative and the literal, between form and finish, and thus to regulate opportunities for cognitive adventure. The evidence also suggests that it is a condition of the possibility of cognitive alertness that we dare to be both prodigal and ironic in face of any political culture which seeks the regulation of the aesthetic – prodigal with its scarce imaginative materials and ironic about its spurious certainties.

It cannot quite be true, but for some while now it has seemed as if this scarcity and spuriousness are all we have left to work on. In one version of the

Postmodern, art's reduction to the synthetic has been celebrated as a wilful form of modernité. We should be alert to the emptiness of such rejoicings. For this is Postmodernism as the fulfilment of that petit-bourgeois dream which Modernism has always opposed, and which has always been the condition of the defeat of the aesthetic. However radically disguised, it is the world of absolute utility and value for money, the world in which morality is made of the logic of the market. In another version of the Postmodern, it is proposed that taste heals all wounds. The literal detritus of the petit-bourgeois consumer's world is subject to a form of aesthetic recuperation in the picturesque tableaux of Tony Cragg. The optimism is unjustified, however. Picturesque tableaux are the signs of a dead theatre, an already enchanted audience.

In fact, if there is little left for art to be made of, it is because the materials of celebration have been so rapidly exhausted. It is from the unaesthetic processes of exhaustion themselves that Art & Language's *Hostages* have been made. Whatever capital has reached out to enclose, the artist has had to undo; whatever capital has sought to represent as essential and universal, the artist has had to ruin with the evidence of its own contingency; whatever forms capital has learned to use for its own designs, the artist has been driven to unfinish. In the language of hindsight these imperatives tend to read as if impelled by a politics. This reading is a form of misrepresentation. In the experience of the studio, the imperatives are aesthetic.