



Painting as Model

Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou, Les dessous de la peinture by Hubert Damisch

Review by: Yve-Alain Bois and John Shepley

October, Vol. 37 (Summer, 1986), pp. 125-137

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778524>

Accessed: 16/08/2012 21:50

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Painting as Model

Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou, Les dessous de la peinture by *Hubert Damisch*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1984.

YVE-ALAIN BOIS

translated by JOHN SHEPLEY

“What does it mean for a painter *to think*?” (p. 59) — this is the old question to which Hubert Damisch has returned in connection with the art of this century, and which he alone in France seems to take seriously. Not only what is the role of speculative thought for the painter at work? but above all what is the mode of thought of which painting is the stake? Can one think *in* painting as one can dream in color? and is there such a thing as pictorial thought that would differ from what Klee called “visual thought”? Or again, to use the language current some ten years ago, is painting a theoretical practice? Can one designate the place of the theoretical in painting without doing violence to it, without, that is, disregarding painting’s specificity, without annexing it to an applied discourse whose meshes are too slack to give a suitable account of painting’s irregularities? Nowhere in Damisch’s book are there broad examinations of the idea of “the pictorial.” Instead there is, in each instance, the formulation of a question raised by the work of art within a historically determined framework, and the search for a theoretical model to which one might compare the work’s operations and with which one might engage them. This approach simultaneously presupposes a rejection of established stylistic categories (and indirectly an interest in new groupings or transverse categories), a fresh start of the inquiry in the face of each new work, and a permanent awareness of the operating rule of painting in relation to discourse. For Damisch’s question is also, as we shall see: what does the painter’s pictorial thought mean for one who has undertaken to write?

Damisch’s book stands alone in France, as it is resolutely opposed to: (1) the stamp-collecting approach of traditional art historians, whose veritable terror of the theoretical has gradually turned their texts into the gibberish of documentalists and antiquarians — in the sense that Nietzsche gave this word (with very few exceptions, twentieth-century art has remained untouched in France by this ravenous sort of discourse, empirical at best, and with nothing of history about it except the name); (2) the ineptitude of art criticism, a form of journalism all the more amnesiac for having constantly to adapt itself to market trends; (3) that typically French genre, inaugurated on the one hand by Baudelaire

and on the other probably by Sartre, of the text *about* art by a literary writer or philosopher, each doing his little number, a seemingly obligatory exercise in France if one is to reach the pantheon of letters or of thought.

While Damisch's book exposes the fundamental incompetence of the first two prevailing discourses (demonstrating to the historians their refusal to ask themselves about the type of historicity of their subject; teaching the critics the necessity of discovering what it is that calls into question the certitude of their judgments), it is in relation to the third and absolutely hegemonic kind of text that his lesson seems to me most important. Why? Because Damisch teaches us above all to rid ourselves of the stifling concept of *image* upon which the relation of this kind of text to art is founded — arrogant, ignorant, predatory texts that consider painting a collection of images to be tracked down, illustrations to be captioned.

One example: Jacques Lacan is reproached for having invoked "abstract models from the start" when faced with François Rouan's braidings (Lacan's everlasting Borromean knots) rather than examining "on the evidence" the detail of the fabric (pp. 280–281). Not that Damisch has anything against abstract models in themselves; he simply says that the work produces them by itself for anyone who takes the trouble to notice, and that in this case neither Rouan's painting nor the theory of knots gains anything by the demonstration in the form of a priori advice from the eminent psychoanalyst.¹ Nor is it that Damisch becomes the prosecutor trying to pin down all the scornful remarks that characterize the discourse of his contemporaries on the subject of art. There is little of polemics in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, which consists of essays written between 1958 and 1984. Or rather there is a *polémique d'envoi*, as one speaks of a *coup d'envoi*, a "kickoff," which governs, if not the whole book, at least the texts of the first and second parts, entitled respectively "L'image et le tableau" and "Théorèmes."

The Perceptive Model

Although they may seem somewhat foreign to anyone reading them today, the pages Damisch devotes to Sartre are decisive, and I would say today more than ever. These concern Sartre's thesis that there is no such thing as aesthetic perception, the aesthetic object being something "unreal," apprehended by the "imaging consciousness." This thesis, from Sartre's *L'imaginaire*,

1. Jacques Lacan's text on Rouan, illustrated with some seventeen figures of knots, began as follows: "François Rouan paints on bands. If I dared, I would advise him to change this and paint on braid." This text, originally published in the catalogue of the Rouan exhibition at the Musée Cantini (Marseilles, 1978), was reprinted in the catalogue of the Rouan exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1983), a catalogue for which Damisch wrote the preface, reprinted in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*. Damisch's answer is simply that the braids were there all along in Rouan's painting for those who were able to see them.

states that, in Damisch's words, "a portrait, a landscape, a form only allows itself to be recognized in painting insofar as we cease to view the painting for what it is, materially speaking, and insofar as consciousness steps back in relation to reality to produce as an image the object represented" (p. 67). Such a thesis would at best hold true for a type of illusionistic painting that, assuming it had existed at all, would only have existed at a particular moment in history. That Sartre's aesthetic is an aesthetic of *mimesis*, in the most traditional sense of the word, is neither difficult nor fundamentally useful to demonstrate, although it may have had a considerable stake in its time. What is important about Damisch's text is that he takes this aesthetic to be emblematic in developing his polemic in an essay on an "abstract" painter, one of the most complex of them, namely Mondrian. For it is not only that what Sartre calls "the imaging attitude" blinds our literati and philosophers to the rupture constituted by "abstract painting," it is also this "imaging attitude" that still today governs studies by the majority of art historians, for the most part Americans, who take an interest in this kind of painting. If theses abound that would make Malevich's *Black Square* a solar eclipse, Rothko's late works stylized versions of the Pietà and Deposition, or Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* an interpretation of the New York subway map, it is because the kind of relation to art denounced by Damisch is not only very much with us but, in the current hostility to theory, stands a good chance of becoming absolutely dominant. Damisch's text shows us, however, that we don't have to search for "une femme là-dessous" in order to remain tied to the system of interpretation of which Sartre was the eponym. One has only to be inattentive to the specificity of the object to be led back to this system; hence Damisch's interest in the detail of the signifier, the texture of the painting, everything that, according to Sartre, insofar as it is real, "does not become the object of aesthetic appreciation."²

The case of Mondrian is symptomatic. How many purely geometric readings (indifferent to the medium of expression), how many interpretations resulting from blindness to the paintings' subtle games have given rise to the pregnant image of a grid imposed upon a neutral background? As early as this formidable text of 1958, and from the point of view of his controversy with Sartre, Damisch sees in Mondrian a painter of the perceptive aporia, precisely the opposite of the "geometric abstraction" genre of which he is supposed to be the herald. For the first time, so far as I know, the enterprise of *destruction* carried out by the Dutch painter is understood as a concerted operation governing every detail of his painting. In order to comprehend, for example, the abandonment of all curves, there is no need to get mixed up in the theosophical

2. "What is real, as one should never tire of stating, are the results of the brushstrokes, the layer of paint on the canvas, its texture, the varnish that is applied over the colors. But all of this is precisely what does not become the object of aesthetic appreciation" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1940, p. 240).

nonsense with which the artist's mind was momentarily encumbered. It is because the line has the function of destroying the plane as such that it will have to be straight:

The interdiction of any other line but the straight corresponded to the experiential fact that a line curving inward on a canvas or piece of paper defines "full" or "empty" spaces, which the imaging consciousness is irresistibly led to consider for themselves to the detriment of the line that serves as their pretext. Mondrian's paintings are made to counter such impulses and to hinder the movement whereby an unreal object is constituted from the tangible reality of the painting, the eye being ceaselessly led back to the painting's constituent elements, line, color, design (p. 69).

Damisch's thesis is rigorously anti-Sartrean: in opposition to the "imaging consciousness," which necessarily has as its purpose the constitution of an image, he sees in Mondrian's canvases, in Pollock's, in Picasso's *Portrait of Vollard*, each with its own modality, "an ever-reversed kaleidoscope that offers to *aesthetic perception* a task both novel and without assignable end . . . the 'meaning' of the work consisting precisely in this swarming and ambiguous appeal" (p. 78). Or again: "If the painter has chosen to prohibit the imaging consciousness from giving itself free rein . . . it is for the purpose of awakening in the spectator the uneasiness with which the perception of a painting should be accompanied" (p. 71). Now, this task of the painter is the stake of his art; it is what makes his canvas a specific theoretical model, the development of a thought whose properly pictorial aspect cannot be circumvented:

One cannot give way to reverie in front of a Mondrian painting, nor even to pure contemplation. But it is here that there comes into play, beyond the sensorial pleasure granted us by Sartre, some more secret activity of consciousness, an activity by definition without assignable end, contrary to the imaging activity which exhausts itself in the constitution of its object. Each time perception thinks it can go beyond what is given it to see toward what it would constitute as meaning, it is immediately led back to the first experience, which wants it to falter in constituting that white as background and this black as a form (*ibid.*).

I would call this theoretical model introduced by Damisch *perceptive*, but by antiphrasis, because for the painters studied it is a question in each case of "disturbing the permanent structures of perception, and first of all the figure/ground relationship, beyond which one would be unable to speak of a perceptive field" (p. 110, in connection with Dubuffet). With the exception of one or two texts, especially the one of 1974 on Valerio Adami, all the articles in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* insist on this point: "Painting, for the one who produces it as for

the one who consumes it, is always a matter of perception" (p. 148). And all the examples chosen (except for Adami and Saul Steinberg) assign to modernity the preliminary task of confusing the figure/ground opposition, without the assurance of which no perception could establish itself in imaging synthesis. It is this "perceptive model" that allows Damisch not only to compare Pollock and Mondrian but also to establish the ambiguity of the figure/ground relationship as the very theme of the American painter's interlacings and to reject as particularly unproductive the divide that some have tried to enforce between Pollock's great abstract period, that of the all-over works of 1947–50, and his so-called figurative canvases of 1951 and the years that followed. Likewise, Dubuffet's great period (the 1950s) is deciphered, by direct appeal to Merleau-Ponty, as an essential moment in this history of perceptive ambiguity:

By treating the figures as so many vaguely silhouetted backgrounds whose texture he strives to decipher and—conversely—by carrying his gaze toward the less differentiated backgrounds to catch their secret figures and mechanics, this painter has restored to the idea of form its original meaning, if it is true that form cannot be reduced to the geometric outline of objects, that it is bound up with the texture of things, and that it draws simultaneously on all our senses (p. 117).

The phenomenological theme of the original unity of the senses often returns in Damisch's writing, but it would be vain to see in these studies an application of Merleau-Ponty's theory. And this is not only because this recurrent theme is seriously questioned with regard to Fautrier (p. 134) or because the criticism of "pure visibility" is reoriented through psychoanalysis (pp. 262–263), but also because phenomenological apprehension in Damisch opens onto a second model, copresent with the first.

The Technical Model

In opposition to the "optical" interpretation that has been given to Pollock's all-over paintings by leading American formalist critics (Greenberg, Fried), an interpretation that partakes in a certain way, but much more subtly, of Sartrean unreality,³ Damisch proposes from the start a reading that I would call *technical*. It begins (but this also applies to the texts on Klee, Dubuffet, or Mondrian) with an insistence on the *real* space set in play by these canvases (of course, it is always a question of countering the Sartrean imaginary or unreal-

3. On the notion of *optics* and the "relative indifference to the material process of elaboration" of the work, typical of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, see Jean Clay, "La peinture en charpie," dossier Ryman, *Macula*, nos. 3–4 (1978), pp. 171–172.

ity). From this deliberately down-to-earth, ground-level apprehension flows a quite special attention to the process of the work as a place of formation, prior to its effects. Against the deliberately obfuscating attitude of the art historians, always ready to erase ruptures, Damisch establishes a chronology, or rather a technical logic, of invention: it would be wrong to see in the gesturality of *The Flame* (1937), or in the scribbled margins of *Male and Female* (1942) and *She-Wolf* (1943), the preliminary signs of Pollock's great art. In the first case, "the touch enlivens the paint that still remains alien to it," while "Pollock's originality will later consist precisely in connecting so closely the gesture deployed on the canvas with the paint it spreads there that the latter will seem to be its trace, its necessary product" (p. 76). In the second case, we are dealing only with a borrowing, from Max Ernst or Masson, if you like: "The invention takes place, indeed, at the decisive moment when the painter raised this process [dripping]—which after all had been only a means of 'padding'—to the dignity of an original principle for the organization of surfaces" (*ibid.*). For there is technique and technique, or rather there is the epistemological moment of technique, where thought and invention take place, and then there is all the rest, all the procedures that borrow from tradition or contest it without reaching that threshold that it is a question of designating—the reason that one can speak of technique "indifferently, that it matters and does not matter for art" (p. 94).

It is by remaining at the elementary level of the gesture, of the trace, that Damisch discovers this threshold in Pollock, first in connection with *Shimmering Substance* (1946), where "each touch seems destined to destroy the effect born of the relation between the preceding touch and the background" (p. 78), then in the great all-over works of 1947–50: "Lines that plow the canvas through and through, in a counterpoint that no longer develops in width but *in thickness*, and each of which has no meaning except in relation to the one that precedes it—each projection of color succeeding another as though to efface it" (p. 80). This reading marks a beginning, first of all because it is the only one that makes it possible to understand the manner in which Pollock was working against surrealism (it is impossible in his case to speak of automatism, despite appearances: cf. p. 85), then because it points to the very place where Pollock's painting abandons, or rather destroys, the order of the image, "which is reduced to a surface effect, without any of the thickness that is the particular quality of painting," as Damisch says later on regarding François Rouan (p. 296).

Damisch is rapidly led, in Pollock's work, to make this category of *thickness* in the order of technique (which has since been reexamined by others alerted by his text)⁴ the equivalent of the figure/ground confusion (to which it is linked)

4. See especially Jean Clay, "Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat: la profondeur plate," in Hans Namuth, *L'atelier de Jackson Pollock*, Paris, Macula, 1982.

in the order of perception. From then on it becomes one of the essential question marks of Damisch's inquiry, functioning almost as an epistemological test in his discourse. The reemergence of the hidden undersides in Dubuffet (p. 114), the exchanges of position between outer surface and underside in Klee (p. 213), the interweavings of Mondrian and later of Rouan—all of these become theoretical models that demonstrate the painting of this century just as perspective demonstrated that of the Renaissance. It is therefore no accident that the book appears under the sign of *Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu*; the essay devoted to the novel provides the subtitle to the collection: "The Undersides of Painting."

If one is to believe Frenhofer, it looks as though painting should produce its full effect only insofar as it proceeds, in its most intimate texture, from a predetermined exchange of positions that would be the equivalent of a kind of weaving in which the threads would go up and down alternatively, the same strand passing now above and now below, without the possibility of being assigned a univocal sign (p. 16).

Frenhofer's name is invoked in no less than five texts in this collection in addition to the one devoted to the "philosophical study" of Balzac ("whoever writes proceeds in a way not dissimilar to one who paints, using a quotation that he had first singled out for completely different purposes, to start out on a new *development*, in every sense of the word" [p. 258]). Far removed from recent romanticist interpretations,⁵ the Frenhofer of Damisch has been, from his first texts, the emblem of a conversion, the signal of invention—with Cézanne ("Frenhofer, c'est moi") and, one should add, Seurat—of a new thickness that would no longer borrow from the old academic recipes:

And if one wants modernity in painting to be signaled by the replacement of the superimposition of preparations, of underpainting, glazing, transparencies, and varnish, by another craft based on flatness, the juxtaposition of touches, and simultaneous contrast, how can we not see that the problem of the "undersides" will only have been displaced or transformed, painting having necessarily kept something of its thickness, even if it were aiming only at surface effects? (p. 37).

Here, from the beginning, a metaphor intervenes to help us see that this *technical* model is irreducible to the *perceptive* model as it was earlier described, although it is its corollary: that of the figure inscribed on the chessboard, "in its

5. I refer to the excellent collection *Autour du Chef-d'œuvre inconnu de Balzac*, ed. Thierry Chabanne, Paris, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, 1985. For a still different approach, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée*, Paris, Minuit, 1984.

full spaces as in its empty ones, but in the superimposition and overlapping of its layers as well" (p. 158), *inaccessible as such to pure vision*. The work on the thickness of the plane is for Damisch a technical model par excellence, because it implies a knowledge and a speculation (p. 279): we are dealing, as close as possible to the paint, with one of the most abstract—in its topological background—inventions of the pictorial thought of this century. "Without recourse to theory or to mathematics, a painter may very well come to formulate, by means all his own, a problematic that may later be translated into other terms and into another register (as happened in its time with perspective)" (p. 288). It is because he acknowledges that painting can provide theoretical models that Damisch will be able to single out in Pollock the moment of thickness and from then on rewrite a portion of the history of modern art.

The Symbolic Model

It is the fashion nowadays to ask oneself about the ways and means by which the passage from painting to the discourse that takes it over is supposed to operate—if not about the end of this transference. It is even one of the most frequent commonplaces in our artistic and literary culture, a *topos* from which very few escape who, without claiming to be "art critics" (that is behind us), make it their profession, if not their work, to write about painting or about painters. Without remembering that this question, which one would like to see preceding any commentary, has already been decided by culture, which is at all times responsible for organizing the game, distributing the roles, and regulating the exchanges between the two registers of the visible and the readable, between the painted and the written (or the spoken), the seeing and the hearing, the seen and the heard. If this question today professes to be such, and a question to which culture, our culture, would not furnish a ready-made answer, it is still culture, our culture, that will have wanted it that way, and that always makes us ask it all over again (p. 186).

If the numerous passages that Damisch devotes in this collection to the relation between painting and discourse avoid as much as possible the cliché that he denounces, it is partly because he demonstrates that his text can only belong to it. Like the Foucault of *This Is Not a Pipe*, whose analyses he anticipates as early as 1960, Damisch likes to draw a historical map of the connections between practices. Here he stresses the extent to which the mode of relation of painting to discourse has become in this century, thanks to abstraction and structural linguistics, a particularly necessary stumbling block in the analysis. It is because he considers painting a key to the interpretation of the world, a key neither mimetic nor analogical, but, as for science or language, *symbolic* (more

in Cassirer's sense than Lacan's), and because he assigns to painting a cultural task equal to and different from the discourse that deals with it, that the archeological or epistemological reading takes an unexpected turn in Damisch, as though finding in certain pictorial advances theorems of anthropological mutations.

Many pages in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* concern the relations that mathematics and painting maintain at the symbolic level, whether it is a question of the role of mimesis in algebraic invention (p. 51) and notation (p. 196) or the common ground (projective plane) on which geometry and perspective construction work (p. 295). Furthermore, it is probably after having successfully shown how the invention of pictorial perspective in the Renaissance anticipated by two centuries the work of mathematicians on the notion of infinity⁶ that Damisch was tempted to pursue the transserial inquiry into modern times. The long article on Paul Klee's *Equals Infinity*, which compares the 1932 painting with the discoveries of Cantor and Dedekind on the power of the continuum, sufficiently shows the interest as well as the difficulty of a thought in which,

beyond the accepted division of the work, the inherited separation of the fields of knowledge and significance, the *differences* among the practices known as "art," "science," "mathematics," and "painting" cease to be thought of in terms of exteriority in order to be thought of—whatever one understands thereby—in terms of relations of production, i.e., of *history* (p. 215).

Partly because this is not my field, I prefer to leave it and insist instead on one of the symbolic models developed by Damisch for the art of this century, a model that moreover has the particular feature, according to Bataille, of ripping the frock coat philosophy gives to what exists, the "mathematical frock coat." One will recognize here the famous definition, given in *Documents* in 1929, of the *informe*, a term, again according to Bataille, *that serves to declassify*. Among the references that return at several points in this book (Frenhofer, Alberti, Ripa, and others), there is one that I consider emblematic of the reading that I am here seeking to circumscribe: it is those pages devoted by Valéry to Degas in which Valéry observed, in Damisch's words,

that the notion of form is changed—if not cast in doubt altogether—by the projection onto the vertical plane of the canvas of the horizontal plane of the floor, which no longer functions as a neutral and indifferent background but as an essential factor in the vision of things, and can—almost—constitute the very subject of the painting (p. 111).

6. See Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du nuage*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, pp. 214–248.

Already in the essay devoted to Dubuffet in 1962—anticipating by a few years Leo Steinberg's invention of the concept of the flatbed picture plane in connection with Rauschenberg—then in more recent studies, the confusion of the vertical and horizontal proposed by one side of modern painting was taken for an essential mutation, participating, if you like, in a critique of optics, whose importance is yet to be measured.⁷ This model includes Dubuffet's twin desires "to force the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground viewed from above, and at the same time to erect the ground into a wall calling for man's intervention by line or imprint" (p. 112); Pollock's *grounds*, "an area, a space of play, attacked by the artist from all sides at once, which he did not hesitate to penetrate in person and which . . . put up a physical resistance to him" (p. 149); Saul Steinberg's *Tables* (p. 231), but I would be tempted to say of these, contrary to Damisch, that they do not come "directly into the inquiry," and are among "those that proliferate in its wake" (p. 130). Even Mondrian's work, as I have tried to show elsewhere,⁸ touches on this symbolic model, this taxonomic collapse, this overturning of oppositions—especially between representation and action—on which our whole Western aesthetic is founded. Damisch probably had an intuition of this, since for him the study of Mondrian's work is "an invitation to *create* under its most concrete aspects" (p. 72). The revelation of this model is one of the most fruitful points of Damisch's book. From cubism to minimalism, from the abstraction of the 1920s to that of the '50s and '60s, I would almost go as far as to point to all the high points of modern art as verifications of this discovery, as demonstrations of its validity.

The Strategic Model

Shortly before his death, "and as though in passing," Barnett Newman confided to Damisch "that everything he had been able to do had meaning only in relation to Pollock's work and *against* it" (p. 154). I like to think that Damisch recalled this remark when he read Lévi-Strauss's *Voie des masques*, and that from long knowledge of this kind of secret, then from its sudden emergence as evidence, a fourth model emerged in Damisch's text, a *strategic* model.⁹ Like

7. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" (1972), reprinted in the collection of the same name, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 55–91. For a reading of Giacometti's "surrealist" oeuvre, based on the *informe* of Bataille and analyzing in it the vertical/horizontal reversal under discussion here, see Rosalind Krauss, "No More Play," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1985, pp. 43–85.

8. My essay on Mondrian's *New York City I*, 1942 (in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 15 [1985], pp. 60–85) owes much, entirely unconsciously, to Damisch's text on the Dutch painter, as to a good number of texts reprinted in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*.

9. "It would be misleading to imagine, therefore, as so many ethnologists and art historians still do today, that a mask and, more generally, a sculpture or a painting may be interpreted each for itself, according to what it represents or to the aesthetic or ritual use for which it is destined. We have seen that, on the contrary, a mask does not exist in isolation; it supposes other real or

chess pieces, like phonemes in language, a work has significance, as Lévi-Strauss shows, first by what it is not and what it opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value, within a field—itsself living and stratified—which has above all to be circumscribed by defining its rules. Lévi-Strauss's condescending remarks about art historians, unable, in his opinion, to understand the structural or rather the strategic nature of signification, are not strictly deserved, at least if one considers art history in its earlier phases and not for what it has largely become today. As we know, Wölfflin conceived the baroque paradigm as incomprehensible unless measured against the classical; and Riegl demonstrated in a thick volume how the *Kunstwollen* of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch art was at first negatively defined in relation to that of Italian art of the same period. Such readings are, in any case, commonplace in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (see, for example, the comparisons between Pollock and Mondrian) and have the merit of no longer taking seriously the autonomy of what is called style. Likewise, since strategy means power stakes, there are many observations in this book on the history of the artistic institution in its relation to production, whether it has to do with the role of criticism, the museum, the market, the public, or even the relationship (fundamentally changed since Cézanne, p. 123) that the painter maintains with his or her canvas.

But the interest of the strategic model does not reside so much there as in what it allows us to think historically of the concepts revealed by the other models as well as the ties that they maintain among themselves. One will notice, by the way, that this fourth model was not born directly from a confrontation with the works themselves: it does not immediately take account of pictorial invention itself, of the status of the theoretical in painting, but of the conditions of its appearance, of what establishes itself between works; it finds itself with respect to the other models in a second, metacritical position, and this is why it allows us to ask again the question of the pictorial specificity (of invention) and survival of painting, without getting stuck once more in the essentialism to which American formalist criticism had accustomed us. "It is not enough, in order for there to be painting, that the painter take up his brushes again," Damisch tells us: it is still necessary that it be worth the effort, "it is still necessary that [the painter] succeed in demonstrating to us that painting is something we positively cannot do without, that it is indispensable to us, and that it would be madness—worse still, a historical error—to let it lie fallow today" (p. 293).

potential masks always by its side, masks that might have been chosen in its stead and substituted for it. In discussing a particular problem, I hope to have shown that a mask is not primarily what it represents but what it transforms, that is to say, what it chooses *not* to represent. Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms. It is not made solely of what it says or thinks it is saying, but what it excludes" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of Masks*, trans. Sylvia Modelski, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 144).

Let us again take the strategic metaphor par excellence, that of chess: Damisch uses it to clarify his historical point. Let us suppose that Newman and Pollock are opponents. How can we determine in their moves what is of the order of the match, belonging in particular to its new although replayable developments, and what is of the generic order of the game, with its assigned rules? One can see what is displaced by this kind of question, such as the problem of repetitions that had so worried Wölfflin:

It is certain that through the problematic of abstraction, American painters [of the abstract expressionist generation], just as already in the 1920s the exponents of suprematism, neoplasticism, purism, etc., could nourish the illusion that, far from being engaged merely in a single match that would take its place in the group of matches making up the *game* of "painting," they were returning to the very foundations of the game, to its immediate, constituent *données*. The American episode would then represent less a new development in the history of abstraction than a new departure, a resumption—but at a deeper level and, theoretically as much as practically, with more powerful means—of the match begun under the title of abstraction thirty or forty years earlier (p. 167).

The strategic reading is strictly antihistoricist: it does not believe in the exhaustion of things, in the linear genealogy offered to us by art criticism, always ready, unconsciously or not, to follow the demands of the market in search of new products, but neither does it believe in the order of a homogenous time without breaks, such as art history likes to imagine. Its question becomes "one of the status that ought to be assigned to the *match* 'painting,' as one *sees* it being played at a given moment in particular circumstances, in its relation to the *game* of the same name" (p. 170)—and the question can be asked about any of the models (perceptive, technical, and symbolic) described above, as well as about the relations they maintain among themselves at a given moment in history.

Such questioning has the immediate advantage of raising doubt about certain truisms. Is the "alleged convention of depth"—rejected by the pictorial art of this century because, according to Greenberg, it is unnecessary—necessarily of the order of the "match" more than of the game (p. 166)? Also, concerning what Damisch observed of the "undersides of painting," should we not rather consider that a series of displacements will have modified their role (the position on the chessboard)? And is it not the same for the convention of "chiaroscuro" (*ibid.*)? Without thereby becoming a theoretical machine encouraging indifference, since on the contrary we have to take a position about it, the strategic approach has the advantage of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever decided, and of leading the analysis back to a type of historicity that it had neglected, that of long duration (to which the symbolic model par excellence also goes back). Hence Damisch's supremely

ironic attitude toward the apocalyptic tone adopted today concerning the impasse in which art finds itself, an impasse to be taken simply as one of the many interrupted matches to which history holds the secret.¹⁰

*

The problem, for whoever writes about it, should not be so much to write about painting as to try to do something *with* it, without indeed claiming to understand it better than the painter does, . . . [to try to] see a little more clearly, thanks to painting, into the problems with which [the writer] is concerned, and which are not only, nor even primarily, problems of painting—if they were, all he would have to do would be to devote himself to this art (p. 288).

Because he considers painting a theoretical operator, a producer of models, because he agrees with this statement by Dubuffet given as a quotation—“painting may be a machine to convey philosophy—*but already to elaborate it*” (p. 104), and because he means in his work to receive a lesson from painting, Hubert Damisch offers us one of the most thoughtful readings of the art of this century, but one that also remains as close as possible to its object, deliberately situating itself each time at the very heart of pictorial invention. For what the perceptive, technical, and symbolic models aim primarily at demonstrating are the mechanisms of this invention, and what the strategic model takes account of is its mode of historicity.

10. “Hence the fiction—basically ideological—according to which art, or whatever goes under that name, would today have reached its end, a fiction whose only meaning is to confuse the end of this or that match (or series of matches) with the end of the game itself (as if a game could have an end): the rule requiring henceforth that all matches (or series of matches) have an end, even in the highly symptomatic manner of the *impasse*, while the moves follow each other at an ever increasing pace” (p. 171).