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ART AND FORM



Sam Rose

# ART AND FORM

FROM ROGER FRY  
TO GLOBAL MODERNISM

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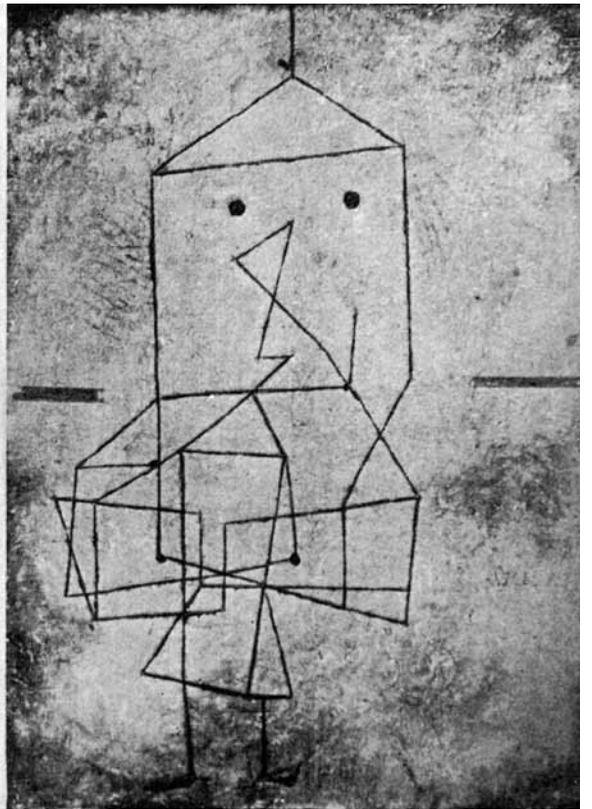
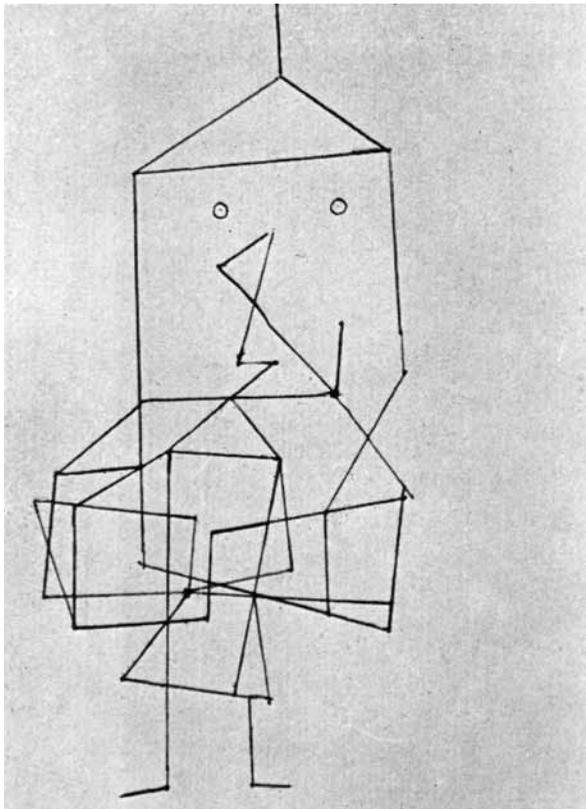
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IN MEMORY OF  
MARY ENSOR  
AND MARK KOLLER



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# INTRODUCTION

Consider three scenes.<sup>1</sup>

Searching through a bog in the late 1700s, as he apparently sometimes does, the philosopher Immanuel Kant stumbles upon a piece of carved wood (fig. 1). Recognizing it as deliberately shaped, he calls it a product of Art rather than Nature. Its shaped-ness allows him to judge that its producing “cause” had “conceived of an end, which the wood has to thank for its form.”<sup>2</sup> Viewed as a humanly made thing, its visible features become imbued with meaning. Carved, scraped, handled to look the way it does, it is seen to have existed for its original maker in those terms.

Turning a corner on a country path in the early 1900s, the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin encounters four painters who have lined up their easels in front of the same landscape. Resting for a moment from the midday Tivoli sun, Wölfflin pauses on a nearby rock and finds himself fascinated enough to stay and watch the paintings develop. He observes that each painter had fixed on exactly the same view and tried as hard as possible to paint nothing but what was before him, but that “the result was four totally different pictures, as different from each other as the personalities of the four painters.”<sup>3</sup> Pictures of the world, it turns out, are profoundly shaped by their makers. And it might be that the shaping, rather than the Tivoli landscape itself, is where meaning really lies.

Finally, entering a room in a New York gallery in the 1960s, the art critic Michael Fried is faced down by a six-foot steel cube (fig. 2). Disturbed by the degree to which this object prompts an experience that depends entirely on his particular situation, Fried decides that the work simply cannot be called art proper. Whereas art offers a world of meaning of its own, this coy lump seems more like a natural object, a stone or rock, than a humanly made thing. Leaving aside the personal thoughts and feelings of the viewer or explanations from theology or natural science, there is no content here to interpret. It is as if the life drains out of the piece of wood in Kant’s hand, as, showing it to an acquaintance, he is told it had just happened to break off from a nearby tree.

These examples from modern philosophy of art, art history, and art criticism suggest something fundamental about the world of things that are



**Figure 1.** Mortar, 1616–1418 BCE. *Handroanthus chrysanthus* wood, 31.5 × 18.9 × 15.4 cm. National Museum and Art Gallery of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, Trinidad. Acc. no. 80/A/549. Photo: Joanna Ostapkowicz / Courtesy of the National Museum and Art Gallery of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Figure 2.** Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962, fabricated 1968. Steel with oiled finish, 182.9 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Gift of the Collectors Committee, 2003.77.1. Photo © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2018 / Estate of Tony Smith.

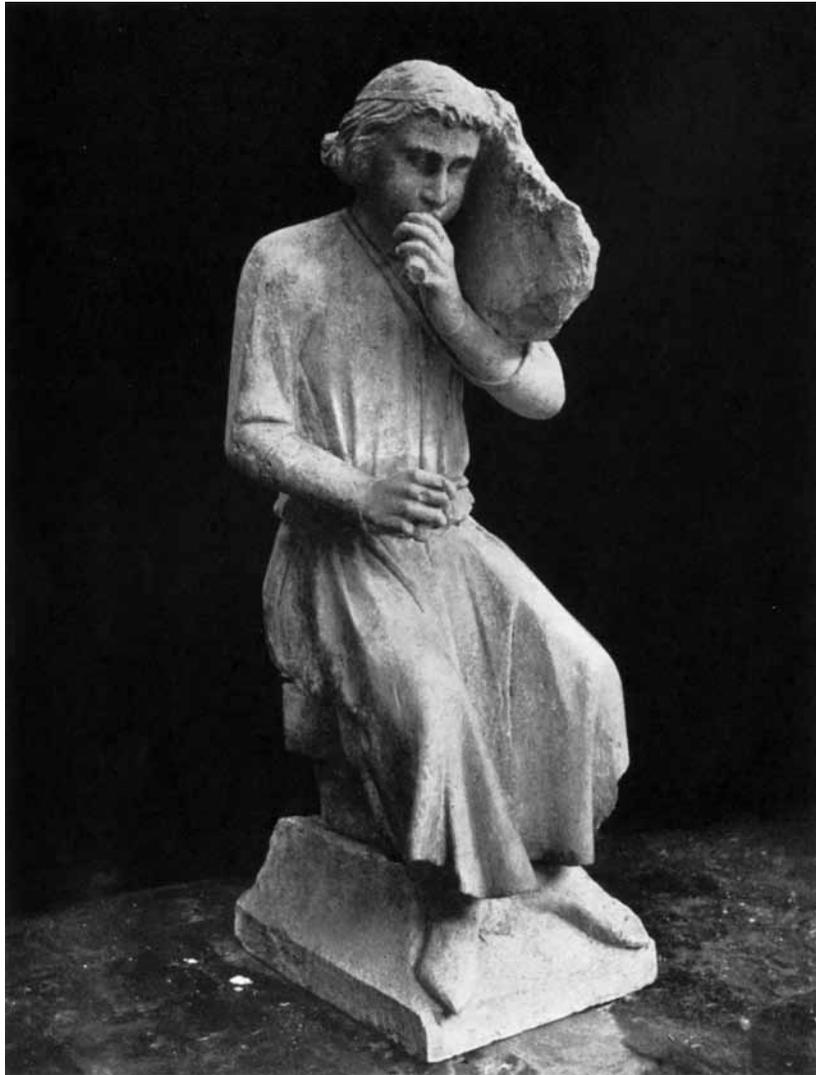
made to be visible, and how it is that we make sense of that world. This is because they speak to a philosophical and artistic idea of form. They suggest, first of all, that the way we experience the world is in large part down to how our minds constitute things for us. (Older and grander words for this include “worldview” and “spirit”; more recent and more modest terms range from “way of seeing” to “visuality.”<sup>4</sup>) Second, they suggest that the things we make to be visible for others—in the way that we put them together—register and make discernible some of that constituting or forming activity. (Here we move to words that grapple with this more familiar sense of form on the ground, such as “configuration,” “structure,” “device,” and “arrangement,” with such forms ready in turn to engage and reshape viewers via “aesthetic experiences,” “affects,” “operations,” or “affordances.”<sup>5</sup>) Intelligence (of artworks) and intuition and inference (by beholders) become key ideas here. Made things appear to pulse with the life that created them, suffused with a purposiveness that allows viewers to know the activity that made them what they are.

To see this in practice, we can look not just to stories or to major summaries of aesthetic theories but also to its enactment in writing on art. Take a passage from a twentieth-century art critic, the British writer and artist Roger Fry, on a thirteenth-century French sculpted figure (fig. 3):

But what is striking here is the certainty with which the artist has grasped the central character of the figure. In the movement of the head and the expression of the face he has made us vividly aware not only of the character of the boy but of his state of mind. In his intentness on the music which he is playing he is scarcely aware of the outer world—his face has that vague unseeing regard which comes from a withdrawal from the outside, from concentrating on what is passing within the mind.

And in the figure there is the poise, the absence of muscular tension, except in the hands, which exactly corresponds to this mood. The whole design has a peculiarly easy rhythmic flow and unity because the man who did this was a great sculptor, but for the moment what I want you to note is the fact that that rhythm is based upon a vivid imaginative grasp of a particular moment in an everyday incident.<sup>6</sup>

Note here the subtle shifting back and forth between the work of art as the artist apparently saw it, as the critic reports having seen it, and as we are now supposed to see it. It is not just that the “certainty with which the *artist* grasped the central character of the figure” is “striking,” but that, in viewing



**Figure 3.** *Seated Musician*, thirteenth century. Musée Saint-Remi, Reims. As illustrated in Roger Fry, *Characteristics of French Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932). Photo courtesy Musée Saint-Remi.

the work, we become “vividly aware” of the figure’s character and state of mind. By the third sentence, the communion between viewer, critic, and artist is complete. Fry shifts to pure description—“In his intentness on the music which he is playing he is scarcely aware of the outer world”—safe in the knowledge that his readers will treat this description of his seeing as if it were the artist’s own. The passage that follows indicates how form has secured this

for the critic. The “easy rhythmic flow and unity,” as he aesthetically judges it, is both the work of a “great” sculptor and is “based upon” that artist’s “vivid imaginative grasp of a particular moment in an everyday incident,” a grasp that we are given access to in turn.

Aesthetic judgment, based on form, allows the critic into the artist’s vision of forms in the work. The critic moves from the artist’s vision of the forms in the work into the artist’s vision of the scene—and from the artist’s vision of the scene into the worldview or visuality embodied in the work as a whole. Form is here the intermediary that allows the crucial alternation between *us* seeing the object and seeing it as the *maker* did. The partial re-creation of the maker’s own experience is nicely summed up by the critic in his own words, “imagining the artists at work,” or the impression he gives that he is operating from within “the artist’s vision.”<sup>7</sup> It also makes it more comprehensible, though no less jarring to some readers now, when Fry moves freely into confident psychologistic generalizations about worldviews of the original makers and users of these images: the “nimbleness of mind, this awareness of actual life” characteristic of French people, the “peculiar power to seize on what is characteristic in human beings as they are,” and the “sudden alert turning of the mind in its tracks” so characteristic of French art.<sup>8</sup>

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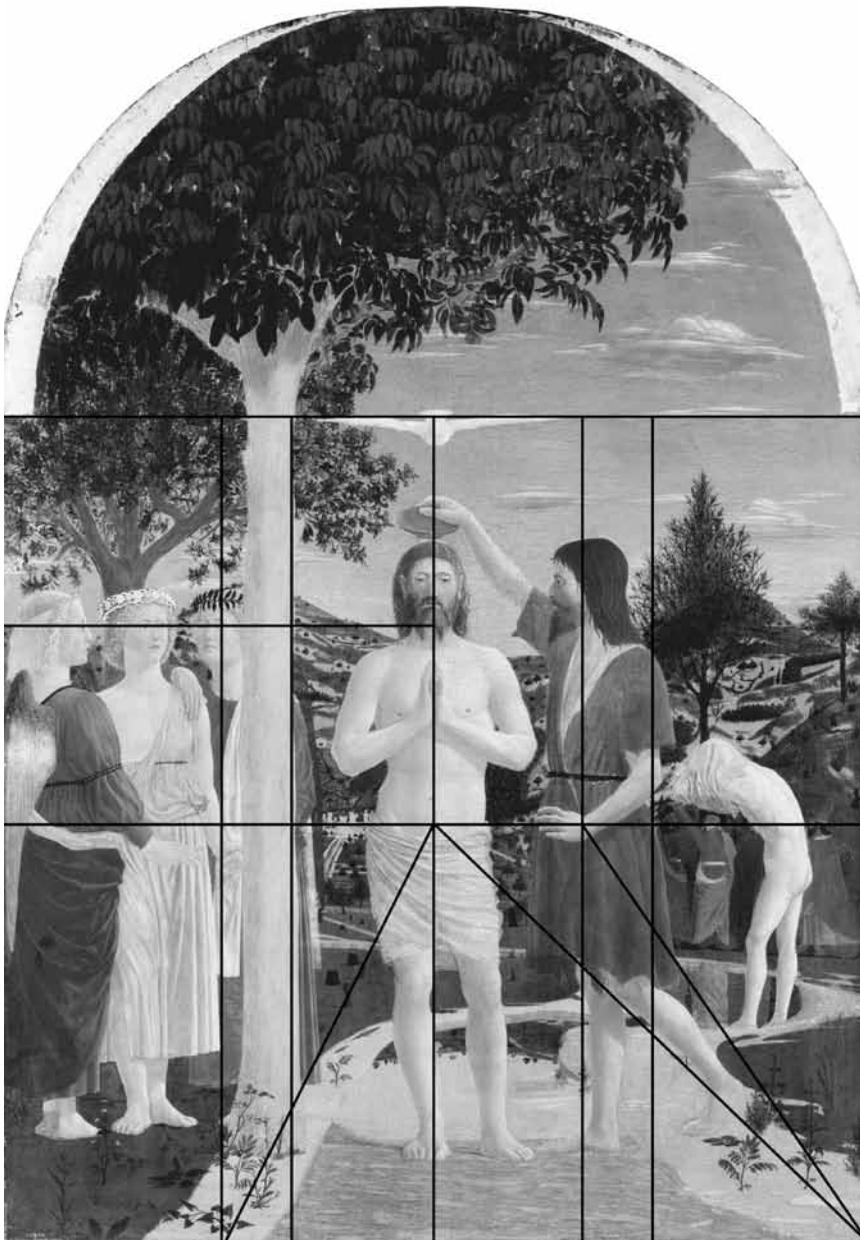
Though it ranges from the late nineteenth century through to the present, this book is centered on the years 1910 and 1939, when, according to standard accounts, the doctrine of “significant form” was popularized by the British writers Roger Fry and Clive Bell, but before “high” formalism’s rejuvenation at the hands of Clement Greenberg. A starting point for much of the discussion is the art writing of Roger Fry. The subtleties of Fry’s thought make his work a useful platform from which to revise ideas about the tie of form and modernism and to examine characteristic modernist positions on visual culture. (I use the term “visual culture” because, although Fry’s account was developed in order to deal with art, in practice it involved a whole system of thought about how the humanly made visual world was meaningful.)<sup>9</sup> More than that, as the son of a knighted judge, a member of the elite Apostles discussion society at Cambridge, and one of the set of intellectuals and artists known as the Bloomsbury group, Fry is representative of a range of modernists who were formed and remained entangled in the society that they attempted to critique. His place amid so many social and institutional networks allows for an examination that also works outwards and shows how ideas about form and

visual culture at the time spread widely into contemporaneous culture and lived on long after this period.<sup>10</sup>

According to the traditional view that I hope to move beyond, artistic modernism understood in terms of the narrowest of formalisms is often called “formalist modernism,” the name for the turn in criticism and art alike to the appreciation of form alone and a purely abstract art to match. In this story, a dominant strand of formalist modernism was spread in Britain and beyond from around 1910 by the writing of Fry and Bell.<sup>11</sup> Theirs is taken to be an escapist position that emphasizes disinterested contemplation of the shapes and colors of the works and a particular (irreducible and unique) set of experiences generated by them. Reference to life outside is excluded because art is an end in itself; despite any expression it involves, it is appreciated for its own sake alone. Form is “structure to the exclusion of meaning,” to use a recent phrase, and any projects that suggest art might incorporate elements of life or even play a direct role in shaping the social world run counter to the trend.<sup>12</sup> These are writers who supposedly turned pictures on their side so that the subject matter would not interfere with their design quality and whose critical approach to works of art can be likened to diagramming their significant form for others (fig. 4).<sup>13</sup>

Formalist modernism of this kind finds a starting point in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* of 1790. “Pure” judgments of taste about “free” beauty, Kant wrote, were made “according to mere form” or “properly concern[ing] only form” (114). But this focus on form alone meant an abstraction away from everything not immediately present in contemplation, with judgments made in relation to what the viewer “has before his sense” rather than “what he has in his thoughts” (116). The everyday existence of things slipped away in a contemplation of form that was also a contemplation of things “without respect to use or to an end” (125).<sup>14</sup> Following polemically simplifying readings by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Britain and Victor Cousin and Madame de Staël in France, Kant’s account of this particular kind of free beauty was expanded into a model for the concept and proper experiences of *art as such*. The tie of form to art and aesthetic experience was then radicalized in the “art for art’s sake” attitudes of late nineteenth-century French symbolism and British aestheticism, which considered aesthetic experience of this sort as an end in itself, a justification for life rather than a means of connection.

The alleged heir to these trends, the “modernist project,” was popularized first by Fry and Bell and then by writers in the United States. It began in earnest



**Figure 4.** Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* (ca. 1488–50) with indications of halves and thirds. Drawing by Andrew Demetrius after illustration in Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

at the turn of the twentieth century and resided in a “process of progressive purification,” as each particular art sloughed off all elements extraneous to its search for the purely aesthetic—for the effects that were proper to the medium alone and that would ensure a suitable richness of experience.<sup>15</sup> Formalist modernism found its natural outcome in the sheer optical plenitude of midcentury abstract art in the United States. It found its natural advocacy in Clement Greenberg’s apodictic explanation of the development of painting from Édouard Manet to Jackson Pollock and others as the story of painting’s salvaging of its aesthetic quality and claim to artistic status amid general cultural degradation. This was a salvation achieved by way of the gradual elimination of all nonformal features that were discovered to be extraneous to the essence of the specific medium, in this case painting. So influential was this narrative that by the 1980s many felt an “anti-aesthetic” stance was the sole way to move from Greenberg, formalist modernism, elitist conceptions of beauty, and the like to a contextually minded, conceptually oriented, repoliticized view of what visual culture and its study might involve.<sup>16</sup>

Since at least the 1960s, increasingly complex accounts of modernism have been proposed by those unwilling to rest with this traditional view or to abandon the notion altogether as the “emptiest of all cultural categories.”<sup>17</sup> Modernism might now be understood in the context of an expanding cluster of interrelated themes in modernity, such as (in no particular order): “the imaginative proximity of social revolution,” the pursuit of freedom in the sense of “self-determining and self-sufficient subjectivity,” the renegotiation of boundaries between high and low culture, the critique and ensuing crisis of representation, engagement with the dis- and re-enchantment of the world, and the emergence of cross-national cultural forms from negotiations between Western and non-Western worlds (not to mention the specific configurations of these and their subsets found in particular national, local, or transcultural modernisms).<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the formalist modernist construction has proven surprisingly difficult to displace as a historical account of how modernist culture was understood by many at the time. Much revisionist work since the 1960s has continued to take formalist modernism at face value and either to set a newfound richness and diversity of contemporaneous culture against the narrow view of this central strand or to recontextualize this strand in ways that still keep to the old view of formalism and modernist criticism.<sup>19</sup> In this book I attempt to effect this displacement in a more internal manner. What I mean by this is that I do not try to simply highlight the naïveté of the formalist

modernist account, just as I do not attempt to look for alternative strands of aesthetic theory while still accepting the traditional picture of the central one. Instead, my aim is to directly address why it is that the traditional picture of formalist modernism is itself so partial and inadequate.

The alternative view I put forward in this book sees form as bound up with making contact, even as the basis for a limited notion of communication.<sup>20</sup> In the recent words of the modernist art historian T. J. Clark, “It is the form of our statements, and the structure of our visualizations, that truly are our ways of world-making—at any rate the ways that hold us deepest in thrall.”<sup>21</sup> Thinking of form in this way builds on the conception of form as structure or organization, carefully developed in Russian formalism from the 1910s onwards.<sup>22</sup> Form is here what Viktor Shklovsky called “the principle underlying the construction of the object,” or, in a more expansive recent update of the view, “Forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts.”<sup>23</sup> At its most restricted, then, form might be simple shape—a decorative pattern, like paisley or the Greek fret, or the linear frameworks that some have tried to discover and map in particular works of art (see fig. 4 above, as well as fig. 5 below). But this concept of form as an organization that can move and mutate through time can also apply to things as various as a particular configuration of a pictorial motif such as the Madonna and Child, a literary genre like the *Bildungsroman*, or a technical format like the oil-on-canvas easel painting.<sup>24</sup> Thinking of the “formal opportunity” or “form-class” of relevance to Cézanne’s work, George Kubler spoke of the long history of the problem of landscape and “tectonic order” that the painter had taken up from Poussin: “The anonymous mural painters of Herculaneum and Boscoreale connect with those of the seventeenth century and with Cézanne as successive stages separated by irregular intervals in a millenary study of the luminous structure of landscape.”<sup>25</sup>

Form in the sense of structure or organization presumes that particular kinds of ordering carry a “distinctive semantic force” and, as such, allow for comprehension.<sup>26</sup> But what this concept of form as structure leaves out is that forms are also the product of a process, the end result of active making or a shaping principle. And because things are *formed*—and seem to reflect or embody the process by which they have been made in a way that gives them a style—their meaningful structures are also always *historical*.<sup>27</sup> This comprehension for us, faced with formed things in the present, might also open onto the forming or world-making of others in the past. Formalism of the kind I

describe in this book combines analysis of visual and aesthetic effects with the historical production of the object in question, often with the former used as primary evidence with which to make judgments about the latter. This formalism is interested not in structure to the *exclusion* of meaning but in structure's connection with traces of intentionality, of a meaningful way to make judgments about ways of seeing and forms of life. And it is as much aesthetic as it is based on reasoning, reliant on feeling it or seeing it as much as calculating it or working it out.

By retrieving the communicative aspect and bringing it back into the moment of formalism's consolidation at the turn of the twentieth century, I show how the sensory and the formal were brought together to produce a criticism predicated on the intuitively felt life, the manifest purposefulness, that objects of human production exhibited and from which whole forms of life could be imaginatively reconstructed. "To assume consciousness is at once to assume form," wrote the French art historian Henri Focillon in the 1930s; "The artist develops, under our eyes, the very technique of the mind; he gives us a kind of mold or cast that we can both see and touch. His high privilege is not merely that of being an accurate and skillful molder of casts. He is not manufacturing a collection of solids for some psychological laboratory; he is creating a world—a world that is complex, coherent and concrete."<sup>28</sup> Over the course of five chapters, I move from this grand, world-making sense of form to a modest one of simple contact. The latter kind is a "postformalism" that is no longer stridently confident about the direct communicative potential of humanly made things, no longer certain that the look of a painting accords with the vision of the artist, and no longer certain even that human creation has a distinct and primary sort of meaning.<sup>29</sup> As such this is the only formalism I think appropriate for the contemporary moment. But an unusual element of what I put forward, reflected in each chapter's move outwards from Fry to others far closer to the present, is nonetheless the continuity between what was standardized in the years around 1910 and what has remained with us. My aim is to offer not only a new way to think about formalism and formalist modernism for scholars in early to mid-twentieth-century art and literary theory but to offer those interested in theory and intellectual history through to the present an account of ideas that they will recognize as very much having persisted.

So what does my take on form change, exactly? Formalist modernism traditionally describes a cultural moment that rejected such externally directed concepts as intention, meaning, and communication. In contrast I

discuss how close attention to the use of form reveals a deep and complex commitment to the external world. One aspect of this engagement with the external is an ideal of viewing as the aesthetic recovery of creative activity that construes the engagement with visual culture as a kind of historical psychology—the use of the imagination to reexperience or reenact the activities and worldviews of others. Beyond finished or static form, then, historical thinking that makes use of form requires a recovery of process, including the particular ways of seeing, the emotions or the experiences that made up the work. Not only do we see this in metaphors of liaison, transaction, or transmission regularly put to use in art writing but in the fact that the proper appreciation of the work was also often described as a process of re-creation of the artist's forming activity. Analysis involves a pattern of shifts between analysis of the finished form, contextual material, and imaginative re-creation or reenactment of the process of creation.<sup>30</sup> This tendency came to standardize an interpretative method that to this day underlies the kinds of engagement with visual culture that claim to be attentive to some variation of *the object* or *the visual*: to become suitably informed about the artist and the work in question, to look long enough to discern its standard effects on the viewer, and to make judgments about purposive activity on the artist's part on this basis.<sup>31</sup> Rooted in the criticism of nineteenth-century writers like John Ruskin and Walter Pater and still with us in many ways, early twentieth-century art writing should seem less an anomaly or paradigm shift than a key (consolidating and paradigmatic) moment in a much wider tradition.

The traditional view of formalist modernism also supports the orthodoxy that aestheticism was countered throughout the twentieth century by a more radical (“historical”) avant-garde dedicated to bringing the spheres of art and life back in touch with each other.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand is the line of medium-specific painters and sculptors from Manet to midcentury abstract art; on the other is the work of dada, the Bauhaus, and other groups that engaged current events and conditions of social life in thematic and practical ways and in doing so explored the critical potential of cultural production. As a generalized dichotomy, however, this is misleading about both art theory and the artists and writers in dialogue with it. In contrast, I discuss the ways in which formalism was and continues to be ethically and politically motivated, even attempting to counteract what was taken to be the solipsistic aestheticism of previous generations by elevating art to a central position within the social world. After 1900 a range of new practices developed in response to the idea that close engagements with works of visual art play an invaluable and

possibly inescapable role in shaping human lives fit for modern democratic society. Formalist theory penetrated cultural arenas including general education and the design-led reform of the modern visual environment, not to mention all forms of education in the practice and appreciation of art (and as such shows why the antiformalism of Marxist critics and other skeptical contemporaries often failed to hit the target). Within two decades after 1910, in effect, a broad formalism had taken hold that was already able to attack the straw man of aestheticist formalism in order to champion its own social (and avowedly anti-aestheticist) credentials.

The stress on creativity and connection with life leads to a further, perhaps even more unexpected, point. One way that the art of modernism has often been distinguished from what followed is the apparent stress on openness and viewer participation in *post-modern* work. For Peter Weibel,

Since the experimental music of the 1950s (from John Cage to Henri Pousseur) and the experimental poetry (Umberto Eco), the public has been invited to participate in the creation of artworks. The artist is not the sole contributor to the work, there is also the spectator. Marcel Duchamp stated in 1957 in his famous lecture on the creative act: "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator . . . adds his contribution to the creative act." . . . This performative turn has an influence on our notion of creativity, on the behavior of the masses, and on our concept of art. First and foremost, we experience the emancipation of the audience: the visitor becomes a user.<sup>33</sup>

Weibel here suggests that the "performative" paradigm of work as invitation, with the spectator now a necessary contributor to the creative act, distinctly separates modernism from the art that followed. To an extent, Weibel's assumption about modernism accords with the formalism discussed in the first four chapters of this book: the confident and universalizing understanding of form's world-making and world-recovering potential, with modernist art apparently a repository of fixed experiences around which a science of criticism could even be modeled. But, as will be seen, formalism's view of visual culture is ultimately not so neat. Works formed and experienced a certain way in the past had, for those in the present, to be formed once again in the act of viewing. The idea of the viewers creating the works for themselves in contemplation—engaging imaginatively rather than passively consuming—was fundamental to the interest in form. And as the "science" of form broke down over the course of this period, revealing the unpredictable

nature of active and imaginative engagements by “users,” what emerged was that even modernist art was all along a space for interpretation without center or limit: “A place where inquiry is initiated, but the results of the inquiry are scrambled.”<sup>34</sup>

This is one of the less often recognized lessons of form: the extent to which viewing is a process of active construction, a putative re-creation wherein we can never be sure what quotient of the creation is “re” and what simply is starting anew. It is not just, then, that “formalism” and the often-referenced “crisis of representation” are names for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century shift of attention from things represented to acts and modes of representation. They are, equally, names for the newfound engagement with the problem of communication in items of visual culture at a moment when it has become clear that modernity has not lived up to its promise of “reconciled social relations of persons who are free because they actually stand in relations of at least institutionally secured mutuality of recognition.”<sup>35</sup> Formalism (in modernism) emerges as a sustained communal engagement in criticism and aesthetic theory with the status of public, shareable meaning, as well as the social consequences for the production and consumption of art that flow from a focus on that question. Though rarely recognized at the time, this is an idea that my account in this book allegorizes and builds towards. It is also, as my final chapter explores, a lesson that any modest or “post-” formalism practicable or recoverable for the present day would have to learn and make central to its self-understanding.

These comments on form, experience, and communication raise the issue of another word key to my book—“aesthetics.” If aesthetics has seen a recovery and rejuvenation in the last twenty years, this has in part been at the expense of the unity of the notion, as all forms of theoretical speculation on art and the experiential are now brought under its banner.<sup>36</sup> To offer just one example, talk of “the aesthetic,” suspicious precisely because of its association with representations of formalist modernism at its narrowest, is replaced in recent visual studies by that of “presence,” “affect,” “agency,” and occasionally even (somewhat ironically) “the formal.”<sup>37</sup> But rather than such substitutions indicating a marginalization of aesthetics, the contemporary understanding of the practice has simply expanded to encompass all of these approaches.<sup>38</sup>

The expansion of aesthetics is opportune for a study that wishes to rethink a historical moment where the experiences offered by items of visual culture, as well as the textual narration and encouragement of such experiences, was given as great a prominence as it ever has been. Taking up the

history of aesthetics alongside modernism (as modernist aesthetics) now implies a far broader purview: not just the aforementioned story of the development from German philosophical thought to a British art for art's sake valorization of aesthetic experience, but the stance art writing took on the theoretical and the phenomenological in the widest senses. While "art writing" is here used to stand for investigation that privileges the practical writing and real-life actions of canonical and noncanonical texts and authors alike, "aesthetics" stands for investigation into past paradigms of "critical reflection on art, culture, and nature" (to use the definition of the recent *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*).<sup>39</sup> My book is about aesthetics in the anachronistic sense it currently has, as the catchall term for a general category of cultural reflection.

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In practice I mix historical and analytic exposition throughout this book, with each chapter taking up a major theme in the study of art theory and writing. The book is split into two parts: "art writing" and "art and life." While the two parts ultimately rely on each other, it is also possible that those solely interested in the history and analysis of aesthetic theory and criticism could focus on part one, while those more interested in the politics and practicalities could skip forward to part two.

The first chapter attempts to come to terms with the nature, spread, and legacy of the broadened formalism discussed in the book as a whole. After a brief introduction to the *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* exhibition of 1910–11 that put forward postimpressionism as an idea and helped bring Fry and formalism to popular attention, I show how confusing and unhelpful Clive Bell's related notion of significant form came to be. I then introduce connoisseurship into the story, a crucial model as it helps demonstrate how the perhaps unusual conjunction of form, style, intention, and communication might work in practice (and have consequences for the writing of art history and criticism from modernism right through to the present). Finally, I move beyond Fry, Bell, and the connoisseurs, showing how such ideas can be found in a range of contexts from academic literary criticism (I. A. Richards) and philosophy (R. G. Collingwood) through to a number of popularizing writers long forgotten but at the time enormously influential.

Chapter 2 then takes up the issue of how and why formalism was thought to offer an objective, perhaps even scientific, form of art criticism. Following on from discussions of connoisseurship and the aesthetic, it

analyses the parallel between formalist writing and the nineteenth-century aesthetic criticism of Walter Pater and others, showing how form was thought to give a more secure path to imaginative reenactments than simply descriptions of shape, line, and color. The rest of the chapter moves into the reconfiguration of objectivity in art criticism when faced with new quasi-scientific conceptions of art and psychology, psychoanalysis, the laboratory, and a more positivistic historicism. A concluding discussion takes up the legacies of these debates in contemporary art history and aesthetics.

The second part of the book expands the revisionist understandings of art writing and art theory explored in the first to reexamine the politics and ethics of formalism as a way of thinking about visual culture. Chapter 3 shows how a broadened formalism supported a particular ethics of close looking that, in turn, came to construct and justify the separation of “high” and “low” cultural spheres. The discussion links a number of usually separate figures and areas, moving between Fry and Bell, the rise of “English” or literary study as an academic discipline, twentieth-century legacies of aestheticism, government initiatives to bring art “to the people,” and present-day upholders of the value of “fine” art. It concludes by showing how aestheticism came to be attacked in the twentieth century according, ironically, to the same socially motivated ideas of its original adherents. Chapter 4 pursues the analysis through the discussion of two alternative contemporaneous visions for an adequate response to mass culture: design theory and Marxist art writing. The first half examines the basic conflict in a design theory that hoped not only to replicate items of visual culture for mass consumption but to preserve the aesthetically crucial intervention of the individual maker. The second half turns to debates within Marxist writing about the ability of art to be truly of the people while still maintaining its highest values. In either case, the chapter shows that the assumptions of formalist theory and writing derailed a number of attempts to break away from the dominant ideal of close looking at high art objects.

Finally, chapter 5 turns to the issue of modern art and its cultural authenticity in Africa, Britain, and South Asia to indicate other senses in which formalist theory was deeply ingrained and widely consequential, as well as to think about the relation between broadened formalism and a broadened or global modernism. (It is more common now to acknowledge the heterogeneity of artistic practices at this moment by speaking of global modernisms in the plural, though I suggest there may be some reason to at least acknowledge the singular form in a way that remains attentive to the multiplicity of the strands within.) I chart the attempts to spread a particular formalist kind of

aesthetic education outside of Britain, in some cases unwittingly imposing universalist assumptions that, unsurprisingly from the present perspective, look all too contingent. The narratives lead into a more general reflection on the fate of modernism as a potentially global concept and a concluding discussion of the possibility that its scope might be greatly expanded without a repetition of the errors of the earlier attempts to globalize. Learning these lessons, I suggest, also shows how a more modest formalism might still be defensible, or even inevitable, in the present day.