

Art and Incarnation: Oscillating Views

Andrew McKenna

**Department of Modern Languages & Literatures
Loyola University of Chicago
Chicago IL 60626
amckenn@luc.edu**

“What is it in us that reacts to art? It is sobering to think that such a fundamental question has never been answered satisfactorily” (*Chronicle* 223, “Art, High and Popular,” Dec. 23, 2000). Those of us who roam through art museums are haunted by this question, and those of us who study Eric Gans’s *Generative Anthropology* (GA) will, I shall argue here, find an answer that is worth pursuing in some detail and across several centuries:

The originary hypothesis explains the power of the work of art through the dependency of our cultural systems of representation on the center-periphery structure of the originary scene. This explanation, in turn, becomes a spur to the concrete historical analysis that fleshes out the model. (*Chronicle* 223) That is what I am going to essay here: first I shall review the dynamics of the originary scene of human and cultural origins as hypothesized by GA; I will proceed thereafter to some concrete historical analyses in order, finally, to consider what is going on in the art world today, the apparently bizarre, not to say aberrant art scene, where we experience something like the end of art in a way that GA can trace to its violent origins.

According to this theory, language emerges as the result of an aborted gesture of appropriation of a large prey that a group of proto-humans has slain for its nourishment. Seizing the quarry lays any of the group vulnerable to the violence that produced it, so that the instinctive, biological act bent on nourishment is suspended in the form of a gesture, a sign, the ostensive, that has the effect of designating the object of appetite as desirable, and has the equal and opposite effect of designating it as mortally dangerous to seize, as inappropriable, lest any designator fall prey to unanimous violence. It is natural to seize the prey and just as natural here, in this circumstance, in this circle of predators, to refrain from doing so, to defer appropriation. All imitate one another in this abortive gesture and all refrain as a consequence, each being a model, a rival, and an obstacle to one another’s action. This communal and mimetically generated sign results in a moment of non-instinctual attention, from which is born a hominized community as a structure consisting of a circle, a periphery of unwitting, mimetic, circumstanting sign producers convened, magnetized, by a center of fascination, whose appropriation or occupation is taboo, forbidden, lethally dangerous. This is the moment of desire, its birth, as the deferral of

appetite, as deferred possession in general, which emerges together with the birth of language, as the deferral of violence. Language is born in and as a representation of desire. The moment is experienced as an event, constituting properly human memory as a before and after of violence, a suspension of biological and instinctive activity produced by the sign, by the mimetic gesturing or representation of the central object. The sacred too is born of this moment, as a central object that is at once attractive and repulsive, beneficent at a distance because terrible to appropriate; it is taboo and desirable at once and the one because the other: *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*. To the before and after of violence corresponds the experience of spatial coordinates of an inside and outside, of a sacred center and a human, profane periphery, whose survival is guaranteed by deference to, by reverence for the center.

In sum, the experience of space and time is born with the experience of desire as deferred appropriation, and with it the experience we call esthetic, or art. In this mimetically and mutually reinforcing spatio-temporal structuring of circum-stance and di-stance (re)produced by the sign—what Gans calls “the little bang” of hominization—the first esthetic effect is registered in and as the undecidable, non-instinctual attention that oscillates between the object desired by the nascent group of humans and the sign that designates it as desirable by all and therefore unavailable to any. Only this oscillation of attention can account for the enigmatic fascination exercised by the sign itself in its inevitable competition for attention with the unappropriable object it designates. Attention cannot focus on the sign even a little bit without feeling the converse, opposing pull of its sacralized referent, in whose sacrality the sign participates marginally. The sign participates in the *ecstasis* of the sacred it generates, whence, as we read in another *Chronicle* on this topic, “the minimal esthetic moment that is contained in every experience of representation” (*Chronicle* 369, “The Esthetic Moment,” March 14, 2009).

To repeat: the oscillation between sign and referent, gesture and object, perpetuates and ensures the attention, the attraction-repulsion seemingly exercised by the object itself, the referent of the sign, whose signified, let us recall, is not “appetitive prey” but “stay away.” Because the sign mediates between newborn subjects and object of desire, because language is born as a representation of desire, the attraction-repulsion seemingly exercised by the object of desire is empirically replicated in the to-and-fro or oscillation of attention between the object and the sign that designates it as desirable and forbidden. In sum, the sign exercises its own power of fascination: *it attracts attention but not desire*, which it generates around the object. The sign generates desire while exercising a power of non-instrumental fascination. We regularly define esthetic experience as non-instrumental, non-pragmatic, non-utilitarian apprehension of signs and we define art as their production and manipulation for this (non)purpose.

The sign invests the referent with a power to generate a community, whereupon reference to the object alternates with reverence for this incomprehensible, seemingly creative power,

deferring violence and diffidence to the sacred being one and the same experience. Just as origin and repetition, origin and mimesis are one for GA, so are reference and reverence, signifying and sanctifying.

Art, then, is born of the sacred, with the sacred, but not as the sacred. In other words, as we read in a recent *Chronicle* (*Chronicle* 370, "Transcendence," March 28, 2009), art has an intermediate status between language and ritual, mixing the material and the transcendental, and consisting in the oscillation between them. This never stops being the case, whether we are talking about prehistoric cave art, medieval or renaissance art, or modern and postmodern art. It is in this sense that "every art work replicates the dynamics and structure of its sacred and (non)violent origin":

It is in the esthetic moment of the experience of a representation that we perform the defining act of generating transcendence from within worldly immanence on our internal scene of representation. . . . Our sense of experiencing the originary generation of meaning is the source of the *frisson* that accompanies our encounter with a successful artwork. Every art work is a model of originary event. (*Chronicle* 369, "The Esthetic Moment") Of course the religious origin of art is a commonplace among art historians as well as archeologists and anthropologists, though on the other hand very few of them have felt any need of an originary hypothesis. What GA does for us with this ground-breaking notion of oscillation is to enable us to open up, unpack, and flesh out the clichés and conundrums of esthetic wonderment, which in the annals of art history read as something like a "black box," an engineer's term for points or junctures in a circuit of relations that is too dense with information to allow for elaboration or illustration.

The origin of human culture is the representation of the sacralized victim by a sign, whose ritualized and monumental reproduction in the ancient world is traversed by another "little bang" on Mount Sinai. The anti-idolatry imperative, which Sandor Goodhart locates at the foundation of Mosaic revelation, empties the center of any particular figure; the presence of the scenic center is independent of all place and of all imagery (Gans, *Science and Faith* 62). Which is to say that it is communal presence itself that will constitute the religious community; this presence ordains for veneration of the sacred a migrant and constantly exilic people rather than a particular place; a people, not a place, and a presence, not a picture. The ritual center is purged of all figurality, with the result that Israel's God is endowed with greater universality than the other gods whose namedness particularizes them (*Science and Faith* 68). There are, appropriately, no artistic images to represent this event; historical memory is inscribed in and as Torah.

The last "little bang" of religious discovery occurs with Pauline revelation, which, like the Mount Sinai encounter, is experienced as an event, a going forth and returning otherwise illumined, enlightened, with a radically altered understanding of the sacred. En route to Damascus, Paul's idea, his ideal, his passionate conviction, of the prosecution of the Law is

converted in a vision-or in a blinding intuition-as the persecution of a victim; his zeal for the jealous/zealous God convicts him of rank homicide. He experiences the transcendence of ethical law by a moral intuition, that of the absolute reciprocity in human relations, and as a consequence of the reciprocity of violence in which he and all humans have a share. The fulfillment of the Law, its universal confirmation, is its translation, its translocation, as recorded in the Pentecost, to all the nations, all *gens*, the gentiles, as centered in Jesus the Christ, the universal victim:

Where the Jews worship a non-figural god, Christianity restores figuration to the sacred center. But the figure is not that of a superhuman master; it is that of a human victim. It is the crucifixion that defines the centrality of Christ in the Christian revelation (*Science* 85)



**1. Grünewald, Isenheim
Altarpiece, ca. 1512**

My focus on this observation will not be on the victim, but on figuration, which owes the wild and seemingly unruly career it has known in Western art to a mystery that fundamentally and essentially resists representation, namely the Incarnation. My analyses are motivated by a remark in *Originary Thinking*, which follows upon the description of Christian or neoclassic art as “the integration of Christian ethical values into the classical esthetic” (150); these are values “which made every human being an equal participant in the sacred,” promulgating “the equality of souls” by virtue of which “the worldly hierarchy lost its authority to differentiate essentially among people” (151):

The new Christian anthropology refuses to distinguish *a priori* between those worthy or unworthy to occupy the center. The Incarnation explicitly articulates theory with anthropology; our common possession of an individual scene of representation is the sign of our common origin and the locus of our communion with the trinitary God. The new “inwardness,” the awareness of the divinely guaranteed internal scene of representation, must be incorporated into esthetic form. (151) We will encounter images of the trinitary God shortly. My interest is the esthetic actualization of this new inwardness, a new relationship between what is inward and outward, spiritual and material, visible and invisible, to which we owe the really unique and fabulous, multiform, multifarious and manifold career of Western art as it draws its initial motivation and energies from belief in the Incarnation. The doctrine that proclaims the presence of the divine in human form explicitly articulates, to borrow from above, a program for artistic representation. The implications of this doctrine for pictorial art are not explored by Gans, the rest of the chapter in *Originary Thinking*, for instance, being taken up by only literary examples (*La Chanson de Roland*, Dante, *Hamlet*, and tragedy) rather than painting. I think we can engage in some concrete historical analysis of esthetic form in the plastic arts in the wake of his remarks above. I am arguing, in sum, that we can *see evidence* for GA esthetics, illustrate it, rather than merely think it,

conceive or conceptualize it, in some representative and representational art works, some products of artistic representation.

The foundational link between Incarnation and figural representation is one that spans art history discussion from Hegel to our day, and whose principles can be traced to early Christian thought (Schefer 41-48). With the Council of Nicea's declaration of the full humanity of Jesus, "in Christ, the divine and the human had been perfectly reconciled and immediately joined" (Hart 209). The Christological debates on how it was that Christ was human led necessarily "into an ever deepening consideration of what it is for any of us to be human," to "the most searching metaphysics of the self ever undertaken." (Hart 209)

Jerôme Baschet's authoritative analyses of medieval iconography (*L'Iconographie médiévale*) yield more precision for this idea. He argues that philosophy's preoccupation with the duality of spiritual and corporal, of body and mind, is an anthropological question that has profound and far-reaching social implications for the medieval church as a human institution of divine origin. This issues in an anti-dualist dynamic encouraging the proliferation of imagery (15). Thus the notion of image and imagination is at the heart of Christian anthropology (16) since it defines the relation between God and humans created "in his image and likeness" (Gen 1.26). However, this likeness or link has been damaged by original sin, producing a distance between divine and human that the Incarnation is understood as bridging:

The restitution of the divine image, made possible by the Incarnation, remains a promise whose realization is hoped for at the end of time, once the glorious bodies of the elect are reunited with god. History in its entirety is that of an image relation, established at the origin and then lost, then restored by the Incarnation and awaited in its fullness at the eschatological horizon. (17) Baschet engages the expression "image relation" (*rapport d'image*) to distinguish how the Incarnation links humans to their creator in a way that is not reducible to the Platonic relation between an original being and a degraded, ultimately disreputable copy, between full presence and untrustworthy representation, or between actuality and image. This is because, as David Bentley Hart states, and as Baschet argues throughout, "with God's full transcendence and creation's inherent integrity established, as it were, it was no longer necessary to think of this world as a distortion or dilution of divine reality, which must be negated or forsaken if the divine is to be known in its own nature" (208). As a result, "an entire metaphysical tradition has been implicitly abandoned," Hart writes. Creation is seen and represented as witness to the beauty and power of the God who made it.

There are innumerable passages in Baschet's work that read like the minutes to a meeting convened by the passage I cited earlier from *Originary Thinking*. This archival and iconographic research reminds us that the use of the term *imago* suggests much more in the medieval world than the word *image* tells us:

The Son, although born of the Father, is of an essence absolutely equal to his: he is the perfect *imago* of the Father. It is a relation which surpasses in dignity that which ties man to the Creator (man is *in* the image of God, the Son *is* the *image* of God). . . . The perfect image of the Father takes on flesh and accedes to the visible. The two image-relations—the *ad imaginam Dei* in man, the perfect *imago* of the Father in the Son—are conjoined in the person of Christ. His sacrifice allows men to regain the lost divine image. . . . This is why the conjunction of the human and of the divine that is realized in the Incarnation is the foundation of the positive articulation of the spiritual and of the corporal. This is also why the Incarnation is one of the principal foundations of Christian image production: if “the son is the visibility of the Father” as Irenaeus of Lyon writes in the 2nd century, and if the perfect *imago* of God has taken the visible form of a man, how could we renounce representing [*figurer*] his humanity as a basis on which to rise toward his divinity? . . . This hypothesis allows us to suppose that the accentuation of the paradoxes of the Incarnation, the dynamics of articulating the spiritual and the corporal together, and the flourishing of images and the affirmation of the ecclesial institution constitute intertwined phenomena that intensify significantly in the central centuries of the middle ages. (17-18)The image is neither full presence nor mere representation, but oscillating affectively and cognitively between them: “The image is active, operational [*opérante*]; we need to consider it less as a reproduction than as a production, less as a representation than as an efficacious presentification” (19). Images are not just an illustration of dogma, the churches are not merely “la bible des pauvres,” as Emile Mâle famously argued, but an exploration of meaning, a “discovery procedure” in GA’s terms; they are, as Baschet says, “*en recherche*, exploring multiple formal modalities” (19) because of the human form the Christian God has assumed. Without reference to Baschet’s research, Hart summarizes the impulse generating medieval art in its statuary, stained glass, and illuminated manuscripts: “Christianity’s great epic narrative of fall and redemption, sin and sanctification, divine incarnation and human glorification, provided the human imagination with a new universe in which to wander, expand, and flourish” (197).

In sum, the medieval world thinks in images not because it is mostly illiterate, which it is, but because it is incarnational in its imagination; its imaginary scene is incarnational.

Art history credits the Renaissance with the discovery and exploration of perspective in painting. In this regard, the doctrine or belief in the Incarnation is highly instructive as a bridge between two epochs which are not easily demarcated.

“La perspective, ça pense” writes Hubert Damisch (*L’origine de la perspective*), whom Daniel Arasse cites, along with Pierre Francastel’s idea of figurative thought, *pensée figurative*, of painting as non-verbal thinking, in order to show us in his *Histoires de Peintures* just how it is that images think. His aim has been to explore perspective in a number of paintings of the Annunciation. According to Francastel, the exploration of perspective conceives of a world opened up to the action of humans, a world organized in

function of the position of the spectator: "The world is commensurable with man," writes Arasse; it is a place where "man can construct a true representation of his point of view" (67). The key word here is "true." We have to remember that Renaissance artists saw themselves as men of science, not, as we tend to see them today, as fantasists because the sacred mysteries they explored may not preoccupy us. Confidence in their representations was underwritten by confidence in the creation whose stability was guaranteed by its transcendent creator and whose goodness was guaranteed by God's entering into it, becoming flesh. The Christian revolution, as Hart calls it, "gave Western culture the world simply *as world*, demystified and so (only seemingly paradoxically) full of innumerable wonders to be explored" (213).

Arasse finds that one of the first works in perspective was an Annunciation scene and argues that this is not by mere happenstance. Perspective constructs an image of the world commensurable with man and measurable by man, while the Annunciation is the instant where the infinite comes into the finite, eternity into time, the incommensurable in the measurable; with the Incarnation the Creator comes into the creature, the unfigurable into figure. Saint Bernard of Siena sought to explain the Incarnation by analogy with the artist creating his world. The Annunciation provides a warrant for figuration and also serves as a privileged theme to confront perspective with its limits and its possibilities of representation. For, upon reflection, the Incarnation has to be the hardest thing to represent as a scene in the whole world of Christian iconography, or in the whole world anywhere. How do you portray the becoming flesh of a notoriously incorporate, unfigurable being, *deus omnipotens*? How do you depict what by definition is (the) unrepresentable? To represent the spirit is to represent no thing, and to represent the flesh is idolatrous-were it not for the Incarnation, as art historians concur. We shall see it portrayed in early Annunciation scenes as an event, which is thematized as such, as we shall see, by dialogue inscribed from Luke's gospel, a dramatization or scene by which worshipers are to understand and to visually experience, within the limits of the visible cannily manipulated by the artist, "the word made flesh."



2. Lorenzetti, *Annunciation*

In one of the first Annunciation scenes (1344), Lorenzetti composes a diptych, separated by a column supporting two arches framing the angel Gabriel and the Virgin. The column supporting the arches is engraved in the gold background at the top of the image and

painted in gold down to the base of the painting, where the tile paving is represented in perspective. The painting thus incorporates a low relief third dimension. Inscribed in the gold background, the infinite, celestial portion of the scene occupying two thirds of the painting, is the formula in Latin of the angel addressing the Virgin: "With God, nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1.37). The engraved inscription is etched out so that its letters stand out, but ambiguously: golden words on a gold field impose two planes of reality simultaneously on the viewer, though they are on the very same plane. The words are interrupted by the column which is on the same visual plane and fuses with the gold background. Arasse comments:

On the plane of a paving tiles, the column becomes material, appearing in front of the Virgin's robe, and a small portion of it appearing in the angel's part of the diptych. Here is how to figure the Incarnation in the Annunciation. The Annunciation is the angel's salute to Mary, announcing she will have a child who will be the son of God. She asks the angel how this will be possible since she has not known man and he responds: "Nothing is impossible to God," and she then says "Ecce ancilla Domini" [Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done according to your word. Lk 1.38] and in that instant the Incarnation takes place. (76)The gold background is divine light, gold being the color of the unfigurable, of infinity, of divinity itself; it shines behind the candles whose light would be reflected by the gold with which the painted column blends imperceptibly. In the lower portion, where perspective is deployed, the column becomes an opaque body. It is a figure of the Incarnation. There is perspective here already, the vanishing point being roughly where the column begins to emerge from the gold background, which is to say, at the center of the scene, at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines between the angel and Mary, heaven and earth, infinite and finite. Perspective is where space, the created world is commensurate with humans. The column is in the form of a spiral, a detail which Arasse does not comment upon; a band of gold circles downward and upward, as if to signify the intertwining of the two worlds, the spirit and the flesh, heaven and earth. In this early Renaissance work, oscillation between two planes, immanent and transcendent, is seen, marked, remarked as language, and engraved as a scenic event. For thanks to the Incarnation, divine transcendence is neither exclusively relegated to heaven above, nor is worldly immanence lacking a transcendent dimension or orientation. It is fair to say that oscillation is the theme of the scene, as both its optical and devotional program.



**3. Fra Angelico,
*Annunciation***

A century after Lorenzetti, when perspective dominates in painting, Fra Angelico engages similar verbal and celestial cross-referencing in his *Annunciation* of Cortona (1433). The event is composed as a diptych, with the angel under one arch supported by columns and Mary under another, but the angel's robe overflows into the neighboring garden and the Virgin's robe overflows into the angel's frame. An ampler dialogue is transcribed, with the Virgin asking how this conception is possible, the angel responding that nothing is impossible to God, and the Virgin responding in turn, "Ecce ancilla domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum," with which words the Incarnation is accomplished (Arasse 94). The "fiat mihi" echoes the "fiat lux" of Genesis. "In the beginning God made the earth," reads Genesis. "In the beginning was the word," reads John's Gospel, and with Jesus Christ the world is redeemed, remade anew. The Incarnation is the moment in which the Trinity is realized: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," reads the narrative. The dialogue is inscribed in gold letters, with the angel speaking from left to right, the Virgin from right to left and then left to right in the "fiat," but we can only read "Ecce ancilla domini" and "verbum tuum." The words "Fiat mihi secundum," realizing the Incarnation, have disappeared, without merely having disappeared behind the column. They have disappeared not behind the column but into the column, which is a traditional symbol of Christ: "Columna est Christus" in Timothy's epistle (3.15). The column is host to the "fiat mihi"; the word has become an element of the architecture, symbolically fleshed out. As a complement to this joining together of two worlds, in place of a ceiling, a star studded background opens onto the heavens above.

More Biblical narrative is portrayed here. In the upper left, we see the expulsion from the garden by the angel Gabriel, in symmetrical opposition to the "hortus conclusus" surrounding the loggia and symbolizing Mary's virginity. The expulsion is bordered by a rough boulder, the barren rocky garden contrasting with the pure and fertile garden that the Virgin's birth will realize, that her giving birth represents. The Incarnation is bringing into the world a new Adam, starting creation anew with the birth of the redeemer, putting an end to the curse which has weighed on humanity since the Fall. Arasse reminds us that in

Florence of the time, the liturgical year begins March 25, feast of the Annunciation.



4. Veneziano, *Annunciation*

At roughly the same time as Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, Veneziano (1455) renders Incarnation by a disorder in perspective corresponding to the fact of God coming as a man into the world. Perspective here is a tool for constructing a regular, ordered world, admirably proportioned, evoking a beautiful, paradisiac vision. The Virgin is enclosed in an architectural space, for she is often identified as an architecture, a temple, a tabernacle, whose womb is host to the son of God. Exquisitely sharp perspective dominates the foreground, and in the background a door is painted with a detail that is disproportionate to its perspectivized distance from the foreground, which is where such detail, or rather lack of it, properly belongs according to the compositional rules governing the construction of the scene. The visible keyhole indicates its disproportionality; the door eludes perspective, it is incommensurate because it is the figure of the Incarnation. Like the Lorenzetti's column, the door hides, or rather contains, the vanishing point. The door, gate, portal, symbolizes Christ in the Virgin, Jesus in the world. Arasse writes:

The door is Jesus in the Virgin, it is therefore necessarily the Incarnation which escapes the commensurability of perspective which tells the visible story of the Annunciation. That is where painting is thinking [*la peinture pense*]. (80) The Incarnation is out of proportion, outside the perspective of a world commensurate with humans, but it gives dignity, beauty to the human world by God's entry as man into it.



5. Piero della Francesca, *Annunciation*

We find the same disproportionate effect with Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation of Perugia* (ca. 1460). We have the same diptych structure, suggesting the coming together of two worlds. The marble wall, though situated at the end of the corridor of elegantly

perspectivized columns, is painted as if it were close to us, the detail of the marble being as incommensurate with its distance from the figures in the foreground as it is from us, the viewers, who are drawn to it by the very rules of perspective that construct the scene and that the marble detail contravenes. It is present, among us, within the painting but alien to the perspective that composes it, and host to the vanishing point. Here, as with Lorenzetti's column, with Fra Angelico's door, the Incarnation is presentified.

The Holy Spirit hovers from a blue sky, radiating and shedding light towards the Virgin, who is enclosed within an extended portico, enveloping her within a different space from-though on the same plane as-the angel, so that it is hiding what is seen, since the angel's gaze meets the column, not the Virgin's gaze: "Columna est Christus." Whether we believe it or not, it makes sense to Christians, it makes sense of living in the world for Christians, whose gaze oscillates between the angel and the Virgin as between two worlds joined at the vanishing point of a mystery that redeems the world, renews creation, launching an exploration of its riches in unheralded and unrivaled ways. For many later Renaissance artists, the vanishing point is figurative at the apex of an oblong triangle retreating towards the horizon and signaling pure worldly immanence, as religious motifs cede to more secular, earthbound modes of representation. For some of the earlier artists, the Incarnation is the vanishing point between two worlds, the horizon of a new creation to whose glory they commit all their talents.



6. Fra Filippo Lippi, Annunciation

In later Annunciations lettering disappears and concomitant alterations in perspective result. With the high Renaissance painter Fra Filippo Lippi (ca. 1450), perspective is the means of emphasizing the Trinitarian God, by focus on the Holy Spirit. The vanishing point, as directed by the angel's wings no less than the white walls in the background and the triangular roof to which they direct the eye, is the dove, the Holy Spirit, to whom the *trompe l'oeil* inverted triangle above the dove point as well. Perspective here makes the Holy Spirit the central theme of the painting, the dove being also centrally located along the oblique axis descending from God the Father-creator upper left and angling down towards the

virgin, crossing her gaze at the book, the Word, which here is being made flesh, as the invisible is being made visible, and transcendence becomes immanence. The dove is located at the vanishing point because the Holy Spirit is the incursion of the invisible in the visible, the meaning of creation, God's saving desire in his Son, Jesus, symbolized by the column on which the dove appears to be ambiguously perched or hovering. The Holy Spirit is the vanishing point of the Incarnation, the relation of Father to Son as historical, as lived in human time and history. The vanishing point here, as with Lorenzetti and Fra Angelico, is a cognitive achievement of no small measure, but it is also and no less so a spiritual conquest, a representation that is also a revelation, which is the way Dostoevsky imagined the role of art, and especially of literature: as a continuation or extension of Revelation. This is what goes into Prince Myshkin's announcement in *The Idiot* to his incredulous socialite interlocutors: "Beauty will save the world."

How does this oscillation play out in modern history, in the history of modern art that we date from the Impressionists, and in art today, which we call postmodern?

With Enlightenment's appropriation of Christianity's universal morality, and the post-Revolutionary's bourgeoisie's appropriation of Enlightenment values, transcendence is invested in the ideology of historical progress, whose orientation only, not its absolute value, was disputed by left and right wing dogmaticians. In *Originary Thinking*, Gans focuses on the Parnassian poets as illustrative of the artist's internal exile from history and society, but the genuine transformation in esthetics operates in painting.



7. Manet, *The Bar at the Folies Bergères*

The impressionists turned their backs on the narrative, heroic, and religious content that had occupied the scene of neoclassic art since the Renaissance in order to concentrate increasingly on formal aspects of representation: light, color, volumetric form, and evanescent shapes dispersed by light, and on compositional arrangement as a whole. The impressionists' subject matter was emphatically contemporary life, what was going on around them: a railroad station or trestle, a boat, balcony, or bar scene. In Manet's *The Bar at the Folies Bergères* (1882) the oscillation effected by the mirror-between center and

margin, between neoclassic pyramidal structure and drift to the right, that is, between humans as subjects and objects of a gaze—is both theme and structuring principle of a purely immanent reality. Where customer’s gaze meets bar girl’s, the spectator’s gaze is thematized, made the object of reflection, literally, and the object of contemplation thereby, in the person of the customer to the right, so that we know that behind the girl is a mirror, symbol of iconic re-presentation, or painting. Viewing subject and viewed object are rival and complementary themes of the painting of which bottles and balcony are the pretext, the worldly occasion. Like Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) and his *Railway* (1872), this is a painting about looking, about seeing and being seen; it is about the human scene in all its immanence. No heroic or mythic or religious material is necessary to dignify its interest: it is good to see, the way fruit is good to eat. The client viewer’s gaze cuts across the painting diagonally, playing with the horizontal and vertical lines of the balcony in the background, that is peopled in a way that is less imposing, impressive than the bottles of wine in the foreground. The content of the artistic image is less important than the arrangement, announcing Cézanne’s still lifes.

The impressionists’ works notoriously diminish the hieratic significance of content in a way that laid the groundwork for moderns artists, “the first,” as Gans states, “to recognize that esthetic form was prior to any content, and could therefore be given whatever content one liked” (*Originary Thinking* 195)—or, as was soon to be the case with the likes of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko, and Pollock, no content whatsoever. As Peter Schjeldahl has noted, we experience such works as “engulfing rather than addressing the eye” (80). The artists increasingly focus on relations internal to the scene of the canvas rather than the representation of anything in the world outside it. As more than suggested by the expression “action painting” for the canvases of Jackson Pollack, the work is itself an event.



8. Cézanne, *Le Mont Sainte-Victoire vu de la carrière Bibemus*



9. Mark Rothko, *Yellow and Gold*

The famous twenty minutes that Cézanne devoted to each brushstroke in his landscapes of Mont Sainte-Victoire towards the end of his life testify to an oscillation between the “motif,” the object of his lingering gaze, and its representation on canvas. “Le Mont Sainte-Victoire vu de la carrière Bibemus” (1887) is mostly about masses of shape, color, effects of light, working towards “purely” formal composition. With Cézanne we experience Creation as a Work in Progress, in which the tension between icon or image and structure is at a maximum, though the painter’s fascination with la Mont Sainte-Victoire, which can be seen from myriad vantage points around Aix, made of it a symbol of verticality, height, dominance, transcendence. I don’t think it is stretching art-historical imagination to see variations on Cézanne’s efforts in the so-called abstractions of Rothko and Kelly, where color fields are jubilantly explored in the absence of any iconic representation. Color is not represented but presentified in a way that connects the *fiat lux* vocation of the painter with that of a divine creator.



10. Ellsworth Kelly, *Orange Field*



**11. Georges Braque,
*Woman with a Guitar***

After Cézanne the movement towards abstraction, purely formal composition, is inevitable, as we customarily see in the pseudo-geometric experimentations of cubism. In Braque's *Woman with a Guitar* (1913), the viewer's gaze is meant to alternate between an experience of two and three dimensions on the painted surface as well as between recognizable fragments of visible reality and abstract, geometric configurations. For a short period, Picasso and Braque, working together in the same studio, suppress color altogether, along with their signature on the painting, as in this *Fruit Dish* (ca. 1912), as if to erase the intention of the artist as well from the scene of representation. As if emulating Christianity's forward progress of institutional self-critique and disenchantment with its own hieratic authority, painting is on a path that will work itself out of a job, conspiring by mid-century in what Harold Rosenberg described as *The Dedefinition of Art*. Before surveying the impasses implied by those developments, we need to recall that the strange fact that Western art has a history that evolves over time to a point where it flirts with its own devolution is owed to its origin in the doctrine of the Incarnation, where divine revelation inserts itself in human time and in mortal flesh.



**12. Georges Braque and
Pablo Picasso, *Fruit Dish***



13. Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World...*

From cubism through abstract expressionism and its postmodern aftermath in minimalism, conceptualism, pop art and op art, this story is succinctly and tellingly summarized by Gans in the “Aesthetic History” portion of *Originary Thinking*, where he remarks that “the inherent radicalism of the modern age made it imperative for each generation to announce a new departure, a new movement. . . . Each work must carry out the renewal of esthetic form *ab ovo*” (181). This fact is explicit in Bruce Nauman’s self-described efforts of “trying to understand what art is and what artists do” (in Tomkins 71): “I knew then,” he wrote in 1981, “that I’d have to start out every day and figure out what art was going to be” (Plagens 58). In “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths” (Window or Wall Sign 1967) he is less reticent in his claims—if he’s not just joking. A stark polarization of views greeted his 1994 traveling retrospective in our nation’s capital, in Madrid, at MOMA, with the *New Yorker*’s Peter Schjeldahl declaring Nauman “the best—the essential—American artist of the last quarter century” and *Time*’s Robert Hughes describing his work as “so dumb that you can’t guess whether its dumbness is genuine or feigned” (in Tomkins 74-75).



14. Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*

These opposing views clearly reflect a fundamental oscillation within critical opinion itself about what, if anything, there is to admire or talk about; and this very ambiguity has

become the hallmark of virtually every “new” artist on the scene. The essays by eminent critics collected in a recent volume entitled *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Rubenstein, ed.) testify to the current exacerbation of this problem. In the third quarter of the last century, art production came to be seen in avant-garde circles like *Artforum* as discourse only. The art object is emphatically disdained as a source of esthetic experience in favor of the occasion to think about art, as well as about sundry social and political issues, an activity punctuated now and then by “infantile gestures of excremental desecration,” as noted in the *Chronicle* named “Sacrificing Culture” (No. 184, Oct. 9, 1999). Every avant-garde breakthrough proclaims itself a new origin—nonsensically—and not without doing intended violence to the viewers’ expectations.

As noted by Gans, twentieth-century art is hostage to an imperative of innovation and the public, concomitantly, to “the terroristic intention of the artist,” namely to the charge of philistinism if it does not submit to the “obligation to enjoy an avant-garde work” (*Originary Thinking* 194). Consequently, as Gans observes, “The esthetic must race to keep its paradoxical desire-objects out of the reach of the dynamic rationalization of the market, which is ever converting them into commodities of mass production” (191). Postmodernism can be described as the end of this race, with the artist’s jubilant declaration, in the person of Andy Warhol, that the market has won. As Gans writes: “The recognition of this inalterable dependency of art on the market is a defining trait of postmodernism” (182), an observation that echoes Jeff Koons’s comment at a 1980’s colloquium—his works have gone for the tens of millions at a time—that the “the market is the critic now” (in *Critical Mess* 102). As a Sotheby’s art expert notes more recently of artist-entrepreneurs, “a lot of artists today are succeeding on sound business principles” (in Thornton 38).



15. Andy Warhol, *Coke Bottles*

As Warhol’s viewer contemplates the scrupulous representation of commodities available to every consumer, his or her attention hesitates ambivalently between the artwork as an object of veneration and as an item of consumption, “between the expressive gesture and the mechanical mark” [Buchloh in Michelson 22), his studio shrewdly taking an industrial cognomen as The Factory. In sum, the work itself oscillates thematically between deferral owed to the sacred center and gratification of appetite by those on the periphery, a difference by which the *Chronicles* frequently distinguish between high and pop art, while

acknowledging their scandal-seeking postmodern conflation:

But the effectiveness of the modern provocation is ultimately dependent, not on the artist's freedom to give an arbitrary content to the artwork, but on the mimetic charge constitutive of the imaginary scene. Regardless of what is in the center, esthetic form forces us to take it seriously. (*Originary Thinking* 195)



16. Andy Warhol, *Marilyn*



17. Andy Warhol, *Mao*

Warhol's transparent ploy is not merely to mock high art seriousness and the spectator's anxious confusion about it; Duchamp, in his carefully disguised resentment of Picasso had already done that with his readymades, as did Rauschenberg and Johns explicitly in Duchamp's wake. Warhol's gambit is at once to explore and explode the structure of center and periphery in which art is born of the sacred. In his ubiquitous representations of violence-electric chairs, revolvers, icons of dead or deadly celebrities—we are reminded that he is not a Catholic for nothing.

The found object is replaced by the found image (Buchloh 95) whose puerile reinscription or serialization thematizes just that gesture, the ubiquity and non-entity of the art object, and where metallic surfacings insist on machine-like reproduction while gold background parodies the aura of the infinite we see in medieval art that is now claimed by the celebrity.

This is itself a self-marketing ploy, of course, one of Warhol's many *blagues*. His actual position, as Hal Foster has noted (in *Michelson* 81), is in between icon and witness of the icono-idolatry of our image-consuming culture, oscillating between the paired roles of exhibitionist and voyeur, spectacle and spectator, which is to say, with Eric Gans, between the object and the sign that refers to it.



18. Andy Warhol, *Mona Lisa*

With postmodern art, as exemplified by Warhol, oscillation now inhabits art's content itself, as the undecidable difference between art and non-art, an ersatz version of sacred/profane divide that constitutes the originary scene of representation, which any number of art installations parody as an outlandish event:

When the traditional properties inherited from the ritual scene are discarded, we are forced to realize that the esthetic scene can operate without them, since it antedates the controlled world of ritual. The *scandal* of arbitrary esthetic content pays homage to the *sacred*, communal origin of the scene on which it is displayed. In discovering the general form of cultural scandal, modernism unearths, beneath the Aristotelian mimesis it rejects, the conflictual mimesis that is the driving force of the originary event. (*Originary Thinking* 195)

But the merely provocative intention of such postures simulating art's violent origin is so transparent as not to bear much repetition. The art scene lately has been typified by the conversely glossy works of Jeff Koons, which proffer metallicized, and monumentally oversized, cartoonish castings of seaside flotation devices, action figures, or comic-book characters. Inflation is the new minimalism by virtue of a pendulum's swing away from exhausted scandal seeking. The highly touted work of Murakami, whose name is everywhere printed with the circled "c" symbol of copyright, is an explicit homage to his revered Warhol. His latest installation includes within it, as part and parcel of it, a Louis Vuitton emporium; not a gift shop, but a proper store, where the very well-heeled spectator can

purchase handbags and other tokens of ostentatiously trademarked prestige that the highly industrialized artist designed for the absurdly pricey *maison de couture*.



19. Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*



20. Jeff Koons, *Tulips*



21. Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*

So my story ends with the unveiling of the long-awaited Takashi Murakami's long-awaited Janus-faced *Oval Buddha* (2007), whose happy face grin mocks the Buddha's enigmatic smile in a Disneyesque, glitzy mock-up of what in the Buddha's own cultural context expressed blissful and sovereign indifference, transcendence in the form of withdrawal from the violence of the world. On its other side its mouth opens as a maw of teeth in a parody of the horror-movie monster which typically delights in snarfing down its spectators. In response to the unveiling, Sarah Thornton reports that an art world aficionado, spontaneously reaching down into the popular vernacular, otherwise known as the vulgar tongue, exclaims, in dead earnest, "unbefuckinglievable!" (214). The expletive is not merely an accident or incident of notoriously crude New Yorkese, nor merely the symptom of a degraded critical vocabulary; it is not a *hapax legomenon*, a one-off interjection, which we

could dismiss as insignificant. Another observer exclaims in admiration “entertaining as Fuck!” (215). The impropriety of the taboo words is an implicit homage to prerogatives of the sacred as host to what is ultimately untouchable or unsayable or unrepresentable, except as the name-of-God pronounced at and as the originary scene of representation, and restated here as a more edgy or streetwise variant of “God damn!” or “I’ll be damned!” The exclamations are not declarative nor imperative, but expletive, an ostensive of sacralizing wonderment. It is not constative, but performative, despite the absence of ritual; it is therefore hyperbolic, outrageous, obscene because of that very absence; it is an interjection whose role, in the form of miscreant expression, is to reinject the sacred back into the art object, to infuse it desperately with hieratic significance, and thereby guarantee the “wow factor,” in the words that Thornton overhears in her attendance at the art scene, lacking which there is nothing worth seeing or saying anything about.



22. Takashi Murakami, *Oval Buddha*



23. Takashi Murakami, *Oval Buddha*



**24. Takashi Murakami,
*Oval Buddha***

At this point, we begin to suspect that the F word is the mantra of postmodern or postpostmodern art appreciation. We hear it in the claims that Damien Hirst makes for his achievements: "I'm a fantastic phenomenal fucking colorist. It's like, I'm a Bonnard, a Turner, a Matisse." (in *Mess 36*). It is not likely that many people believe this, even if he does, and we cannot know that for sure, and it doesn't matter. The anti-Warholian claim is meant to provoke public interest in his productions. Maybe he does believe it; anyone whose works command a 200 million dollar price tag, as his have in recent auctions, could believe in anything.

So the story ends where it begins. For belief itself, now strangely devoid of any specific content, formerly named as God, or genius, or beauty, or the sublime, all placeholders for the name-of-God, is what is at issue. Jean-François Lyotard has famously described the postmodern condition as having outlived confidence in a master narrative, in an overarching story that ensured significance to historical and cultural experience. Now every one gets to tell his or her own story. Everyone is the author of his or her own biography, conceived as the self-fashioning, minor masterpiece that we call a *career* (Gans, *The Origin of Language* 278), which is guaranteed by the open and egalitarian dynamics of the marketplace. Gans has argued nonetheless that all these stories follow basically the same narrative line, etched out by desire and the resentment that its frustration inspires, and by the rare but signal occasions when love surpasses or counters resentment.

Much of this is born out by our present financial crisis. Right now the entire market scene is in trouble worldwide, facing the possible collapse of the financial credit system, which we need to recall is essentially a credo, a belief system. And the art market has imploded as a consequence, because it has obeyed the same speculative dynamics, a revolving hall of mirrors in which each investment is modeled on that of another's investment, and reciprocally onwards and upwards to what we call a speculative bubble. This is a telling metaphor, designating a structure bonded by the molecules at its circumference, its circumstancing, component members on the periphery, rather than by any substantial or

material content. The centrality in the art world of auction houses like Christies and Sotheby's as loci where art history is made by dollar signs discloses the mimetic rivalry driving up prices and sacralizing their targets by the only measurable standard that a market-driven culture has at its disposal. As Thornton remarks in another telling metaphor, "Even if the people here tonight were initially lured into the auction room by a love of art, they find themselves participating in a spectacle where the dollar value of the work has virtually slaughtered its other meanings" (39). Not "trumped," as we might have expected, but "slaughtered": yet another gesture, which I find inept, over the top, cheaply sensational, toward the sacred by evoking the violence it withholds.



**25. *New York Times*, Sunday
Business Section, June 15,
2009**

Today financial markets are flooded with toxic assets of no knowable, measurable value. Concomitantly art auctions, where collectors are used to bid competitively, mimetically, on presumably "priceless" art works, cannot garner an opening bid for the works of known masters. Speculators in CDOs, CDS's, and other financial instruments of recent, unregulated concoction, and art spectators are wrapped in the same downward spiral of mimetic disbelief. The Mosaic ban on idolatry obtains, and we are witnessing the punishment that issues from its violation: according to many observers, we have theologized the market, with, among other fantasies, the idea that it is always smarter than its participants, that it, like Adam Smith's invisible hand, is beneficently self-regulating and self-correcting for humanity's benefit. What the Mosaic ban reveals about this particular idolatry is that it was always predicated on belief in another's desire rather than on anything that could bind a community more substantially together, such as a desire for another's welfare, as prescribed by Deuteronomy (6.5) and Leviticus (19.18). Now we know better, and an inchoate theory of behavioral economics, reminding us that the market's creators and participants are humans, not statistical "figures," is on the rise, though as long as it succeeds in ignoring the dynamics of desire and representation disclosed by GA, it probably won't get very far in illuminating our present crisis. Not, at least, as far as La Fontaine, whose fables "La Montagne qui accouche" ("C'est promettre beaucoup? mais qu'en sort-il souvent? / Du vent.") and "La Grenouille qui se veut faire aussi grosse que le boeuf" (whose punch line is a lesson, a "morale" for bull markets: "La chétive pécure s'enfla / Si bien qu'elle creva" [See the puny yokel wax / So large he cracks]) tell us more about

mimetically driven self-delusion than all Wall Street analysts put together. An astute *New Yorker* journalist has recently summarized this colossal mismanagement “in a few familiar words: debt, greed, hubris” (Paumgarten 44), while bringing up Margaret Atwood’s observation that “in Aramaic the words for ‘debt’ and ‘sin’ are the same” (49) and that the ubiquitous search for causes has all the earmarks of scapegoating (49-50). Elsewhere he describes the disaster in terms which resonate with—or shall we say in current art-criticalesque: “reappropriate”—the emergent vocabulary of art appreciation, namely: “the call-and-response recapitulation of a giant variegated clusterfuck” (45). Go figure.

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