

2 “When I Raise My Arm”

Michael Fried’s Theory of Action

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Michael Fried’s “Morris Louis” has at its center an interest in what Fried calls “distinctively human . . . action,” particularly, the “act of drawing” and, more generally, “mak[ing] one’s mark” (ML122).¹ But that interest is at every moment accompanied by and even articulated through a deep worry about (sometimes amounting almost to a refusal of) both drawing and marking, even action itself. Thus, for example, he says that the rivulets in Louis’s unfurleds not only “do not strike one as drawn” (ML 110) but that they seem more like “the manifestation of natural forces” than of human ones. And he says of the stripe paintings Louis was making before his death that there is a “crucial” sense in which “they are not drawn” but an equally crucial one in which “they *can* be seen as drawn” but “not . . . as the fruit of any imaginable act of drawing” (ML 122). So, on the one hand, Louis is all about “the will to draw”; on the other hand, no actual drawing. On the one hand, the question of distinctively human action is the central one; on the other hand, Louis’s paintings “more than those of any previous painter, give the impression of having come into existence . . . without the intervention of the artist” (ML 126). The idea that Louis is concerned above all with acting is introduced in conjunction with what is described as his refusal of the primary act in question—marking and, in particular, drawing.

One reason drawing is problematic in “Morris Louis” is because of how you do it—with your “hand, wrist and arm” (ML 126). That’s why this essay is called “When I Raise My Arm”; part of my argument will be that Fried sees in Louis’s painting what amounts to a refusal of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s foundational (for the theory of action) question, “what’s left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” and that this refusal amounts to a theory of action that is also a theory of the work of art.² But we can more easily approach this issue by way of a second and more obvious reason, the problematic status in “Morris Louis” not only of what the act of drawing is but of what drawing looks like on the canvas. In this text, Fried associates drawing with the “plastic or tactile identity” of “tangible entities” in “traditional space” (ML 117)—in other words, with the “sculptural” “illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking,”³ an illusion that, in Clement Greenberg’s reading,

had been jettisoned in modernist painting's effort to identify what was "unique and exclusive" to "pictorial art." Because, according to Greenberg, "[f]latness" or "two-dimensionality" "was the only condition painting shared with no other art," "Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."⁴ So the refusal of drawing in "Morris Louis" can be identified with the refusal of traditional or sculptural space.

At the same time, however, Greenberg was careful to insist on the limits of flatness. If in "After Abstract Expressionism" he famously flirted with the idea of an unmarked but "stretched or tacked-up canvas"⁵ counting as a picture, in "Modernist Painting" he had in effect already sought to discount that flirtation by warning that "the flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness" because "[t]he first mark on a surface destroys its virtual flatness."⁶ And that Fried himself shared this reservation is clear from the fact that, describing the relation between the rivulets of color on each side and the vast expanse of blank canvas in the unfurleds, it's precisely this reservation that he quotes. So if the unfurleds are resolutely in opposition to the tangible things located in the traditional space of drawing, they are in opposition also to the utter flatness imagined in the "stretched or tacked-up canvas."

Greenberg's way of resolving this tension between what he took to be the necessary commitment to flatness and the equally necessary violation of that commitment was by way of a distinction between two kinds of illusions painting made possible. If, on his view, modernist flatness works against the "realistic" depiction of "recognizable objects" and against the kind of "sculptural" illusion that had characterized earlier painting (that's the "illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into"), it does not give up illusion altogether. Rather it leaves room for what he famously calls an "optical" or "strictly pictorial" (as opposed to "sculptural") "illusion of a kind of third dimension." Hence even in a painter as committed to refusing depth as Piet Mondrian, you still get the suggestion of a space you feel you can look (albeit not walk) into—"a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension." And it is this interest—in the "translation" of three dimensions "into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms"⁷—that characterizes for Greenberg the fundamental demand of modernist painting: to make manifest both the illusion of depth and the reality of flatness.

The point for Fried is slightly different, though he too is interested in opticality. Earlier in the Louis essay, with reference to Jackson Pollock, he both deploys the term and describes the phenomenon (an "illusion" that is not of "tangibility but of its opposite," available to "eyesight alone" (ML 106)) in ways that are deeply compatible with Greenberg. But in quoting Greenberg's remark that "[t]he first mark on a surface destroys its virtual flatness," Fried is more interested in the words "first" and "destroy" than Greenberg is. Indeed, where Greenberg, as we've seen, flirted with the idea of the unmarked or empty canvas as a kind of *telos* for modernist flatness, Fried, describing the "vast expanse" of precisely such a blank canvas in the

unfurled (as if, in fact, the unfurleds were the closest anyone had yet come actually to offering a blank canvas as a painting), insists on the necessity of the mark and the desirability of the violence it does to flatness. Right before quoting Greenberg, Fried says of the “rivulets of color” on either side of the unfurleds’ vast expanse of canvas that “they simultaneously destroy and make pictorially meaningful” that blankness. And right after quoting Greenberg, he says that in the unfurleds, “Louis made major art out of what might be called the *firstness of marking* as such, a firstness prior to any act of marking.” Indeed, insofar as Fried persistently identifies the blank canvas in the unfurleds with “the blankness . . . of an enormous *page*” (ML 119), the mark can be understood in part to play the structural role of writing, where—with respect to meaning—neither sculptural nor optical illusion (or for that matter, flatness itself) is exactly relevant.

Some thirty years later, Fried himself would describe his difference from Greenberg with respect to opticality as a response to what he understood as the “double role” that concept played in Greenberg’s writing. On the one hand, Greenberg was making a “global claim about modernist painting, which in its drive to distinguish itself from sculpture is said to have pursued opticality along with flatness from the start” (IMAC 20); on the other, he was deploying it only to characterize a feature of recent painters like Louis. And it is this second, more local application with which he identifies his use of the concept, while noting that Greenberg seemed to be undecided about what his own position was. For example, Fried notes that in the first (1960) version of “Modernist Painting,” right after describing what the first mark on a blank canvas does, Greenberg claimed (in a “key sentence”) that modernist painting seeks “to fulfill the impressionist insistence on the optical as the only sense that a completely pictorial art can invoke” (quoted in IMAC 21). But in the later (1965) version, Fried points out, that sentence disappears, with the effect, as he sees it, of now implying not a particular interest in returning to the impressionists but “a consistently optical bias from Manet and impressionism through Mondrian to the present” (IMAC 22). It’s this “global” view of opticality that he associates with Greenberg’s reductionism—the idea that “there was a timeless essence” to painting “that was progressively revealed”⁸—and that Fried wants to deny. And it’s this reductionism that he identifies with literalism, writing that if Greenberg’s modernism had discovered that “the irreducible essence of pictorial art was nothing other than the literal properties of the support, that is, flatness and the delimitation of flatness,” it’s “easy to see” (IMAC 36) how minimalism could draw the conclusion that what mattered was not just flatness as such but literalness as such.

If, however, we look at another difference between the 1960 and the 1965 “Modernist Painting,” the situation becomes a little more complicated. The sentence Fried quotes in the Morris Louis essay—“the first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness”—is itself a revision. In the 1960 version, Greenberg says not that the first mark made on a surface destroys its

virtual flatness but that “the first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness.”⁹ So although flatness gets destroyed in both versions, in 1960 it’s the literal flatness of the canvas, while in 1965 it’s the virtual flatness of a surface.

What does this revision accomplish? In at least one way, its point seems a little clearer than does the deletion of “the optical as the only sense that a completely pictorial art can invoke,” especially if we note that this isn’t the only time that “literal” disappears from the 1960 text. Just as he replaced “literal and utter flatness” with “virtual flatness,” Greenberg also (earlier in the essay) removed “literal” from the phrase “the literal two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting’s independence as an art.” Why? The literal two-dimensionality goes because paintings aren’t literally two-dimensional and so the literal flatness must also go because, insofar as he is identifying flatness with two-dimensionality, they aren’t literally flat. Which means not that the canvas (unmarked or marked) isn’t in some sense flat but that the flatness the mark destroys is something else—not a property of the canvas but a two-dimensionality the canvas never really had.¹⁰ In this sense, the mark that destroys flatness by making possible the illusion of three-dimensionality does so by destroying what it now constitutes as a prior illusion—the illusion of two-dimensionality, what Fried calls “apparent” flatness (ML 119). The first mark creates the appearance it is also understood to destroy. Or rather, it transforms what we might call the original literal illusion (literal because, as the trajectory of Greenberg’s revisions suggests, it’s the illusion that the unmarked canvas is two-dimensional) into a depicted illusion. And thus, since (as Greenberg has reminded us a page or two earlier) “pictures themselves . . . exist in three-dimensional space,” the first mark creates the possibility of seeing the actual three-dimensionality of the picture as also a kind of illusion—a depicted three-dimensionality—what Greenberg calls “a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension.”¹¹ In this way, both the flatness of the painting (which isn’t real) and the three-dimensionality of the painting (which is real) are rendered ideal. They are both representational effects.

From this standpoint, Fried’s idea that there are two lines of thought about flatness and opticality in Greenberg makes sense even if thinking of one of them as global and the other as local may not be the most perspicuous way to distinguish them. One way to read Greenberg’s history of painting is as the progressive confrontation with the “ineluctable flatness of the support,” a confrontation that culminates in modernism’s valorization of the purely optical as painting’s essence. On this reading, it’s the physical facts of the canvas—“the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment”¹²—that are dispositive, and so it’s this reading that leads us, as Fried says, to minimalist literalism. Minimalism pierces the veil of apparent flatness and reveals the three-dimensionality of the painting as object, hence the irrelevance (going forward) of painting. But, in the reading I’ve just outlined, the flatness that is ineluctable is doubly so—first as the

actual illusion (the appearance of flatness) that minimalism unmasks and second as the depicted illusion that the first mark makes possible because it turns the appearance of flatness into the representation of flatness and because it turns the reality of three-dimensionality into the representation of three-dimensionality.¹³

The intimacy of these two readings is visible in Fried's characterization of "the emphasis Louis places on the bare canvas in the unfurleds, the sheer primacy he gives it" (ML 120). The primacy of bare canvas repeats the insistence on the materiality of the support that had culminated in Greenberg's at least equally bare "stretched or tacked-up canvas" that already exists as a picture and that marks the final stage in the painting's reduction to literalist three-dimensionality. But here that primacy is conferred on the bare canvas by the painter ("he gives it"). It's like the flatness that Greenberg describes as not just destroyed but created by the first mark. Which is why Fried sees the rivulets as simultaneously destroying and making meaningful the canvas into which they're stained: they turn its "apparent" flatness into a signifying flatness. And here too, we see the relevance of his description of the blankness of the bare canvas as "the blankness, one feels, of an enormous page." The kind of mark made on a "blank page or canvas" (ML 119) offers a different solution to the problem raised by modernism's refusal of the illusion of three-dimensionality. That problem, properly understood, was how to avoid the collapse of the work of art into the reality of three-dimensionality, and the replacement of sculptural by optical illusion is one way of solving it. But the redescription of drawing as a kind of writing is another, a way of making the surface virtual by making it in itself the site of meaning.

Which is not to say that—for painting—the idea of illusion is entirely sacrificed. Pointing to the experience of trying to focus intensely ("bear down") on the rivulets of paint in each side, Fried describes the beholder as feeling "physically too close" to the painting to bring them into "simultaneous focus." You can't, for example, compare the rivulets on one side to the rivulets on the other without looking back and forth between them, so you feel you need to step back to get a better view of the whole. But then—when you do step back—nothing is changed. Why not? Because your sense of being "physically too close" is "illusory"; it doesn't matter where you are. The "illusory closeness" of the unfurleds belongs "not to one's actual situation viewing them, but to the paintings themselves." Furthermore, it's precisely this illusory closeness that "makes the blankness of the canvas seem like that of an enormous page," since the sense that you can't focus simultaneously and sufficiently on both banks of rivulets produces the experience of the reader rather than the beholder. No matter how close to or far from the page you are, there is no way you can read both the beginning of a line and the end of it simultaneously, and in order to experience the book correctly you don't need to. But, transposed from writing to painting, this literal experience of the book (you can't read it by focusing on a whole page) becomes a way to signify the distinctive experience of the painting—you can *only* see

it when “your attention is brought to rest on the painting *as a whole*” (ML 121). And this quality of being a whole is what the painting establishes by making the beholder’s sense of closeness illusory, by making the question of where the beholder stands irrelevant, by making its illusion and hence its meaning belong to itself instead of to the viewer.

Thus the question of what the first mark made on the canvas does leads us to the description of that mark as establishing the canvas as the site of an illusion. The illusion produced by the painting’s depiction of three-dimensional space is repudiated but not in favor of its real flatness (since the picture plane is flat but no picture is) and not on behalf of its real three-dimensionality (since everything is three-dimensional) but on behalf instead of its represented flatness. Hence the identification—in both Greenberg and Fried—of illusion with meaning; and hence, in Fried’s Louis, the idea that it’s your experience of the painting (the illusion of being too close) that makes you understand the irrelevance of your experience. Fried describes Louis as “the last major painter who did not have to deal explicitly with the issues” raised by minimalist literalism, the last painter who did not have to confront the possibility of his paintings being experienced as “a kind of object” (ML 128). But both in his account of the importance of the illusion and his account of the structure of the illusion, we can see Fried already reading Louis against the literalist critique of illusionism. “Three dimensions are real space,” Judd wrote in “Specific Objects”; “that gets rid of the problem of illusionism . . . which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art.”¹⁴ Looking at an eight and a half by fourteen foot canvas in real space, there’s a best place to stand to see it as a whole; looking at *Alpha Pi*, you can only see it “*as a whole*” by discovering that it doesn’t matter where you stand. The beholder whose illusion (when pierced) reveals to her the irrelevance of her own position in real space (i.e., the irreducibility of the illusion) experiences the difference between herself as a subject looking at an object and herself as a beholder looking at a painting.¹⁵

But if it makes sense to see Louis not as the “last major painter” who “did not have to confront the risk that his paintings might be seen as objects” (ML 128) but rather as the first major painter who did confront that risk, that’s only because, in the terms in which Fried presents him, he created that risk for himself. We can begin to see how by remembering Fried’s description of the veils as giving “the impression” of having been determined “by uniform, impersonal not just natural but elemental forces” (ML 117) and of the rivulets in the unfurleds as “the manifestation of natural forces” (ML 122). In other words, the painting that established itself “as a whole” by rendering the beholder’s experience of it irrelevant to its meaning seems to render the artist’s activity in making it equally irrelevant. It seeks in fact (as we have already noted) to give the impression that it has “come into existence” “without the intervention of the artist.” Indeed, the first mark on the empty canvas that Fried sees as thematized in the unfurleds is even described

as something that “happens on, and to, the blank page” (ML 119), as if the act of marking were best understood as never quite performed, as an event rather than an act. And this desire to problematize the act of making the first mark is given a special force by the fact that the very structure of the phrase—“the first mark made on a canvas”—is, with respect especially to the unfurleds, misleading since, as Fried says, they are “more accurately” described as painted “with” rather than “on” the canvas (ML 120). What he means by this is that Louis poured the paint onto the (blank, unprimed, and unstretched) canvas and then controlled its flow by manipulating the canvas itself. So, for example, the natural force of gravity plays a major role. And any mark of the artist’s agency—anything that looks like it could have been made by “his hand, wrist, and arm”—is refused. Or when it does make its way in, it is criticized. The effort in general is to produce paintings that, looking as if they’d been produced by something other than the human body (the hand, the wrist, the arm), would look as if they had separated themselves from the act of making them. And the point of this effort was for Louis to make sure, Fried says, that he “didn’t allow himself to get into his paintings in what he felt was the wrong way” (ML 126).

In other words, in order to avoid getting into his paintings in the wrong way, Louis ran the risk of appearing not to get into them at all. Which, as a theoretical position rather than an aesthetic decision, had its own attractions. For example, a year before Fried began writing the Louis essay, the philosopher Monroe Beardsley (co-author along with the literary theorist William K. Wimsatt of “The Intentional Fallacy”¹⁶) imagined “enjoying an abstract expressionist painting” at a museum and then discovering that the painting was “actually made by a child or a chimpanzee or a machine.” The point of the example, he thought, was that the discovery “does not invalidate your response.”¹⁷ It doesn’t matter whether the painter was a child or a chimpanzee because (and this was the central tenet of “The Intentional Fallacy”) what you’re responding to is the painting not the painter’s intentions or (if the painter were a machine or a natural force) the painter’s lack of intentions. So on this account, neither Louis nor Fried need ever have worried about getting into the painting in the wrong way because the artist can never get into it at all; whether the mark looks intentional or not, we effectively treat it as if it weren’t. Hence when Fried says that “Louis’s paintings, more than those of any previous painter, give the impression of having come into existence as if of their own accord, without the intervention of the artist” (ML 126), what, following Wimsatt and Beardsley, he should be saying is that Louis’s paintings perform the truth of all art—looking as if they came into existence of their own accord, they make clear that it doesn’t matter how they came into existence. Looking as if they came into existence without a painter having done anything, they make clear the irrelevance of the effort to understand what the painter did.

Of course, Beardsley does not make this point against Fried but—close enough for jazz—against Stanley Cavell, with whom Fried’s intellectual

relations at this point in their careers were extremely close. In 1967's "Music Discomposed," Cavell had written that we approach works of art "not merely because they are interesting in themselves but because they are felt as made by someone," and for this reason (because "they are not works of nature but works of *art*") the "category of intention" is "inescapable" in speaking of them: "without it, we would not understand what they are."¹⁸ And although Beardsley in effect doubles down on the idea that the beholder would not know what the work was by insisting that even the artist (as monkey or machine) need not know what it is, it's easy enough to see the implausibility of his idea that the beholder's response would be unaffected by discovering the painting was made by someone or something who didn't know what a painting was. That the experience of a bunch of colors can be enjoyable is obviously true; most of us like sunsets. But insofar as what you're enjoying is, say, the way in which the painting refuses (or insists on) optical instead of sculptural illusion, it's even more obvious that discovering it to have been made by someone (or thing) that doesn't have the concept of either the optical or the sculptural (or, for that matter, of refusing and insisting) will indeed invalidate that response. Paint randomly applied to a canvas can look like a tangible object or not; it can't continue the tradition of sculptural illusion, and it can't refuse to continue it. In other words, you can always treat the painting as if it were made by no one (this will be part of what is meant by treating it as an object), but then you will not be seeing it as a work.

So what is Fried getting at—or what does he think Louis is getting at—when he insists that Louis's paintings do not look like they've been "drawn or acted on," that instead they give the impression that they were made just as Wimsatt and Beardsley asked us to imagine all works are—without the intervention of the artist (as if by "natural forces," like a sunset)? In Wimsatt and Beardsley, the point of eliminating the artist's act is to emphasize the necessity of keeping the artist out of the work. But in Fried's Louis, as we have already begun to see, the point is not to keep the artist out of the work but to keep him or her from entering it in the wrong way. What, then, is the wrong way?

Fried gives that question a kind of psychological answer with respect to Jackson Pollock, the painter who, in his refusal of drawing, Fried thinks of as closest to Louis. Pollock's "development," he says, "seems to have involved a continual struggle between the literalness and specificity of urgent personal feeling and the impersonal and in that sense abstract demands of painting itself." In part, the idea here is that (impersonal) painting required Pollock to repress (personal) feeling and thus to "dissolve or revoke" the most "direct means of specifying feeling"—drawing. And here Louis has an advantage since, as Fried imagines him, Louis's most urgent personal feelings may not have been "psychological" in the sense of being concerned with "relationships and feelings" other than those "connected with painting itself" and hence need never have been experienced by him in the way

that they were by Pollock—as in conflict with (and therefore needing to be “excised” from) his painting. The way Fried puts this is to say that Louis’s “imagination” was “radically abstract” in a way that neither Pollock’s nor any other modernist painter’s was. But of course even this radically abstract imagination requires Louis to do as Pollock had done and refuse drawing. Which we can begin to understand better if we remember that it’s not just the specificity and urgency of feeling that Pollock struggled against but its “literalness” (ML 126). And if we then remember that it’s not his psychology but his body, not his feeling but his wrist and his hand and his arm, that Louis struggles against.

“Louis’s eschewal of drawing,” Fried says, “amounted to the refusal to allow his hand, wrist, and arm to get into his paintings: and this . . . amounted to the refusal to allow himself to get into his paintings in what he felt was the wrong way” (ML 126). Thus, for example, he says of the florals that they fail when you come to see “the limits” of the “configurations” “as determined by the artist’s wrist, which is to say, as drawn” (ML 117). Why is this a failure? Because when you see the configurations as determined by the artist’s wrist, you see the painting as a trace of the painter’s body, a natural rather than an intentional sign—literally “literal.” From this standpoint, the attempt to make paintings that look like they’ve come into existence “without the intervention of the artist” is the attempt to make paintings that look like they’re *meant* and not just caused by the artist. In fact, it’s precisely because Louis understands drawing as a failure to mean (the mark on the canvas is just the index of the painter’s wrist; the painting that is just an indexical sign of the painter’s body might as well be made by Beardsley’s chimp) that he understands the act of meaning to require a refusal of the act of drawing and requires the act of meaning to run the risk of looking like no act at all.

This is why Fried’s reading of what turned out to be Louis’s last paintings, the stripes, continues to insist that, because the stripes are “not seen as circumscribed by a cursive gesture,” “they are not drawn,” while at the same time describing them as different from the rivulets of the unfurleds because they are experienced “as in some important sense intentional, as issuing from a distinctively human and not just natural action” (ML 122). It’s as if until the stripes, the fact that Louis would not allow the paintings to look like they were made by an intentional act (drawing) was a function of his sense that drawing had come to look intentional in the wrong way—that it looked in the painting like the literal effect of a feeling (Pollock) or in Louis of a bodily act (the movement of the painter’s wrist). Which gives us what Cavell, replying to Beardsley, called a “bad picture” of intentional acts. Anti-intentionalists like the New Critics, Cavell said, see intention as “some internal, prior mental event causally connected with outward effects.”¹⁹ But that’s not only a “bad picture” of what an intention is, it’s a “bad picture” of what a work of art is: it pictures the work as “more or less like a physical object, whereas the first fact of works of art is that they are meant, meant to

be understood.”²⁰ And, more fundamentally still, it’s a bad picture of what an act is.

This bad picture is produced by the effort to answer the Wittgensteinian question we began with: “What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” If, in other words, we understand the theory of action as the effort to say what’s left over, and the answer we come up with is “your intention,” we have a model of the act in which it consists of a physical movement of the body plus an intention and a model of the work of art in which it consists of the physical object it is plus some other thing (the artist’s intention) outside it. And if we think of the intention as external and prior to the work, then it will be (as the New Criticism thought it was) relevant only as a cause—it will have nothing to do with the work’s meaning.²¹ And it’s precisely getting himself into the painting as its cause that Louis resists. That is, his desire not to come into it in the wrong way is a refusal to let the work be reduced to an effect of its causes: the indexical marks of the arm, hand, and wrist that Fried identifies with drawing.

But it is precisely this picture of the intention as outside the physical act—as “an extra property” of it—that Cavell, following Elizabeth Anscombe, means to reject. To take one of Anscombe’s examples, suppose we juxtapose a tree waving in the wind and Anscombe herself writing “I am a fool” on a blackboard. We might say that the movements of the tree’s leaves are like the movement of her hand and distinguish between what the leaves do and what the hand does by saying that in order to understand the movement of the woman’s hand as her act, we need to add her intention to write with it. But our account of what the woman is doing was from the start that she is writing on a blackboard. “We notice many changes and movements in the world,” Anscombe says, but “we have no description” of what she calls “a picked-out set of movements or a picked-out appearance of the tree remotely resembling ‘She wrote ‘I am a fool’ on the blackboard.’” The point of the “picked-out” here is that we already see the movements of the writing hand as writing; writing is the description of them. By the same token, we ask “What does it say?” about “a word or sentence” not about “certain appearances of chalk on the blackboard.”²² Certain appearances of chalk are like the tree’s leaves in the wind; they’re not what we see when we see her writing. The idea, then, is that acts are no more physical movements to which someone has added intentions than words are marks to which someone has added meanings. In Fried’s Louis, marking is meaning.

In a footnote to his claim that the “first fact of works of art are that they are meant, meant to be understood,” Cavell imagines someone objecting: “No. The first fact about works of art is that they are *sensuous*.” To which he ends up somewhat reluctantly responding: “The first question of aesthetics is: How does that ‘sensuous object’ mean anything?”²³ The reluctance, presumably, is because even that version of the assertion produces too much of a difference (or the wrong kind of difference) between the sensuous and

the meaningful—too much of a sense that art involves adding the meaningful to the sensuous when in fact there could be no meaning that was not already sensuous. The objection to Beardsley (and to the various forms of anti-intentionalism for which “The Intentional Fallacy” can serve as a stand-in) is that he imagines that the work is nothing but a sensuous object, hence the merely causal relevance of the way it was made.

Perhaps the most visible alternative to Beardsley's anti-intentionalism at the time was the kind of intentionalism represented by the work of the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto. Armed with his own what's-left-over understanding of the central problem of the theory of action—an action “is a movement of the body plus x ”—and with a parallel formulation for works of art—“a material object plus y ”²⁴—Danto produced out of works like Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) exemplary instances of the intention as an extra property of both the action and the work. For Danto, the aesthetic equivalent of what do I have to add to my arm going up in order for me to have raised my arm is what do I have to add to the Brillo boxes in order to have produced *Brillo Boxes*.²⁵ But really that question had already been raised in Greenberg's account of the “stretched or tacked-up canvas” that could in itself count “as a picture.” What do I have to add to that canvas to make it into a work of art? How does that sensuous object mean anything?

Some thirty years after writing it, Fried himself noted that his account of the unfurled might “be taken as showing what in fact was required in order that a large expanse of canvas compel conviction as painting, that is, be endowed with specifically pictorial, not simply literal, significance” (IMAC 40). In one sense, the answer is simple: paint. It can contain vast stretches of blank canvas but it can't be blank—it has to be marked. But here we see (again) both why it's crucial that the Morris Louis essay is organized around the question of the act and why it is so leery of allowing any actual act into it. The blank canvas isn't just a limit case (as far as you can go and still have something that will count as a picture); its attraction to Louis is its utter repudiation of drawing: you can't come into it the wrong way. The problem is that, not having come into it in the wrong way, you look like you haven't come into it at all. Or as if the only way you can come into it is with your mind instead of your hand—as if something that happens in your head is the way of making the sensuous object mean something.

But you can't come into anything with your mind. Which is why Fried turns Louis's blank canvas into a blank page. The blankness is crucial since it enables you to avoid not only the illusion of tangible objects but touch itself (the reduction of painting to the action of your “hand, wrist and arm” (ML 126)). And the rivulets of paint on the sides—made *with* rather than *on* the canvas and themselves looking “natural” (“elemental” rather than “intentional”)—repeat (even literalize) the refusal to understand painting as the movement of your arm. At the same time, however, because the rivulets of paint turn the blank canvas into an “enormous page” and thus (like Anscombe's blackboard) into a site of inscription, they turn it into a sensuous

object that is simultaneously a site of meaning. It's for this reason that these two different modes of the refusal of drawing are described by Fried as, together, producing not an actual drawing or even a mark, but "the *firstness of marking* as such—prior to any act of marking (e.g. drawing)" (ML 119). The transformation of canvas into page proleptically describes the act of marking it as neither the material movement of the hand nor the immaterial contribution of the mind.

And the terms of this description are made clear in Fried's account of Louis's last work, the stripes, which, he says, are not drawn but can nonetheless "be seen as drawn." What this means is that they are not "the fruit of any imaginable act of drawing" since what he calls "the sheer apparent velocity of their paths across the canvas" makes that impossible; no one could draw anything as quickly as they seem to have been made. But, "experienced" nonetheless as "in some important sense intentional," they are seen "as the instantaneous, unmediated realization of the drawing impulse, the will to draw" (ML 122). They embody, in other words, not drawing but the possibility of drawing—the concept of drawing, the desire to draw, and the ability to draw—all the things that make it possible to pick out those movements of the hand that constitute drawing (or writing).

It's for this reason that I've wanted to qualify Fried's description of Louis as not yet having "to confront the risk that his paintings might be seen as objects" (ML 128). What his essay argues, at least on my reading, is that Louis sought to produce and hence confront the risk that his acts might not be seen as acts, which is different from the question of what a painting is but is intimately linked to it: we could never see paintings as paintings if we didn't already see acts as acts. This, in effect, is the critique of Beardsley's (or anyone else's) anti-intentionalism; it asks us to see works of art as if they weren't works of art. But we can also see in what Fried calls the "radical abstractness" of Louis's imagination the motive for that anti-intentionalism. Like certain modernist poets, Louis, he says, was committed to the "ideal independence" of the work from "the personality of its maker" (ML 127). Getting your personality into the work was getting into it in the wrong way, just as getting your body into it was getting into it in the wrong way and as even imagining that you could get your mind into it was getting into it in the wrong way. It's the refusal of these ways that led theorists like Wimsatt and Beardsley to deny the relevance of the artist's intentions to the work's meaning; it's the same refusal that leads Fried's Louis to run the risk of seeming not to get into the work at all. The difference is that—demonstrating the independence of the work from the personality of its maker by demonstrating the identity of the meaning of the work (of meaning itself) with the actions of its maker—Fried's Louis produces a right way.

We began by noting the identification of the refusal of drawing in Fried's Louis with the refusal of sculptural illusion (tangible objects) that Greenberg identifies with modernism *tout court*. But we also noted that for Greenberg,

the refusal of illusion runs the risk of turning the painting into just such an object, and it's for that reason that he insists on the replacement of sculptural with optical illusion. What opticality signals is the work's ability to mean—to represent three-dimensionality as well as to be three-dimensional. And if opticality as such was never as central to Fried as to Greenberg, the question of meaning certainly was. That's why, for example, distancing himself from opticality, he will say in 1986 that it was not any "notion of opticality" that made Anthony Caro's work important to him, "it was the syntactic nature of his art,"²⁶ which he had, in "Art and Objecthood," identified with "meaningfulness *as such*" (AO 162). Hence it makes sense that insofar as opticality matters in "Morris Louis," it's an opticality that, as I've suggested, is identified with the emergence of the blank canvas as a blank page (hence with writing) and less with the effect of the first mark on that page than with the act of marking itself. The illusion that matters here is the "illusory impersonality of Louis's art" (ML 127), illusory not exactly because it isn't really impersonal but because the illusion of "natural" or "elemental" "forces" is required to make visible the impersonality—the abstractness—of action itself. In "Morris Louis," the question of what a painting is is approached through the question of what painting is.

Notes

- 1 A much shorter version of Fried's essay was first published in *Morris Louis*, the exhibition catalog (Los Angeles, Boston, St. Louis, 1966–7) and then in *Artforum* (February 1967). The larger text that I discuss here appeared first as a book, *Morris Louis* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1970).
- 2 The whole passage reads: "Let us not forget this: when I 'raise my arm,' my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" Whether Wittgenstein meant the question to be answered or whether he himself meant to suggest that, as posed, it was misleading and should be refused is itself a real question but not one that I address. For my purposes, the relevant fact is that some philosophers (my interest is in Arthur Danto, partly because of his importance to the theory of action and especially because of his importance as a theorist of the work of art) understood the theory of action as an attempt to answer it, while some other philosophers (I focus on G. E. M. Anscombe, partly because of her centrality to a different version of the theory of action and also because of her importance to Stanley Cavell) understood the theory of action as an attempt to refuse it. I should say also that while it's very convenient for me that Cavell was influenced by Anscombe and that Fried was so close to Cavell, I don't mean to rest my discussion on these connections. I would argue rather that the entailments of what as a kind of shorthand we can call Fried's modernism led him in this direction.
- 3 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), 73.
- 4 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 69.
- 5 Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131.
- 6 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 73.

- 7 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 73.
- 8 Michael Fried, "Discussion," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 73.
- 9 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 90.
- 10 Indeed, Greenberg's effort to replace flatness as a literal property of the canvas with flatness as two-dimensionality is made explicit when he alters the 1960 text—"Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else"—by adding "two-dimensionality" and equating it with "flatness": "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so . . ."
- 11 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 70.
- 12 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 68.
- 13 Although my own emphasis here is on literal flatness as already three-dimensional and hence on the necessity to produce the illusion of three dimensions out of an object that really is three-dimensional, I regard this account as basically compatible with Michael Schreyach's wonderful discussion of Greenberg's use of Hans Hofmann to produce the distinction between "meaningless' flatness" and "re-created' flatness." See "Re-Created Flatness: Hans Hoffmann's Concept of the Picture Plane as a Medium of Expression," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* (49: 1, 2015), 44–67.
- 14 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax and New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1975), 184.
- 15 A relevant alternative formulation would be by way of John Cage's answer to a woman asking where the best seat would be for a performance of 4'33": they're all "equally good" (Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 105). Because no set of sounds more belongs to 4'33" than any other set of sounds, whatever she hears in back will be just as good as what she would hear in front. But with an unfurled, the irrelevance of where you stand works just the opposite way. Because the illusion of its closeness belongs to it, what it shows is not that one experience of the work is just as good as another but that the meaning of the work (the illusion of its closeness) is independent of anyone's experience of it.
- 16 W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).
- 17 Monroe C. Beardsley, "Comments," in *Art, Mind and Religion*, ed. W. H. Capitan and D. D. Merrill (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), 104.
- 18 Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 198.
- 19 Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 226.
- 20 Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," 228.
- 21 On intention as cause in Wimsatt and Beardsley, and how the problem is their mistaken view of intention and not their view of interpretation, see Jennifer Ashton, "Two Problems with a Neuroaesthetic Theory of Interpretation," *nonsite.org* (<http://nonsite.org/article/two-problems-with-a-neuroaesthetic-theory-of-interpretation>, 2011).
- 22 G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 83.
- 23 Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," 228.
- 24 Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5.

- 25 For a more extended critique of Danto's conception of the work of art, see Walter Benn Michaels, "Anscombe and Winogrand, Danto and Mapplethorpe: A Reply to Dominic McIver Lopes," *nonsite.org* (<http://nonsite.org/article/anscombe-and-winogrand-danto-and-mapplethorpe>, 2016).
- 26 Fried, "Discussion," 71.