

## Introduction

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) influences much of Western philosophical thought. Kant can be perceived at the same time as the pinnacle of Modern Enlightenment and as offering a revolutionary insight to that of the Modernist ideal.

Kant's major philosophical insight can simply be stated as the realisation that the world is perceived and ordered or understood the way it is, because of, not in spite of, the actual faculties of human cognition, in other words, because of the mind itself (Magee in Osborne 1991:45). The world to which Kant was referring was the *world of phenomenon*, viz. that which the empirical methods of science at the time could describe and know. But, even as this remained true to the Enlightenment project, namely, that the knowing subject (specifically the scientist or the natural philosopher, the exemplary man of reason) could objectively describe the world (the so-called object [of knowledge]), Kant allowed a space for the unknowable. This he called the *noumenal* reality, which he used to refer to the world beyond the sensory and *a priori* structures of the mind. As far as the latter is concerned, it posits the idea that there are hidden and unfathomable realities, which we can term the *sublime*. This concept of the sublime will be introduced in Chapter One, *Modernism as defined by Kant and Greenberg* and analysed further in Chapter Three, *Re-evaluating Kant and Newman* in order to assess Kant's conception of fine art.

Even as Kant united the purely rationalistic philosophies<sup>1</sup> on the one hand and the empiricist philosophies<sup>2</sup> on the other, with his discovery of *a priori* synthetic truths (knowledge gained both from experience and logical

**Comment [Regine1]:** 1. This is a contentious claim and again a sweeping one. Do you believe Magee's assessment, i.e. is it valid, or do you criticize him? 2. By saying that Kant came to this realisation, are you suggesting that the common perception at the time was very different, and that Kant was a pioneer in this regard?

**Comment [Regine2]:** The word 'project' makes it sound planned, and as though the Enlightenment was organised or structured in some way. Remember that it is only structured from the perspective of today, looking back to the past so that we can see the patterns.

**Comment [Regine3]:** This last sentence is too long and complex because you are joining together two ideas. Can you rework it? Perhaps like this: "The main principle of the Age of Enlightenment in the ...th century [indicate this] was that the knowing subject (specifically the scientist or the natural philosopher [are you equating these two?], being the exemplary man of reason [are you quoting this phrase from someone?]) could objectively describe the world (being the so-called object of knowledge). Although Kant's insight remained true to / was in accordance with this principle, he did allow a space for the unknowable."

truths),<sup>3</sup> a revolutionary synthesis indeed, a slippery slope, so to speak, began to set in. This was the slippery slope whereby the mapmaker, to use Wilber's (1996) terminology, would now be written into the picture, the map (world) or territory. This contrasted with the paradigm of Enlightenment insofar as the notion of truth was previously understood to consist of the correct representation (mirroring or correspondence) of the map – the world – by means of the objective methods of the rational explorer. In other words, it was believed that the mapmaker did not affect the correct apprehension of truth, and that the observer did not affect the observed.<sup>4</sup>

However, Kant insisted on the significant role of the mapmaker and this led - not indirectly - to the Postmodern critique of Modernity and in particular, the so-called Age of Reason, otherwise known as the Age of Enlightenment. The mapmaker came to be perceived as a fragmented, complicated and culturally constructed entity – a conception ironically born of the same apparently free, autonomous and rational Modern man epitomised in Descartes' famous *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) and developed by Kant. This is articulated by Tarnas (1991:354):

Thus the modern condition begins as a Prometheus movement toward human freedom, toward autonomy from the encompassing matrix of nature, toward individuation from the collective, yet gradually and ineluctably the Cartesian-Kantian condition evolves into a Kafka-Becket-like state of existential isolation and absurdity – an intolerable double bind leading into a deconstructive frenzy.

Moreover, arguing that Kant, an eighteenth century philosopher, did in some measure lead to the Postmodernist revolt means that it is not realistic to see his ideas and arguments solely as conforming to Modernist ideals (and

specifically to those of the Enlightenment). It is simplistic and reductive to say that Postmodernism suddenly appeared out of Modernism to offer new and revitalising perspectives in philosophy and by extension, aesthetics and art history. Many of the ideas that we associate with Postmodernism<sup>5</sup> can be seen in their infancy within Modernity and Modernism<sup>6</sup> itself. A good example of this is the *avant garde* of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in its re-questioning of art and open experimentation. Moreover, Postmodernism could not exist without its precursors of Modernity and Modernism. This is not to deny that changes have taken place or that distinctions cannot be made. My intent, rather, is to reveal, during the course of this dissertation, the complexity, interconnections and interpretative options that are necessary for formulating a truer conception of Modernism and Postmodernism. I do this by re-evaluating the standard interpretations of Kant's aesthetic theory.

Based on this reinterpretation of Kant, this dissertation offers a revisionist or alternative reading of Abstract Expressionism, some of which are considered to have fulfilled purely formal ideals which have been derived originally from Kant.

Kant is usually regarded as the founder of Formalism, which one might equate with aestheticism, though not aesthetics as such (Guyer 1994:80). This is so as Formalism is a kind of ideological stance, rather than simply a general approach to art theory. Provisionally, one could define Formalism as the belief that aesthetic appreciation lies in the pleasure and the satisfaction gleaned from the work of art in response to its formal characteristics rather than its subject matter, ideas or content. As Kant says: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object" (in Crawford 1974:92). The type of

pleasure that this peculiar sensitivity inspires is described by Kant as disinterested passive contemplation. The “aesthetic” viewer is not interested in the use of the art-object *per se*, or even in what can be understood by it in terms of a particular cognitive law. Rather, the viewer gains a general pleasure from appreciating the object’s aesthetic properties, even if they cannot be described in language.

This aesthetic notion is amplified by certain twentieth century art critics, such as, Clive Bell, Richard Fry, Harold Rosenberg and especially Clement Greenberg. In a series of eloquent and highly persuasive essays published from the 1930s to the 1960s, Greenberg argued that the ideals of Modernist art were objectively verifiable, that they conformed to certain immutable laws. In this sense, he saw Modernism as fulfilling the promises of the Enlightenment, during which rational determination governed the parcelling of all disciplines, and during which all fields of knowledge were divided into discrete areas of competence (Greenberg 1961:90). Abstract Expressionism may thus be regarded as the “high” point of the fine art of painting, as it facilitated the imaginary space of ideal reflection where art separated itself from the real world (an idea that parallels Kant’s notion of “disinterested” aesthetic contemplation). This is precisely what Postmodernity critiques, taking its cue, perhaps, from Pre-Modernism, where there had been no clear concept of “art”, as it had been fused with life-processes.

This dissertation includes not only a dialectic vacillation between the Modern and the Postmodern, but also, albeit only as an underlying factor, a third term, the Pre-Modern. It is my contention that Pre-modern ways of knowing may also enhance our current appreciation and understanding of art and culture. If we see “cultures as ways of articulating and satisfying pre-

cultural needs, then art's distinctiveness resides not entirely in its disinterested stratospheric isolation, but in its primordial biological rootedness" (Elliot in Hartley 2003:225); in other words, aesthetics cannot fully explain art without instincts. These "pre-cultural needs" encompass, for example: community and reciprocity, the extra-ordinary and the transcendent, play and make-believe, attachment and bonding, system-building, reconciliation with and reverence for the natural environment and phenomena (Elliot in Hartley 2003:225). In this regard, I endorse the idea "that art must in the West again start to be concerned with what is not accessible to verbal language, what cannot be said or deconstructed or erased, but nevertheless exists to be perceived by non verbal, non literate pre-modern ways of knowing" (Elliot in Hartley 2003:225).

This sense of the ineffable is precisely where the Kantian notion of the sublime and "indeterminate law" to which beauty somehow refers, finds an accord. This is where hyper-literate, modern Western man is at a loss for words in trying to describe and "know" an artwork. Instead, all Western man has is a metaphor, a knowing *that it is*, rather than *what it is*, and no structural relation or contrast presents us with clarity. Meaning or union is perpetually deferred.

The central argument that pervades this dissertation is that there are Postmodernist elements within the Modernist discourse. We already see the first inklings of Postmodernity in Romanticism and Idealism, both of which are Postmodernist revolts against Modernism, albeit within Modernism itself. They were reacting to that aspect of Modernism, which can be called scientific monism whereby reality is defined by what can be seen and measured.<sup>7</sup> Idealism argues for higher modes of knowing by undermining

positivistic science. This is achieved by bringing in the factor of interpretation or dialogue, so that, as Tarnas (1991:118) observes, whereas the “monological describes, the dialogical understands”. Romanticism and Idealism attempt to avoid the negative side of the modern experience, as Tarnas (1991:124) says, “the disaster of modernity was that it reduced all introspective and interpretative knowledge to exterior and universal flatland: it attempted to erase the richness of interpretation from the script of the world”. This focus on the role of interpretation in the creation of meaning coheres with aspects of Postmodernist theory, as will be outlined in Chapter 2. It also agrees with what I will argue regarding Kant’s assertion that one cannot fully grasp the content of a successful work of art.

The tensions that pervade Postmodernism also concern the Modernist (Wood 2002:2). On one level, Modernism purged art of language: Academic art had been highly theorised, and was centred on the proximity of art and literature, on the recounting in visual terms of predominantly classical and biblical narratives. Modernism severed this connection. Notions of the “innocent eye”, or as later Modernists wrote, of an art that appeals to “eyesight alone” add up to a domain from which language, with all its connotations of the rational and the conventional, is expunged. In its stead, feeling and emotion are prioritised. In another sense, however, Modernism is haunted by language. Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky, for example, all wrote copiously on the theory of abstraction. In Cubism, words frequently appear in paintings and collages. Therefore, one cannot simply say that Greenberg’s Modernist formalism with its emphasis on the visual accurately describes the art of that time. In general, it is as if the relationship of language to Modern Art is that of a kind of frame, setting the terms of the emotional encounter of spectator and work of art (Varnedoe 1991:50). Part

of Modernism's revolution had been to turn art away from a public realm of shared language and narrative, towards a private sphere of feeling and emotion, wherein the latter are conceived as somehow more fundamental than words or more natural and "universal". Nonetheless, language creeps into the picture, so to speak, and we find that even with the art of Newman who tries to elevate the viewer beyond the realm of language, the need for theory and the attempt to explain become necessary. Clearly, there is an unease in the relationship between language and art, which dates back to the inception of Modernism, and continues on to post Abstract Expressionist art movements and finally into what is often termed Postmodernity.

My strategy for investigating the above concerns is structured in the following manner: In Chapter 1, I examine Kant's aesthetic theory in relation to the Modernist/Formalist perspective. This is then linked with the aesthetic formalism of later art theorists, in particular, Clement Greenberg. Specific paintings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be used to support the theoretical perspectives presented above, with special attention to Abstract Expressionism. In general, I offer the standard account of artistic Modernism. Thus, Greenberg represents the theoretical underpinnings of Modernism, whereas Hoffman and Newman, in particular, exemplify Modernist concerns in practice. Hence, choosing these three individuals in my view renders an accurate picture of "traditional" Modernism.

In Chapter 2, I will highlight the problems of Formalist art criticism. This will necessarily entail a critique of Modernism in particular and of Modernity in general. Kant's aesthetic theory will be critiqued by adopting a Postmodernist perspective. Specific late 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings will be used to deconstruct the Modernist perspective, beginning with the Pop Art revolt

against Abstract Expressionism and continuing with other artworks that are widely regarded as breaking the shackles of Modernist ideology. The philosophies of Deconstructionists such as Derrida, Lippard and Jenks will be used in this dissertation to lay the theoretical foundation of Postmodernist art. In that context, I will introduce the concept of the language turn in order to explain the role of language in undoing the Modernist tendency toward mystification and talk of *presence*. Another way of saying this is that while Modernism is concerned with immediacy; an immediate effect that the work of art creates in the viewer, Postmodernism is more interested in how one understands an artwork through mediation, for example, that of language. Artists such as Kosuth, Oldenberg and Warhol will be looked at in relation to this discussion on the role of language by examining how they reflect certain Postmodernist ideas in their artwork. All the above theoreticians and artists are a major force in the Postmodernist intellectual terrain, hence their inclusion gives an accurate picture of Postmodernity.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the rereading of Modernism argued in Chapter 2, results in a linear interpretation of art criticism and art history and that the paintings they purport to explain (or “read”) ought to be revised. In this light, Kant’s aesthetic theory is reinterpreted by considering its similarities with aspects of the Postmodernist discourse. It will be argued that Kant did not necessarily propose a kind of aesthetic Formalism, which is rooted in the representational paradigm or art-as-mirror paradigm (referred to as map-making),<sup>8</sup> but rather that Kant was concerned with the notion of metaphoric play and the important role of the imagination in evaluating art. This, it will be argued, finds its source in the Continental tradition, namely, the Structuralist thinking of Saussure,<sup>9</sup> in Nietzsche,<sup>10</sup> in Wittgenstein’s game-theory of language and among poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida. It

will thus also be argued that the limits of language do not suggest that there is nothing (meaningful) beyond its grasp.<sup>11</sup> This allows a space for the visual language of art. In fact, it is precisely the metaphors of art that are able to allude to the “unsayable” (the ineffable). In this light, the artworks that have been explored in Chapter 1, that is, the art of Newman, are re-interpreted in accordance with this alternative perspective. This alternative reading will be re-evaluated through the concept of metaphor and the sublime. Metaphor describes the figurative, non-literal nature of art that, it will be argued, Kant puts forward in his speculation on aesthetics. The sublime refers to Kant’s notion that there is the possibility of an overwhelming object in our perception and that this relates to art, as the artwork might inspire a conception of the transcendent or sublime (Kant 1952:88). This in turn recalls the Postmodernist sublime with its notion that art tries to make present that which is essentially unrepresentable.

Much is at stake in reinterpreting a seminal thinker from the past such as Kant. While it is easy, and true to an extent, to point fingers at and blame the “men of the Enlightenment” for the ills of Modernism, one should also try to identify similarities and continuities between the past and the present. But it is important to challenge past thinkers. Equally importantly, however, we need to identify and acknowledge that those who have changed our intellectual terrain influence what and how we think today. A reinterpretation of Kant such as the one presented in this dissertation may suggest that there is continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism. Therefore, neither the theorists of the past nor those of the present can claim moral transparency and political neutrality. A more balanced interpretation, or revision, leads to caution with respect to taking the moral high ground. A rereading of Kant’s theory of aesthetics emphasises the role of the reader

and the specialist in (re)constructing textual meaning and (re)evaluating visual art in forging a future *intellectual-ethical-artistic* framework.

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **Modernism as defined by Kant and Greenberg**

In this chapter, I intend to show how Kant's theory of art as laid out in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) lays the foundation for certain basic Modernist tenets. This is developed further by the critic Clement Greenberg. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief analysis of two Modernist artists, namely Barnett Newman and Hans Hoffman which is based on Modernist Formalist conventions. Since Newman's art is an original *oeuvre* and an exploration in abstraction, he is a major representative of Modernist art. Hoffman, likewise, is a representative of Modernism in that his work includes the best of European modern abstract art and one may argue, offers a unique vision within the context of abstraction. The above coheres with the overall argument of my dissertation in which I assess whether or not Kant is a Modernist. In the present chapter, then, I present arguments to support that Kant can be considered a Modernist (based on his being a Formalist), whilst in Chapter 3, I give arguments against him simply being a Modernist.

I intend to explain the fundamental features of Modernism in relation to Kant's aesthetics. The three aspects of Modernism that I will thus focus on are:

- 1) the notion of artistic genius or the centred artist;
- 2) the search for an artistic ontology and
- 3) the idea of an artistic teleology.

All three ideas perpetuate the myth of the *avant garde*, of there being a possible rupture with the traditions of the past, in creating new orders of aesthetic experience and the freedom of the individual artist in expressing

his/her vision (Jansen 1964:55). The will of the artist in terms of this view is responsible for creating the artwork that inspires a kind of *presence* as it expands the creative range of the medium.

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* embodies much of what is considered modern or Modernist. Osborne lists the following Modernist concepts, but for the purpose of my argument, I find ontology, teleology and artists' centre as sufficient, as they embody what Osborne identifies as Modernist. In broad terms, according to Osborne (1991:45), the Modernist fields of interest are expounded by the following ideas:

- a) a focus on the form of the artwork, as in Formalism;
- b) a sense of purpose/teleology (that is, inherent growth within art history);
- c) perceiving design, hierarchy and closure as "good" properties of an artwork;
- d) a concept of "purity";
- e) *presence* (ontology or being);
- f) centering of the artist;
- g) a belief in root/depth
- h) a strong sense of the independent self (usually being the male artist), his originality; and finally,
- i) the break with tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Since it is the artist who creates the artwork, I shall begin by looking at the centring of the artist or the notion of individual artistic genius.

## 1.1 The Centred Artist

The notion of genius is a peculiarly Modernist notion and echoes Descartes' (ca. 1650) famous "Cogito" wherein the singular, autonomous self is etched out. The implication of this awareness of self is the call to be responsible, self-reliant on our own judgements, and trusting of that which the self filters or perceives. A further consequence is the belief in more elevated minds as naturally some will be more aware than others, and as is pertinent to my case, the belief in those who are deemed artistic geniuses.

Furthermore, according to Gablik (1984:31), a defining characteristic of what it is to be Modern is that

... consciousness is solitary, consequent to the disestablishing of communal reality. It is the most intense form of individualism the world has ever known. Modern life is lived in a world turned upside down, in which we are painfully aware of our separateness but have lost sight of our connectedness ... as Daniel Bell has pointed out, the social unit of society is not the group, guild, tribe, or city, but the person.

As an extension of this Modernist consciousness, one might see the artist as an intensely self-aware, independent and separate individual, who seeks a rational or even supra-rational explanation of his sense of reality simultaneous with his subjective feeling.

It is no surprise that Modernism is characterised by a multitude of art movements, each with an individualistic stance claiming to have knowledge of reality *qua* the mind. The discoveries and theories of Freud, for example,

opened consciousness to a greater interest in the self and the mind. The growing awareness of the self as a rational being also includes the idea that the self is directed by unconscious drives, or rather, that the genius accesses a deeper terrain of conscious experience. Freud's work in psychoanalysis brought to light the depths of the human psyche, disclosing the intelligibility of dreams, fantasy, and psychopathological symptoms. Tarnas (1991:65-66) describes how Freud illuminated the sexual origins of neurosis, thereby demonstrating the importance of infantile experience in conditioning adult life. The discovery (or theorisation) of the Oedipus complex unveiled the psychological relevance of mythology and symbolism, recognised the psychic, structured the components of the ego, superego and id, revealed the mechanisms of resistance, repression and projection, and brought forth a host of other insights, thus laying open the mind's character and internal dynamics (Tarnas 1991:65-66). On the one hand, this science of the mind can be viewed as the culmination of the Enlightenment, where the human unconscious is under the scrutiny of rational investigation, and on the other it can be regarded as Romantic/Postmodernist, because it undermines the rational mind by accessing a mind that does not submit to rational analyses.

Since the Renaissance, the concept of the anonymous artist, or the artist as a simply skilled craftsman who is part of a guild, has gradually changed. These changes were partly initiated by the writings of Vasari (ca. 1580), who began writing biographies of artists and so, eventually in recent times, was set in motion the cult of the artist-genius or artist-hero. The artist saw himself as a kind of priest, who divined the interior soul, or spirit (Jansen 1964:78). And this artist was almost always male as society considered only the male as being an artistic genius. Later artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Kandinsky and Malevich, as well as many other early Modernists promoted

a concept of life that was essentially transcendental, although it was not tied to institutionalised religion (Coppelstone 1985:93). Moreover, there is the Modernist phenomenon with its plethora of art movements and each artist developing a unique style. This uniqueness was understood to derive from higher consciousness or even the upper realms and in that sense, was transcendental. To arrive at the transcendental, art had to avoid and resist being dictated to by forces outside itself and thus art separated itself more completely from religious and social institutions. It also separated itself from craft in order to entrench itself in its own arena of competence (Greenberg 1961:23) and to determine its own relationship with other areas of human social life, rather than simply being a function of these extra-artistic concerns. The point is that Modernism heralded an unparalleled search for new meaning for the individual and society and this is reflected in the art of the time.

Kant's theory of aesthetics is a forerunner of this Modernist vision of art and the artist viz originality, painting (for example) as an enclosed discipline and not simply concerned with a social function. Kant argues that artistic genius is original, opposed to imitation and unteachable, which means that it is a gift or a talent. Beautiful art is the art of genius: "Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art" (Kant 1955:23). Talent itself is the product of nature. "Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art," says Kant (in Crawford 1974:150).

Furthermore, beautiful art is an act of genius. According to Fenner (1996:76)

1) Genius cannot be learned; rather, it is more like an aptitude and is therefore original.

- 2) There are exemplary works of art, which can serve as a standard.
- 3) Genius cannot describe or explain scientifically how it derives its products, but rather gives the rule just as nature does, i.e. beyond the artists' ken (genius is a "guiding spirit").
- 4) Nature, by the medium of genius, does not prescribe rules to science but to art, and to it only insofar as it is beautiful art.

Kant therefore holds that whereas science can be learned and all its steps are logically derived, in the case of art, "exemplary" exhibits are the only way of showing or teaching in art (Kant 1955:87). Moreover, one can only easily judge a work of art once it has been completed; one cannot follow a logical sequence to deduce what a work of art ought to look like to be classified as a product of genius. This insight reflects the "unconscious" creativity of artistic genius, as the artist cannot explain how he created his masterpiece, how it arose in thought and how it developed to its final product.

What provides the soul in fine art is an aesthetic idea. As Kant put it: "An aesthetic idea is a counterpart of a rational idea. Whereas the latter is a concept that would never adequately be exhibited sensibly, the former is a set of sensible presentations to which no concept is adequate" (Kant, in Meerbote 1991:87). An aesthetic idea, then, is as successful an attempt as possible to "exhibit" the rational idea. It is the talent of genius to generate aesthetic ideas. Also, the mode of expression must be tasteful according to Kant (1955:101) – for the understanding's lawfulness is the condition of the expression being in any sense universal and capable of being shared. The genius must also find a mode of expression, which allows a viewer not only to "understand" the work conceptually, but also to reach something like the

same excited yet harmonious state of mind that the genius experienced in creating it.

Kant's notion of genius answers the question "how is it possible to make art?" Art involves practical ability, which cannot be reduced to determinate concepts, which is distinct from a mere comprehension of something. The latter can be fully taught; the former, although certainly subject to training, relies upon native talent. (Thus Kant claims that there can be no such thing as scientific genius, because a scientific mind can never be radically original). Art is furthermore distinguished from labour or craft – the latter being satisfying only for the payoff that results and not for the mere activity of making art. Art (like beauty) is free from any interest in the existence of the product itself. This coheres with the Modernist notion that the fine arts are radically distinct from craft, and that they exist as hallowed, aloof from the world and its commodities, in fact, set apart from the humdrum of life itself (Goldblatt 1997:167).

To emphasise the above further, Kant states: "Genius is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: Genius is the innate predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant 1952:43). In other words, that which makes it possible to produce (fine art) is not itself produced – not by the individual genius, nor through his or her culture, history, education and so on. From the definition of genius, as that talent through which nature gives the rule to art, it follows that originality is a characteristic of genius i.e., since the process of art making is concealed and different in each case, originality is an integral part of it. Simons (2002:116) holds that

Kant's theory of genius – for all its vagueness and lack of philosophical rigour – has been enormously influential. In particular, the radical separation of the aesthetic genius from the scientific mind; the emphasis on the near miraculous expression (through aesthetic ideas and attributes) of the ineffable, excited state of mind, the link of fine art to a metaphysical content, the requirement of radical originality...

Cassirer (1981:321) amplifies the concept of genius in stating that “genius and its act stand at the point where supreme individuality and supreme universality, freedom and necessity, pure creation and pure lawfulness coalesce”. Hence the work of genius testifies straightforwardly and unambiguously how the most intimate subjective feeling at the same time reaches down into the deepest sphere of pure validity and timeless necessity. Or in other words, the artistic genius reconciles individuality with common humanistic goals.

This subjective vision of art is in contradistinction to science where the personality of the creator must be expunged if the accuracy of the result is to be protected. In contrast, in the case of the artist, everything that he/she gives is endowed with its peculiar and supreme value only through what he/she is. He/she does not alienate him/herself in any work, which then continues to exist as an isolated thing of value in itself, but in each peculiar work that he/she creates a new symbolic expression of the univocal basic relation given in his “nature” in the “proportion of his mental powers” (Kant 1955:38).

Kant's notion of artistic genius is in agreement with the Modernist conception of the artist as the centre of artistic creation. Jackson Pollock (ca.

1950's) is often championed as the shaman of artists, whose inner struggles and gestural painting find their source in Freudian<sup>13</sup>, universal, unconscious impulses, which presume that the artist has a “deeper” degree of access to emotions and intuitions that extend beyond normal conscious life. This personal expression is a direct result of liberal humanism, which champions the values of individualism and free market competitiveness, both of which contribute to creativity in the arts (Tarnas 1991:245).

To the extent that there is a fascination with the artist, there is a concomitant focus on the work of art (the search for an artistic ontology). In this regard, it would be useful to see how Wollheim, a leading art historian, perceives the artwork in considering the nature of the artwork. Wollheim (1987:103 - 104), in a rather philosophical verve, describes how the artist transforms the material into a medium, that is, into a vehicle of meaning. This is achieved by a process Wollheim terms “thematisation”: the artist, playing the role of both viewer and creator, develops the surface of the picture towards a particular purpose or goal; each mark on this surface either contributes to that desired end or requires erasure. The means by which this is achieved is via the simultaneous harmony of hand, eye and brain, which together serve the intentions of the artist. Wollheim defines this intention as a set of primary thoughts, emotions, experiences, beliefs and attitudes that cause the artist to paint in a certain way. Thematisation gives way to motif, by which Wollheim means specific formal arrangements, and this causes a special kind of perceptual experience as the artist sees things in relation to other things. Wollheim calls this *seeing-in*. The term refers to the “twofoldness” of seeing, that of seeing the marked surface and at the same time seeing something within the surface. According to Wollheim, an artist has a style because he himself has formed it, whereas he has a language (verbal)

because he has learned it. Another mode of perception, namely *experiential perception*, is defined by Wollheim as the capacity to enable us to see a painting as an experience of, for instance, melancholy, turbulence, or serenity "the knowledge that we require in each case has to function not so much as a cognitive stock but as perceptual" (Wollheim 1987:93). A further significant concept defined by Wollheim is visual delight. This cannot be reduced to language, such as taste, for example. Wollheim (1987:101) argues that "Pleasure rests in matching, bringing together, or deriving something out of a juxtaposition, two experiences or two aspects of a single experience". The spectator cannot read the painting like a simple sentence; instead, he/she must be sensitive to seeing the energised surface. An analysis of this kind helps to define how one can argue for the particular genius of the artist in creating an artwork as the artist uses all the tools at his/her disposal to create something. This will be explored later on in this chapter by looking at the examples of Newman and Hoffman.

## **1.2 The Search for an Artistic Ontology**

The Modernist call for an aesthetic essence is exemplified by the phrase "art for art's sake" and consists of such notions as an aesthetic attitude or contemplation, aesthetic harmony and the belief that significant art is timeless and universal. In order to actualise these ideas, artists tended toward the "purity" or artistic "autonomy" of abstraction, Formalist criticism and universalist conceptions of internationalism. In what follows these notions will be amplified.

### 1.2.1 Aesthetic Essence

Maurice Denis, who is a generation younger than Edgar Degas (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and who was inspired by the example of Paul Gauguin (also early 20<sup>th</sup> century), wrote the following often quoted sentence in an essay published in 1890: “Remember that a picture – before being a battle-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours in a certain order” (in Lynton 1989:18). This view transforms the focus of art from its usual representative and figurative, expressive functions to a self-aware or reflexive activity, and thus a certain autonomous self-consciousness. It is not surprising that one pervasive idea of Modernism is its concern to delineate areas of human endeavour, so that the realm of beauty in art, which came to be known as aesthetics, was a unique area of expertise and study (Crawford 1974:90). In this regard, Kant helps to define the Modernist situation. Kant’s aim is to illustrate that a realm of aesthetic judgement exists (Guyer 1997:15). But this aim goes even deeper: on the one hand, it is thought, aesthetic judgement was found not to be fundamentally different from the ordinary theoretical cognition of nature, and on the other hand, aesthetic judgement has a close similarity to moral judgement. Thus, Kant attempts to demonstrate that the physical and moral universes – and the philosophies and forms of thought that present them – are not only compatible, but unified. Here Kant adds his name to the modern trend of Enlightenment to discover and comprehend the totality of things under one grand, universal scheme of thought (Fabozzi 2002:132). There is thus a dual concern: a desire to separate art from other activities and a recognition that art is part of other areas of human endeavour in its universalist undertones. Aesthetic essence constitutes the conception of art’s separateness and its integration within the total human experience.

### 1.2.2 Art for Art's Sake

Abstract art did not only bring into being a new aesthetic style, but also a change of direction regarding the *raison d'être* of art itself. For the committed Modernist, the self-sufficiency of art results from its social liberation from a practical function. Aesthetic experience is an end in itself, and worth having on its own account. The only way for art to preserve its truth is by maintaining its distance from the social world – by staying pure. Quite deliberately, then, during the high period of Modernism, art cut itself loose from its social moorings and withdrew to save its creative essence. As Wassily Kandinsky (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) says, “the phrase ‘art for art’s sake’ is really the best ideal a materialistic age can attain, for it is an unconscious protest against materialism, and the demand that everything should have a use and practical value” (in Gablik 1984:21). In opposition to materialist values, and because of the spiritual breakdown that followed the collapse of religion in modern society, the early Modernists turned inward, away from the world, to concentrate on the self and its inner life. In the thinking of early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, a work of art was an independent world of pure creation, which had its own essentially spiritual essence. This recalls the earlier Romantic spirit; images of Friedrich’s figures in landscapes encapsulate the Romantic Modern spirit – secular in tone but spiritually charged (Jansen 1964:139).

Greenberg is adamant that art has its own unique position or, even better, that the aesthetic experience, one’s sense of value, is unlike other dispositions and judgements (Greenberg 1961:88). The presence of value requires the presence of judgement devoid of historical, stylistic, scientific,

sociological and psychological curiosity, all of which has not discovered anything fundamentally important about the experience of art as art. Greenberg (1961:81) thus states as follows:

Art is autonomous ... its aim is to provide humanity with aesthetic value or quality and therefore trying to justify art by assigning it a purpose outside or beyond itself is one of the main causes ... of the art's obfuscation, of all the misleading and irrelevant talk and activity about art.

In sum, according to Greenberg, the phrase “art for art’s sake” refers to the mission of art itself, namely to engage the viewer on an aesthetic level.

### **1.2.3 The Aesthetic Attitude and Aesthetic Contemplation**

The structure of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, specifically his analyses of beauty, is divided into five moments. The concept of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic contemplation is developed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*.

The first moment states that the pleasure which is felt in the judgement of taste must be based on a universally communicable mental state. Otherwise, the judgement of taste could not legitimately be distinguished from the judgement of sensuous pleasure, for which we claim no universal validity (Kant 1952:34). Here we have an all-important concept, namely, that even though taste concerns the subjective state of the observer, nevertheless all observers, disposed in the same way and possessing of the same cognitive apparatus (continuing from where Kant left off with his *First Critique*), can perceive a given sensation under the order of a judgement of taste. This renders the judgement universal, based on the Kantian universal mind and

the *presence* of the form of the artwork, that is, its ontological status as being present as an object constituted in a very particular way (Guyer 1997:110). Both the notion of a “universal mind” and the form of the artwork are the common basis for knowing or judging, and can thus be called prototypically modern. In fact, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, whereby the art of other nations and periods (the East, “primitive” art of Africa, etc...) influenced major 20<sup>th</sup> century artists (the Post Impressionists, Picasso, the Expressionists, to name but a few) is a further instance of the Modernist tendency to co-opt and homogenise art in the name of a universal mind and universal aesthetics rooted at depth in a certain “sameness” shared by all and expressed variously in the arts<sup>14</sup> (Weightman 1973:89).

It will be seen that the focus is on the elements of art themselves on an aesthetic level and this derives from a formalist perspective. The deduction made in the second moment is that such a universally communicable mental state must be based on the cognitive faculties (the imagination and the understanding) being harmoniously related in their free play, satisfying the general conditions for cognition (Kant 1952:28). Since, in Kant’s view, nothing can be universally communicated except cognition or mental states insofar as they relate to cognition (Wellmer 1991:16), then the subjective state of the mind on which the universally communicable message is based, must be the same as that generally pertaining to cognition, namely, the harmony of the cognitive powers of the mind – the imagination and the understanding.<sup>15</sup> But, since the judgement of taste is aesthetic and not conceptual, the state of mind in which the pleasure in the beautiful is based, cannot be that of a definite act of cognition (judging a particular to be subsumable under a concept). Rather, as Kant (1952:34) notes “the cognitive

powers must harmonise in free play not determined by concepts.” Here Kant opens the door for a metaphoric concept of art which I will develop in chapter 3.

Kant defines the aesthetic state of mind as the free play of the mental powers in a certain harmony. We shall see how Greenberg assumes the position as critic precisely because he - the critic - expresses so eloquently what he perceives. It is he, the Modernist critic – the aesthetic conscience – that becomes a mediator between the general public and contemporary art. In this respect, one can see in Kant the seeds of the art critic, since it is he, the critic, who observes paintings and describes the result of the harmonious interplay of the understanding and the imagination. In other words, the critic is he whose faculties are most attuned to finding the harmony in an artwork and who is therefore a representative for the rest of humanity in so far as excellence in art is concerned (Fenner 1996:89).

The Modernist concern with the art object *per se* and more specifically, with the aesthetic nature/being of the object under scrutiny, is given due explication and clarity by Kant. Kant (1955:36) describes the artistic distance that is required to judge whether an object is beautiful or not as being “disinterested.” This is in stark contrast to “interest” which is “what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object’s existence” (in Fenner 1996:42). Fenner continues: “In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be the least biased in favour of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it” (Fenner 1996:42). In this conception are included two ideas. Firstly, it is the contemplative image to which one is supposed to attend, i.e. how the object is represented in the imagination and the understanding. One is meant to pay attention to the object without

considering anything but the object's phenomenal appearance, or how one senses the object.

Secondly, one is supposed to pay attention only to the representation of the object in itself and not to any purpose this might serve. Kant was keen on including in his exposition of *disinterest* the notion that the object must be regarded not as an object of instrumental good but as an object that was for nothing beyond itself (even if it relates symbolically to the moral). This clearly marks a stage in the development of Modernist art which leads to the application of the famous maxim "art for art's sake", and for the steady purification of art of all extraneous uses, ideas and the like toward a self-enclosed, self-referential discipline (Kant 1955:43).

This kind of Formalist thinking has specific repercussions for modern society. We may not always be aware of the history that informs how society is ordered, and so we take the gallery or art museum, for example, for granted. However, the whole concept of the gallery is a result of a history of ideas, such as those of Kant. It is Kant's drawing out of the aesthetic attitude relating to the special enjoyment/appreciation of art in and of itself that is pivotal in the whole cult of the art gallery and museum, which one can also call peculiarly modern. By arguing that it is not the use and existence of the object that is significant, but its form, Kant thus paves the way for the modern museum phenomenon. Hence the dual concepts of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic contemplation have an impact on the form art will take on a social level.

### 1.2.4 Aesthetic Harmony

Kant argues that using the powers of the imagination and understanding enables the viewer to discern a *significant* organisation of elements – a rule-governedness – resulting in a harmony of the cognitive powers (Kant 1952:63). The consciousness of this harmony brings about the feeling of pleasure. This recalls the modern art critic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roger Fry (in Crowther 1997:165), who argued that “significant form”, by which he meant that form which presented itself most meaningfully to the eye and thence to the mind (i.e. to the imagination and the understanding), was the mark of a great work of art. In Kant’s (1955:26) words:

For since the ground of the pleasure is placed merely in the form of the object for reflection in general – and consequently, in no sensation of the object, and also without reference to any concept which anywhere involves design – it is only conformity to law in the empirical use of judgement in general (unity of the imagination with the understanding) in the subject with which the representation of the object in reflection, whose conditions are universally valid *a priori*, harmonises.

The experience of an object – an ordinary empirical object or a work of art – requires the synthesis of the manifold of intuition into a unity. In cognitive perception, this synthesis is determined by rules; concepts determine the unification and the cognitive judgement is thus determinative (Gracyk 1986:33). In aesthetic judgement, which is a kind of reflective judgement, this synthesis is not determined by empirical rules or concepts, and hence it is free to relate the parts in whatever way it can to obtain a synthetic unity of the manifold. Consequently, “pleasure in the beautiful results when such an

ordering is achieved that the cognitive powers are in harmony; it is as if the manifold has a unity to which a concept ought to apply, even though there is no definite concept applicable” (Kant 1955:90). The above marks art as a “passive”, “contemplative” delight, not a practical engagement. In this way, Modernist aesthetics eschews the role of history, society and psychological factors that might impinge on the work of art and the artist.

Another way in which one argues for the profundity of aesthetic harmony is to observe how, in the fifth moment, Kant links aesthetics and morality. The basis of his argument is that, implicit in the universal communicability of judgements is agreement as to beauty as a duty – which is a moral imperative (Kant 1955:101). Kant’s argument is thus that the beautiful is a symbol for the morally good – and consequently, that it gives pleasure with a justifiable claim for the agreement of everyone. The idea is that nature was designed for our cognition in the macrocosm, and that beauty in art symbolizes this in the microcosm. The supersensible underlies morality through its link, the judgement of taste. As Kant says: “Now I say that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and that it is only in this respect (a reference which is natural in every man and which every man postulates in others as a duty) that it gives pleasure with a claim for the agreement of everyone else” (in Crawford 1974:156). He argues (in Crawford 1974:156) this as follows:

Taste makes possible the transition, without any violent leap, from the charm of sense to habitual moral interest, as it represents the imagination in its freedom as capable of purposive determination for the understanding, and so teaches us to find even in objects of sense a free satisfaction apart from any charm of sense.

And further: “If the beautiful arts are not brought into more or less close combination with moral ideas, which alone bring with them a self-sufficing satisfaction, this latter fate [dulling the spirit] must ultimately be theirs. Then they serve only as a distraction ...” (Crawford 1974:184).

What beauty expresses generally (though symbolically) is the idea of morality. Rather than portraying specific moral ideas, however, beauty, both in art and in nature, serves as the basis of morality by leading us to contemplate the supersensible.<sup>16</sup> The sublime does this by exposing our supersensible faculty (in other words, our imagination as the agent of reason) as if it could dominate the sensible. Kant (1952:110) distinguishes between two kinds of the sublime. There is the “mathematical sublime” whereby a vast object overwhelms our perceptual and imaginative capacities. Nonetheless, we can comprehend it at the level of thought, highlighting our sense of the scope of our rational being. Then there is the encounter with powerful things which is called the “dynamically sublime”. Here the power of x is beyond our capacities of perception and imagination, but at the level of ideas it nevertheless vivifies the scope of the rational, because of, and not in spite of, the sensory incomprehensibility. It has already been argued that this effort to grasp that which escapes definite form, has moral import, as it invokes the disinterested aesthetic stance. The disinterested state of mind can be seen as moral in that the potential to perceive harmony requires a sensitivity on which morality also insists. The beautiful in nature accomplishes this by presenting nature as if it had been designed for our purposes, thus symbolising the idea of our dominion over it. And the beautiful in art does this by being a microcosmic presentation of

the same formal purposiveness experienced in natural beauty, that is, aesthetic harmony.

### 1.2.5 Formalism

The concern with form as described above leads directly to the Modernist concern with art for its own sake (as discussed) and to the concomitant self-enclosed experimentation that leads further away from the artist's concern with nature or the object, and more and more toward the "elements of art themselves". The Modernist search for purity of design and the movement away from strict adherence to nature can be traced from the Impressionists and the Post Impressionists, via Kandinsky and Mondrian, to Dadaism (to some extent), Surrealism (to some extent), De Stijl, Fauvism, Cubism, German Expressionism and, ultimately, from Europe to America, with the Abstract Expressionists (or in short, the *avant garde*).<sup>17</sup> The *avant garde*, by focusing on the medium, veered more and more away from mimesis, to create a self enclosed world, a form or object that exists in its own right – a blotch of orange in a fruit bowl that is not simply a blotch of orange in a fruit bowl (Jansen 1964: 90). In other words: the blotch of orange can stand for something other than an orange or it may yet simply be a constituent element in an abstract design of sorts. Moreover, the Kantian emphasis on form corresponds to the Modernist concern with the art-object as the centre of meaning, the means through and by which the critic might decipher and elucidate the meaning "contained" in the image or, better, the form.

Kant argues that proper judgements of beauty are only concerned with the perceptual form of the object. *Form* is the appearance of design and composition, rather than colour and tone, which Kant relegates to mere

“charm” that gratifies through sensation alone (Kant 1952:23). Once again a judgement is “pure” only in the case of a free beauty which presupposes no concept of what the object is meant to be. If it did have a purpose, this would restrict the free play of the faculties – the contemplation of the form or shape of the object. As Kant (1955:123) says: “In painting, sculpture, indeed all plastic arts, in architecture and the art of gardening insofar as they are fine arts, it is the design that is essential, in which it is not what offers enjoyment in sensation but what pleases solely through its form that constitutes the basis for all dispositions to taste”. Thus only the formal aspect can necessitate the feeling of pleasure that marks the exercise of taste.

One can further associate Kant’s preoccupation with form and free beauty with being a precursor to the appreciation of abstract art, since he uses examples of free beauties, namely designs *a la grèque*, foliage for frameworks or on wall paper, “fantasias”, and “all music without texts”. He cites these examples because “they signify nothing, represent nothing, no object under a determinant concept...” (Kant 1955: 76). The Modernist phenomenon of abstract art is precisely the play of formal relations, of structure and medium. Rather than aligning itself with any strict adherence to a narrative, it is more akin to music and to the programme of abstraction.

Concerning the arguments above, Clement Greenberg has said: “I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist” (1961:12). I believe that Greenberg had the following Kantian points in mind when he said that: (1) the aesthetic is a distinct sort of experience, based upon feeling, rather than taste as in intellectual comprehension;

(2) the aesthetic is an experience of formal values of the artwork;

(3) these formal values suggest aesthetic ideas; and

(4) the aesthetic experience is either of the beautiful or of the sublime. Greenberg regards his Formalist aesthetic as deriving from Kant. He develops and expands on Kant's theory by giving an account of what happens when we see a painting and setting out how this theory might be used as a basis for a criticism.

In arguing in favour of such constants in aesthetic appreciation, Greenberg (1993:10) cites certain psychological tests, which show that most people across cultural divisions prefer blue to other colours, thereby hinting toward the objectivity of taste and the psychological and physiological impact of the formal elements of art and artworks.

An objective series of tests to ascertain the scientific basis underlying human perception would tend to prove the universality of our manners of perceiving, and of the ways in which lines and colours operate to produce these effects. In this way, one can construct a visual thesis which would relate to both a formalist conception of art appreciation and of meaning. Moreover, a rigorous theory of seeing lends itself to formalist art criticism, and the general concern with the art-object, the sign language contained within the artwork itself, rather than what texts might have to say about it. In the remainder of this section, I put forward the notion that there is an objective criterion to the way in which we see. If this is so, a formalist exploration would appear to be a worthy pursuit for the artist, in his/her attempt to induce a certain intellectual and emotive reaction in the viewer by his/her formalist leanings as concentration on the reality of *form* is paramount to executing and viewing an artwork.

Critics such as Rudolf Arnheim (1974:89-90), applying the processes and findings of modern psychology within the realm of human perception, argue that the eye organizes visual material according to definite psychological laws. In his book, *Art and visual perception* (1974), he describes in depth how the following tools of visual language operate and interact with the perceiving consciousness: balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, colour, movement, dynamics and expression. Art historian Ernst Gombrich (1960:67) argues that the eye is not a passive instrument, but rather that it serves a mind that is selective if it is not to be swamped by indigestible messages. Arnheim (1974:5) concurs with Gombrich: “All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention.” Arnheim (1974:93) recounts the same conclusions reached by researchers in art education, specifically with regard to “the trust in the objective validity within the visual experience”. As an example of this, he cites Gustav Britsch, who successfully proved that the mind works according to logical laws and proceeds from the perceptually simplest components to patterns of increasing complexity (Arnheim 1974:617). Gombrich (1960:65) thus explains that “what an artist constantly worries over whether he/she has got it ‘right’ is much more difficult to put into words”, that is, the concern is with a visual language. Arnheim (1974:162) goes even further:

The expression conveyed by the visual form is only as clear-cut as the perceptual features that carry it. A clearly curved line expresses its swing or gentleness with corresponding clarity, but a line whose overall structure is confusing to the eye cannot carry any meaning. An artist may paint a picture in which a ferocious tiger is easily recognisable, but unless there is ferocity in the colours and the lines, the tiger will look like taxidermy and there can be ferocity in the colours and the lines only if the particular perceptual qualities are brought out with precision.

Berger lends further support to the “visual thesis” *qua* Formalism. He writes (Berger 1972:18): “Seeing comes before words ... words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by a world ... and that seeing which comes before words can never quite be covered by them”. This recalls Kant’s same exposition of aesthetic ideas as those which are never quite fully comprehended or grasped by language (a point that I shall develop in Chapter 3). The content or meaning of a work of art is ineffable, and thus not to be grasped by language (the language of aesthetic discourse) (Kant 1952:88). Content and form merge into one another as “aesthetic experience turns out to be all content and all form” (Greenberg 1961:55). There is a tendency in Modernism and particularly in the works of the Abstract Expressionists – Hoffman, Newman, Rothko et al – to defy explanation: for appreciation lies in experience, an engagement of consciousness with the *presence* that the work of art assumes – its ontological significance/being.

Further arguments *vis-à-vis* describing and understanding art in formal terms can be derived from Wölfflin. Wölfflin, in his *Principles of Art History* (1950), attempts to solve the problem of the development of style in the contemporary art of his time. He appeals to strict and clear laws according to formal principles to account for the development of art, changing style and innovation:

For example:

- 1) the linear versus the painterly;
- 2) the development from plane to recession;
- 3) the development from closed to open form;
- 4) the development from multiplicity to unity; and
- 5) the absolute and relative clarity of the subject.

He focuses on the painted object and on how the artist has used the mechanisms of his/her craft to communicate better, rather than relying on subject matter. Wölfflin (1950:16) concludes that “...every artistic conception is, of its very nature, organised according to certain notions of pleasure...” This pleasure is determined by the formal configuration that is the work of art. In the case of scientific precision, he claims that there is a law operating in the arts by which we can gage this pleasure and explain it – which is clearly a formalist critical stance.

At this point one should bear in mind that Kant’s theory of art appears to match the Modern formalist approach and this partly demonstrates why Kant can be seen as a Modernist. It also points one towards the search for an artistic ontology and forms the basis for a Postmodern critique of artistic Modernism.

### **1.3 The Notion of Artistic Teleology**

The basic idea of artistic teleology is that there is a natural and necessary or inevitable progress in art.

The concept of teleology was championed by Frederick Hegel, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher. He argued that there was an inevitable progress toward absolute truth and knowledge and a process of historical unfolding. Norris (1990:201) comments that: “consciousness and history ... unite at some point of maximal lucidity and hard-earned knowledge where thought comprehends, through its own self-present activity, the dialectic which has worked to produce that encompassing knowledge”. Now, there is a march toward absolute knowing, which suggests that history is purposive.

The role of art from this perspective is such that it is regarded as the sensuous bringing forth of the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of each period. This is similar to the dynamic of the *avant garde*, where artists are perceived to be the prophets of the future. Specifically, this idea of Artistic Teleology is expressed in the formalist line of the *avant garde* – Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and so on. All such movements consist of a belief in the future, where looking back could only be regressive and should thus be avoided (Jansen 1964:310). Moreover, all were in search of essentialism, the essence of art, which is considered to be the culmination of past art (even if revolutionary).

Perhaps the most obvious example of the teleology inherent in Modernism is exemplified by 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The Modernist movement in architecture put its faith in the liberating aspects of industrialisation and mass democracy. Its heroes were Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. The Bauhaus movement, for instance, captured the spirit of the times with its promise of merging art and technology into a new unity. Van der Rohe claimed that this new spirit would solve all problems – whether social, economic or artistic (Hughes 1991:206). The universal, international Bauhaus style was made possible because of new means of construction. It was thus seen as the pinnacle of artistic progress and achievement, ahead of its time, utopian – in short: a significant accomplishment of the *avant garde*. A similar utopian search can be found in painting through expanding the range of expression of the medium (Hughes 1991:181).

To explore the evolution in painting, and thus artistic progress, one can refer to Greenberg's analyses of certain paintings. Greenberg finds two sources

for development in American painting since 1945. The first of these is Cézanne's intention to produce, in his reaction to Impressionism, a picture space of solidly constructed forms. The second is Monet's attempt, working within a tradition going back to Turner, to use large colour masses with relatively unemphasized value contrasts (Greenberg 1961:66). Both Cézanne and Monet aimed to depict nature accurately. Ironically, the result of their efforts to be true to nature was to lead painting back to abstraction, for Cézanne's use of small colour planes to suggest volume, as well as Monet's large, barely differentiated masses of colour drew attention to the surface of the canvas itself. This shallowness of the picture space, which did not contain represented objects, was a change from the representational view of painting, that is, painting as a window into "realistic space": "previously one looked into the painting's surface as onto a stage. Modernism ... rendered this stage shallower..." (Meerbote 1991:76). What began to happen was that paintings did not just represent or correspond to a world out there, but the picture plane and elements of art in themselves became objects, or rather subjects, in their own right.

In other words, nothing could look more different from a Raphael than these Modernist paintings. Nevertheless, the aim of Greenberg's formalist-based criticism is to show the continuities in art history, by showing how, through a series of formal transformations, the artist can move from Raphael to Olitski. Hence, Greenberg says, there is nothing in Modernist painting "that cannot be shown to have evolved out of either Cubism or Impressionism ... just as I cannot see anything essential in Cubism or Impressionism whose development cannot be traced back to the Renaissance" (in Fabozzi 2002:36). Greenberg (1961:190) continues: "I think Western painting holds pretty much together from Giotto right up to Pollock and beyond". Even

more emphatically, he states: “I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification” (Greenberg 1961:12). In this way, Greenberg constructs a narrative whereby Modernist painting is the necessary and natural consequence and perfection of past art.

In respect of Modernist painting, Greenberg identifies this with the “self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant” (1982:62), declaring that, as Kant “was the first to criticise the means itself of criticism”, he was the first real Modernist. Kant’s project was to attain self-knowledge by circumscribing the extent and possibility of reason’s own powers, that is, through the deployment of reason to criticise and delimit itself. Only once this has been achieved, can philosophy be on secure foundations. It is this process of self-criticism that Greenberg (1982: 62) defines as the “very essence of Modernism”; this same process leads to the argument that the awareness of the elements of art themselves is necessary to explain the development of art i.e. the development of the use of the medium necessarily entails an improvement in the arts as there is now a greater range of expressive possibility.

Furthermore, just as Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, so Greenberg clarified the area of painting all the more so. “Purity” is therefore self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism is the arts “becoming one of self-definition with a vengeance” (in Fabozzi 2002:15). It will be argued from this formalist perspective that Abstract art represents the high point of art. The elements of art themselves define the uniqueness of painting. For example, Greenberg defines *flatness* alone as what is unique and exclusive to pictorial art as distinct from sculpture In his endorsement of abstract art,

Greenberg (1961:15) argues in favour of disinterested contemplation or “detached contemplation”, “without being interested in ulterior meanings and motives”, that is, value in itself. Abstract painting, according to Greenberg (1982:24), possesses “greater singleness and clarity than a representational painting does and to apprehend this at once requires and demands a freedom of mind and untrammelledness of eye that constitute ‘at oneness’ in their own right.” His descriptions are meditative, perceptive, perhaps even religious in tone, as they state in robust language the nature of a given work of art. Greenberg (1961:132) says, for example: “...for the cultivated eye, the picture repeats its instantaneous unity like a mouth repeating a single word”, and “...you become all attention, which means that you become, for the moment, selfless”, that is, identified with what you are looking at. This recalls Kant’s belief that the artwork is a symbol of morality in that, through the requisite contemplation, one acquires a love for the artwork that does not come from interest and possession (utility) but from selflessness. This selflessness that is the basis of art, relates it to the moral sphere. As mentioned earlier, I regard this view as Modernist in that, even as the modern world is one of change and flux unprecedented in history, there is at the same time a utopian vision and a belief that art can change the world. This would appear to link the aesthetic with goals beyond the physics of art itself. From this perspective, art appeals to a teleological movement toward the philosophical notion of perfection or, at any rate, upliftment, personified by abstract art and the theory that surrounds it.

In *Homemade Aesthetics*, Greenberg (1999:7) argues that taste is involuntary and intuitive in nature, and that it is thus incorrigible and objective: “You no more choose to like or not to like a given item of art than you choose to see the sun as bright and the night as dark”. This is not to democratise taste,

because, from the Modernist perspective, only certain people, the art critic, for example, truly sees a work of art. This means that only the art critic's intuitions and perceptions can be trusted, and that he/she did conceive of the faculty of taste as that which can be developed or "cultivated". Consequently, it is fair to regard Greenberg as an elitist, aligning himself with those who reveal "the truth", hence the quasi-religious character of his writing style. In this way, the critic becomes that individual whose job it is to specify the "good" and thus to determine the teleological pathway of the art world.

This focus on the work of art and its quality is engendered, in Modernist terms, by its element of surprise and its potential for changing art. It directs its movement through continued newness and originality so that aesthetic quality is maintained – "and the life of a tradition of art is its quality" (Greenberg 1961:48). Again: "All good art innovates ... it innovates because any maker of better art has, aside from his competence, something to say that no one else has said or could say" (Greenberg 1961:52) – even as they are aware of their predecessors. Accordingly, it is not coincidence that Reinhardt *et al* (1994:66) claimed that art comes from art. Therefore, modern *avant garde* art is positive and imbued with both a spirit of tradition and the new, the possibility of innovation and originality (uniqueness). To this end, Greenberg's role as art critic is to help to determine which art is that which is precisely imbued with quality, and consequently to help chart the inevitable evolution in art.

Greenberg defines the type of attitude required to appreciate new Modernist art as one which very often requires learning to revise one's initial feelings. He argues that there is a need for openness: "...you get shaken up in an

edifying sort of way that I can't describe here, it's beyond me, when you are forced to like something you don't want to like. It sort of shakes you and it improves your eye too" (Greenberg 1961:102). Greenberg (1961:116) states that:

Major art – superior art in the fullest sense, the best new art – surprises not only internally within the given work and not only in its own intrinsic terms but also externally, extrinsically, in relation to the terms of expectations established by previous – and especially the immediately previous – best new art. And this ... is why advancedness, innovation, is always an ingredient of the best new art and of major art. And major art also signalises itself by experience – the fact of its surprise – remaining and renewing itself within the work and without the work...

This kind of "superior" art is opposed to academic art, kitsch, pop culture and craft. General opinion is merely conventional and fails to keep up with taste, according to Greenberg (1961:51). Taste serves to highlight the truly formal innovations that move dynamically from one artwork of note to another (Greenberg 1961:56).

In the above analysis of art as expressed by Greenberg, I have tried to show how Modernist art and its related theory are the product of previous art, in the same way that Kant's philosophy concerning art influenced Greenberg a century or more later. I have argued that the withdrawal of art into its own material limits has meant that it has forged its own destiny and that critics such as Greenberg have made this possible. I have tried to establish that the focus on the elements of art and design helped to forge a link between art, past and present. The final point was that new art was marked by its originality, which, nevertheless furthered the climb of fine arts toward their

absolute perfection, as envisioned by Hegel, owing to the genius of the individual artist. In this next section I will show how Formalism applies to two major Abstract Expressionists, namely Hans Hoffman and Barnett Newman. In so doing, I will later be able to make clear in Chapter 2 how a formalist analysis eschews other factors that may be significant in understanding the artist and his work, factors which take us beyond the confines of the artwork/object.

## **1.4 The Abstract Expressionism of Hoffman and Newman**

### **1.4.1. Hans Hoffman**

In this section, I shall deal with Hoffman in relation to the three Modernist categories established above, namely the centred artist, ontology, and teleology.

#### **1.4.1.a) The Centred Artist**

The trust in artistic genius or, more accurately, in original style, is, as mentioned above, specifically Modernist. In this regard, Greenberg (1961:87) confidently expresses the extent of Hoffman's achievement: "Their billowing, broadly brushed surfaces declare depth and volume with a new, post-Matissean and post-Monetian intensity of colour, establishing unities in which both Fauvism and Impressionism acquire new relevance." Such an achievement, one may argue, renders Hoffman an artist at the very centre of the art world, which, in itself, is a mark of his genius as Greenberg (1961:98) asserts. Greenberg thus establishes Hoffman as the centre of

artistic creation as he is not only cognisant of all the latest developments in the mechanics of art but expands and builds on them too.

Together, the *presence* that the artwork asserts and the belief in an inherent evolution in the arts, and painting in particular, render the artist the very locus of meaning and inspiration. It is particularly through his style, which he has formed (as intimated by Kant), that the painting may assert its existence and may thereby generate movement and progress in the arts.

#### **1.4.1.b) Artistic Ontology**

The following are distinguishing features of Abstract Expressionism:

1. brush strokes become defined for their own sake replacing shading;
2. primary colours replace toning;
3. line is defined as a third colour between two other colour areas;
4. the picture plane becomes flatter and flatter.

All of these herald the destruction of naturalistic pictorial space and with it that of the object. The result is that the painting-object assumes a *presence* and reality in its own right, not as a window into another “real” world, but as it is reflecting an ontology.

This *presence* is explained in terms of the use of the medium. Greenberg (1961:128) describes how colour determines form from the inside: “where thick splotches, welts, smears, and ribbons of paint dispose themselves into intelligible shapes the instant they hit the surface...”. More eloquently and grandly in discussing Hoffman’s work, Greenberg says: “His paint surfaces breathe as no others do, opening up to animate the air around them, and it is by their open, pulsating surfaces that Hoffman’s very best pictures surpass

most of Kandinsky's, as I feel they do" (Greenberg 1961:128). He describes Hoffman's work in formalist terms, viz. "unity is attained, if it is attained, by fusion rather than reconciliation, and fusion is itself attained by dint of a heightening of intensity that is without like in contemporary art" (Greenberg 1961:45). There is an acute awareness of the manipulation of paint and its resultant effect that is the painting, which now exists in its ontological form.

Much of what is here defined as Modernist is suggested by the enormous weight given to the status of being, or the *presence* of the artwork (ontology). This *presence* equates itself not so much with violence of colour or shape – it can be there in a quiet Hoffman too – but with "something more pervasive that might be called the picture's concentrated radiance, its effulgence and plenitude as an identity: an identity gained as a result of a complete insistence on the paint-covered rectangle as a dramatically self-contained and involuted statement" (Greenberg 1961:131). Paintings such as *Cataclysm*<sup>18</sup> (1945), *Fragrance*<sup>19</sup> (1956), *Summer Night's Bliss*<sup>20</sup> (1961) and *Wild Vine*<sup>21</sup> (1961) are singled out as being especially powerful in invoking a strong sense of being (Greenberg 1961:136).

By using colour compositionally rather than to describe an object "out there", Hoffman explores the terrain of colour for its own sake. He scientifically penetrates the "purity" of the elements of art for their own sake so that "though colour is the element in which Hoffman is most independent and original, it is simultaneously his chief means of conservation. He could be said to take the easel tradition into regions of chromatic experience it has never before penetrated" (Greenberg 1961:136). The result is that, through his use of colour, Hoffman is able to establish a pictorial order. This pictorial order can be equated with the harmony of the mental powers that Kant spoke

of in relation to aesthetics and aesthetic experience in general (ontology), although Kant himself did not include colour as form. Moreover, Greenberg argues that this harmony of colour is beyond the decorative, as “Hoffman has discovered or rediscovered that colour can galvanise the most inertly decorative pattern into a pictorial entity”– all of which is made explicit, “... in our time, most fully, through Abstract art” (Greenberg 1961:138). “Pictorial entity”, in this context, can be equated with the harmony induced by the *presence* of the work of art.

In Hoffman’s essay, *On the aims of art* (in Goodman 1990), he writes that the picture ought to swing and resound to the rhythm of colour, increased through artistic integration to the highest light of intensity and richness. By, with, and from colour, form is intensified in subordination to “spatial and spiritual unity” (in Goodman 1990:91). In large areas of light and form, the painter achieves a rhythmic animation. In this sense, the medium has its own rhythmic laws, so that “the boundlessness of the spirit can only find material expression within the lawful limits of a medium” (Hughes 1991:121). This is the triumph of Formalism, in terms of both the act of painting and the viewing of painting according to the high claims of Modernist aesthetics. The search for an “essence”, an ontologically real *presence* is entailed by a formalist agenda as Formalism, Greenberg maintains, necessarily leads to Abstract art with its concern with the basic “elements of art” in themselves.

#### **1.4.2.c) Artistic Teleology**

Simplistically, one can say that Abstract painting is a child of Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism and of the influence of the Orient and Africa. Greenberg, as an exemplar of the *avant garde* critic, sees Abstract

Expressionism as having evolved into the apex of contemporary painting, in line with the arguments presented in section 2.3 above where it was argued that painting follows a progressive line until the present point in time.

According to Greenberg (1961:41), the reason Abstract Expressionism is seen as the apex of contemporary painting is because it contains within itself the essence of past art. In this regard, Greenberg (1961:56) sees Hoffman as having digested the works, methods and styles of his predecessors: Matisse, Cubism, Mondrian, Kandinsky as well as the recent American Abstract Expressionists such as Rothko, Still and De Kooning. Yet, he has gone beyond them to find or develop his own style. In so doing, Hoffman has taken the activity of painting further, says Greenberg (1961:67), and his understanding of the medium can be an example for other painters.

Greenberg describes Hoffman purely within an art context. His painting such as *Effervescence*<sup>22</sup> of 1944 “he predicted an aspect of Pollock’s ‘drip’ method and at the same time Clyfford Still’s anti-Cubist drawing and his bunching of dark tones” (Greenberg 1961:100). Furthermore (Greenberg 1961:126):

In *Fairy Tale* of the same year he expanded and deepened a hint taken unawares from Masson ... in a way that anticipated Pollock’s great *Totem No. 1* of a few months later. In the tempera-on-gesso *Cataclysm* of 1945 ... still another aspect of Pollock’s later ‘drip’ manner was anticipated (‘drip’ is inaccurate; more correct would be ‘pour’ and ‘splatter’) ... Most of the pictures are more important as art than as prophesy...

Hoffman is regarded as an innovator in being the first “drip painter”, that is, to use paint in a free way as an expressive medium and thus offering greater

expanse to surface texture via paint, all of which breaks with traditional painting. Greenberg (1961:53) claims that “As far as the ‘history of forms’ is concerned, the main event in post war painting seems to me to be the transition to a newer and looser notion of the easel picture...”, that is, a tendency toward a freer, looser style. These are deterministic innovations as they lead to a far more open, expressive and original style of painting. As mentioned earlier, the whole concept of innovation, originality and generating changes in the traditional use of paint, is specifically Modernist and aids in developing art closer to its ultimate form (expression) – thereby weaving a teleological pattern toward perfection.

#### **1.4.2. Barnett Newman**

In this section, I shall deal with Newman in relation to the three Modernist categories established above, namely the centred artist, ontology and teleology.

##### **1.4.2.1 The Centred Artist**

Rosenberg (1978:176), writing about Newman, interprets the formal elements of his art as precise measurements and expressions, a science. Yet, Rosenberg (1978:176) continues they are beyond science, giving rise to an artistic brilliance, which might be described as having religious significance. Each of his paintings would be developed as the unforeseeable result of activating the predetermined elements of his plastic vocabulary. His rectangles and bands were charged with organic tension – as in a religious rite or ceremonial performance (Rosenberg 1978:91). This “tribal” interest relates once again to the Modernist interest in other cultures and in the

search for a universal, fundamental essence that pervades the human spirit, a deep structure inhering in certain forms that the artist-genius is blessed in discovering and creating. This view carries many assumptions about the artistic process and assumes that the edifice surrounding a hallowed concept of art is on sure foundations.

Newman (in Hess 1970:21) spoke for the modern artist, arguing that he ought to escape the shackles and categories that undermine the *presence* and originality of the artwork. In so doing, Newman attempts to argue that the form and quality of the artwork surpasses that of understanding, explanation and reductionism. This is the general Modernist tendency to elevate art and by implication, the artist and relates to Kant's esoteric notions of the sublime. Hess (1970:22-24) certainly does elevate Newman's art in respect of his capacity to analyse the works in formal terms and thereby to describe the relationships and symmetries as imbued with meaning. He "reads" *Uriel* (1955),<sup>23</sup> *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1)<sup>24</sup> and *Cathedra* (1951)<sup>25</sup> as metaphysical realities, which are written into their symmetries and involve visions of ultimate reconciliation. Newman's *oeuvre* is highly original, requiring a formal analysis that reveals content, but even where construction of narrative content is not clear or even possible, their formal strength of *presence*, I would argue, marks them as paintings of significant harmonies and aliveness. Hess (1970:3) maintains that the vision and skill of Newman are considered responsible for creating such masterpieces, as he does not rely on past painting, but only his inner centre.

### 1.4.2.2 Artistic Ontology

Newman's search led him to a very personal methodology and form. Newman does not think of a line as simply a line: "I think of it as a colour area that activates and gives life to the entire area of the painting. It is not a stylistic device, it's something that for me is more real. It permitted me to see myself and have a sense of my own reality" (in Knoff 1990:51). The ultimate statement of the "being" of the painting is here expressed in that, through the artwork, the onlooker is meant to have a sense of existence, and even life as the artist so intended.

Newman expresses the revelation of his processes as coming to an awareness of the act of painting itself. This type of awareness, not only of the elements of art but of one's relationship with and through the medium, is once again Modernist, because the general understanding that pervades Modernism is an awareness (*cogito*) of the self. In Newman's words (in Hess 1972:67):

To verbalise and articulate what I think the line did to me, what *Onement* made me realise, is that I was confronted for the first time, I suppose, really with the thing that I did, whereas up to that moment I had been able to remove myself from the act of painting, or from the painting itself. The painting was something that I was making, whereas somehow for the first time with this painting, the painting itself had a life of its own...

The last part of the quote perhaps shows that one can transcend one's sense of self through meaningful activity, thus becoming one with the act of painting itself as one participates rather than simply observes. One is in

dialogue, as it were, with the painting's surface, and so the painting has life, or is infused with life. This is the more Romantic strain of Modernism with its concern with release and transcendence, and it explains the fascination with other people and cultures or a Pre-Modern reality which to the Western mind appeared to be closer to nature, essence, or the transcendent self (Jansen 1964:33). For Newman this sense of *presence* of self brought about by the painting was, actually, "a metaphysical fact" (Hess 1972:55) – reality. Painting was defined by its ontological significance or existence.

#### **1.4.2.3 Artistic Teleology**

Newman emphatically stated: "we do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend", because "we are freeing ourselves, independent of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, that have been the devices of Western European painting" (in Rosenberg 1978:52). In this statement, Newman expresses the profound change in the *avant garde* wherein the European artistic and cultural centre gives way to New York. Previously, Europe still derived its images from historical association and the like. Technically, this meant that the Europeans, according to Greenberg (1961:99), were still wedded to sensuous nature, even in the case of Kandinsky and Mondrian who are not considered "purists" by Greenberg, as their geometrical works are the equivalents of trees and horizons. By contrast, however, American Abstract Expressionism is said to have created "truly abstract worlds" (Rosenberg 1978:6) – a virtually clean slate of the imagination. Here Newman felt himself to be "at home", at home "in the world of pure idea" (Rosenberg 1978:9). In this pure world of form, as far removed from nature as possible, there remains a "...memory of the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality" so that Newman aimed to express

a universal sentiment (Rosenberg 1978:97). As Goldblatt (1997:44) says regarding the state achieved in viewing a successful painting of Newman: it is “without a name and nothing to be desired.” All these observations indicate a Modernist bias both in terms of the exclusivity of analyses in formal terms and in terms of the quasi-religious significance attached to the work of art, that is ostensibly devoid of any content “of the world”. One may argue that his work reveals a progressive movement toward the real occupation of art (Woods 1972:18).

The apparently revelatory, metaphysical state generated by viewing certain abstract paintings recalls the Kantian concept of disinterestedness described earlier. Moreover, one could equate Kant’s definition of pure beauty and Greenberg’s conception of “purity” (the refinement of – and consciousness of – the medium<sup>26</sup>) with the type of abstract, metaphysical works embodied by the height of the *avant garde*, Abstract Expressionism. As such, Newman’s work disregards “the flimsy presences that constitute the universe of things” (Rosenberg 1978:88). The result was not treating nature as separate data or abstracting therefrom as, for example, with Cubism but rather “starting from scratch” (Rosenberg 1978:88). *Genetic Moment* (1947),<sup>27</sup> *The Beginning* (1947),<sup>28</sup> *Pagan Void* (1946)<sup>29</sup> and *The Command* (1946)<sup>30</sup> by Newman are all “revelations” through colour, form, and their interrelationships, which have no correlation with nature (Hess 1972:6). Perhaps this is what Kant foresaw when he spoke of the greatest satisfaction gleaned through art as that which could not be pinned to a specific concept. The desire to start over in painting and to innovate formally indicates a strong belief in artistic teleology.

## 1.5 In summary

In this chapter, I have argued that Kant's aesthetics contain certain Modern and Modernist notions. His references to Formalism, his concepts of artistic genius, of disinterested perception, of "pure beauty" and of the reconciliation of both subjective (one's private experience of the art-object) and objective (the common cognitive disposition that is aesthetic) states of consciousness are particularly Modernist. In support of this thesis, Greenberg, who helped to clarify the Modernist agenda, refers to Kant himself, arguing what constitutes quality in art, through his acutely form-based criticism and belief in artistic teleology. Two esteemed artists of Abstract Expressionism, Hoffman and Newman, were briefly looked at with a view to illustrating some of the concerns of Modernism as outlined in terms of the perspectives of Kant and Greenberg.

In the next chapter, I will problematize Modernity and Modernism. In so doing, certain key Kantian and Greenbergian concepts will be brought to task, such as the implications of aesthetics and the aesthetic attitude, Formalism, artistic genius, being or *presence* of the artwork and artistic teleology. Effectively, I will be using a Postmodernist reading to critically analyse and critique many Modernist concepts.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **Deconstructing Modernism in Theory and Practice**

I argued in Chapter 1 that Greenberg (1961:19) saw the “self-critical” tendency of Modernism, as an extension of the philosophy of one of the most well known figures of the Enlightenment: Immanuel Kant. Greenberg called him “the first real Modernist”, referring to Kant’s “distinguishing between the various spheres of knowledge: ‘aesthetic judgement’, ‘practical reason’ (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge)” (in Geiger 1999:371).

According to Greenberg, in all artistic fields, the “high” point of artistic Modernism was characterised by self-criticism, self-definition and the elimination of aspects that had been absorbed and borrowed from other disciplines. Greenberg also argued that Abstract Expressionism is a “high” point in Modernist painting, as an art form that exemplifies Kant’s conception of disinterested pleasure. Greenberg developed further the concept of the radically “pure” and “flat” surface. In Chapter 1, I briefly analysed both Hoffman and Newman in terms of such a Modernist Formalist perspective.

In the following section (2.1), I will explain relevant aspects of Postmodernist theory and its critique of Modernity. The function of this section is to introduce the theoretical underpinnings that explain the material (tangible) features of the Pop and Conceptual art movements. Both Pop and Conceptual Art are good examples of early Postmodernist art movements, if one can indeed speak of “a Postmodernist art movement”.

I have dealt with specific categories of Modernist ideology in Chapter 1, namely artistic ontology (focussing on essentialism, Formalism and universality), artistic teleology (focusing on secular determinism and the *avant garde*) and the notion of the individual artistic genius (viz. the artist as the centre of meaning and expressing inner depth and truth). In Section 2.2. all three of these areas will be critiqued using a Postmodernist reading, by considering two art movements of the 1960's and 1970's, namely Pop Art and Conceptual Art, as illustrative examples. I will demonstrate how Pop Art undermined the usual distinctions between "high" and "low" art, and how it did away with established assumptions concerning the artist. The latter point is also relevant to Conceptual Art, in addition to devaluing the intrinsic *presence* (ontology) of the actual artwork. I also briefly mentioned in Chapter 1 how both Kant and Greenberg distinguished between art and craft, with the former referring to "high" art and the latter to "low" art; this too will feature in the arguments to follow.

## **2.1 Postmodern Theory**

In this section, I give an overview of the ideas that inform Postmodernism. These ideas include: the decentring of knowledge, the contingent basis of knowledge, the blurring of cultural boundaries, the "centred" reader/viewer, the linguistic turn and deconstruction. Each of these ideas in turn show how Postmodernism is critical of Modernism and its ideological stance. Postmodernism is also disdainful of the perennial Modernist search for metaphysical truth. Instead, Postmodernism declares the end of further theories, movements and "isms". Conner (1992:77) claims that Postmodernism reflects a pluralistic, rootless society, where consumerism,

proliferation of media images and a multinational capitalist economy make it unique in history. There is no privileged position, not even that of the artist; there is no new style or world, since individual interpretations are derivative.<sup>31</sup>

### **2.1.1 The Decentring of Knowledge**

In Charles Jencks' *What is Postmodernism?* (1984), he argues that steering away from Modernist universalism and elitism<sup>32</sup> was the defining characteristic of Postmodernism. As we shall see in the following, there is a movement away from centralised authority to decentralised pluralism. There is an increase in genres, which often leads to eclecticism. Hence, there is a movement from exclusion to inclusion, the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life and, in general, the collapse of the hierarchy between that of elite and popular culture.

Derrida amplifies these ideas by virtue of his method of deconstruction, in terms of which he focuses on *how* words say, rather than on *what* they say, that is, language says more than one thing simultaneously. The result is a decentring (where "centre" represents origin, truth, ideal form, fixed point, immovable mover, essence, God and *presence*). Knowledge is no longer perceived as arborescence (tree-like, hierarchical), but rather as a rhizome (having many roots, "and" [inclusive] Sarup 1993:90). This precludes repression, marginalization of others and fixing the play of binary opposites. Western thought tends to privilege one of the pairs that constitutes a binary opposition, but Derrida's aim is to create the free play of binary opposites, in a non-hierarchical way. He is not simply anti-truth; instead, he argues against being a slave to our signs and symbols. One therefore does not speak

on behalf of others, but one gives them a voice. With his method known as deconstruction, which is a form of textual analysis, he shows how other interpretations are possible, resulting in a decentring, non-authoritative and non-hierarchical perspective.

### **2.1.2 Knowledge is Contingent**

The project of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment set itself the task of formulating objective science, universal morality and law, as well as a blueprint for autonomous art. It was to provide for the happiness of individuals and society by controlling natural forces and creating “useful” social institutions (Sarup 1993:93). The Enlightenment, it is true to say, did bring about much positive change. The rise of democracy (the state no longer the defining power, hence no longer the dominant mythic hierarchy), the banishment of slavery, the emergence of liberal feminism, the differentiation of art, science and morality, an increase in life expectancy (truth not dictated by the state, but the rise of science) and the undoing of dominant social hierarchies were all results of the Enlightenment (Tarnas 1991:191). But the domains of science, morality and art became institutionalised and gave way to scientism, cultural imperialism and aestheticism. All these domains came under the control of experts, divorced from life, so that, in the case of art, “art and art criticism form a mutually supportive closed system, cloistered from the exigencies of social reality” (Coppelstone 1985:67).

The task of Postmodernity can be viewed as the integration of the big three – science, art and morals (Wilber 2001:10). The means by which this balance is restored is by the critique of prevailing systems. After “twenty years of

feminist discourse and theory, we have come to realise that ‘just looking’ is not just looking, but that looking is invested with identity: gender, socio-economic status, race, sexual orientation ... so looking is invested with lots of other texts” (Trodd 1998:93). One ought to recognise that there is a politics to looking and selecting, and that our aesthetic sensibility is informed by some-or-other contingent philosophy.

The way we describe and explain what we see is through language. Wittgenstein, the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, concurs with the above as he argues that the way in which language functions is dependent on how it is situated in a specific context. The turn away from the mirror paradigm to one that is rooted in “cultural signs” and the role of language in shaping reality is no better exemplified than in the case of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1889-1951) argued that philosophy can be reduced to syntax. In his early writings, he concluded that language can only function to picture facts, other than which it is meaningless (Wittgenstein 1972:101). Later he derived a different philosophy, as he argued language could be used in various ways, depending on the context, the *form of life* or the currently operating language-game (Wilber 2001:77). Philosophical quandaries are therefore not actual difficulties of reality, but problems of language, which dissolve once we correctly perceive the error in the use of language. Hence reason reflects one’s culture, which is a single contingent *form of life*, rather than an objective standard of truth. As a result we cannot easily specify and define categories, such as that between “high” and “low” culture.

### 2.1.3 Blurring the boundaries between high” and “low” Culture

In respect of the dissolution of boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, Greenberg, in his influential 1939 essay, *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, delineates the distinction between fine art and kitsch. The former is based on aesthetic quality and generally appeals to an elite audience, whereas the latter is mass produced commercial art (kitsch), which is based on marketability and generally appeals to a less-educated audience. To a large degree, his essay attempts to establish the standards by which progressive fine art is judged.

Twenty years later, critics such as Alloway (in Wood 2002:22) claimed that it was no longer possible or necessary to maintain this division, largely because of the explosion in both the population and in the methods used to reproduce and distribute images. Alloway thus argues in the *Art of the Mass Media* (1955) that critics had for too long used criteria established in the area of the fine arts to critique mass culture. He felt that a new vocabulary needed to be established that was more aware of the particulars of mass communication. One of the strengths of mass art, in Alloway’s view, is that it is inherently more open to change than fine art. Furthermore, because it can be reproduced, it has the potential to be ubiquitous.

Alloway did recognise the unease that mass art created, by stating “what worries intellectuals is the fact that as the mass arts spread, they encroach on the high ground” (in Bernstein 1992:87). In this Postmodernist stance, Alloway can be construed as an early advocate of Pop Art. The concept of elitism in art is called into question, resulting in the blurring of boundaries in

so far as what constitutes art. Postmodernism effectively calls into question two centuries worth of the notion of the elite and the elevated nature of art.

Under the influence of feminism and postcolonialism, “high” art is furthermore seen simply as the viewpoint of elite Western white males. Terms such as “taste”, “beauty” and “art for art’s sake” are constructions that express class interest. From a Postmodernist perspective, to say that art is universal is imperialist, ignoring the differential standards of their makers (Pippin 1994:77). Walker (1982:145) takes an interdisciplinary approach, claiming that Postmodernism attempts to undo the Modernist framework. This is achieved by subverting “high” art with, for example, time-based performance art, art on the street or in other environments, and the use of trivial objects and hybrid materials.

#### **2.1.4 The “Centred” Reader/Viewer**

Another way to define Postmodernism is to say that, whereas 19<sup>th</sup> century art was concerned with the artist and early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century art with the work or the text, Postmodernity is preoccupied with the reader/critic and breaks down the form of the art object while enlarging its boundaries. Duchamp, who represents an early break in the modern *avant garde*, said that it is the viewer who completes the artwork (Hopkins 2000:55). According to Mensche (1997:134), “Postmodernism retains the notion of the art object, but redefines it as a site, a crossroads traversed by communication highways continuously routed by external, extra-textual circumstance. Any method which attends only to the art object will prove inadequate”. The focus thus veers away from objects and aesthetics towards a social and cultural interpretation. Norris (1991:37) understands the situation as “an

emphasis upon the essentially plural and diffuse play of meaning across the boundaries of individual works”. The work is not just an object but “the space between the object and viewer – that is intertextuality – resulting in a vertigo of interpretation” (Beckley 2001:65). Interpretation is the order of the day, and not a fixed perspective relating to a static object out there.

### **2.1.5 The Linguistic Turn and Deconstruction**

The ideas expressed above concerning the nature of reality, can be elucidated by the concept known as the Linguistic Turn. The Linguistic Turn, or change of direction, is a phrase introduced by Richard Rorty (1967). It comes from the gradual realisation that a true reality is necessarily mediated by language. Martin Heidegger (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) similarly refers to this concept in German as “*Kehre*”. The Linguistic Turn is also part of Structuralism and Poststructuralist language theory, of which Derrida’s concept of “Deconstruction” is the most influential (Beckley 2001:13). Derrida argues that language is the precondition for any meaningful experiences and thoughts.

I shall briefly describe Derrida’s concept of Deconstruction below, as it describes how language is not a transparent medium. According to Potgieter (2002:26), artists’ growing understanding of language is something metaphoric and creates meaning; it has been fundamental in the shaping of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will deal specifically with the role of metaphor, which marks the relationship between words and objects, in Chapter 3. My discussion at the present revolves around the Deconstruction of Modernist tenets, which are based on language operating on a sub-conscious level. Pop and Conceptual Art bring to light the factor of language (and cultural codes)

within the context of art. This criticises the Modernist canon of art. In addition, The Linguistic Turn is an important aspect of Postmodernist theory, and allows me to be critical of Modernity. In terms of an ontology or aesthetic essence, the appearances of reality are not transparent but require the “veil” of language. Instead of a teleology, language usurps the suppressive inherent logic of visual art. According to Lacan (in Hartley 2003:90), in the case of the artist, the Linguistic Turn gives rise to the notion that one is born into an endless, ungovernable linguistic field. All utterances and statements originate not from the “I” but rather from this unconscious field. The result is a decentred subject/artist as a direct consequence of this “veil” of language.

The language turn recognises that experience and perception are veiled by a membrane of language, so that we cannot describe or even experience reality without recourse to a field of language. One might say that there is no “fact” outside of language, or no “reality” other than that which refers to itself under some linguistic description. To emphasise, Wittgenstein (1958:71) serves as a good example of one who recognised that a simple description of reality assuming language to be a transparent medium is probably inaccurate. In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein proposes an open multiplicity of language games (a cultural *form of life*), each with its own virtues of what counts as a valid or meaningful utterance. Perhaps, then, philosophers can only be deluded if they seek to render language more accurate and perspicuous by measuring its natural imperfections – ambiguity, metaphor, opaque inference and so on – rather than a crystalline transparency of logical form.

Most significantly, what the Linguistic Turn engenders is the idea that art is not an activity that discovers pre-existent meaning. Rather art creates new meaning (Potgieter 2002:88). This vies against “logocentricity” (West 1996:99), the belief that sounds (of words) are mere representations of meanings already present in a given speaker’s mind. According to this philosophy, language affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the word and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation”.

The above implies that the philosophical enterprise is not seen as the painstaking recovery of meaning by extrapolating definite meaning from words that act as expressions of thoughts. On the contrary, there is to be, for the reader and critic alike, what Culler (1983:91) calls “the pleasure of infinite creation”. This means that there is an infinitely creative mode of interpretation, with no fixed points of reference regarding meaning or truth. This represents an ultimate act of resistance not just against logocentricity, but also against Western culture’s commitment to rationality and linear thought patterns. While Wittgenstein (1958:89) saw that the problem that beset philosophers was that of language, he argued that philosophical quandaries could be solved by ridding oneself of the errors of incorrect language use. Derrida (1973:15) is not so optimistic and holds that language outwits philosophers.

To reiterate: if there is no true reality that is not mediated by language, then the idea that there is a one-to-one correspondence between language, thought and feelings is undermined (Potgieter 2002:56). This equivalence of concepts with reality originates with Plato, namely that thinking is

independent of language, or more accurately that language mirrors thinking. Later philosophers argue that no meaningful thoughts and experiences exist without and outside language, in other words, that our experience are mediated, rather than direct. Saussure (1986:100), a key Structuralist thinker, maintains that there are only differences in language and that the relationship between linguistic sign (the signifier) and “thing out there” (the signified) is arbitrary. Saussure (1986:167) states that “in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the differences are set up: but in language there are only differences without positive terms”. Hence it is only the interdependence of terms that produces meaning. In Derrida (1987:93), this view manifests even more emphatically: he says that language is the systematic play of differences, within a chain or system that allows each sign to refer to other signs. The result is creative interplay with no regulation. In a similar vein, Allison (in Harrison 2001:95) writes: “It (a linguistic sign) has meaning ... only because it is different from the other signs that are not presently in use, different from other signs which lie in reserve, which ground or subtend the present speech. The meaning of a word is thus ‘decentred’”.

The result of this “decentring” is that meaning is not pinned down, but proliferates. Words cannot be traced back to original essences or a true meaning, but splinter into possible meanings, depending on their use in a given context. One cannot clearly define reality; only language can, as it were, refer to reality in metaphorical terms. Potgieter (2002:54) thus writes that “all meaning is a metaphoric interpretation of a metaphoric interpretation”, suggesting that Modernist notions of something ontologically particular or teleologically inevitable, are false (Potgieter

2002:54). This inability to define reality precisely is a theoretical concept that I will use in my discussions on Kant and the sublime in Chapter 3.

A consequence of the Language Turn, as indicated earlier, is what is known as Deconstruction. Deconstruction is a concept introduced by Derrida in the late 1960's. It is neither an analytical nor a critical tool, neither a method, nor an operation, nor an act performed on a text by a subject. Rather it resists definition and translation (Honrich 1995:22). Deconstruction can be seen as an outgrowth of the shift of philosophical interest to that of language. Its major influences are Heidegger and Structuralism. In the former case, it alludes to his destruction of ontology. Heidegger argues that time is infinite and as such calls for the destruction of the metaphysics of *presence*. There is no point at which time arrests and is present or itself timeless. Rather, the Structuralist significance is expressed by the system that governs it and the appreciation mobilised by that system. Derrida goes further and destabilises these oppositions. As its name would suggest, "Deconstruction" attempts to critique existent texts, highlighting their weaknesses and assumptions rather than offering a constructive alternative, although the process can have positive outcomes. Deconstruction is thus a further tool that attempts to destabilise secure meanings and metaphysical structures. Consequently art practice and art theory is seen as open ended in terms of process and generating meaning.

In conclusion, I would like to turn to Conner (1992:120) who says of Postmodernists that "they reject foundationalism, essentialism and transcendentalism". They reject intentionality (see Chapter 1, pg 20), "truth as correspondence and representational knowledge" (see Introduction, pg 2), "they reject grand narratives, metanarratives and big pictures of any variety.

They reject realism, final vocabulary and canonical description” (Conner 1992:120). Wilber (2001:178) develops this further by saying that Postmodernism is based on three assumptions:

- 1) reality is not pre-given but a construction, an interpretation as opposed to the “myth of the given”;
- 2) meaning is context dependent and contexts are boundless, and
- 3) cognition must therefore privilege no single perspective.

A consequence of the above perspective is that we realise that our beliefs about the world are influenced by society and that what we conceive to be real is a social and linguistic construct. Reality is a useful fiction or simply a point of view relative to the viewer. As Tarnas (1991:111) believes, what the observer knows and experiences is to some extent a projection of what he perceives. The ideas explored above will be utilised in the following analysis of art, which reflect a Postmodernist discourse.

## **2.2 Deconstructing an Artistic Ontology**

### **2.2.1 Pop Art and the demise of the *avant garde* mentality**

The *avant garde*, to all intents and purposes, does not really deconstruct “high” or “pure” art. The case of Dadaism may be an exception, but even in this case, the *avant garde* mentality is present, being a belief in the capacity of art to transform reality and in the prophetic nature of the artist. Abstract Expressionism is regarded by Greenberg et al as the zenith of *avant gardism*, as it is the ultimate form of individual self-expression (Greenberg 1993:8).

The aesthetics of Pop Art comprises the following according to Russell (1981:13-14):

- 1) The breakdown of the conventions of the picture plane and the use of three-dimensional extensions into the surrounding space, incorporating elements of the actual environment;
- 2) The substitution of industrial techniques and materials for oil paints and a preoccupation with man-made objects as far removed from nature as possible (consumer culture);
- 3) The erosion of previously established hierarchies of subject matter (Mondrian and Micky Mouse are now equally relevant) and the expansion of art's frame of reference to include elements considered until now as far outside its range, such as technology, kitsch and humour;
- 4) The movement away from the private mythologies of Surrealism and the interior monologues of Abstract Expressionism to a more extroverted and impersonal subject matter associated with the urban environment, and
- 5) A greater mobility and flexibility toward art in general, whereby every art situation is more total and inclusive of the simultaneous levels which occur in actual experience.

During the course of this analysis the above concerns will be explored.

Pop Art represents the beginning of the demise of the *avant garde*, and hence a move into a Postmodernist direction as indicated by the above five points. In this section, I argue that the methods of Pop artists undermine the philosophy informing Modernist Abstract Expressionism. I accordingly use Pop artworks, whose express aim is to question art, as examples to deconstruct the idea that the artwork is a sacred object whose *presence* surpasses that not deemed "art". The reason for deconstruction is to show

that the criterion established by Modernist “high” or “pure” art is not necessarily on solid ground, and indeed, as Postmodernists suggest, may be an arbitrary, cultural construction (Milner, Thomson & Worth 1990:82).

Greenberg sees the development toward the specificity/focus of the work of art as a purging. Whereas painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fell under the sway of the other arts, especially literature, painting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century set itself the task of rediscovering what was specific and proper to painting alone (Greenberg 1961:125). In his famous essay, *Modernist Painting*, referred to previously, Greenberg (1982:5-6) clearly expresses his views in this regard: “the task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered “pure”, and in its purity find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence”. The extent to which the artist discovered this purity or essence through his own individual efforts determined his/her degree of success.

To reiterate, Greenberg thus exemplifies the canon of traditional “high” art, which denotes a means of personal expression via a personal style. This relates both to Kant and Greenberg’s emphasis on the unique nature of the artist. As this style is often regarded as unique to the artist, the work is irreproducible. Indeed, much of its value may reside in its authenticity. This idea is contradicted in Warhol’s *Thirty are better than one* (1962),<sup>34</sup> where the artist proclaims that the mass production of artworks are preferable to the creation of unique (“pure”) masterpieces. Repetition undermines the singularity of the painted image and the method reflects a cool, calculated approach as opposed to that of Abstract Expressionism (Greenberg

1982: 60). Repetition is the result of the mechanical process of printing, as opposed to the intensely personal, often very gestural expressionist approach.

As argued in Chapter 1, the artist has traditionally been regarded as a gifted individual whose insights and modes of expression are often inventive and original. Subject matter is frequently profound and idealised. In Pop artworks, like Warhol's *200 Soup Cans* (1962),<sup>35</sup> the subject matter is banal and lacking in "idealisation". What is more, the subject matter is borrowed from mass culture, rather than expressing the unique vision of the mind of the artist. The artist becomes a conduit to the outer world, rather than the source for new and creative images. As such, the work does not reveal the artist's own personal mark making, and instead, the "painting" equalises all areas of the surface. One could surmise that while Abstract Expressionist works ignore the "outer world" in favour of the inner dimension, Pop artworks such as this dredge up from beneath the surface the "outer world" and present it in its stark, cold reality. Pop artworks such as this therefore both undermine art's search for profound subject matter and the artist's role, as the one who forms images of the inner and transcendental world.

The materials of a traditional artwork are generally natural, that is, they are used in a state close to that in which they are found in nature. This might refer to Kant's dictum that a successful work of art appears as if it is a product of nature (Kant 1952:91). In Oldenberg's *Giant Soft Pan* (1966),<sup>36</sup> the medium used is vinyl, which is synthetic and provocatively unlikely in an art context. The "purity" of the artwork is thus compromised, as traditional painting materials are not used. An extension of this is the claim by Abstract Expressionists that their works are inspired by nature. Jackson

Pollock goes so far as to exclaim, “I am nature” (in Lucie-Smith 1977:10), endorsing a kind of dialogue between the way the artist paints and the rhythm of nature. Pop Art, by contrast, eschews the visceral quality of paint and presents a surface replete with materials of consumer culture, cultural codes that seem very different from “untouched” nature.

In contrast to other objects, artworks are traditionally non-functional objects of contemplation. This recalls Kant’s and Greenberg’s appeal as to the special and transcendental nature of the art object and the passive contemplation required by the onlooker. Oldenberg’s *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963)<sup>37</sup> examines the question of functionality and non-functionality by depicting practical objects like the table, in terms of painterly perspective, which is normally reserved for non-functional objects in a painting. Rather than fulfilling the criteria for passive contemplation of a flat surface, this “interested pleasure” of real objects is brought into view and, so to speak, sullies the pure realm of art.

A distinction between traditional “high” art and mass, “low” art objects (outlined above and in Section 2.1.3) may be made by noting that the former are usually permanent and enduring in form, unlike other objects, which are either damaged through use or ultimately destroyed completely by being consumed. Oldenberg’s *Giant Soft Pan* (1966)<sup>38</sup> contrasts traditional artistic forms because of its impermanent form. The aesthetic essence derived from enduring works of art reveals the significant and timeless reality of such art and, what is more, serious abstract art continues that tradition according to Greenberg (1961:18). Oldenberg’s work calls these “high” art values into question – values such as the culture of the masterpiece, the hallowed art

museum that houses the art object and the artist-genius who created the masterpiece.

Moreover, as intimated in Chapter 1 on Ontology, the elevated aura of the traditional work of art is enhanced by being placed in a museum or gallery. The particular placement of the artwork is also important, as traditional sculptures are generally placed on raised bases and paintings are framed, often under glass and hung out of reach on the wall. These factors combine to endow the work with a transcendent quality. Although Pop artworks like Oldenberg's *Pastry Case* (1962)<sup>39</sup> are still viewed in galleries, they stand directly on the floor. This serves to remove the artwork from the rarefied atmosphere usually associated with "high" art and renders the work like any other object that one might ordinarily experience in one's everyday environment.

Traditionally, stress is placed on the artist's craftsmanship or mark as mentioned regarding the unique style of Newman and Hoffman. But paintings like Warhol's *Green Coca-Cola Bottles* (1962)<sup>40</sup> are provocatively and intentionally imperfect. Consequently, a transparent relationship between the artwork and viewer, namely that the artwork is placed in an ideal setting revealing technical prowess to be contemplated by the viewer, is called into question. The result is the subversion of art as elitist, as the artist's style is not necessarily innate, but rather contrived.

Another strategy of Pop artists is to choose for their subject images that have a broader audience than elitist art, as, for example in Lichtenstein's *Wham* (1963).<sup>41</sup> In this work he adapts a comic strip. This immediately means that it has a broad appeal, as opposed to traditional "high" culture. The latter is

supposed to be complex in meaning, imbued with serious purpose and understood only by a select few. A comic strip in the guise of fine art has connotations of superficiality and light-heartedness, regardless of the content it presents (in this case a war plane that has been shot down!).

As stated, Pop art's recurrent iconography is based on real things that are part of everyday life, not just the artist's private world. This includes, *inter alia*, household objects, images from the cinema, images found in the mass media (like comic strips and billboards), food (like hamburgers and Coca-Cola) and clothing: in short, consumer culture. These items are conventionally expected to be excluded from true and "pure" art. By including that which is temporal and impermanent within the "sacred" space of art, the function of otherworldliness, it may be argued, the profound meaning or the formal-scientific exploration attributed to, for example, works of Abstract Expressionism, are compromised. In this way, traditional concepts of art are deconstructed in accordance with Postmodernist theory, which tends to blur the boundaries between that which is considered proper in an "high" art context and that which is considered improper.

Richard Hamilton's work can be defined as popular (i.e. designed for a mass audience), transient (offering a short-term solution), expendable, low cost, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business (Polonsky 1982:32). Such values contradict the claims of Kant and Greenberg that art requires a special aesthetic attitude both in making art and in perceiving and criticising art.

Lippard (1970:80) sketches out the new terrain that Pop art marks out:

The future of art seems no longer to lie with the creation of enduring masterpieces but with defining alternative cultural strategies, through a series of communicative gestures in multi media forms. As art and non-art become interchangeable, and the masterpieces may only be a reel of punched or magnetized tape, the artist defines art less through any intrinsic value of the art object than by furnishing new conceptualities of life style and orientation.

Generally, as the new cultural continuum underlies the expendability of the material artefact, life is defined as art – as the only contrastingly permanent and continuously unique experience (Lippard 1970:12). Art, apparently far from life and now enduring in an ethereal reality, is reintroduced to life and enters into dialogue with it. The aim of doing this is not to simply undermine art. Oldenberg explains: “I have a very high idea about art. I am still a romantic about that, but the process of humbling it is just to test it, to reduce everything to the same level and then see what you get” (in Lippard 1970:85). In other words, Pop artists are not destroying art, in fact, they purport to be doing art, but they are counteracting the rarefied atmosphere of Abstract Expressionist (“high” art).

One can call Oldenberg’s adoption of the banal a democratisation of art. Barbara Rose (in Mirzoeff 1998:27) explains:

[O]ne of the fundamental premises in Oldenberg’s art and a part of his democratic intention, was to give the public some foothold in his art – to reach an audience previously untouched by visual art ... Because his images resembled familiar objects ... his public even from the outset was far larger than that for abstract art. The full message of Oldenberg’s art might be understood only by the *cognoscenti*, but some aspect of it will be available to all.

Thus, by accepting his environment and depicting its banality, Oldenberg posits an art that is unpretentious and down to earth, in contrast to traditional theories of art, which are idealised, elevated and sublime. Oldenberg (in Russell 1981:97-98) states his aims explicitly:

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, etc. ... I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero ... I am for a government inspected art, regular price art, yellow ripe art, extra fancy art, ready-to-eat art, fully cleaned art, spend less art, eat better art, ham art, pork art, chicken art, termite art, banana art, apple art, turkey art, cake art, cookie art..."

Oldenberg thus extols an art that is found in the everyday and simple realities of life, in stark contrast to the dictates of "pure" and "high" art. The angst-ridden image of the Abstract Expressionist artist torn through the expressions of his swirls of paint, had led to a discourse of artificiality and the dissonance of mass imagery disturbing the supposed pinnacle of art.

An ontology of Modernist art considers that an artwork is unique because it "contains" an aesthetic essence, because it is imbued with a certain *presence* and quality of form. The strategies of Pop artists outlined above devalue the very notion of a special aesthetic attitude by blurring the boundaries between fine art and consumer culture and by incorporating technical means other than the traditional ones. This effectively deconstructs a Modernist artistic ontology.

### 2.2.2 Conceptual Art versus Modernist Formalism

Conceptual art offers a new concept of art that differs from Abstract Expressionist art. It also redefines the *raison d'être* of art and does not argue, as do the Modernist formalists, that painting ought to be more concerned with the medium of its expression (or with properties of flatness and the like). Instead, it circumscribes an entirely new terrain in which the artist can work. Modernist Formalism, which was elucidated in Chapter 1, generally works within a given tradition, for example, painting, whereas Conceptual Art is concerned with the very concept of art itself.

From the perspective of Kosuth, a leading Conceptual artist, to be a Conceptual artist, the artist must question the nature of art (in Russell 1981:19). If an artist accepts the conceptual parameters of painting (or sculpture), then he is already accepting the accompanying tradition with its conventions, for example, as to what materials one uses. Kosuth says further that the word “art” is general and that the word “painting” is specific. Painting is one kind of art. Furthermore, if an artist creates paintings, he is already accepting (and not questioning) the nature of art. Formalist critics and artists alike do not question the nature of art, but being an artist now in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, means that one must question the nature of art (Kosuth in Russell 1981:46). In other words, the Conceptual artist stands outside the scope of any one discipline of art and, instead, engages philosophically with the concept of art itself. In contrast, argues Kosuth, formalist critics and artists are locked into a historical framework that informs the particular tradition in which they choose to work.

Insofar as its critical reception was concerned, Conceptual Art was defined from the outset in relation to and in contrast with Formalism by critics like Lucy Lippard (1970). The strategic reason for emphasising dematerialization and anti-objectlessness was the immediate necessity to break away from the formalist terms of the time, that is, from aestheticized art philosophically conceived of in terms of shapes and colours and employed for the good of “superior taste”. By removing the formalist-type experience, it seemed obvious that the condition of something being defined as art would have to be sought elsewhere.

According to Russell (1981:133), originally, Conceptual Art was a twofold enterprise:

- 1) it was concerned with a theoretical examination of the concept “art”, and
- 2) it put forward concepts as art.

The necessity for such an enterprise arose from the crisis in painting<sup>42</sup> and the impasse of formalist and minimalist aesthetics. The emergence of Conceptual Art was also reflected in the iconoclastic *oeuvre* of Marcel Duchamp, whose influence on Conceptual art has exceeded that of any other 20<sup>th</sup> century artist.

The following example will give an idea of some of the issues involved in representation: An early work of the American artist Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965)<sup>43</sup> presented the concept “chair” by means of a real chair, a photograph of a chair and a dictionary definition of the word “chair”. It illustrated the fact that physical form (*qua* Formalism) was not crucial in the presentation of concepts; in other words, Conceptual Artists were not bound to create objects (unless one describes them as “objects of thought”) or to use traditional art media. The chair, then, is not simply a physical chair,

but includes a flat photograph of the chair and the dictionary definition of “chair” (Hughes 1991:231). The implication of this is that one can define reality as multi-dimensional, the visual being one clue to “truth” and itself including various levels (actual chair, photographed chair). More significantly, the concept chair forms a part of our cultural signifying systems (viz. its dictionary definition) and hence its material significance is not necessarily the crucial factor.

Kosuth argued that art was a “language”, that artworks were propositions “presented within the context of art as a comment on art” (in Walker 1982:167), and that therefore each new artwork extended the existing concept of art. His statement, “art is the definition of art,” revealed that Kosuth believed art to be a tautological system. “All art after Duchamp”, said Joseph Kosuth, “is conceptual in nature, because art only exists conceptually” (in Russell 1981:10). This is a view that also questions all past art, so that art is in the object but also in the artist’s understanding of art to which the objects are subordinated. Hence, Kosuth’s famous maxim is “art as idea as idea”. An example of art’s subordination to the mind is Kosuth’s *Information room* (1970)<sup>44</sup> which displays two tables covered with books, mostly linguistic philosophy paperbacks, with chairs inviting the viewer to share in the artist’s reading – the arrangement is not as important as their placement in an art context. Text and meaning thus become the form, not the traditional formal values demanded from an artwork. The abolition of the aesthetic art object eliminates the concern with “style”, “quality” and “permanence”; material and aesthetic properties are secondary and could be dispensed with.

Robert Morris (1990:184), a leading Conceptual artist, made the following statement:

... in a broad sense art has always been an object, static and final even though structurally it may have been a depiction or existed as a fragment. What is being attacked however is something more than art as an icon. Under attack is the rationalist notion that art is a form of work that results in a finished product. ... What art now has in its hand is mutable, which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space. The notion that the work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer holds much relevance.

This statement reflects the ultimate end-point in a Modernist conception of art, wherein sensitivity towards its formal values is a limited perspective; rather, art returns to the mind. Wellmer (1991:217) said: “they can have it (the artwork) just by knowing it”. This had been hinted at decades earlier, when Duchamp rallied against what he called retinal art, as opposed to an art in service of the mind. The form of the artwork is only a means to stimulate the mind, not an object to be venerated and defined purely in terms of the tradition to which it belongs.

Conceptual Art does not have to be purely linguistically predicated (Kemal 1980:21). Indeed, it can eschew words altogether. Sometimes it embodies an abstract idea in a disconcertingly literal way. In 1979, for instance Walter De Maria, under the auspices of the Lone Star Foundation Inc. filled a large West Broadway gallery with 500 solid brass rods, each of the same length. Added together the rods totalled a kilometre and the work was therefore entitled the *Broken Kilometer* (1971).<sup>45</sup> Again, the materials become

secondary to the concept as the idea that is contained linguistically is the primary feature of the artwork.

In Conceptual Art theory there is skepticism regarding autonomous spheres of culture or separate fields of expertise; instead, there is “an imperative to go beyond formal affiliations” (Mensche 1997:73). This is achieved under the rubric of the anti-aesthetic, which is not intended as one more assertion of the negation of art or of representation as such, as is the case with Modernism. It was Modernism that had been marked by such “negations” (for example, Dadaism), espoused in the anarchic hope of an “emancipatory effect” or a “nihilist void” (Mensche 1997:91) or in the utopian dream of a time of pure presence, a space beyond representation. This is not the case with Conceptual Art, however, as all the critics take for granted that we are never outside representation – or rather, never outside its politics. Here then, the “anti-aesthetic is the sign not of modern nihilism – but rather of a critique which destructures the order of the representation in order to reinscribe it” (Mensche 1997:91). Thus, the position of the Conceptualists is not simply to negate formal values, but rather to question them by destabilising them *qua* concept.

Sol Lewitt (in Morris 1990) in his excerpts on Conceptual Art published in the *Art Forum* magazine in 1967 states: “[I]n Conceptual Art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a Conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair” (in Weightman 1973:13). This is in marked contrast to formal art, where the struggle of the artist with his medium is of utmost significance, as is the meaning that this struggle may then engender for the viewer; the process from start to finish is

all-important. The Conceptualist, as theoretically, the Pop artist, might instruct a team of experts to actually do the work, claiming only the immaterial idea for him- or herself. Kosuth (in Weightman 1973:14) says: “Conceptual Art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colours or materials”.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, whereas Modernist art had become a refined and hermetic discourse, Conceptual Art opened it up to philosophy, linguistics, the social sciences and popular culture. The traditional “high”, pure art had led to – or was opposed by – a much more open, inter-disciplinary approach of extra-artistic concerns. As such, a painting, for example, exists beyond its reception as an integrated whole, whose formal gestalt or presence defines its place within a clearly marked field of art. Its ontology points to a concern for aesthetics, while Conceptual Art redefines the project of art-making as one of redirecting the content of art to the mind, and thus to that which is essentially non-retinal.<sup>47</sup>

### **2.3 The Demise of a Teleological Perspective**

The agenda of the *avant garde*, to re-emphasize, was characterized by the search for the new and the original. Whereas in certain instances this resurgent spirit was only meant to develop art further (as with Formalism), in other instances the intention was that the art could produce revolutionary social and political change (for example, with Russian Constructivism and Dadaism [Jansen 1964:103]). The artists of the *avant garde* regarded it as “their task to be the ‘advance guard’ in bringing to fruition a kind of predetermined artistic progress” (Potgieter 2002:49). Their role as prophets of the future (Jansen 1964:245) implies a belief in the existence of an artistic

teleology. As argued in Chapter 1, the formalist track or direction of the *avant garde* consisted largely of discovering the essence of art itself.

However, it can be argued that the formalist *avant garde* became a self-imposed retreat from social realities, in its search for aesthetic autonomy and essence. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Modernist art criticism itself served to support the isolation of the art world from the general public. According to Conner (1992:52), this ivory tower approach meant that they did not make a significant social impact.

Duchamp questioned the concept of “depth” aesthetics by submitting his “ready mades”. I agree with Potgieter (2002:51) who says that the following actions – producing blank paintings, soundless music, books with blank pages, compositions based on chance, erased drawings and so on – “announce the self-realization that no particular aesthetic essence exists.” Added to this list are the strategies employed by Pop and Conceptual artists. The demise of the *avant garde* is tantamount to eradicating the belief in an artistic teleology.

Throughout the sixties, critics announced that painting was at its end, that it had been exhausted, and that it had inevitably reached an impasse (Said in Russel 1981:96). It appeared that subject matter, both naturalistic and abstract, could not remedy the situation. This was as a result of painters denying illusionism; for example, Stella’s early works functioned as whole units; moreover, their thick stretchers made them stand proud from the wall and stressed their three-dimensional objecthood. At this point, the Modernist painter could either revert to pictorial illusion or switch to sculpture (Said in Russell 1981:98). A failure to make a clear choice would lead to hybrid

inter-media forms that were anathema to the formalist critics because they contravened the “purity of media” dictum of Modernist theory. In the case of Stella, it appeared that aesthetics was marked by such a sharp break that painting was on insecure foundations, tending towards sculpture and thus marking a sharp fissure with an aesthetic that existed within the firm boundaries as delineated by the Modernist paradigm.

Furthermore, Minimalist art,<sup>48</sup> the dominant mode of the mid-1960s in America was almost exclusively three-dimensional in form, but paradoxically, it owed little to the post-1945 sculptural traditions. Rather, it developed in response to the impasse that painting had reached. Donald Judd (in Weightman 1973:73), one of the chief exponents of Minimalist Art,<sup>48</sup> explains in his essay *Specific Objects* (1965: 18) that his generation found the basic characteristics of painting – those vaunted by Greenberg – far too restrictive. Consequently, they resorted to the three-dimensional space, because of its unlimited potential, as it dealt with “real space” and therefore avoided the “problem of illusionism”. Judd was however reluctant to call his new objects “sculptures” because he believed that sculpture, like painting, had become a “traditional form”; hence his neutral description “three-dimensional work”. The point here is that sculpture, learning its lessons from painting, did not develop within itself, and it did not entrench itself more firmly within its own discipline. Rather the discipline was subverted and “evolved” along new lines, albeit vastly different from those that were supposed to engender an aesthetic sensibility. This new line (that is, the subversion of the *avant garde*) bordered on the hybrid, in not quite being a painting or a sculpture. This idea of the co-mingling of various disciplines coheres with Postmodernist discourse. The above also relates to the earlier discussion on “impurity” – with specific reference to an artistic ontology –

insofar as there was now an interface between painting and sculpture. Significantly, sculpture did not define its exclusive terrain within which to develop and thus exhibiting a teleological progression; instead it mixed with other disciplines and thus progresses in many directions simultaneously, not simply in a step by step upward fashion.

### **2.3.1 Pop Art and the “fall” of the *Avant Garde***

Perhaps the lack of a clear aesthetic (teleological) evolution in art is even more evident in the case of Pop Art than that of Conceptual Art. In contrast to the Modernist, for the Pop artist, the aesthetic faculties cannot be disengaged from the rest of life. Rauschenberg’s statement that painting relates as much to life as it does to art is by now sufficiently well known to be part of history, and the influence of his attitudes on Pop art has been tremendously important. Throughout his painting career, he has maintained an informal connection with the theatre. In 1963, he performed his first original multi-media piece entitled *Pelican* (Russel & Gablik 1967:93). In this performance he roller-skated together with Alex Hay; both of them had parachutes strapped to their backs, while Carolyn Brown danced in toe-shoes. His performance works usually mix professional, trained dancers with non-dancers (and sometimes even with chickens, birds, turtles, dogs or inanimate objects) in an effort to break down the barriers between art and actual experience. Rather than merely express himself in painting, he breaks with a teleological endeavour to produce a new painting, and finds new materials and methodologies, changing the focus and direction of *avante garde* art and defining a new direction for art, not necessarily an “upward” or sequential one.

In all of Rauschenberg's work, whether it is for the theatre or for painting, there is an "absence of hierarchy of significant experience" (Mirzoeff 1998:113); that is to say, no particular experience is given priority or importance over another. His idea "that there is nothing that everything is subservient to" (in Hopkins 2000:34) has been one of the most seminal in contemporary art (theory). It means that each element has equal importance and must sustain itself in time. There is no climax, only equally relevant details: all parts of everyday experience have equal relevance, not merely as part of a whole. For the Pop artist, there are no irrelevant details. This links with the Postmodernist notion that all parts are interconnected (though perhaps in an arbitrary schema), that there is no centre and that meaning is generated in a specific context with no one feature (or perspective) being dominant (as mentioned in Section 2.1 above). A performance was thus a site or, rather, an event where art and life could interface, without a specific "form" (artwork) being discernable, and hence aesthetics is not the privileged discourse.

Art, according to Postmodernist art movements such as Performance Art, Minimalist Art, and Earth Art, ought to have a manifest connection with the environment. It must act directly on experience, instead of being something that simply stands for it. For example, Oldenburg transformed the place where he paints, his studio, into a store, that is, a total environment, and made saleable objects (mainly food and clothing) out of cardboard, burlap, chicken wire, muslin, paper mâché and enamel paint. Oldenburg accordingly said of his work that it existed "halfway between art and life" (in Hopkins 2000:127), to reiterate the point made earlier. His goal was to establish a new, hybrid art premised on the fusion of theory and practice, "which, as a self reflexive analytical system, would critique the process of cultural

signification” (Brooker 1992:10). In other words, he subverted painting as painting through the act of painting banal sculptural forms. He subverted the concept of art, as he introduced real, common place “objects”. He also broke down the traditional art world, as he converted his actual studio into an arena to sell and market his work, decrying the notion that an artist’s studio was his sacred space alone. This marked a break with the very serious painting/teleology, both in the theory and the practice that characterised Abstract Expressionism. Rather than explore within the traditional arena of painting, Oldenberg subverts the assumptions and goals of artistic Modernism and thus undermines its teleological movement.

Lichtenstein’s *Little Big Painting* (1965)<sup>49</sup> personifies a desire to create a rupture with the past. Lichtenstein’s work is a close-up of an Abstract Expressionist brushstroke. It therefore seems to indicate, on a pre-iconographic level, the spontaneity, directness and brutality of that movement. Such qualities are reflected in the Abstract Expressionist’s working method. As Harold Rosenberg (1978:44) explains, the Abstract Expressionists did not approach the canvas with the intention of depicting something, but rather with the intention of recording their contact(s) with the material. Pollock, for example, believed that the act of painting was an act of self-discovery. As described in detail by Rosenberg in relation to *Autumn Rhythm* (1958)<sup>50</sup> he works spontaneously and dramatically, allowing his body movements to be recorded in the dynamic, sweeping rhythms of paint. Although the Pop artist, Lichtenstein included, appears to have borrowed the style of another movement for the subject of his painting, his means of communication actually contradicts the basic tenets of Abstract Expressionism. Iconographically, the motif therefore symbolises the antithesis of spontaneity, directness and brutality: Lichtenstein seems to

view the Abstract Expressionist's brushstroke of an action painter, like Jackson Pollock, through a magnifying glass. He then reproduces the background of the background version by means of a mass media printing technique. As a result, he exposes the real structure of the solid printing colours. By using different methods to that of their forebears, the Pop artists halt the tendency for expressive, solemn "high" art, and instead offer a new direction to the teleological pattern exemplified best by the Abstract Expressionists and related art theory shaped by Greenberg.

Consequently, his treatment of the brushstroke may be interpreted iconologically as humorous juxtapositions of two conflating traditions: Abstract Expressionism and printing. An overlap of paints and contrasts of colour in the Abstract Expressionist work creates an indeterminate illusion of space. The Pop painting, however, is flat. Whereas Pollock's encrusted surface is expressive, Lichtenstein's smooth surface is impersonal. While Pollock worked freely and spontaneously, allowing the paint to develop as he progressed, Lichtenstein works with a great degree of control, in an effort to achieve a well-crafted finish. Pollock felt his painterly rhythms were reminiscent of natural movements like the ebbing and flowing of the ocean. Ironically, Lichtenstein's brushstroke appears to be machine-made, with great rapidity and ease, but it is actually slowly executed by hand. The Pop artist suggests the loss of intended meaning (of the 'mark-making') through frequent use. In the wit and irony of Lichtenstein's work, he undermines the project of Modernist "high" art and therefore questions the authenticity of the artist himself. In quoting another work of art, he invokes its demise, along with many of the assumptions about the *avant garde* that go with it.

A further argument against the traditional “high”, “pure” art is the example of mass culture kitsch – a cheap mass reproduction of Rodin’s “Thinker” by Warhol.<sup>51a</sup> The copy is kitsch since it distorts the iconological meaning, form and intention of the source. The artist’s original sculpture had been envisaged as a limited edition, whereas the number of potential reproductions is limitless. The medium of the copy is obviously inexpensive, as six reproductions only retail for fewer than five dollars. Rodin’s work, however, is made from bronze, which has traditional, elevated connotations. The visual delight of its surface, its costliness and its grandeur of scale are all rendered insignificant in Warhol’s artwork. Rodin’s sculpture is a means of self-expression, representing a physical manifestation of thought, and it is supposed to be contemplated, not used. But in the kitsch reproduction, the artwork, previously elevated above the level of prosaic practicality, now becomes a functional commodity. Consequently, the meaning of the work is distorted and the once profound work is vulgarised and debased in typically kitsch fashion. Moreover, art is used to comment on other art, rather than simply continue along the path dreamed of by its forbearer. In this self-awareness, lies the self-reflexive attitude of Postmodernism, not the critical faculty of Modernism to entrench the arts further within the boundaries of their own discipline. The question posed by Warhol is whether the work is about art reflecting on art, or whether it is simply mass culture – the question itself blurs the distinction between art and mass culture.

An important category of Pop images is art that makes some reference to other art. In quoting, Pop art attempts to comment on other works of art. This is a form of pastiche and irony. It declares the end of the *avant garde* in that, rather than declaring something novel, a new style, or set of meaning or the like, it halts the so-called “progress” of the arts and pokes fun at its

“triumphant” march. It reveals a self-consciousness that undermines the seriousness and purposiveness of “high” fine art.

### **2.3.2 Conceptual Art Discontinuities (and Beyond)**

Having defined Conceptual Art in Section 2.2.2 above, I will now explore how it undermined some tenets of artistic Modernism with a view to showing how Conceptual Art, like Pop Art, deconstructed artistic Modernism, specifically teleology.

Some of the best of Conceptual Art is rigorous in rejecting everything that is not art and, as Ad Reinhardt was, is totally dedicated to that which *is* art. This is in opposition to the Modernistic sense of the division between art and not-art. There is a desire to guarantee a meaning for art conceptually, not aesthetically. For example, even though Reinhardt worked within the tradition of painting, his art ran along the lines of a formula. He was more concerned with the conceptual nature of painting than with its aesthetic appeal. Thus, he says in his essay, *12 Rules for the Studio* (in Woods 1972:71) that he abhors expressive painting. On the other hand, a Conceptual artist might, for instance, subvert the teleology of aesthetics by introducing banal elements and commercial elements. So, like Pop artists, Conceptual artists incorporate whatever means at their disposal to make art, not being concerned with the methods and example of the Abstract Expressionists or any consideration of teleological progress.

The Postmodernist agenda fuses artistic traditions, such as painting and sculpture, and explores new media of expression. For example, texts, photographs, maps, diagrams, sound cassettes and videos are used to refer

the spectator to happenings removed in time and place from that which is presented in the gallery. All of the techniques and approaches discussed above effectively spell the end of the Modernist *avant garde* and its search for the essence of art, as they define the locus of meaning as not contained in one central art-object or the teleological drive of abstract painting.

There is a new conception of an art-object whose primary purpose it is to serve as a medium for an idea or thought process. For example, in recent contemporary art, such as Installation Art, one would value the material object only as a vehicle for a concept. This is often well expressed with the use of technologically advanced tools of art-making such as computer generated art. These methods disguise the personal “touch of the artist” or the directness of the artist. The artwork may not even be a physical object in the traditional sense. Instead, it might assume the form of patterns of light taking their cue from a data stream emanating from any random computer or television screen (Potgieter 2003:27). Such work is also not bound to a specific site, context or dimension. Furthermore, to own it simply requires downloading it. Jackson (Eksteen in Potgieter 2002:112) argues that, in the light of

the new media technological transformations, a form of violence has been committed to the historicized notion of the art object that destroys the foundations of dominant aesthetic theories grounded in the rarefied image, text, object, or other formal aesthetic structures.

In other words, the new media have undermined the original project of the *avant garde* with its insistent growth within the traditional fields of artistic endeavour i.e. an artistic teleology.

In Conceptual art, there is a dematerialization of the art object. This has been taken to the point where the traditional art object has been dispensed with entirely. We may be presented with a record or communication, which in itself claims to have no interest in either perception or expression. Osborne (1991:55) writes, for instance, that abstraction has been carried to the point where the artwork, as a perceptible object, has disappeared. Many Conceptual artists deliberately make their products uninteresting or trivial from a visual point of view in order to deflect attention from the perceptible “object” to the “idea”.

Kosuth accordingly argues that Conceptual art exhibits non-teleology in relation to Abstract Expressionism. He claims that “ready-mades”, such as, for example Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1914),<sup>51b</sup> exclaim, “I am art because I am art”, in a way that is similar to what Reinhardt said of “art – as – art”. In contrast, Formalist painting announces itself by saying, “I am art because I look like other paintings”. Conceptual Art is therefore tautological, whereas formalist art is not tautological, but typological (that is, “I am because I am like others”). Kosuth argues against aesthetic teleology, as he believed that a painting could never really question the nature of art, because the medium has an in built-in assumption about what art is.

## **2.4 The Decentring of the Artist**

In this section, I endeavour to “decentre” the artist, that is, to undermine his role at the centre of artistic creation. This necessarily entails describing events and developments in the art world at the time. The purpose of such a deconstruction is to break the shackles of *avant garde* thinking wherein the

artist is placed on a pedestal. Instead of considering the artist in his stereotypical role as incessantly compelled to create, I will explore the artist as a Post Abstract Expressionist. Such artists, both Pop and Conceptual artists, work very self-consciously, often questioning the very nature of art or becoming their own interpreters and critics. In terms of the dissertation as a whole, this discussion is intended to deconstruct the model developed in Chapter 1.

#### **2.4.1 Toward a Decentring of the Artist**

As noted in Chapter 1, the image of the artist inherited by the post-war *avant garde* was a fundamentally heroic one. Etched in our minds are the examples of Picasso's changes of style, Duchamp's cerebral dandyism and Mondrian's broad abstract vision. In each case, the Modernist artist can be understood to possess a superior sensibility. This model largely persisted before but mainly after 1945 and is not in vogue in contemporary theory. Photographs of Pollock by Hans Namuth (1954) depict him as haunting and brooding, a prototypical non-conformist. Changes in society have however slowly modulated the sense of the artist's special status. For instance, the cultural value attached to the concept of "uniqueness", was eroded by commodity production and the rise of reproductive technologies (Fabozzi 2002:67). Pop artists such as Warhol adapted his art to the times and were insistent that business art is the "best art" (in Polonsky 1982:76).

#### **2.4.2 The Artist as Critic**

According to Lippard (1970:112), in traditional "high" art the artist is perceived as the inarticulate genius and the critic is the necessary

intermediary between the vexed artist and the public. Conceptual Artists, beginning with Reinhardt, have usurped the role of the critic and thus transformed the idea of the inarticulate artist to that of the competent theorist. Conner (1989a:116) noted in respect of Reinhardt that “there can be no doubt that paradoxically for his claims of purity for his art, his painting and (his) polemical position belong together. Indeed one of the chief values of the painting lies in its provocative implications as criticism”. Thus, the work of art and the artist’s theory surrounding the artwork together constitute the artwork (Conner 1989b:144). The artist did not find his/her centre simply in creating the artwork but required theory in order to establish a somewhat tenuous centre.

It was Kosuth – as a young artist inspired by Reinhardt’s polemics – who called for an explicit merger of criticism, or writing about art, and art making. In Conceptualism, he foresaw the annexing of the critic’s function by an art form dedicated to a theorization of its own existence. His goal was to establish a new, hybrid art premised on the fusion of theory and practice, which, as a self-reflexive analytical system, would critique the process of cultural signification. In so doing, art theory would become part of the artist’s meaning. The artist’s intentions were not simply in the art object itself and, even if they were, the critic did not necessarily have the tools to reveal them, as the artist now was in a position to describe and define his own art. The separation of the artist and the critic had been a defining feature of “high” Modernism. This was now called into question, with the artist assuming the dual functions of art-maker and theorist/critic. The artist could not simply create an artwork and proclaim his/her vision clearly expressed, rather there was an aspect of instability (decentredness) as the artist attempted to write about the artwork.

### **2.4.3 Artistic Anonymity, Aesthetic Indifference and the Death of the Author**

Perhaps the most extreme expression of a boredom with traditional aesthetics is contained in Oldenburg's statement "I am for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways..."(in Varnedoe 1991:97). Oldenburg's vision of blurring the boundaries between art and life results in the "death of the artist (author)" (Barthes 1977:23), as meaning becomes lodged in one's perception: art can take on the texture of life and the artist can become an anonymous by-product of the art-process. For example, Rauschenberg worked with a mixture of procedures and stated that "I'd really like to think that the artist could be just another kind of material in the picture working in collaboration with the other materials..." (in Varnedoe 1991:73). Therefore process was all-important and the brushwork was just another element, just another activity within the process working through the artist and not simply by the artist.

Roland Barthes, in his essay, *The Death of the Author* (1977), building on Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory formulated fully in 1949, writes about the formative stages of human identity formation. Barthes claims that the dawn of self-consciousness in which the subject experiences itself as "other" disproves the idea of a unified "core" to subjectivity. Barthes and other thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida and Kristeva "polemically wielded related concepts in the 1960's to destabilize bourgeois liberal belief in essential, unchanging 'human nature'" (Goldblatt 1997:82). Barthes argued that the text is not a line of words revealing a single "theological" meaning or the message of the author (God), but, as Goldblatt (1997:86) writes, "a

multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” The consequence of his ideas is the empowering of the “reader”, which, to some degree, is at the expense of the ‘author’” (as developed in Section 2.1.4 above). In the case of the visual arts, power was now granted to the viewer, and not to the so-called mysterious centre of meaning, the artist.

Certain artists, aware of the perhaps untenable notion of the Modernist conception of art and in keeping with Barthes’ theory, self-consciously “paint” art and the artist out of the picture. For example, Duchamp “trampled on this holy ground of belief in an individual essence” (Lucie-Smith 1977:176) and in singular meaning by infecting the world of ineffable feeling with a series of clever puns, such as the *LHOOQ* (1912)<sup>52</sup> (which if read aloud sounds like *elle a chaud au cul*: “she’s got a hot ass”) captioning the once chaste and unmustachioed Mona Lisa, and the name he coined for his own female alter ego, Rrose Selavy (Hopkins 2000:33). Such antics disturb the sonorities of the canon of the artistic author with the barbs of sex and slang.

Rauschenberg has a different strategy to Duchamp: He consciously and deliberately paints the same thing twice, *Factum I* (1963) and *Factum II* (1963)<sup>53</sup> In so doing, he questions the uniqueness of the work of art and devalues the myth of the artist who produces original meaningful art. Reality is rendered elusive and as Polonsky (1982:18) observes: “these are tokens of spontaneity; authenticity is placed in quotation marks.”

Mel Bochner notes that “serial or systematic thinking has been generally considered the antithesis of artistic thinking” (in Bowie 1990:132). If the

masterpiece was that single painting or sculpture into which the supreme artistic achievement of a career is compressed, then the serial work offers instead a set of alternatives, none of which takes precedence. By implication, the concept underlying the series or the process was therefore more important than the final object. The result is that with serial imagery the masterpiece concept is abandoned (Coppelstone 1985:68) and, by extension, so is the elevated notion of the artist. This applies as much to the serial images of Warhol as to the dematerialization of the art object as in the case of Conceptual Art.

#### **2.4.4 Re-evaluating the Idea of the “Inspired” Artist**

Following the Structuralist<sup>54</sup> search for a hidden depth or logic pervading the manifest (external) structure (of linguistics or art), whether we look at the Modernist work and writings of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich or at Greenbergian aesthetics, it is always possible to discern the same absolutist goals. What is constant in all of them is an allegiance to the idea that something called “inspiration” or imagination acts as a bridge between the self as a personality involved in the complex and random life of experience *and* the will, the self-identical centre (Finch 1968:99). What imagination provides, it is asserted, is a means of rendering these two aspects as one. As Brancusi said: “I am no longer of this world. I am far from myself, detached from my body, I am among essential things” (in Ferraro 1998:31). In other words, the “pure” realm of art that only the artist is privy to, constitutes a translation of profound ideas into the medium of a particular art. In order to access these ideas, it is believed, the artist enters the realm of the imagination or “inspiration”, an unusual state of mind that then governs his mode of expression.

Duchamp represents a break in this elevated notion of the artist (that is, as the inspired creator) and of the creative process. Instead, Duchamp is humorous and witty. For example, he presents a bicycle wheel upside down on a stool in 1913. His efforts in using the “ready-made” were intended to put art back in the service of the mind. His interest turned from the tradition of painting and sculpture to the challenge of invention. Rather than endorsing a view of painting that required an altered state of consciousness or awareness – as “inspiration” no doubt entails, Duchamp questioned the very possibility that painting could elicit an awareness of “essential things” and engages with the larger philosophical question: What is art? These ideas were developed further by Pop Art’s undermining of elitist art practices and Conceptual Art’s dematerialising of the once sanctified aesthetic art-object and de-emphasising the sanctified touch of the artist.

According to Fabozzi (2002:354), in the wake of Postmodernist theory, this altered concept of the artist, as one who no longer has access to deeper realms of understanding, meant that

knowledge was no longer produced from a centre, foundation, ground, basis, identity, authority, or transcendental competency. Knowledge was dispersed, multiple, fragmented, and theoretically varied. Knowledge was no longer based on continuity, unity, totality, comprehensiveness, and consistency. Knowledge began to be understood in terms of discontinuity, difference, dissemination and differends (the gap between two positions, the space between) [brackets my inclusion].

Although Fabozzi’s statement may appear sweeping, it reflects a generalized constant concerning Postmodernist artistic theory and practice, that is, post

1945. This is aptly expressed by Warhol (Pop Arts' advocate), who has become the myth of the pop celebrity. He replaces tortured sincerity and inner depth with shallowness and packaging. Warhol is ironic and plays with the myth of self-consciously making himself into a myth to begin with, instead of waiting for a myth to build up. Rather than trying to shun the external world of the media and its images or suggesting a deeper vision inherent in the outer world, Warhol lets the outer world into his inner world so there was no conflict. As such, he remade himself in its image becoming machine like, being blank, revering celebrity, the ordinary, money and commercialism. This contrasts sharply with artistic Modernisms' disdain for money and the showmanship of the artist. It also reflects a turn away from "depth" aesthetics.

Warhol's strategy of "shallowness" finds its counterpart in Postmodernist thinkers such as Baudrillard. Baudrillard argues that all one can do in the face of Postmodernist life is to passively surrender to the flow of media, images, products... etc. The result is the death of the real, of sex, (because it is everywhere, no longer personal and private and intimate), of modernity, of soul (the system co-opted all forms of art or entertainment), even power (unlike Foucault, he argues that power is rendered obsolete, made hyper-real through simulations, codes) (in Sarup 1993:45). He goes further to define simulacra as copies of real events or objects, which ultimately overthrows the concept of the true copy which itself now becomes the real. Extrapolating further, one can say that his theory emphasizes surface over depth, surrender over creative inspiration. The result is what is known as hyper-reality, that is, a code around the fact. Reality becomes all too visual (depthless), and there is an invasion of privacy. This is reminiscent of Warhol's repetitive images. The image that was once unreal now becomes

reality. Deep structure, that is, meaningful subject matter delivered by an artist who is supposed to hold and deliver truth, no longer appears to be a tenable notion of art.

The superficial was all that was left to art. Hopkins (2000:106) claims that nothing would be left in the sphere of art except its use as a container for celebrity. He continues that the *avant garde* was consigned to social parody, the world of fashion, promotion and commercial manipulation, that is, creating a new model artwork every ten minutes. Warhol's prints wanted to be glanced at like a television, not scanned like a painting. Warhol produced works that were morally numb, like death filtered through an indifferent medium reflecting the condition of being an uninvolved spectator (Hughes 1991:349-51). Warhol helped to turn the art world into art business and therefore dissolved the traditional ambitions and tensions of the *avant garde*, along with the myth of the artist as a figure that lacked an interest in commercial affairs. This was clearly in opposition to the Modernist *avant garde* artist who would not have considered reducing his art to market forces, especially so since the artist's unique vision could not simply be bartered for or commodified. Abstract Expressionist work after all aimed to be spiritual and, since the spiritual may oppose the material, there was necessarily a tension between the two.

Rauschenberg achieves the dissolution of the artistic personality and indeed, the artwork itself, as discussed above, by bringing together heterogeneous images and technologies. This also seems to throw into question the idea of pure origin or authorship, as images variously derived are placed within the same "painting". Instead of creating his own vision, he manipulates and

distorts images already present, thus working from pre-existent images rather than being inspired to create his own images.

Warhol's work, *Do it yourself* (1962),<sup>55</sup> represents a replica of a children's do it yourself colouring-in book which promises the child that by simply painting the outlined shapes in the indicated colours, a work of art will be produced. The Pop work can be differentiated from the child's game in terms of the creator's intention, that is, it is as an example of "high" art. It satirises the kitsch-like distortion of reality, embodied in the implicit aims of the manufacturer's purpose, which is to persuade the public that anyone can attain the status of an artist. One needs to passively follow a set of procedures without having to find suitable subject matter, including choice of medium and colour as the painting kits are bought complete with paints in the prescribed colours. Technical virtuosity is unnecessary as the forms are already outlined. Moreover, it is large enough in scale to mock the heroic scale of Abstract Expressionism. This contradicts the notion of the original intelligence of the artist and his creation of, at least potentially, a masterpiece.

#### **2.4.5 In Summary**

It was suggested in Chapter 1 that both Kant and Greenberg represent artistic Modernism and the aims of the *avant garde*. In this Chapter, I have argued that both Postmodernist theory and the Post Abstract Expressionist art movements that it informed, have taken Modernist ideology to task, thus arguing against Kant's Formalism. I have argued that Pop Art and Conceptual Art, in view of their artistic strategies, undermined Modernist tenets, such as ontology, teleology and the centred artist. In the case of Pop

Art, these artistic methods or strategies include repetition, quoting, inclusion of mass images and materials. In the case of Conceptual Art, these methods or strategies include dematerialization, a focus on questioning art, fusing of various processes and media. In both Pop Art and Conceptual Art, it was argued, the artist was no longer the artistic centre, as traditional notions of the artist and medium of expression were altered. It was further argued in this chapter that the inter-disciplinary approach that both Pop and Conceptual Art exemplify argues against a teleological “pathway”. Furthermore, the tendency to undermine visual experience, to some degree evident in the works of Warhol and more obviously in Conceptual works, deconstruct any notion of aesthetic presence or ontological being.

Perhaps, I have done an injustice to Kant. In the following chapter, I will investigate a reinterpretation of Kant that suggests that various Postmodernist “moments” pervade his text. I also intend to “rehabilitate” Newman, a leading Abstract Expressionist. I will not re-analyse Hoffman, however, as I think if I can argue for a re-evaluation of Newman, this can safely apply to Hoffman as both artists were described in Chapter 1 as exemplifying Modernism. In sum, it will be argued that both Kant and Newman do not, on all accounts, oppose Postmodernist theory. In this way, the strict polarities of the first two chapters will become rather more integrated. The equation will also become more complex, as the boundaries between Modernism and Postmodernism will become blurred.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **A Re-evaluation of Kant and Newman**

Wellmer (1991:44) makes an interesting point, stating that if there is something new in Postmodernism, it is not the radical critique of Modernity, but the redirection of that critique. Considered in this light, Modernism and Postmodernity do not represent a sharp dualism, but a continuity with only slight nuances defining the contours of each. Ostensibly, Postmodernism and Modernism appear to be poles apart, and this is certainly true given Lyotard's (in Simons 2002:84) definition of the Postmodernist as "incredulity towards meta narratives ... wherein the narrative function is losing its function, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyagers, its great goal". However, even in terms of this definition, one can draw a parallel between Modernism and Postmodernism, in that in the former case it was precisely Modernism's questioning ("of the hero, the dangers, the voyagers, the great goal" [Simons 2002:84]) that marks it off from Pre-Modern tribal and religiously-orientated societies. In this sense, both the Modernist and the Postmodernist are part of the modern. Or, in other words, one might see Postmodernism as one strain of Modernist philosophy and art.

Furthermore, Brooker (1992:90) contends that the Postmodernist aesthetic emerges as an investigative aesthetic of the "sublime" as I mentioned earlier in relation to Kant. He maintains that Postmodernism does not necessarily sequentially follow Modernism but describes its founding conditions, the basis on which it stands.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the demise of the *avant garde* around the 1960's and the concomitant theoretical shift in aesthetics, deconstructed the premises of Modernism. This would suggest that my analysis indicts Kant, apparently a progenitor of Modernist ideology, as argued in Chapter 1. However, my intention in this chapter is to argue that Kant can, in fact, be read as reflecting Postmodernist and Poststructuralist thinking as well. My method is to gauge from his Third Critique instances of what one might term Postmodernist "moments". It will be suggested that Kant's language, that is, the tensions that pervade his text, overlap with Postmodernist concerns. According to this interpretation, we can rehabilitate the narrow Kantian interpretation according to which he falls into the category of an Enlightenment figure of Western Rationalism, inclined to grand totalising, to use Postmodernist verbiage. The other focus of this chapter is a reinterpretation of Barnett Newman. I will suggest a re-evaluation of Abstract Expressionism generally and a reassessment of its meaning in relation to a Postmodernist approach. As such, both Kant and Newman can be shown to move beyond a Modernist categorization. They both appear to be precursors of Postmodernism, for example, in their use of a metaphorical or figurative language, as I will argue. By metaphorical language, I am here referring to the capacity for art to assume an abstract language that invokes thoughts and feelings, unlike the "window" or correspondence paradigm wherein painting simply has a literal/representative function. A metaphorical language in art is akin to the imagery in, say, poetry.

Kant traditionally represents the pinnacle of Enlightenment thinking and Newman that of Modern Abstract Expressionism. Thus, to use these two figures as a fulcrum for my arguments questions the assumptions of the usual understanding of Modernism and Postmodernism, as apparently Modernist figures exhibit Postmodernist features. If I successfully demonstrate this, it will suffice to say that Newman and Kant illustrate that a continuity exists between Modernism and Postmodernism.

### **3.1 The Language Turn and Kant's Copernican "Revolution"**

As explored in Chapter 2, the language turn refers to the idea that reality is mediated by language. One implication of this is that there is a veil of language around us and through which we map reality.

I mentioned in my introduction that one of Kant's unique insights was that knowledge was a product of the human mind (the "observer"), "the operations of which could only interpret reality, and not deliver it up in all its pristine reality..." (Norris 1990:4). The Kantian Copernican Revolution therefore consists in recognising that the mind that attempts to describe, explain and interpret reality is already complicit in that reality. So for Kant, the observer is important to order the world; the mind is active and creative in structuring and perceiving. Knowledge is thus properly called human knowledge: "the knowing subject is never disengaged from the body or the world, which form the background and condition for every cognitive act" (Tarnas 1991:168). This is a striking parallel to Post Structuralism, which focuses on the extent to which reality, including our own being, is constituted by our very acts of trying to use, describe, and understand what is. In attempting to explain reality, we in fact constitute it, and reality is

fundamentally malleable (Smith 1996:70), assuming we can only think with language, which may be the case as we seem to need symbols – sounds and/or signs – to think through. This coheres with the concept of the language turn, as it is through the net of language that we define and in a sense, create, reality. Thus, the Kantian mind turns out to be a linguistic representation of the world.

Since language is one of the central ways in which human beings communicate and make sense of the world, one can argue that Kant is not just saying that human subjectivity is co-responsible for the truth that presents itself to us, but that it is mainly language that is co-responsible for the truth (reality) that appears before us. Kant (1952:153) seemed to realise that language is “alive” and therefore excludes the possibility of a final grounding of knowledge. As he said, “philosophy uses dead and learned languages”. Kant realised the point at which words could not fully explain, describe and circumvent reality, for example in the realm of aesthetics and the sublime. Language cannot fully describe the thought of a representation of the imagination, nor the extent to which an aesthetic idea expands symbolically and metaphorically (Kinnamen 2001:33). The Copernican Revolution of Kant can be perceived as a direct influence on the Postmodernist theories both in its emphasis on language and in its recognition of the limits of language.

Accepting the idea that Kant can be seen as a precursor of Postmodernist thinking, I will argue in the following that Kant need not be perceived solely as conforming exclusively to principles inherent within a Modernist framework.

### **3.2 Kant in Opposition to Formalism**

To be branded a formalist contains the assumption that one's method of aesthetic discourse is a-political. The ensuing criticism is that this a-political stance causes "insidious erasures" (Dillon 1997:3). In trying to omit the political from aesthetic discourse, there is often an attempt to argue in favour of a kind of universalism, resulting in "fashioning subjects and discursive forces in uniform shapes without regard for political and historical specificity" (Dillon 1997:64). If one can show that form is necessarily political, then by implication Kant's concern for form is also political, or he himself may have indicated the relationship.

One cannot simply separate form from political meaning. To the extent that form is inseparable from history, form itself becomes the bearer of political and historical meaning (Jameson 1991:56). Form is never merely formal, never quite as empty (as aporetic, as universal) as Modernist critics imagine. For example, Pop Art, described in the previous chapter, in particular did away with the personal touch and instead used collage elements in order to reflect the society around them and perhaps the lack of interpersonal communication. Form, as the bearer of meaning thus becomes the content of the text rather than the container of contents. Jameson (1991:48) observes that "it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works." The point is that form necessarily entails some content, possibly political, and that Kant himself, it will be argued, alluded to this.

While, on the one hand, we can see Kant as a formalist, a universalist in his wanting a universal substrate of aesthetic experience, he is also, on the other hand, a central figure of liberal agency in relation to ethics and aesthetics. Kant asks, for instance, how it is that we can be both determined by nature and be free (*First Critique*, 1894:66). The answer lies, according to Kant, in the field of culture. In Kant's *Third Critique*, he clearly elaborates the relation between a narrowly aesthetic notion of form – form in a work of art – and the larger “form” of subjectivity – the form at issue in Post Structuralism (Jameson 1991:54). This notion that form is a conduit for a greater awareness of human subjectivity, and not simply an aesthetic play of surfaces, is explored by Kant. He tries to create a bridge between man's agency (his supersensible aspect) and his conformity to natural law (his sensible aspect). That bridge, Kant believes, is made possible in the experience of aesthetic judgement. In both the experience of beauty and that of the sublime, man loses a cognitive sense of the world in order to discover the law of reason within himself, his own “supersensible substrate” (Kant 1955:76). This involves liberation from the cognition of the material world in the “free play” of the mental powers of understanding and imagination in assimilating beauty. In the case of the sublime, it involves the outright failure of the mental powers and cognitive abilities. Insofar as this is the case, form is a means of release to that of not-form. Or, in other words, form is not simply about itself, but about what it alludes to.

A further argument of Kant is that the aesthetic is more than how formal properties cohere with man's sense of harmony; rather, art has a role in the moral sphere. In order for man to be moral, he must be able to realise the moral in the sensible world, for through his coming to realise his freedom, moral obligations arise (Kant 1952:77). With free will comes the idea that

we must act responsibly. Kant (1952:152) talks of taste as making the transition “from the charm of sense to habitual moral interest possible”. This is because taste “represents the imagination, even in its freedom, as amenable to the final determination of the understanding and teaches us even to find sensuous objects a free delight apart from the charm of sense” (Kant 1952:152). Taste, it seems, is supportive of morality in that its necessity tries to strike a balance between free rationality and sensuous nature, which is deemed suitable by the morally good. In attaining that balance, it promotes the possible realisation of moral ends and so gives support to morality. Kant’s point is that art can possess moral significance and moral import because it possesses characteristics, which harmonise with the demands of morality. Although this may sound Modernist, my claim is that Kant was concerned with features of an artwork that are not only formalist such as that engendered by moral considerations. As such, he effectively paves the way to a Postmodernist discourse.

Furthermore, Kant distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime. While beauty is characterised by some or other form, the sublime is formless. Taste can only judge objects possessing some particular form. However, Pillow (1994:109) notes that Kant does not keep this distinction very clear. This is because a work of art gives rise to an experience of the sublime in its presentation, that is, in a beautiful form, and of the unbounded content of aesthetic ideas, that is, its metaphoric import. This being so, Kant’s theory of art and especially of a successful artwork includes both a notion of form and that, which is beyond representation, the formless (Kant 1952:81). Pillow draws attention to Kant’s example of “intertwining foliage” in describing a painting. This description does not capture the complexity of observation of parts to the whole, and rather than settling on the fixed

concept, “foliage”, the imagination<sup>56</sup> plays with and varies its apprehension of objects. Crowther (1985:111) also uses the example of “intertwining foliage” to maintain that we cannot consider it as a formal configuration alone (that is, as a complex of shape, colour, mass, density, line and so on) which does not fully do justice to our complex and creative engagement, that is, the mind’s capacity to see the form in various ways. This “creative engagement” consists of the freedom of the imagination as it relates part and whole, so that, as Pillow (1994:449) notes, “rather than settling on the fixed concept “foliage”, imagination plays with and varies its apprehension of its objects”. As such, it is not the readily perceivable form alone that is significant, but how that form inspires a perception and conception that renders that form precisely not simply that form. In this regard, the form may ascend to that of the sublime, the not-form, as it were. In relation to Postmodernism we may say that the open-ended search that characterises the Postmodern is alluded to by this “not-form”, that which escapes definition.

In fact, Kant considers the main task of the artist to be more than simply finding the appropriate form. For Kant, the work of fine art presents the subject matter of aesthetic ideas within the framework of a determinate formal arrangement, and it is the former that is the real work of the artist *qua* genius.

Kant seems to be saying that form becomes meaningful insofar as it causes the viewer to think of a work of art in many different ways; in other words, form should inspire the faculty of the imagination and reason. Kant (1952:134) explains:

If a presentation of the imagination is imputed to a concept, as belonging to the exhibition of it, and yet it by itself prompts so much thought as could never be comprehended in a determinate concept, and by which the concept itself aesthetically expands in an unlimited way; then, the imagination is creative and thus sets in motion the power of intellectual ideas (i.e. reason), specifically by making reason think more, at the prompting of such a presentation ... than can be grasped and made distinct in the presentation.

Thus, Kant is not simply saying that meaning arises solely out of the harmony of an artwork induced in the mind of the observer. Rather, here he expresses the thought that a concept cannot adequately grasp the aesthetic idea. This is also contained in Kant's description of the symbol. A symbol is a sensible intuition, which refers to a rational idea (or a complex of ideas). Kant uses the example of an analogy, for example, how we might reflect on the comparison between a despot and a handmill. But Kant goes further and argues that a symbol is such that it has kinship over many concepts and that it is thus beyond a concept that can be expressed in words. Kant sums it up thus: "within one and the same artefact the aesthetic idea possesses a sublime interior content recommended to us by its outwardly beautiful form" (1952:156). Kant believes that the success of an artwork is measured in terms of whether the transition from form to content is a smooth one or not. The role of beautiful form is to render reflection on content possible. Beauty induces reflection, so that aesthetic judgement of a work of art involves both a restful contemplation of its beautiful form combined with an agitated exploration of what its aesthetic ideas or content may mean. It has been argued here that insofar as the latter is a significant and an integral part of Kant's aesthetics, one ought to see Kant as not merely conforming to a

Modernist-formalist agenda. Instead, this focus on the open-ended meaning of a work of art equates with Postmodern concerns.

### **3.3 Unity of Beauty, Truth and Goodness**

In Kant's *Third Critique*, through references to the concept of the supersensible, he engineers a reconciliation or unity of nature and morality (viz. the harmony of nature is said to induce moral sentiment), understanding and reason, truth and goodness via judgement and beauty (Crawford 1974:103). This intermingling of categories is Postmodernist in that, as described previously, Postmodernism seeks to disclaim these three separate domains and instead argue for an interpenetration of truth, goodness and beauty. It is therefore also not surprising that Kant influenced the German Romantics, who likewise sought a unity of experience and knowledge, of reason and nature.

Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasised that one aspect of Modernism is its attempt to separate the spheres of human knowledge into specific compartments. Many critics and theorists have placed Kant into that category, thinking that, in his three *Critiques*, he was demarcating the proper province of knowledge (science), morality (practical reason) and art (judgement). This, however, is clearly not the case. In showing a convergence of knowledge-claims and aesthetic-claims, Pillow (1994:20) for instance maintains that, "the conditions met in a valid aesthetic reflective judgement are just the necessary subjective conditions for determinate cognitive judgements, and are thus *a priori* and universally valid". Moreover, the similarity between moral and aesthetic matters lies in the fact that withdrawing from sensuous interest, which is required for moral reason,

is similar to the disinterested stance of aesthetics. In the latter case, it is the way in which *we* engage with the object, not so much the object itself that determines the character of our pleasure. Kant argues in the *Third Critique* (1952:154) that it is this attitude (the contemplative distance or disinterest) that teaches us to love truly (disinterestedly), which is the basis of moral rectitude. In such a way, Kant joins the traditionally separate domains of truth, goodness and beauty.

By imputing moral values to art, as mentioned above, the political is necessarily brought into focus, so that art as a personal activity also has political ramifications. It is not absurd to suggest on this basis that the constant self-criticism and responsiveness to what artists are doing, which was, to some extent, begun by Kant will take us far from the universalising authoritarianism of Greenbergian Formalism. The result, Harrison (2001:90) believes, is a socially sensitive analysis of the “rhetoric of the image” as well as the “poetics of form” while confronting the unavoidable and ultimately determining interconnections between art, culture and politics, sexual and otherwise. As argued in Chapter 2 on the “decentering of the artist”, one cannot separate an individual’s artistic expression from his/her psychology, hence there cannot be an exclusive concern with aesthetics; if there were, the analysis would be distorted or only partially valid.

These interconnections or blurring of categories recall the struggles that pervade Postmodernity in its uncertainty as to the definition of the self or the possibility of any metaphysics. This inability to render reality transparent is in fact reflected in the tensions in Kant’s text. For example, there is a tension in his writing: on the one hand, he writes that there is an inherent moral voice in art (based on human free will), while on the other hand, he is

concerned with the role of nature in bequeathing artistic sensibility (beyond the power of choice) (Kant 1952:63). I think this is a struggle that is difficult to resolve. It is in moments like this where Kant's text cannot be so easily assimilated as Modernist. Kant is saying we can only have a partially true conception of art, because art necessarily involves paradoxes – a moral concern *and* an a-moral, instinctual one (or, in other words, formalist *and* political, psychological dimensions). The contradiction cannot be resolved, and the tension ought to be maintained.

I share with Lyotard (1986:69) the basic premise that in any Modernist (or Postmodernist) society we are confronted with an irreducible plurality of interconnected language games. This is true, for example, in the case of Kant's distinction between theoretical, practical and aesthetic reason (the separate modes of discourse for science, practical morality and aesthetics). In this sense, Kant's Modernist rationalism self-destructs into a Postmodernist twist. For his notion of three separate types of discourse is a striking parallel to Wittgenstein's notion of the pluralism of life-forms. In Wittgenstein's (1958:102) theory, there is the idea of a network of local but interrelated language games and of a continual process by which new linkages occur. Individual systems distinguish themselves or forge connections without the possibility of a comprehensive meta-discourse emerging (whether in the sense of a "grand theory" or an ultimate justification). Perhaps, in terms of the Kantian paradox, he is alluding to the impossibility of meta-theories or discourses.

Kant may also have conflated these apparently different language games, that is, blurred the boundaries of truth, beauty and morality. According to Gracyk (1986:77), Kant differentiated the "cognitive" from the "practical"

attitude in terms of theoretical versus practical reason, and held that the aesthetic attitude is different from either of these. But, Gracyk (1986:214) contends, Kant may nonetheless have thought that the cognitive attitude depends on the aesthetic, the implication being that every object is beautiful. A cognitive judgement requires “determination according to concepts” so that it makes a claim about the objective world (Gracyk 1986:41). A judgement of taste, on the other hand, can be universally valid “without reference to a concept” (Gracyk 1986:49), so that it is not important to know what one experiences to make aesthetic judgements. But insofar as both cognitive and aesthetic judgements may be universally valid, the two overlap, so that “we are conscious that the objective relation suitable to cognition in general must just as well hold good for everyone and must at once be universally communicable, as is every determinate cognition, which certainly always rests on that relation as objective condition” (Gracyk 1986:218). This quote implies that normal cognition rests on the same state of free play, which characterizes aesthetic judgement. If so, simple empirical judgements like “the water is boiling” would not be possible unless the judging subject was simultaneously making a judgement of taste. The point is that one cannot easily separate aesthetic judgement from cognitive judgements.

To reiterate the point I have been making: On the one hand, it is Kant’s *Third Critique* that attempts to generate, carve out and constitute the domain of the aesthetic in its wholly modern signification. On the other hand, Kant’s project in the *Third Critique* was to use aesthetic judgement in order to locate the underlying instability of reason and to try to cross the gulf separating freedom and nature, ought and is. In this light, one can recognise the truth’s revelatory role for the beautiful (Verhaegh 2001:398). The

judgement of taste is not completely general and to the degree that it lacks complete generality, there is room for its enhancement to have qualities of meaning and “aboutness”, and thus, of truth, “for the more specific the enhancement, the more like a propositional truth claim it is” (Verhaegh 2001:378). In this manner, one may suggest that the aesthetic dimension as articulated by Kant, is not an isolated realm disconnected from notions of truth or knowledge-claims. This contradicts the Modernist vision of an autonomous aesthetic dimension. This view is essentially Postmodernist, as the aesthetic is no longer an isolated state of being, but intermingles with other kinds of perception. A Postmodernist may likewise claim that we cannot consider an aesthetic experience in isolation from other kinds of cognition.

### **3.4 The Kantian Sublime and Postmodernism**

In Kant’s *Third Critique*, he deals extensively with the concept of the sublime, which, I will argue, recognises a dimension that is beyond language or description. This further demonstrates why Kant may not essentially or exclusively be a Modernist. According to Dillon (1997:78) the large canvases of Abstract Expressionism with their wild natural grandeur, limitlessness and intense painterly means, seek to express ultimate truths about the individual’s relation to the world. This seems to echo Kant’s notion of the infinite in his definition of the sublime. In Kant’s theory of the sublime he defines the sublime as that which is “absolutely” and “beyond all comparison” great (Kant 1955:88). In the same way that Abstract Expressionists sought to elevate the viewer beyond a constricted sense of the self, the Kantian sublime transcends the mundane self. These are the supersensible aspects of the self previously mentioned, which are beyond the

causal mechanism of nature, beyond the measurable world of nature and which can, through thought, only vaguely comprehend infinity itself. The Kantian sublime can help clarify Greenberg's writings on Abstract Expressionism, but that also bring to bear Postmodern concepts of the sublime.

What Kant's theory of the sublime points to is an art whose primary concern is an interest in the intangible. Therefore, the focus is not simply the delight in form which may constantly shift. Rather, there is an interest in dematerialization (a theme picked up on in Chapter 2) or, in what might be understood as the "representation of the unrepresentable", that is to say, in Postmodernist terms, there is a recognition of the "other" of language, that which escapes description. Kemal (1980:39) argues that Kant's notion of the sublime is Post Structuralist in that the revelation of all representation is insufficient. But the very fact that they give expression to this insufficiency affords such positions the capacity to evoke the sublime; in other words, the awareness of the limitations of language (visual or verbal) means that there is always some aspect that is unsayable or that cannot be visually *present*.

If Kant's theory of the sublime concedes that concepts are inadequate expressions of that which surpasses the sensible intuitions, we might infer from this a denunciation of the idea of *presence* and link Kant to Derrida. Amplifying further the consequences of the discussion on the language turn, Derrida (1987:271) argues, using the example of motion, that there is no *presence*. He writes that "if motion is to be present, *presence* must already be marked by *difference* and deferral" (Derrida 1987:237). We must, he says, '*penser le present a partir du temps comme différence*' (think the present starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and

deferral)” (Derrida 1987:237). As such, the play of differences involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element, which in itself is not simply present (Derrida 1987:42). Derrida (1987:13) states that:

This linkage means that each ‘element’ is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only everywhere, differences and traces of traces.

Consequently, it may be suggested that Kant’s theory of the sublime is a precursor to the thoughts of Derrida, a Postmodernist. This being so, instead of perceiving Kant as simply a formalist within its ideology of *presence* and aesthetic value, we can see that Kant was already struggling with the relationship between the conceptual, the imaginative and the sensible. As Kant (1952:134) himself says regarding the sublime: “the sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense”, that is, it eludes being present. Thus, the Kantian sublime can be seen as a founding condition to the Postmodernist sublime, which emphasizes the limits of language.<sup>57</sup>

Lyotard (1984:148-9) claims that the Postmodernist “is undoubtedly a part of the Modern”; it would be “that which, in the Modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself”. He further states that the Postmodernist sublime denies the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable, but instead is that which searches for new presentations

(Lyotard 1984:154). It does so not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. Thus a Postmodernist writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes and the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to determined judgement, by applying familiar categories to the work or text. I would argue that Kant's dual notion of the beautiful and the sublime reveals a tension, namely between that of a theoretician trying to define the category of the aesthetic and the experience of the beautiful, and of one who recognises the inability to make sense of the ineffable in art or nature, the ineffectiveness of pinning down the activity of reason when confronted with certain experiences, artistic or otherwise.

Pillow (1994:121) argues that contemplation of an artwork's content may be more adequately characterised as an experience of agitation akin to the experience of the sublime, a separate moment from reflecting on the beautiful form (pleasure). This comes about because of the overwhelming quality of the aesthetic idea owing to the imagination, which conjures up a sense of the sublime vastness. This sublime vastness is beyond all concept and provides no unity to the "expanding series of kindred presentations that cause even more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words" (Kant 1952:177).

Lipschitz (in Mirzoeff 1998:66) contends that Postmodernist aesthetics makes visible the impossibility of wholeness or, to use Lyotard's terms, "the unrepresentable in presentation" (Lyotard 1984:90). This, according to Lipschitz, refers to the sublime, which inspires both pleasure and pain, awe and terror in the viewer, a view shared by Kant. The result is that in its "refusal of harmony it instils a pleasurable sense of the very impossibility of

an autonomous, finite knowledge, a singular truth” (Lipschitz in Mirzoeff 1998:63). In this sense, the implication of the Kantian sublime is that it agrees with a Postmodernist outlook in which a multiplicity of interpretations is emphasized i.e. to the extent that the sublime opens up interpretation, to that extent is there a multiplicity of interpretations.

This “multiplicity of interpretations” can be seen to emerge, too, in Kant’s definition of aesthetic ideas. Kant (1952:183) defines such ideas as “representations of the imagination which gives much to think about, but without any indeterminate thought, that is, concept being adequate to it, which consequently no language can completely attain and make comprehensible”. In other words, Kant is pointing to a realm of experience beyond that of language. It is at this point that literal language becomes ineffective and that the analytical philosopher, Kant, concedes victory to metaphorical, figurative language. Only with figurative language can one potentially glean an experience, which defies description.

That there is a domain beyond that of language might sound as if it contradicts the Postmodernist emphasis on the ubiquitous nature of language. It would appear that, when Derrida says that “there is nothing outside of the text” (1987:78), that language takes precedence over the visual. But, in accordance with the discussion above concerning the sublime, surely certain things cannot be put into words, for example, emotion, wonder or experience (as opposed to an idea). However, Derrida (1976:129) is not saying there is nothing outside language, for he also states: “I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search

for the ‘other’ and the ‘other of language’ ” (Derrida 1976:123-4). Derrida’s intention is therefore not to destroy the possibility of a meaning outside of language, but “to distance oneself ... from the habitual structure of reference, to change or complicate our common assumptions about it, which does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language” (Derrida 1976:123-4). This concurs with Kant’s alluding to a realm beyond the grasp of language, and not just an aesthetic haven, as it were, but one that is metaphorical and has moral application. As I have argued, in accordance with Kant and Postmodernism, art has the capacity to invoke a meaning that transcends language, so that language cannot fully describe a work of art and that “form” thus expands into a “multiplicity of interpretations”.

Therefore, it is my view that the Postmodernist sublime is rooted in the Kantian sublime.

### **3.5 Kantian Postmodernist Instances: On Metaphor and “Blind Spots”**

Since it appears as if Kant is saying that the nature of the aesthetic is elusive, then one can see his insights as influencing seminal thinkers such as Nietzsche, whose reflections are key to Postmodernist scepticism regarding Western Rationalism and its search for definite aesthetic principles such as those described by Formalism. In this section, I will show how aspects of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* is replete with certain tensions and allusions that can be read as Postmodernist. In relation to metaphor, for instance, I will argue that Kant recognised the limitations of language and the need to stretch language in order to describe that which is above the merely tactile. This in turn leads to certain “blind spots” in his text as Kant oscillates between defining Formalism and that which has features of Postmodernism.

It appears that Kant is the epitome of the Modernist in trying to argue for an experience that involves a shared universal language, an aesthetic essence that points the way to the often expressed Modernist utopia, that is, a shared humanity (Kant 1952:101). Kant argued that the empirical interest in the beautiful exists only in society, within a context of sociability or humanity. He goes so far as to conjecture that a man abandoned on a desert island would not adorn himself with flowers or beautify his hut, because this refinement would only occur in society, where there would be need for communion and communication with others (Kant 1952:88). This is very different from an *a priori* definition of the lone, individual self, alienated, yet with innate concepts of the good, the true and the beautiful. A shared humanity might exist, therefore, based around social convention or contract, not an inherent universalised humanity. In this regard, Kant veers from the Modernist path.

It will be shown that, rather than revealing the precise limits of reason, Kant appears to be uncertain as to the nature of truth in actually coming to a precise concept of “aesthetic judgement”. Nietzsche (1995:219) comes to mind at this point, where he inquires

What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seems firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

In order to become fixed as truths, metaphors had to become reified into concepts over time, during which they proved their usefulness for the species. I will argue that Kant paved the way for this sort of critical thinking, whereby truths become, at best, metaphorical allusions as the mind was “complicit” (or helped create) truth. And insofar as this is the case, the text or work of art is not an end in itself (a closed work or form), but part of a signifying system, a stream of consciousness, if you like.

One of the possible far-reaching ramifications of Nietzsche’s argument regarding the nature of truth, is that all philosophies become merely the personal confessions of their authors; behind each theory are valuations which help to preserve a certain kind of life. Hence, it is absurd to believe in objectivity or detachment; rather, philosophy has its source in the instinct and the unconscious, which are manifestations of the “will to power” (Nietzsche 1995:45). Interpretation is the order of the day, not revealing an absolute truth. This critique of the project of Enlightenment rationalism reflects Postmodernist thinking as described in Chapter 2. In what way does Kant reflect such concerns? Before I attempt to answer this question, I will embellish further on the nature of the metaphor.

Derrida (1987:189) develops the Nietzschean account of truth and claims that language is metaphorical, working by tropes and figures. This being so, language allows meaning to shift around, resulting in a creative, imaginative and somewhat unlimited diffusion of meaning. This is because, on the one hand, we have no way of analyzing the relationship between literal and figurative language owing to the fact there is no access to a true reality, since there is no reality that is not already mediated by language. On the other

hand, however, this very impossibility of analysing opens up the possibility of an excess of meaning (Potgieter 2002:54). In this regard, Cilliers (in Potgieter 2002:49) writes that meaning is the “effect of play, and not determined by relationships. Instead of pinning it down, the interactive nature of the sign allows meaning to proliferate, to be excessive”. In terms of the blind-spots of Kant’s text, one can point out that, while Kant was trying to conjure a theory of art, he, in fact, seems to argue that this is an impossible task, because art, by its very nature, defies explanation or, at best, only admits the language of metaphor (Potgieter 1999:79).

Potgieter (1999:88) argues that Kant exhibits a Postmodernist metaphoric understanding of art and social change, rather than the totalising, correspondence thinking (see introduction) that is thought to constitute Modernism. In his analysis of beauty, Kant, although perhaps not so very consciously, separates literal language and figurative language. The former relates to the formal aspects of the work of art (style) and the reproductive imagination, and the latter to that of original artistic creations, the ideas and content of a work of art (or the productive imagination) (Dillon 1997:13). According to Kant (1952:175-6), an original aesthetic idea is a “representation of the imagination which produces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, that is, concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get on level terms with or render completely intelligible”. In other words, metaphorical or figurative, poetic language cannot be made clear by literal language. Potgieter explores this further and notes that in contradiction of the above, Kant (1952:183) later writes that:

taste, like judgement in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it orderly and polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance, directing and controlling its flight, so that it may preserve its character of reality. It introduces a clearness and order into the plenitude of thought, and in so doing gives stability to the ideas, and qualifies them at once for permanent and universal approval, for being followed by others, and for a continually progressive character.

In this quotation, Kant now maintains that literal language keeps figurative language in check, so that it does not get out of hand. Kant indicates that there is a creative oscillation between literal and figurative language. An exclusively Modernist-literal language is inadequate as the work of art is not clearly one specific idea or concept, but a “play” of many meanings abound.

Moreover, the metaphoric perspective is set in motion with his distinction between alive and dead languages (Potgieter 1999:80). With this demarcation, he carves out a definite literal sphere and a figurative (read: metaphorical) poetic sphere. The consequence is one of struggle, in a complicated discord to find a reconciliation to bring about a new meaning. In a sense, then, it is the internal working of “live” language that is co-responsible for reality. In this way, Kant adds his name to the list of Postmodernists who seek to define reality as a construction of language and thus rather more akin to an interpretation. The question is, as also queried by Potgieter (1999:89): Why does Kant, who is known for his dry, technical, “dead” language, use figurative/metaphorical language at the end of his analyses of beauty? I refer back to phrases such as “clips its wings”, “makes it orderly and polished”, “directing and controlling its flight” and “stability to the ideas” (Potgieter 1999:89). Why does Kant find it necessary to repeat arguments, previously discussed in detail in literal language, but now in

figurative language? Potgieter observes that perhaps this is because he realises, albeit inadvertently, that language helps to bring about reality, rather than reflecting reality or corresponding to reality. Hence, Kant ends off the section in figurative language, even though literal language may have seemed to have “defeated” figurative language, given his methodical description of beauty and the sublime.

Thus, one can say that Kant undermines the notion of the existence of a timeless, particular aesthetic reality/quality that can be expressed by literal, discursive thought processes. He fails to make transparent the mechanism of art, given his need to appeal to the sublime and his use of metaphorical language. He sets in motion a metaphoric perspective on art and social change. Therefore, in answer to the question set out above, Kant seems to open up a Pandora’s box whereby interpretation, not objectivity, is the order of the day. His metaphorical leanings are can be called “blind spots” in that they posit a conception of art that cannot be theorised completely, at odds with the very intent of his project.

Further tensions that arise in Kant’s text may also be termed “blind spots”. In the first three moments of his “analysis of beauty”, Kant asserts that the experience of beauty distinguishes itself from other experiences by its intrinsic immediacy and with its lack of intermediary aspects (Potgieter 1999:256). For example, the encounter with beauty does not necessitate reasoning, sensuous euphoria, joy in that which is good, conceptual order, charm, emotion, virtue and perfection (Potgieter 1999:256). Precluding all this, no particular, universal aesthetic qualities remain, only a sense of meaninglessness, that asks: what remains behind artistic form once we have abstracted these qualities from it? This is tantamount to Post Structuralism

and its interest in form, rather than allowing something (a depth) behind or beyond the artistic form. Kant (1955:80) tries to overcome this with the idea that beauty consists of the “free play of our mental powers”. Aesthetic judgement is no longer immediate, but is rather a game between imagination and understanding. However, this undermines Kant’s argument, for then beauty, Potgieter (1999:73) notes, is not immediate, but mediated. The consequence of this is that we cannot simply appreciate a work of art as beautiful, without recognising that it is culturally embedded as part of a signifying system or language construct – and such is the concern of the Postmodernist.

In Kant’s section regarding genius, he says: “...where an author owes a product to his genius he does not himself know how the ideas for it entered into his head” (1952:169). Here, too, is a “blind spot” as observed by Potgieter (1999:75) since it is wrong to look for great artists’ inspiration only in raw sensibilities or in unschooled talent. Kant sees this error, as he realises that the artistic genius is not someone who has a “natural” talent to present the centre/essence of beauty, but someone who creates original aesthetic ideas. Kant says that “genius can do no more than furnish rich material for the products of Fine Art; its elaboration and its form require a talent academically trained, so that it may be employed in such a way as to withstand the test of judgement” (1952:171-72). There is a tension in his text between his desire to embrace nature as the sole guide of his art as opposed to nurturing or culture. However, ideally, the work of art must contain soul, which (according to Kant) is the capacity to produce original aesthetic ideas. However, this does not just happen like a bolt from the blue, or by being “nature’s favourite”, as he intimated earlier. Describing the creative process, Kant (1952:180) notes that the form is not, as it were, a matter of inspiration,

or a free swing of the mental powers, but rather a slow and even painful process of improvement, directed to making the form adequate to one's thought without prejudice to the freedom in the play of those powers. Dynamically oscillating toward the Romantic spirit (raw talent) and then toward what one might term a Postmodernist scepticism (nurture, process) regarding the artist, Kant's argument is not always without dynamic struggles or "blind spots".

Furthermore, even in respect of Kant's belief that beauty represents a sphere of human existence that operates separate from the rational and the conceptual, paradoxically, he tried to use rational efforts to explain the internal mechanisms of art and beauty. This is another "blind spot", as argued by Potgieter (2002:99). Potgieter (2002:103) contends that if Kant is able to put into words the ineffable that is beauty, then it would mean that art is no longer ineffable. In other words, if one claims that beauty is transcendent and inexpressible, then it is self-defeating to try to make utterable the meaning and experience that art evokes – at least not in a literal, philosophical manner. And yet, this is precisely what Kant seems to be saying, namely that he did not believe in a centre of art that can be shown with literal language. Hence, Kant held it is impossible to deduct a taste principle: "... a principle of taste would mean a fundamental premise under the condition of which one might subsume the concept of an object, and then, by syllogism, draw the inference that it is beautiful. That, however, is impossible" (1952:141). Further, he adds that it is only throwing away labour to look for a principle of taste that affords a universal criterion of the beautiful by definite concepts, because what is thought is a thing impossible and inherently impossible. In sum: Language cannot be used as a tool to prove forever the structure of artistic endeavour. Perhaps it is for this reason

that Nietzsche (1995:247) said: “philosophy is defined by Kant as the science of the limitations of reason!” Therefore, while a universal aesthetic judgement may exist, Kant concludes that such a judgement cannot be deduced in a literal, discursive manner.

### **3.6 Reinterpreting the Art of Barnett Newman**

Abstraction can be conceived as a language experiment and Newman as the height of that experiment. If this is so, then it can be shown that his works are characterised by both Modernist (a visual language) and Postmodernist elements (the sublime) as abstraction, it can be argued, includes both elements of Formalism and that of the sublime. On the latter point, one can thus connect Newman’s version of the sublime to that of the Kantian sublime. In trying to express the ineffable, I would argue, Newman has formed a language of the sublime. This is very different to a purely formalist analysis. But the language of Formalism is not an end in itself: it leads to the awareness of the abstract language. This abstract language now, as perhaps never before, allows for a spiritual concern. This spiritual concern is a bridge to the Postmodernist in its alluding to the indefinable, sublime content, rather than being (only) a Modernist groping for metaphysical stability.

In this section, I will argue that Barnett Newman, a key figure of Abstract Expressionism, is not simply a Modernist, as argued in Chapter 1. For, in the same manner that I have suggested that Kant was struggling with what may be termed Postmodernist “issues”, in what follows I will argue that Newman too may be considered to reflect a Postmodernist perspective. This is so on two counts: firstly, in contrast to the suppressive a-political formalist stance, Newman was indeed concerned with political matters. Secondly, in contrast

to the formalist approach and its concern for the harmonious interaction of surface features, I will show that Newman's primary interest was profound subject matter and content. I will not focus in detail on the former point but will, instead, concentrate on the latter point, with the implication that the nature of Postmodernist content involves a metaphoric, figurative kind of understanding akin to that which was described above in the Section on "metaphors and blindspots" (Section 3.5) and relating also to that of the sublime (Section 3.4). In other words, one may equate Modernist sublime with Postmodern ineffability. A further implication is that Abstract Expressionism generally need not be consigned to that of a Modernist (formalist) endeavour, hence I will refer to other Abstract Expressionists.

Abstract Expressionism can be interpreted as a political style of painting. The liberal ideologue, Arthur Schlesinger, in his influential book, *The Vital Centre* (1949) paradoxically saw alienation and insecurity as necessary complements of the West's freedom. He writes that this freedom was the only hope "against totalitarian certitude, [because] free society can only offer modern man devoured by alienation and fallibility" (in Hopkins 2000: 11). The fact that Abstract Expressionism can be interpreted as carrying the ideals of the West, vies against a strictly Modernist interpretation where there is simply a focus on form and the language of art, where external forces are insignificant. In these terms, we can see Pollock's interest in psychoanalysis and Surrealism as an expression of man's alienation in a frightened, though free world with the intent to expose the irrational basis of extreme political options such as Fascism and Communism (Hopkins 2000:179).

Most significant, however, is the construction of the argument that Abstract Expressionism, strategically located in the midst of the Cold War environment, came to represent American democratic values as opposed to communism. Art historians such as Guilbaut (in Brooker 1992:251) have argued that in the later 1950's the American government's promotion of Abstract Expressionism abroad amounted to cultural imperialism. The scale of the artworks and their abstract, highly individual nature led to ascribing ostensible political values to these, even though such values might have contradicted an alternative political agenda on the part of the artist. For example while Newman stated about his art that, read properly, his works "would signify the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism" (in Knoff 1990:21), his works were often used to trumpet American capitalism. Ironically, those able to buy and "read" them tended to be upholders of state power.

Such political concerns would contradict a purely formalist reading of art, in that they refer to and incorporate elements beyond the form of the artwork itself, which involves social and historical features.<sup>58</sup> Greenberg, too, did not hide away in his ivory tower of a-political formalist discourse. To complicate matters, Greenberg (1961:369) said that "the main premises of western painting have at last migrated to the United States, along with the centre of gravity of industrial production and political power". With this statement, Greenberg clearly aligns himself with American Capitalistic concerns. He himself resigned from *The Nation* in 1949, because of its communist sympathies and in the 1950's became strongly anti-communist, in line with McCarthyism, to the extent of helping to found the American Committee of Cultural Freedom (ACCF). The ACCF was later to be funded

by the C.I.A.! There is thus a political interest embedded in Greenberg's art criticism.

The political becomes a question of finding the appropriate form. The sheer scale of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1), a 15 foot wide field of solid red broken only by "zips" of colour, becomes a public address, a grand statement. This social, perhaps didactic concern can even be traced to Pollock, who was influenced by the socio-politically conscious Mexican muralists, Rivera and Siqueros (Jansen 1964:199). Reminiscing about the late 1940's when he made his first mature paintings, Newman (in Knoff 1990:88) said that:

the issue in those years was: what can a painter do? The problem of the subject became very clear to me as the crucial thing in painting. Not the technique, not the plasticity, not the look, not the surface: none of these things meant that much. The issue for me – for all the fellows, for Pollock, for Gottlieb – was: what are we going to paint? The old stuff was out. It was no longer meaningful. These things were no longer relevant in a moral crisis, which is hard to explain to those who didn't live through those early years.

This encapsulates the sentiment that Newman and the Abstract Expressionists were not simply satisfied with a "paradise of pure forms", but were politically active and, as I will argue below, immersed in the esoteric nature of form/s. Newman believed that his paintings gave the viewer a sense of personal presence or self consciousness (Knoff 1990:176), and one could find an appropriate political position to match Newman's existential claim for his paintings. As the adage goes: "the personal is political" (in Trodd 1998:77).

Newman emphatically claims, that “the struggle against subject matter is the contribution the modern artist has made to world thought ... yet the artist cannot paint without subject matter” (in Russell 1981:321). Essentially, Newman contends that, without subject matter, art is mere decoration. Rather the aim of art should be to achieve feeling through intellectual content. For example, we find in Newman’s work that even the scale of his paintings were related to Kabbalistic numerological symbolic structures (Hess 1972:43). In the titles of his paintings, there is clear reference to Genesis and to the primal creative act of the invisible G-d. But, while the titles refer to definite religious and spiritual themes, the form breaks the traditional pre-modern interest in this subject matter. One can further argue that it does not constitute only Modernist abstraction and its search for essences (or a meta-language), but also echoes Postmodernist concepts of the sublime. This is so, because his work reveals a totally new and abstract vision unfettered by literal, traditional interpretations of the biblical theme.

This new vision of biblical content is given an expansive, original expression. This profound, perhaps mystical impulse is no better expressed than in his continual repetition of the “zip”. The “zip” is a charged vertical stripe of a particular colour. It may operate metaphorically on a number of levels: A sign of Adam – conscious, aware and upright; a shaft of lightning representing the act of creation; rending of the veil of the temple, or even G-d dividing the waters. A further suggestion by Rosenberg (1978:32) is that the “zip” reflects the power to divide and clinically separate in demonstrating an argument as it divides the canvas in segments, thus suggesting different “sides” to an argument.

It is not so much his non-formalist and spiritual-religious subject matter that make Newman a forerunner of Postmodernism, for spiritual concerns were not anathema to Modernism. The difference is that his abstractions became a language that places him as a forerunner of the Postmodernist sublime. This is characterised by his language's mystical relationship with the Kabbalah,<sup>59</sup> a system that posits the sublime in its conception of infinity. This is echoed in Newman's desire to evoke subject matter, rather than merely fanciful design, and in his striving to achieve what he called in 1948, "an art that would suggest the mysterious sublime rather than the beautiful" (Lynton 1989:238). To this end, Newman was in search of a sublime image, images of the "poetic outcry ... of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void" (in Lynton 1989:253). Clearly, Newman was not a man of trivialities (Knoff 1990). He did not, in the name of a higher purity, renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design, a settling of accounts with the then-current abstract art based on Constructivism and the Bauhaus (Wellmer 1991:7). On the contrary, the abstract shapes he used and his entire plastic language were directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical clarity (Rosenberg 1978:98). However, as opposed to the Modernist vision, this metaphysical understanding need not be concluded with a clear cut theory, for the Kabbalah itself, albeit replete with theory, rests in the (non)foundation of that which is intrinsically unknowable (Hopkins 2000:93).

Nonetheless, Newman is also a Modernist in his search for a spiritual formula for his work. Newman (in Knoff 1990:80) specified, by analogy with the geometrical art of the *kwakiuti* three essentials of contemporary painting and sculpture:

- 1) that its language must be abstract;
- 2) that its dynamic must be “ritualistic will”, not rationality or system, and
- 3) that its end must be vision or enlightenment.

On the second point, one might suggest that Newman’s search for the Unknown is expressed by non-logical methods, echoing, one might suggest, a Postmodernist yearning for the sublime. One can see each of his own paintings brought into being as the unforeseeable result of activating the predetermined elements of his plastic vocabulary – as in a religious rite (Rosenberg 1978:100). Hence, one might describe his formal language as an expression of an “inner kingdom” – the equivalents in paint of a flash, no matter how transitory. It is this “flash” – a revelation of a complete “form” or concept – that has been known throughout the centuries as spiritual enlightenment, that which is beyond the flimsy appearances of the universe of things (Hess 1970:8).

In trying to find original images for the human predicament, Newman strongly states: “we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The images we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history” (Newman in Hess 1970:7). While this kind of statement is Modernist in its belief that a viewer will immediately respond to the new and original essence expressed in his painting, it can also be seen as a necessary step to finding images of the sublime other than traditional religious images, because traditional religious images require some knowledge of the biblical text and hence the reaction is generally mediated by text, not immediate. If they do convince with immediate effect, then the images might be sublime, with an image that is the “self-evident one of revelation” (Newman in Knoff 1990:8) implying an exalted image.

Therefore, Newman did not simply use an abstract form because he had an interest in the purity of the elements of art themselves, but rather because it enabled him to realise his abstract content, the sublime vastness that Kant intimated as he connected the sublime with awe (Kant 1952:55) and it is a Postmodernist sublime as it defies closure, finitude.

Recurring themes in his earlier work make use of the metaphorical symbol of the circle. The circle might represent the void, or the potential of what is, i.e. the pregnant moment. It might have a physical glow or aura, for example in his *Pagan Void*<sup>60</sup> of 1946 (in Hess 1970:9), where the circle is surrounded by a white halo similar to that of his *Genetic Moment*<sup>61</sup> of 1947 (in Hess 1970:9). Newman's circle even suggests a vertical element, as it retains elements of a tree, branch, root or flower-stalk such is the potential of the "kindred of associations" (Kant 1952:56). This, Hess (1970:26) believes refers to the Kabbalah and the concept of the primordial light – the nature or state of the spiritual worlds before the genesis of this material universe. This primordial light is referred to in Kabbalistic liturgy as the white fire, that aspect of the Torah<sup>62</sup> before its concretisation in the clear black letters of the Hebrew script. Although this might sound Modernist with its reference to "aura" and "primordial", it is also potentially Postmodernist; the same Postmodernists do, after all, refer to the sublime, as an "aura" or as something "primordial" that eludes representation (Foster 1996:94).

The following would seem Modernist, but certain Postmodernist themes do emerge, such as the striving for sublime subject matter that transcends man's attempt to structure and explain the universe or only metaphorically (via the play of the surface) to allude to mystical content or feelings. Newman's ubiquitous metaphorical element is his vertical stripe. On one level this

refers to the sense of right place, the beingness of the place where one stands. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1) is a prime example of this concept as it refers to man, according to Rosenberg, who, in working to re-establish the unity and harmony of the universe coexistent with the Divine, acts as the Divine, in the here and now, and aids in the coming of the ultimate reunion. Hess (1972:17) remarks on this kind of religious fervour in his analyses of Newman's paintings. In *Uriel* (1956),<sup>63</sup> Hess looks specifically at the shining pale blue, materialized in layer after layer of paint which stands next to the mud-blood colour, which is more thinly painted, allowing the white ground to shine through. Hess (1972:32) concludes that this form exudes spiritual potency: "The metaphysical presence is opaque, the physical one is translucent. One is eternal, the other transient. One is man's vision – solid, real. The other, his identity – marked by doubts and equivocations". Hess goes on to describe the blue as separated by a black zip from the brown and questions whether this, indeed, is the last gate? Or the last guardian? But, with (perhaps) metaphysically astute eyes, he contends that the blue "pushes through", defining a brown zip and finally the two colours meet at a soft, lyrical edge, for even as the pale blue dominates the red-brown, it does not overwhelm it (Hess 1970:21).

That painting itself is an act of revelation for the artist himself and not only for the viewer is reflected in the fact that Newman objected strongly to Greenberg's formalist interpretations (Abrams in Hess 1970:57). With regard to his first use of the vertical stripe, Newman states: "I don't paint in terms of preconceived systems, and what happened there was that I'd done this painting [*Onement* (1961)<sup>64</sup>] and stopped in order to find out what I had done, and I actually lived with the painting for almost a year trying to understand it" (brackets my inclusion, in Hess 1972:37). One might surmise

that painting for Newman is a critical activity (and not merely a technical one, or concerned with beauty in any defined sense), expressing a desire to imbue a work of art with meaning. This becomes apparent when Sylvester asks Newman: “But for you the coming off of a thing involves a correspondence with an experience outside painting, does it?” Newman replied to this in the affirmative. It is, therefore, no wonder that he gives paintings titles in order to evoke the emotional and intuitive complex that he experienced at the time – they become metaphorical devices that in some way correspond to his thoughts and feelings. Although this is ostensibly a Modernist stance, it also lends itself to a Postmodernist reading in that there is a limit to that to which the painting refers, and an impasse at some point, where there is no clear translation.

Newman’s disdain for form and beauty in and of itself is articulated in his essay, the *Plasmic Image* (Newman in Hess 1972:8). In this, he writes that he finds the Greeks of ancient Athens culpable for deliberately focusing on form and thus setting aside the problem of meaning, unlike their predecessors, the Egyptians. Thus the classicism we inherit from the Greeks is an art of “physical purity”, an empty “fanaticism of refinement”. Beckley (2001:76) claims that, armed with this indictment, Newman charges the Renaissance, 18<sup>th</sup> century Neo Classicism, certain strains of Romanticism and even the arch-Modernists Picasso and Mondrian with sacrificing meaning to the absolutism of perfect creation – and thus buying into the fetish of quality. Instead, form or beauty ought to be a receptacle of meaning and so Newman concludes in the *Plasmic Image* that we must return to the true nature of painting to understand that it involves thought, and that it is the expression of intellectual content. This is both Modernist and Postmodernist: Modernist in its belief in the “true nature of painting”,

Postmodernist in its concern for meaning not only lodged in form. This conceptual bent is most emphatically expressed in Newman's statement: "aesthetics is for artists, as ornithology is for the birds" (in Rosenberg 1978:43). To reiterate the point, namely that the real purpose of art is the creation of content, we can turn to Barnett Newman's famous article, *The Sublime is Now* (1945). In it, Newman indicated that he had pondered the classical literature of the sublime and concluded that modern artists were struggling to regain a genuine sublime subject. This is especially so in an age devoid of efficacious sublime myth, in which painters were trying to reassert the desire for exultation of the sublime, making "the sacred cathedral zone out of themselves and out of their own feeling" (Newman in Rosenberg 1978:22).

The anti-formalist notions mentioned above oppose Judd's (in Weightman 1973:99) formal description of the material qualities of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1). The following quotation puts in perspective the formal analysis of Chapter 1 and its contrast to the current metaphorical description:

It's eight feet high and eighteen long. Except for the five stripes, it's red with cadmium medium. From the left, a few feet in, there is an inch stripe of a red, close in colour but different in tone, a few feet further there is an inch of white, across the widest area there is an inch and a half of dark yellow, almost raw sienna stripe, the colour that was changed. These stripes are descended in sequence but of course are seen once, and with areas.

The description is clinical and does not attempt to delve deeper than the surface features. It has been argued that this is a shortsighted conception of the portend of these images, but the necessary step to seeing the surface as

conveying that which can only be alluded to, never completely expressed or exhausted as one plumbs the surface for depth-features. One aspect of Modernism is its interest in the trivialities of mere surface features, whereas another is its desire to plumb the depths. The difference between Modernism and Postmodernism in the desire to “plumb the depths” is, in the case of the former, that there is a desire to find a metaphysical construct (and a desire to believe in this possibility), whereas with the latter, it is to allow the instability of not-knowing.

Rothko spoke for the Abstract Expressionists when he asserted: “I am not interested in relations of colour or form or anything else ... I am interested in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on...” (in Rosenberg 1978:215). Newman found a way of dealing with these fundamental “states” in terms of the idea of sublimity through painting, because his work explores the tension between the hubris of attempting to represent something which cannot be represented and simply declaring itself as material. One might think that with his superficial affirmation of the two-dimensionality of pictorial space and his lack of stylistic development (just zips, colour fields and switches, and a multitude of repetitions) he can be taken as an exemplar of the formalist tendency in art or reduce painting to a pure essence. But, as I have argued, there are other aspects to his art, given his frequent comments about the sublime and by his observation that “the self, terrible and constant is for me the subject matter of painting” (in Rosenberg 1978:21). I suggest the self he here refers to is the sublime self, the inexplicable self that emanates from the unknown and which cannot be represented or defined.

Both Kant and Newman regard the sublime as residing not simply in the invocation of emotion by overwhelming phenomena, but rather in the sense of revelation, infinity, that arises from such a confrontation (Norris 1990:32). Indeed, this transcendent species of the sublime is further seen as at least partially definitive of the human condition. For Kant (1955:106), it is testimony to our ultimate “vocation”; for Newman the sublimity of the pure artistic act is the authentic “birthright” of our “artistic nature” (Crowther 1985:44). This may appear Modernist in reference to origins, but it can also be construed as Postmodernist in its attempt to rationalise the ungraspable in cultural terms. Lyotard (1986:81), commenting on Newman, says that everything is in the painting – one can only say “ah” or “look at that”, phrases that are expressions of the sublime and of revelation, rather than of detailed comprehension or understanding (1986:55). What Lyotard was referring to here, is that Newman reached an end point in his art beyond which language could not go or reflect upon. Newman had actually found an image for the sublime, so to speak. But in the very act of finding it, language is unable to deal with it and hence there is only the exclamation of an inner seeing, without understanding.

## **Conclusion**

Having defined Abstract Expressionism as an open-ended, self-conscious language experiment, I went on to explain how Newman's work can be described as sublime in being an art of revelation. However, before one reaches a sense of the sublime, one needs to attend to the surface-features. This recalls the idea of a visual thesis or language as that developed in Chapter 1 and Greenberg's aesthetic theory. Rather than remaining within Formalism or even within a quasi-spiritual Modernist framework with its groping for essences and a meta-narrative (physics), I have argued that some abstraction constitutes a rendering of the sublime in both the Kantian and the Postmodernist sense, that is, the idea that that which is presented does not present or capture essences.

In this dissertation, I have been dealing with a re-evaluation of Modernism in the light of my analyses of Kant. For, if there are textual inconsistencies in Kant's text, and continuities in respect of the Modernist and the Postmodernist, then it might be that other Modernist texts or artworks also contain Postmodernist features. These Postmodern features were explored in the early Postmodern "movements" such as Pop Art and Conceptual Art. The far-reaching conclusion is that the changes that took place within Modernism were not imposed from the outside, but instead were the seed for contemporary thinking (even if antagonistic) – all of which had already been latent in these texts and artworks.

There is evidence that Modernism should also be understood as a liberating force, as de-totalizing. If one compares Modernism with the Pre-modern, it is clear that Modernity represents the gaining of artistic independence. This

includes the capacity to conceptualise freely and engage in metaphoric play (Kemal 1980:101). Rather than the hegemony of one grand tradition, Modernity represents the breakdown of period styles into small movements and experiments. Moreover, Modernist art was often marginalized and anti-establishment (i.e. opposing the powers of the day). The *avant garde* was often revolutionary and disruptive. Although artistic Formalism was totalitarian, it is still characterised by endless experimentation with artistic form (Hughes 1991:207). Furthermore, not all Modernist art was formalist with the values of formal distance, an aura of uniqueness and monumental autonomy, but some of it was already giving way to an art that was to be inscribed in the praxis of life, valued for its use and truth and not simply for autonomous formal pleasure. For example, even the highly aloof and “spiritual” works of Suprematism under Malevich, came to be used as a basis for furniture design and theatre costumes (Hughes 1991:303). A balanced view of Modernism ought to consider this reading and, insofar as it does, one might draw a Modernist-Postmodernist continuity. By extension, I would argue that Kant represents a meeting point or interface of both Modernist and Postmodernist ideas.

Whereas Modernism seeks wholeness, a stable sense of presence and observance of the rules, Postmodernism has no preformulated rules and embraces inventiveness, flexibility, and, above all, defends the values of experimentation or “complexification”. I have argued in the previous chapter that Modernist art was in fact replete with an attitude of experimentation and inventiveness and with a political awareness (for example, in the case of Abstract Expressionism) that is usually associated with Postmodernist discourse. Furthermore, I have outlined an approach wherein we can perceive so-called Modernist thinkers such as Kant as not simply

conforming to the ideals of Formalism. Instead, there is a concern for metaphoric play and a recognition of that which escapes linguistic description. In this sense, one might construct the phrase “dynamic harmony” to refer to Kant’s notion of beauty and Formalism, and the phrase “dynamic tension” to refer to the sublime, analogous to a Postmodernist disdain for literal, correspondence theories of language and truth.

In this dissertation, then, I have tried to show that Kant can be reinterpreted to exhibit features of Postmodernist discourse. The same can be said of Barnett Newman and, by extension, of Abstract Expressionism. What are the consequences of this analysis if my interpretation is sound?

The introduction of metaphor as a key concept in art-making and appreciation, allows for an art criticism that delves beyond mere formal harmonies. Potgieter (2002:38) is instructive here as he describes metaphor in these terms:

Surely the space where the visual work of art cannot be written, must be the space where it is most effective, where it does its specific kind of metaphoric work that cannot be done in any other manner. I find it crucial that we acknowledge this space, otherwise there would be no need to make visual works of art in the first place.

It is precisely in this capacity that artworks can stir emotions of the sublime and allude, symbolically and metaphorically, to what Kant (1955:147) called “a kindred of associations”.

Thus one can construct the following equation: the Kantian sublime is a precursor to the Postmodernist sublime, which in turn intersects with Newman's concern for the unrepresentable, the sublime. The far-reaching conclusion is that there is a blurred boundary between concepts and artistic forms designated as Modernist and those designated as Postmodernist.

If this "blurring" is true, the implications in terms of power structures are that we have to recognise that our ideas about art are not necessarily so original or free of that which we regard as past imperfections. A consciousness that the Modernist is included within the Postmodernist or vice versa renders any viewpoint that regards itself as exclusively Postmodernist as being on shaky foundations.

## **Endnotes**

1 Rationalistic philosophies center on the idea that the nature of reality can be understood with the pure light of rational deduction from some basic axioms.

2 Empiricist philosophies are based on the idea that the nature of reality is arrived at via empirical data and that this experience is given to a mind that is, as it were, like a “clean slate”.

3 “With Kant, Modern Philosophy combined the transcendental unity of apperception with the manifold of experience. Modern philosophy was no longer based on a theory of representation – representation to the mind through reason or representation to the mind through experience – but in the linking of transcendental subjectivity and empirical objectivity” (Honrich 1995:353).

<sup>4</sup> This paradigm was the result of an almost religious belief that science could reveal all truths and that everything could be understood by its methods. Otherwise known as scientism, this paradigm can be contrasted with science itself and is based on a belief or faith and is thus an ideology. In Postmodern terms, scientism is based on a grand narrative or myth, rather than on an objective statement of fact (Osborne 1991:56).

<sup>5</sup> One could argue that a new sense of self (viz. of an individual who questions everything and who is no longer at the mercy of the gods) and a discipline of the mind began to emerge at the time of Ancient Greece and the beginnings of philosophy in the West. Postmodernism, in my estimation, is a further development of that self-same search, rather than being a complete rupture with Western philosophy. One could say that the essence of this kind of analytical thinking, viz. what we call philosophy, is skepticism; thus Postmodernity attempts to debunk many of the concepts born of Greek idealist and/or empiricist thought (developed by Enlightenment thinkers), such as, for example, the sacred trilogy: Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

<sup>6</sup> A distinction needs to be made between “Modernity”, Modernisation and “Modernism”: Modernity usually means the events that were set in motion with the Enlightenment, from Descartes to Locke to Kant, and the concomitant technical developments from a feudal–agrarian-mythic worldview to industrialisation and a more rational world view (Wilber 1998:63).

Modernisation “refers to stages of social development which are based upon industrialisation.

Modernisation is a diverse unity of socio–economic changes generated by scientific and technological discoveries and innovations, industrial upheavals, population movements, urbanisation, the formation of national states and mass political movements, all driven by the expanding Capitalist world market” (Wilber 1998: 131).

Modernism is a blanket term for the explosion of new art styles and trends from roughly the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In opposition to Classicism (being the art of the academies), modernism emphasises experimentation and finding an “inner” truth behind surface appearances. In this respect, avant garde experimentation and its anti–establishment spirit overlaps with Postmodernist artistic concerns and methods.

<sup>7</sup> Early physicists posited the notion that the consequences of events could be determined if one had the requisite initial data, so that, in theory science could explain the causal nature of reality. This contradicted the belief embraced by Romanticists, viz. that reality was essentially indeterminate and mysterious (Tarnas 1991:11).

<sup>8</sup> This is so, because, while a particular form might not be aesthetic in terms of its reference to, or its correspondence with, or its representation (mirror thereof) of aspects of the visible world, but rather to certain aesthetic concepts, albeit indeterminate, of the mind. The basic idea is that the form is a visual accord of something fixed or pre-given and is thus still a literal, rather than a metaphorical way of thinking about language, art and reality. One can equate this notion that there is a pre-given Reality to the Greek concept of the Logos (the Word, Mind, Reason, Spirit) – e.g. whether it is a painting said to refer to a god (pre-modern) or to some abstract aesthetic principle (Modern).

<sup>9</sup> Saussure is credited with the idea that a sign is composed of two components: the word (the signifier) and that to which it refers (the signified). The sign is an arbitrary construct, decided by convention, rather than being natural. Signs only become meaningful within a sign system, a language, where the rules of that language give meaning to the manifest content (Sarup 1993:58). The consequence of this is that a text can be understood, because there is a deep structure to language and the relationship between signs. Therefore, the reader can discover a fixed meaning by understanding the language-structure operating through the text. Poststructural thinking (which by some stretch of the imagination can be equated to Postmodernist thinking) goes a step further and argues that the linguistic structure is not fixed, that signs do not have stability and that therefore the meaning of a given text has many possible interpretations. The role of the reader is emphasized and meaning is determined more by the discourse or the type of socially constructed language game (e.g. denotative or moral), rather than by an underlying meaning that coheres with reality (Sarup 1993:73).

<sup>10</sup> Although Nietzsche, together with his contemporaries Marx and Freud, is regarded as having been a significant influence on Postmodernist (and poststructuralist) thinking, all of them can be considered as being “more” Modern in that they subscribe to a grand totalising explanation of reality, which Postmodernist discourse denies / rejects.

<sup>11</sup> Language is described by certain limits, defined by, for example, Wittgenstein’s “use” theory of language or Nietzsche’s skepticism regarding the transparency of the language medium.

<sup>12</sup> Postmodernist discourse contrasts the above ideas as follows: a) critiquing Formalist aesthetics; b) arguing for the rupture and discontinuance nature of art history; c) presenting and creating artworks and writings that involve play, process, chance and dispersal; d) focusing on absence; e) decentering the self and deconstructing the cult of the genius; and f) involving endless surfaces rather than a belief in depth/origins/new beginnings (Osborne 1991: 53).

<sup>13</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis is an interesting phenomenon of modern life. Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, which certainly influenced Surrealism, Rousseau and Abstract Expressionism.

<sup>14</sup> Only so-called “enlightened” Europe was privileged, however, to see and know this truth, that is, to possess the “other”. For example art was collected from Africa and Oceania only to be used and incorporated in Western museums, hallowing the West’s concept of the aesthetic and later appropriated by early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, such as Picasso.

<sup>15</sup> In the fourth moment, Kant defines what he calls a *common sense*, viz. that the contemplation required in respect of taste and in the pleasure of the beautiful is based on that subjective element that we presuppose in all men, since it is necessary for all possible cognition, a basis for all judgements.

<sup>16</sup> Although formalist aesthetics as spelt out by Kant is Modernist, in separating the domain of art from other activities, its link to morality does not undermine the modernist call for “art for art’s sake”, because artists of the modern era – and especially within the Modernist framework (late 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the late 1950’s) – thought they were doing something of universal scope, directly or indirectly related to moral and universal truths, albeit “without the outmoded props and crutches of history...” (quoted in Hess 1970: 65).

<sup>17</sup> The *avant garde* or advanced guard were represented by a number of art movements beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their aim was to advance the state of the arts, at times with social and political implications.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Hoffman, *Cataclysm* (1945). Oil on canvas, 202,8 x 187,2 cm. Signed and dated: “HOFFMAN 1945”. Collection Mr and Mrs B. H. Friedman. (Illustration: Goodman 1990:80.)

<sup>19</sup> Hans Hoffman, *Fragrance* (1956). Oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm. Signed and dated: “HOFFMAN 1956”. Collection Mr and Mrs J. Powers (Illustration: Goodman 1990:84.)

<sup>20</sup> Hans Hoffman, *Summernight’s bliss* (1961). Oil on canvas, 213.2 x 135.cm. Signed and dated: “HOFFMAN 1961”. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Illustration: Goodman 1990:89.)

<sup>21</sup> Hans Hoffman, *Wildvine* (1961). Oil on canvas, 239 x 265 cm. Signed and dated: “HOFFMAN 1961”. Collection Mr and Mrs T. Stilla. (Illustration: Goodman, 1990:91.)

<sup>22</sup> Hans Hoffman, *Effervescence* (1944). Oil on canvas, 249.6 x 561 cm. Signed and dated: “HOFFMAN 1961”. Collection Peter Palumbo, London, England. (Illustration: Goodman 1990:66.)

<sup>23</sup> Barnett Newman, *Uriel* (1955). Oil on canvas, 249.6 x 561.6 cm. Signed and dated: “NEWMAN 1955”. Collection Peter Palumbo, London, England. (Illustration: Hess 1970:24.)

<sup>24</sup> Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1). Oil on canvas, 249.6 x 561.6 cm. Signed and dated: “NEWMAN 1950-1”. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Gift of Mr and Mrs Ben Heller. (Illustration: Hess 1970:28.)

<sup>25</sup> Barnett Newman, *Cathedra* (1951). Magma on canvas, 239.6 x 553.8 cm. Signed and dated: “NEWMAN 1951”. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. (Illustration: Rosenberg 1978:77.)

<sup>26</sup> A refinement of medium uncontaminated by surface texture, composition and drawing.

<sup>27</sup> Barnett Newman, *Genetic Moment*.(1947) Oil on canvas, 98.8 x 72.8 cm. Signed and dated: “NEWMAN 1947”. Collection Annalee Newman, New York, New York. (Illustration: Hess 1970: 55.)

<sup>28</sup> Barnett Newman, *The Beginning* (1947). Oil on canvas, 104 x 75.4 cm. Signed and dated: “NEWMAN 1947”. Collection Annalee Newman New York, New York (Illustration: Hess: 1970:48.)

<sup>29</sup> Barnett Newman, *Pagen Void* (1946). Oil on canvas, 85.8 x 98.8 cm. Signed and dated: "NEWMAN 1946". Collection Annalee Newman, New York, New York. (Illustration: Rosenberg 1978:33.)

<sup>30</sup> Barnett Newman, *The Command* (1946). Oil on canvas, 124 x 93 cm. Signed and dated: "NEWMAN 1946". Collection Annalee Newman, New York, New York. (Illustration: Hess 1970:41.)

<sup>31</sup> Fundamentally, Nietzsche reacted to the Enlightenment values of truth and value. Instead he erased "knowing" – preaching the "death of God" and Dionysus as the model for human standards. According to the sceptic Nietzsche, there is no single physical reality beyond our interpretations, but only perspectives, thus relativising epistemology.

<sup>32</sup> That is, to think you have found a universal essence to mankind can be an elitist cultural or ideological stance subsuming all peoples under one overriding concept or theory.

<sup>33</sup> Teleology, scientific determinism and positivism would be the main offshoots of Modernist linear thought patterns.

<sup>34</sup> Andy Warhol, *Thirty Are Better Than One* (1960). Synthetic polymer paint silk screened on canvas, 279.4 x 208.3 cm. Signed and dated "WARHOL 1960". Collection Mr and Mrs Peter M. Brant, Greenwich, Connecticut. (Illustration: Hughes: 1991:81.)

<sup>35</sup> Andy Warhol, *200 Soup Cans* (1962). Silkscreen on canvas, 182.9 x 254 cm. Signed and dated "WARHOL 1962". Collection Kimiko and John Powers, Aspen, Colorado. (Illustration: Hughes 1991:83.)

<sup>36</sup> Claus Oldenberg, *Giant Soft Pan* (1966). Vinyl filled with foam rubber; wood; metal; plastic tubing, 304 cm high x 148.9 cm wide x 155.6 cm deep, cord and plug, 728.1 cm long. Signed and dated "OLDENBERG 1966". The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Illustration: Polonsky 1982:171).

<sup>37</sup> Claus Oldenberg, *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963). Vinyl filled with foam rubber, wood, metal, plastic tubing, 304 cm high x 149 cm wide x 156 cm deep. Signed and dated "OLDENBERG 1963". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Illustration Polonsky 1982:166.)

<sup>38</sup> see note 36.

<sup>39</sup> Claus Oldenberg, *Pastry Case* (1962). Burlap soaked in plaster painted in enamel; plates; in glass and metal showcase, 52.7 cm high x 76.5 cm wide x 37.5 cm deep. Signed and dated "OLDENBERG 1962". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. (Illustration: Polonsky 1982:167.)

<sup>40</sup> Andy Warhol, *Green Coca Cola Bottles* (1962). Oil on canvas, 85 x 46 cm. Signed and dated "WARHOL 1962". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Illustration: Polonsky 1982:160.)

<sup>41</sup> Roy Lichtenstein, *Wham!* (1963). Magna on two canvas panels, 170 x 120 cm. Signed and dated "LICHTENSTEIN 1963". The Tate Gallery, London. (Illustration: Hughes 1991: 103.)

<sup>42</sup> The crisis in painting refers to the seeming finality to painting, that, as it were, there was no further vista to reach or subject to paint.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Multimedia assemblage/installation. Signed and dated "KOSUTH 1965". Whitney Museum of Art, Connecticut. (Illustration: Godfrey 1998:99.)

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *Information Room* (1970). Multimedia assemblage/installation. Signed and dated "KOSUTH 1970". Whitney Museum of Art, Connecticut. (Illustration: Godfrey 1998:104.)

<sup>45</sup> Walter de' Maria, *Broken Kilometer* (1971). Multimedia installation, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Signed and dated "de' Maria". (Illustration: Godfrey 1998: 1130.)

<sup>46</sup> Other work of the 1960's and 1970's included body sculpture or performance art, street art and events, earthworks and process art. Some critics and artists place this whole area of activity within the category of Conceptual Art, which owes much to Duchamp, frequently via John Cage, as it extols "visual indifference" (Duchamp's phrase in Buskirk 1996: 42) and chance rationally-planned for, while extending the boundaries of art and getting rid of the buyable, sellable object. The form cannot be owned as in the case of body art, or the temporal nature of earth art and performance art, hence concept predominates over materials and structure.

<sup>47</sup> Earth art is both conceptual and perceptual, that is, it is perceptual for the person(s) actually seeing it, but for the rest of us it can only exist in our minds – unless the experience is shared graphically, as "is certainly the case with Robert Smithson's evocative film, a work in its own right, about the Spiral Jetty" (Wood 2002: 48). But as a record of a spectacularly beautiful event, it would be difficult to surpass the film made of Christo raising his 200 000 square foot, bright orange Valley Curtain across a 1250 foot span of land in Colorado. The art object was not the curtain, but the process, the event and the preparation for it and in fact its entire history. Christo makes his art about and of daily life; the film makes this concept clear. Thus, again, the work is lodged in an entire process, not in one real object or expression

<sup>48</sup> Greenberg considered Minimalism not as art, but rather "like a door, a table, a sheet of paper" (Greenberg 1993: 43). Whereas Modernism has frequently invoked the artist's inner "depths" as a bulwark against an alienating external world, a new "depthlessness" seemed to haunt Minimalist art. Instead of surface revealing depth (Greenberg's "all surface" kind of rhetoric revealing an inner depth), there seemed to be just the shallowness of the surface and the paint. Artists now manipulated visual surfaces and codes, assuming that their sensibilities were formed out of representations rather than "prior" to them in any sense. Postmodernist movements or late Modernist movements inverted the very tenets of Modernism.

<sup>49</sup> Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Big Painting* (1965). Oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm. Signed and dated "LICHTENSTEIN 1965". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Illustration: Hughes 1991:162.)

<sup>50</sup> Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm* (1950). Oil on canvas, 198 x 320 cm. Signed and dated "POLLOCK 1950". Metropolitan museum of art. (Illustration: Jansen 1964:204.).

<sup>51a</sup> Andy Warhol, *Thinker* (1961). Signed and dated "WARHOL 1961". Mixed media sculpture, Metropolitan museum of art, New York. (Illustration: Polonsky 1982: 167.)

<sup>51b</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1914). 61cm high. Signed and dated "DUCHAMP R MUTT 1914". Ready-made, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. (Illustration: Jansen 1964: 195.)

<sup>52</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *LHOQQ* (1912). 68 X 75 cm. Signed and dated "DUCHAMP 1912" Assisted ready-made. Print on the Mona Lisa. Yale University art gallery. (Illustration: Hughes 1991: 88.)

<sup>53</sup> Robert Rauschenberg, *Factum I and Factum II* (1963). 80 x 34 cm x 2. Oil and enamel on canvas. Signed and dated "RAUSHENBERG 1963". Mr and Mrs Tinus collection, California. (Illustration: Polonsky 1982:171.)

<sup>54</sup> In simple terms, Structuralism argues that there is a stable structure to language, where a given element has meaning in terms of the whole structure and also that there is a deep structure that explains the given surface features (Powell 1998:9).

<sup>55</sup> Andy Warhol, *Do it Yourself* (1962). Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 137.2 cm. Signed and dated “WARHOL 1962”. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany. (Illustration: Hughes 1991:80.)

<sup>56</sup> By this, Kant is alluding to the multifarious ways in which we can perceive something and the extent to which the imagination can do so, to that extent are the parameters of form expanded.

<sup>57</sup> The Kantian sublime and the limits of language are similar in that the inability to pin down meaning in words is because of the open exploration of form, which defies an easy verbal explanation

<sup>58</sup> Social and historical features are particularly important to Postmodernist art criticism as argued in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>59</sup> The Kabbalah refers to the system of Jewish Mysticism. It comes to explain how the Infinite manifests, both creating and sustaining the myriad forms of creation.

<sup>60</sup> see note 29

<sup>61</sup> see note 27

<sup>62</sup> This refers to the complete Hebrew Bible, of which Kabbalah is the mystical component.

<sup>63</sup> see note 23

<sup>64</sup> Barnett Newman (1961). Oil on canvas, 70.2 x 41.6 cm. Signed and dated “NEWMAN 1961”. Collection Annalee Newman, New York, New York. (Illustration: Rosenberg 1978:122.)