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book review of

*Modern Art and the Remaking of Human Disposition*

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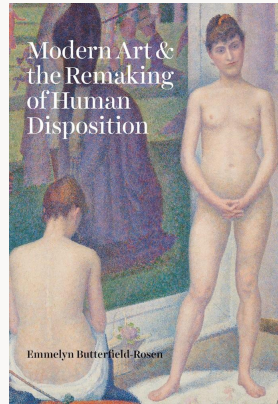
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Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen,  
*Modern Art and the Remaking of Human Disposition*.  
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In the summer of 1886, Philippe Tissié, a young, ambitious doctor working under the direction of hotshot neurophysiologist Albert Pitres in the Bordeaux hospital of Saint-André, came across a male patient who went by the name of Albert. Twenty-six years old, Albert had been admitted to the psychiatric ward to become the first *fugueur*, a medical disorder that compelled him to travel up to seventy kilometers a day, often by foot, often in states of obscured consciousness, not knowing who he was or why he traveled, and unable to identify himself when picked up by the authorities.<sup>[1]</sup> Needless to say, this patient was not really the first *fugueur*. Other terms in other languages testify to the widespread recurrence of this odd comportment—*Wandertrieb*, literally meaning “hiking drive” in German, or, another French designation, *automatisme ambulatoire*, are amongst the most suggestive descriptions. Albert was, however, the first to be formally diagnosed with fugue, and the subject of the thesis *Les Aliénés voyageurs* by the above-mentioned Tissié that, published in 1887, led to mad traveling’s ascension to the rank of a “diagnosable type of insanity.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Albert and his physician Tissié have no part in Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen’s supremely ambitious and erudite book *Modern Art and the Remaking of Human Disposition*. On the face of it, the *fugueur*, an ostentatious personage of movement in a quite literal sense, might be regarded as the sheer opposite protagonist of a scholarly undertaking set to flesh out “the elimination of oblique turns of the body, the emphasis on ‘stiffness’ and uniformity of gesture, the de-articulation of hands and feet” (7) that emerged in European art around 1900, and that redefined the representation of the human figure. Even so, it is notably the second defining characteristic of fugue that mirrors the semantic positioning of Butterfield-Rosen’s scholarly endeavor: the states of unconsciousness that seized the mad traveler, the unwitting impulse to drop everything and to take to the road so aptly punctuated in contemporaneous monikers like *Wandertrieb* and *automatisme ambulatoire*—a mind, to paste in Butterfield-Rosen’s elegant phrasing, “outside of waking consciousness” (12) signifying the end of a previously assumed “inevitable congruence between subjectivity and a thinking ‘I’” (quoted from Jonathan Crary on p. 10). Moreover, the puzzling incongruence between

bodily activity and consciousness was on the radar of emerging scholarly disciplines that were attempting to understand the phenomenon on the basis of new premises.

These premises, as this book proposes, also provide fertile grounds for revisiting the human figure as a motif in some of Europe's most provocative and controversial works of art that the fin de siècle gave rise to—a brilliant feat of scholarly innovation that seems just as obvious and simple as it is surprising and remarkable. For, while much of the recent history of nineteenth-century art has focused on art and the human subject, oftentimes the artists themselves, in their entanglement with “modern life,” with the conditions and challenges of modernity under the denominator of a social history of art, the image of the human figure as the locus of artistic inquiry took a back seat.<sup>[3]</sup> Certainly, there is a broad basis for such a trajectory. The decline of history painting and thus of the human figure as a major theme and resource of painting comes to mind, and concomitant the ascent of landscape and figure painting's displacement. Georges Seurat himself, to point ahead to the first chapter, felt the pressure of this inverted genre hierarchy, since if his *Poseuses (Models, [1886–88])* marked “an attempt to reconcile—or demonstrate the impossibility of reconciling—the academy's ‘grand’ tradition of figural representation” (39), it was with Seurat's land- and seascapes, or “when figures were absent, [that] critics widely endorsed his divisionist pictures” (40). The nineteenth century is also considered, as Richard Shiff once observed, a period in the history of art in which critics and theorists began to direct their attention more on the “means of representation” whereby the figure along with other subject matter may have lost significance as a vehicle of expression and meaning in late nineteenth-century critical discourse.<sup>[4]</sup> In this respect, it appears consistent that Butterfield-Rosen's book focuses primarily on the human figure as a pictorial object, as a *Denkfigur* (figure of thought) for “what it meant, for the hegemonic cultures of Western Europe around 1900, to be human” (5), rather than the material and technical processes of the discussed artworks' production. Through such a lens, one of the central innovations of this book is to allow the figure to emerge, or to be rediscovered, as a place where questions and problems of modern art were acted out.

The overarching argument propounded by the book is that by the late 1800s a new “naturalization of mind” (11), propelled by emergent disciplines such as evolutionary biology and psychology, fundamentally transformed the concept of the human mind, reshaping the way in which the relationship between body and mind, interiority, exteriority, and subjectivity were conceived. This shift, the book submits, was reflected in and sometimes even directly commented on by works of art. More specifically, Butterfield-Rosen argues that the reconception of the human mind around novel understandings of the psyche, in particular newly proposed genetic proximity to animals, “materialized in works of art by means of new dispositions of the body” (4). Disposition, one of the key terms of this work, programmatically suggests the conceptual intersection of bodily postures with notions of mind. Whereas traditional sculpture attended to a “formal paradigm of corporeal expression” (7), a mimetic naturalism that used bodily torsion and especially gestures to both give the impression of an animated and inspired figure and provide “viewers with imaginative access to a depicted figure's invisible psychological interior” (6), the new bodily postures, operating within the matrix of modern science, subverted and challenged these conventions. Over the course of three chapters the book engages specific pairings of artworks based in some kind of historical nexus—Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884–86) and *Les Poseuses* in chapter 1, Max Klinger's *Beethoven-Denkmal (Beethoven*

*Monument*, 1902) and Gustav Klimt's *Beethovenfries* (*Beethoven Frieze*, 1901–02) in chapter 2, and, in chapter 3, Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (*The Afternoon of a Faun*, 1912) both in its performance and in its photographic remediatization.

If modern science, together with responses in period criticism, marks the first thread that informs the interpretations put forth in this book, turn-of-the-century archeology, or cultural history more broadly, provides the second one. Not infrequently, their interlacing is aptly demonstrated. For instance, when Sigmund Freud instructed fellow psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger in 1909 to “put [his] spade in so as to dig down to the buried infantile element” (from a letter by Freud as quoted on p. 200), it revealed, as Butterfield-Rosen suggests, a metaphorical overlay of modern archeology's interest in unearthing the hitherto buried antiquity with psychoanalysis' approach to conceptualizing sexuality that echoed the search for origins that characterized the so-called Darwinian age. More generally, however, the book posits that the shift from gesture to posture was not only an effect of modern science's remaking of the human mind, but the consequence of a broader cultural coming to terms with artistic and philosophical models of late antiquity, heralded by an analogous interest among cultural historians around 1900 to mine older, preclassical sculpture for anthropological concepts.

While Aby Warburg's weighty *Pathosformel*, first presented in 1905, continued to be preoccupied with the afterlife of a classical repertoire of gestures in works of art from late antiquity to its present, other scholars had reoriented their interests towards the question of “how to interpret figuration that did not incorporate Western art's familiar gestural repertoire” (22). This is where the subject of “primitivism,” or “postural primitivism” emerges in the book through the observation that the formation of that concept “relied upon a formal logic that was fundamentally postural,” and that works that were considered to be primitive “appeared to lack the familiar repertoire of dynamic gestural formulas” (22) inherited from Greek antiquity. As Butterfield-Rosen shows, the formal category of frontality played a prominent role here. For while the frontal orientation of figures was “discovered” towards the end of the nineteenth century as a common denominator of archaic or so-called “primitive artists”—“always presenting the body along the body's central vertical axis, always presenting the figure in attitudes in which a bisecting line could be drawn straight down” (25)—the concomitant psychologization of frontality as utterly exterior and not determined by an interior center provided room for artists to subvert academic conventions of bodily postures. (Widely recognized as a seminal formal concept in twentieth-century abstract art, frontality is hereby also restored to its lost figurative origins.)

Georges Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* and its similarly ambitious follow-up *Les Poseuses* rank among the most researched and commented-on works of late nineteenth-century French painting. The former's presentation at the last Impressionist Exhibition in 1886—the same year Albert the *fugueur* was admitted to the psychiatric hospital in Bordeaux—has been widely regarded as a decisive moment of reshuffling within French modern painting that resulted in neoimpressionism's, and ultimately symbolism's, emergence at the new forefront of the Parisian avant-garde. This narrative has largely been pre-shaped by art criticism of the time and hinged primarily on the new technique of “pointillism” that Seurat, Signac, and fellow neoimpressionists had developed. Building on this, Butterfield-

Rosen, however, ventures into a different direction from previous scholars by focusing on Seurat's "rigid, repetitive, formally abbreviated mode of figural representation" (34), a path she defends by stating that "art history has never analyzed the painter's figural technique as closely as his system of divisionist facture" (44). Extricating Seurat's figures of the *Grande Jatte* from the scientism of his divisionist technique, however, by her account, did not make him the father of French classicism's rebirth. Instead, the figures themselves—their conspicuous formal features such as their frontal or lateral orientation and their suggested "stiffness"—mark the arrival of a primitivism that opens up Seurat's painting for both an interpretation of his figures as a negation of "figure's corporeal suppleness" (48) and an advancement of stiffness (*raideur*) as the sign of a cultural and scientific discourse that is radically overwriting the opposition between "intelligent wakefulness and stupid slumber" (56).

Moving from *La Grande Jatte* to *Les Poseuses*, the central hypothesis that informs the latter's interpretation is that, if *La Grande Jatte* marked Seurat's provocative attempt to cast out corporeal expression and therefore traditional conceptions of human interiority, with *Les Poseuses* he relativized this controversial move formally, by resorting to practical, time-tested techniques and especially conventional techniques of posing, while iconographically and compositionally exposing the idea of a figure's inner life as an illusion and product of "mere *singerie*" (93). The argument, in short, goes that Seurat drew on three existing specific and culturally charged models for the three figures in *Les Poseuses*—*La Baigneuse Valpinçon* (*The Valpinçon Bather*, [1808]) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to the left in dorsal view, the seated Spinario in profile to the right, and Polyeyktos's Demosthenes frontally in the center, with the latter being especially "renowned in the nineteenth century as a particularly 'pregnant representation of the inward life'" (82). In choosing a new kind of model, however, a so-called *modèle technique* or *modèle moderne*, whose appeal, contrary to classical models' skills, was precisely that they did not have a fixed repertoire of traditional poses, Seurat created, as Butterfield-Rosen argues, an expressive dissonance that amounted to the subversion of the illusion of thinking—"thought, here, is not really thought. Rather it is an imposture of it, indeed, merely the pretense of a poseuse" (92).

This interpretation is further explicated by the historical interlacing of the École des Beaux-Arts and the Hôpital Universitaire la Pitié-Salpêtrière (Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital) that points to a connection between the art world and psychiatry, which intersected in the subject of the posing figure, as, for instance, when in the psychiatrists' imagination hysterical female patients were transformed through hypnosis "into a sort of expressive statue, a motionless model" (from a scientific paper by Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer as quoted on p. 95). If this led to the highly problematic historical analogization of artistic model and female patient of psychiatry in late nineteenth-century France, the popularization of hypnosis during this period also helped to highlight the "fundamentally ambiguous mental condition that was and always has been intrinsic to the regular artistic posing session" (95), namely, the duality of its requirements: an act of passivity that suggests the negation of one's own "I," on the one hand, and the imitation of a fictitious person's mindfulness on the other. For Butterfield-Rosen, the central figure in *Les Poseuses* posits this duality as an acknowledgment of the duality of the human disposition that encompasses mental dispositions of both consciousness and unconsciousness.



The second chapter—“Beethoven’s Farewell: The Creative Genius ‘in the Claws of the Secession’”—takes up this thread in the cultural context of Vienna, about a dozen years after Seurat’s Parisian moment. The focus lies on the contrasting conceptions of the figure present in the two major works in the fourteenth exhibition of the Vienna Secession in 1902, which was dedicated to the composer Ludwig van Beethoven: Max Klinger’s *Beethoven-Denkmal* and Gustav Klimt’s *Beethovenfries*. Karl Kraus, the Viennese publicist and founder of the infamous journal *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), introduced, in a piece of contemporary criticism, the basic opposition of Klinger’s and Klimt’s interpretations of Beethoven: while the former’s sculpture portrayed a seated Beethoven in a bent-over posture, legs crossed, hands clenched into fists and with a facial expression of stoic introspection, symbolizing for Kraus an “inner life of utmost tension,” Klimt’s frieze, in typical Krausian harshness, amounted to nothing more than “superficial allegories with their shallow materialistic punch lines” (107–8).

Kraus’s unequivocal bias exposes him as representative of a school of thought still deeply enthralled with a tradition which conceived of the artist’s creative activity as a primarily intellectual endeavor signified through “preexisting corporeal conventions for expressing the inner activities of the intellect” (110). The clenched fist and seated posture locate Klinger’s Beethoven firmly in this paradigm: in the Western history of bodily metaphors, the grasp expresses a state of mental tension that equates the gesture with cognitive apprehension. Correspondingly, Beethoven’s seated posture manifests the opposition of two forces, Beethoven’s resistance against gravity’s pull, which encapsulates “a noble and ennobling heaviness” (116). More generally, the bodily defiance of gravity—such as, for instance, the heavy head of Auguste Rodin’s *Penseur* (*The Thinker*) resting on a hand—figures in Butterfield-Rosen’s reading as a metaphor of consciousness deeply embedded within the postclassical tradition and “central to Western art’s advancement of self-congratulatory claims about the power of human intellect” (116).

If the *Penseur* affirmed the centrality of the human intellect to creation, another of Rodin’s sculptures worked to subvert it. In the *Monument to Balzac* (1891–98)—a standing figure without visible limbs—the artist rendered the issue of gravity less conspicuous while essentially disposing of gesture as a means of expression. Above all, however, it is the conspicuous bulge in the lumbar region of the writer’s otherwise undifferentiated body that “can be seen to point . . . to a physical and conceptual displacement of the locus of creative potency . . . from above to below, from the head to the genitals” (122). Rodin thus prefigures Klimt’s work from the point of view of evolutionary theory. According to this argument, the Beethoven frieze brings to bear an analogy to Darwin’s theory of sexual selection through sexualized ornamentation and richly decorated figures. Beauty in evolutionary terms assumes a “functional purpose . . . rooted in sexuality” (152), benefitting the selection of a mate for procreation. Klimt’s espousal of this instinctual model of human subjectivity hence maximizes the contrast to Klinger’s intellectualist tribute to Beethoven.

This reinterpretation finds its conclusion and climax in the last passage of the frieze. The nude couple in the center of the scene stands in a golden bell, which Carl E. Schorkse once designated as a womb, their heads obscured in embrace.<sup>[5]</sup> Here Butterfield-Rosen directs the reader’s attention to two facial disks that hover above the two figures, representative of their heads, and that almost directly undermine the metaphorical analogy of thought and

gravity. Instead, the comet's tails symbolize cosmically the suspension of earthly gravity while artistic creativity is sexualized and deintellectualized into a "moment of fertilization, to express symbolically the inner states of man and woman experiencing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or perhaps to express Beethoven's own mental state in the transcendent moment when the Ninth Symphony took shape in his imagination" (161).

The book closes with an analysis of Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912) interpreted as a "*mis-en-scène* of dreams." The dance choreography, which originally refers back to the Ovidian metamorphosis of Pan and Syrinx, had a high-reaching (yes, pun intended) history of late nineteenth-century avant-garde adoptions. Stéphane Mallarmé's poem of the same title was published in 1876 and also set to a symphonic poem by Claude Debussy in 1894. For Nijinsky, who had hitherto appeared as an extraordinary virtuoso and dynamic *premier danseur* of the Ballets Russes, this was his debut as a choreographer, and after Debussy had granted the rights to the ten-minute orchestral composition, the premiere took place at Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet in 1912. Based on this extraordinarily dense and multifaceted interweaving of art-immanent and cross-media references, the chapter takes its cue from two crucial features of Nijinsky's *tableau chorégraphique*. First, the dreamlike character of the episode, in that the Faun is unsure whether his attempted rape of two nymphs was real or dreamed, echos the nexus of sexuality, dream, and the unconscious brought into play by Freud's theory of the psyche. Second, the static and formulaic movements of the choreography that were meant to simulate two-dimensionality—for example, in an extremely difficult-to-dance intertwining of frontal torso and lateral positioning of head and feet—established a "corporeal . . . technique that not only departed from balletic classicism but estranged or negated the very concept of dance as a medium grounded in motion" (167).<sup>[6]</sup>

Butterfield-Rosen argues that these two aspects, and by extension Nijinsky and Freud, share a reliance on "archaic figuration" (179) and that the bas-relief provided both with a model for conceptualizing their respective work. An essential component of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) consisted in the assumption that the process of dreaming tapped into a regressive sphere of the ego, which preceded a fully formed conscious. Only there *Traumbilder* emerge as illustrative concretizations of abstract mental subject matter. Analogously, Nijinsky subjected *L'Après-midi d'un faune* to a last conversion, from poem as text into a sequence of illustrative images that "visually insisted upon its own archaism" (180). An essential part of that insistence was the proximity of the choreography to bas-relief sculpture, an attribution that is also strongly anchored in contemporary reception, and in which the cultural-historical psychologization of the archaic coincides with Freud's theories about the development of the infantile psyche. Against this backdrop, Butterfield-Rosen's interpretation of Nijinsky's juvenile faun becomes a textbook performance of infantile sexuality in the guise of bas-relief.

If bas-relief provided the formal logic and historical semantics by which the author placed the ballet within the psychoanalytic horizon of meaning, cinema functions as the final reference point for this amalgamation. Indeed, through the flatness of the set, the mechanical movement patterns, and recorded statements, Nijinsky offered an ample repository of sources for associations to cinematography—both in projected form and on the material basis of the filmstrip. For example, it is Nijinsky himself who suggests a relation

between cinema and dreams: “I know what an eye is. An eye is the theater. The brain is the audience. I am the eye in the brain” (Nijinsky’s diary as quoted on p. 233). It is not easy to unravel what precisely this quotation ought to mean, yet Butterfield-Rosen manages to extract a compelling reading: as if projected from the inside of the brain onto closed eyelids as screen, the *mise-en-scène* of the faun’s dance insinuates the audience dreaming the faun’s erotic dream as their own. “[T]his merging of subjectivities [affirms],” so the coupling back to psychoanalysis goes, “the common currency of infantile sexuality as a dimension of human experience that is shared” (234). Like the faun, we are in our dreams “necessarily destined to repeat, or reactivate, certain kinds of sexual scenes remembered from childhood” (238).

It is the broad achievement of this comprehensive study to have made a number of texts on cultural theory, which were written around 1900 and to that extent also participated in the formation of art history as a discipline, fruitful for the current art history of modernism and especially in relation to the works treated centrally in the book. Foremost among these is Julius Lange’s *The Representation of the Human Figure in Its Earliest Period until the Apogee of Greek Art* (1892), whose “law of frontality” provides the crucial period distinction and theorization of posture “as: Obliquity = conscious; Frontality = not conscious” (28) that drives the whole book. Furthermore, these include Emanuel Löwy’s *The Rendering of Nature in Earlier Greek Art*, published in 1900, whose psychology of archaic sculpture illuminates Butterfield-Rosen’s reading of Nijinsky, and the thesis *The Law of Imitation* (1890) by the French Gabriel Tarde, which makes Seurat’s “monotonous repetition of sartorial silhouettes and postures” (58) in *La Grande Jatte* tangible from the sociology of the period as a kind of somnambulism.

Equally noteworthy is the rich use of sources, especially art criticism, which grounds Butterfield-Rosen’s interpretations firmly in historical debates and issues. However, it is also in this context that a curious absence is conspicuous: the controversial debate in the 1860s about the human figure as a vehicle of expression, ignited by Jean-François Millet’s depictions of peasants laboring in the field and in their domestic space. If the critic Zacharie Astruc had found that “one doesn’t like [Millet] halfway: one is either fanatical about him or repelled by him,”<sup>[7]</sup> this does not merely point to the agitation within a splintering circle of art critics, but more fundamentally, to the historical scope of the issue over which they split. After all, the problem was nothing less than whether the insistent way in which Millet portrayed the field workers in his paintings as fully absorbed and almost automated in their work was indeed credible, or whether they were posing (or were posed) simply too forcedly to remain convincing as expressive figures.<sup>[8]</sup> Particularly with regard to Seurat, an art-immanent and more imminent prehistory of the problem of “human disposition” in Western art around 1900 remains unaddressed, to which the author would undoubtedly have contributed an insightful perspective.

The book is distinctly elegantly written, beautifully and cogently illustrated and typeset, and thus a pleasure to read. One is not deprived even of humorous passages, such as the scatological allusions to liquid laxatives used in the contemporary satire surrounding Klinger’s *Beethoven-Denkmal*, in which Nietzsche’s desacralization of the seated thinker “as a figure above all for poor digestion, and more specifically for the affliction of constipation” (129) is resonant. Nevertheless, it is also true, despite all the fluent reading pleasure, or



precisely because of it, that in these three sixty-page chapters it is not always easy to keep track of the interpretations' essentials and to discern "sustaining" and merely "supporting" arguments. This is certainly also due to the numerous period metaphors—extensively mapped out by the author—that aggregated the semantic richness of the figure as a subject of art, and that at times propel the book forward, as if automatically, with an irresistible *Wandertrieb*.

With its exceptionally broad scope, the book testifies to the author's boldness in combining speculative theses with intellectual rigor, and in so doing, demonstrates how it is still possible today to cast landmarks of the Western art canon in an innovative and exciting light. I am convinced that this book will become an influential reference for present and future generations of scholars of modernism, not necessarily as a book that has brought something to a conclusion, that has put a lid on a scholarly subject, but as a profound resource, both in content and method, for confronting works of art with unanticipated conjunctions and queries.

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[1] Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7.

[2] Hacking, *Mad Travelers*, 8.

[3] I do not mean to suggest there haven't been any late nineteenth-century art historical accounts in which the figure and its presentation are regarded as key to an artwork's meaning. Especially with regard to Camille Pissarro, examples come to mind such as Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), a reference that Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen picks up in her book, or T. J. Clark's interpretation of the two female figures in *Two Young Peasant Women* (1891–92) in his *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 55–137. But in terms of focus, these contributions constitute not so much an attempt to imagine art history through the lens of the figure as a sometimes discreet and sometimes more overt constant of artistic production, but as isolated instances in which the conditions and challenges of modernism emerged as an issue of the figure.

[4] Richard Shiff, "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France," *Yale French Studies*, no. 66 (1984): 28.

[5] Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 259.

[6] Due to the performative nature of the ballet, the interpretation is based on a photographic album commissioned by Nijinsky from Adolphe de Meyer, c.f. Adolphe de Meyer, *Le Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune* (Paris: Éditions Paul Iribe, 1914).

[7] Quoted in Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 191.

[8] Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 188–91.