

GILBERT-ROLFE

JEREMY

STEPHEN

MELVILLE

S E A M S

A R T A S A

PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

CRITICAL VOICES IN
ART, THEORY AND CULTURE



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Essays by
Stephen Melville

Edited and
Introduced by
Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

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Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture is a response to the changing perspectives that have resulted from the continuing application of structural and poststructural methodologies and interpretations to the cultural sphere. From the ongoing processes of deconstruction and reorganization of the traditional canon, new forms of speculative, intellectual inquiry and academic practices have emerged which are premised on the realization that insights into differing aspects of the disciplines that make up this realm are best provided by an interdisciplinary approach that follows a discursive rather than a dialectic model.

In recognition of these changes, and of the view that the histories and practices that form our present circumstances are in turn transformed by the social, economic, and political requirements of our lives, this series will publish not only those authors who already are prominent in their field, or those who are now emerging—but also those writers who had previously been acknowledged, then passed over, only now to become relevant once more. This multigenerational approach will give many writers an opportunity to analyze and reevaluate the position of those thinkers who have influenced their own practices, or to present responses to the themes and writings that are significant to their own research.

In emphasizing dialogue, self-reflective critiques, and exegesis, the *Critical Voices* series not only acknowledges the deterritorialized nature of our present intellectual environment, but also extends the challenge to the traditional supremacy of the authorial voice by literally relocating it within a discursive network. This approach to texts breaks with the current practice of speaking of multiplicity, while

continuing to construct a singularly linear vision of discourse that retains the characteristics of dialectics. In an age when subjects are conceived of as acting upon one another, each within the context of its own history and without contradiction, the ideal of a totalizing system does not seem to suffice. I have come to realize that the near collapse of the endeavor to produce homogeneous terms, practices, and histories—once thought to be an essential aspect of defining the practices of art, theory, and culture—reopened each of these subjects to new interpretations and methods.

My intent as editor of *Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture* is to make available to our readers heterogeneous texts that provide a view that looks ahead to new and differing approaches, and back toward those views that make the dialogues and debates developing within the areas of cultural studies, art history, and critical theory possible and necessary. In this manner we hope to contribute to the expanding map not only of the borderlands of modernism, but also of those newly opened territories now identified with postmodernism.

Saul Ostrow

Stephen Melville and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe: "Self-Determining Systems"

The texts by Stephen Melville and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe in this volume represent not only the complexity of their individual projects, methodologies, and practices, but also what each believes is intellectually and culturally at stake. Given their projects and approaches, Melville and Gilbert-Rolfe guide us through the diversity of contemporary thought and philosophy, unravelling the Gordian knot that circumscribes their subject: art and the practice of the art historian. Gilbert-Rolfe brings to the task of critically reviewing Melville's writings not only his own knowledge and analytic ability, but also an astute self-interest. The consequence of this is a text that articulates the subtle shading of Melville's arguments, as well as his own, within a broader philosophic discourse. Neither Melville, a literary theorist turned critic and art historian, nor Gilbert-Rolfe, an artist, critic, and theorist, are detached academics. Therefore their writings reflect not only a real concern for what art and culture may represent, or how one might interpret these, but also the more practical question of how these issues will affect their practices.

Gilbert-Rolfe identifies Melville's subject as being the intricate interface between the art object, its history, philosophical interpretation, and the practice of the art historian. Using Melville's texts and drawing on both the writings of Heidegger and such contemporary thinkers as Derrida and Lacan, Gilbert-Rolfe demonstrates the function of each of their texts and their relationships to one another. His writings, like those of Melville, are not merely detached views, but the product of a proposed model of criticism, art history, and philosophy. This model is itself premised on a self-reflexive discussion of

what can be attributed to a given object, while taking into account that the history of an object's interpretation is distinct and different from the history of that object itself. In other words, the authors argue that such histories reside within the context of one another. From this vantage point, the writings of Melville and Gilbert-Rolfe are not only a product of the function of such multiple frames of reference, but are also part of an ongoing disquisition that attempts to bring sense to what we might make of such things as art, history, and philosophy within the discursive framework of postmodernism.

To begin with, Gilbert-Rolfe makes a case for the view that art history's problem at the end of the twentieth century is the crisis of modernism's historical project itself. Beyond this standard argument lies another far more sophisticated one. This is premised on Melville's proposition that art history's tripartite subject—art, art history, and the art historian—is to be found situated, albeit uncomfortably, between the question of the art object and that of the object of art. Obviously the passage between the question of what art is and what it says is not necessarily clear. To complicate things further, Melville represents the relationship between the discourses of art history, philosophy, and the art object as being somewhat dysfunctional, because art resists being circumscribed by either its history or by philosophy. The resulting dance of approach and avoidance functions in such a manner that the various discourses at work are not complementary, but instead are the means by which the limitations of each become antibodies, preserving the health of their respective subjects. The implication is that the modernist goal of stasis or balance is not art's enterprise. Instead, what Melville and Gilbert-Rolfe propose is that its goal should be the self-preservation and maintenance of each discourse's identity in relation to others. In this construct each element becomes the subject of its own self-critical discourse, rather than becoming enfolded one into the other or reduced to common ground.

In this, each practice is the product of a deconstruction of its own metaphysics. This results in "it" coming to exist within its own "self-determining" system, while remaining true to its material identity and practices, as well as its necessarily existing as such within a heterogeneous rather than homogeneous environment. The consequence of this proposition is that the need to develop a totalizing or

unifying concept that would dialectically resolve all differences is discarded in favor of something like a field of deferral, parallelism, and intersection. Gilbert-Rolfe shows that Melville's thinking is premised on the existence of a Kantian art object, a Hegelian model of history, and a Heideggerian practice of philosophy. The identity of each of these, Gilbert-Rolfe argues, arises from the discourse produced or induced by each system existing within and by its own criteria. Despite this diversity of criteria, the postmodern world herein described is not one in which "anything goes," for the ensuing heterogeneity guarantees the terms and identity of each thing within an environment of noncontradictory differences. In this manner, both the subjectivism and arbitrariness that are implicit in other models of postmodernism, as well as the universalism of modernism, are not only set aside but rejected.


Saul Ostrow

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**INTRODUCTION BY
JEREMY GILBERT -
ROLFE**

Stephen Melville and Art's
Philosophical Attitude Toward
History



STEPHEN MELVILLE AND ART'S PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD HISTORY

It is of the essence here that this posing of criticism as a problem is not tantamount to transforming criticism (and art history) into art—that is simply to refuse the newly posed question and to reaffirm the impossibility of contamination . . .¹

The subject of art history may be found situated, not necessarily comfortably, between the question of the art object and that of the object of art. One is a question of what it is and the other of what it says, and the passage between the two is not necessarily clear. The two are, however, linked in one obvious sense: *what it can* say is to some extent *conditioned* by *what it is*. This leads directly, by implication rather than through explication, to the question of whence might emanate any “saying” that the work may do. Stephen Melville has examined the tripartite identity of art history’s subject—art, art history, and the art historian—largely with this last question in mind.

It is clearly the case that art history’s problem, at the end of the twentieth century, has to do with a crisis associated with the historical project itself. While most art historians seem quite content to let their discipline be a history of the decisions of art dealers, so that art history is a subject formulated by Ph.Ds in response to the behavior of people with undergraduate degrees, it is nonetheless unclear that a theory of progress or regression—i.e., of historical development—can provide an adequate motive for what seems to be better described as an economy of recirculation and reconvention. Deprived of a historical trajectory many historians of art, like economic and cultural historians, seem to have settled for theories of irreversibility as substitutes for the theories of development which once allowed them to perform that confusion of methodology with

actuality of which the discipline was accused by Nietzsche but which nonetheless permitted it to indulge in the fantasy that meaning is a result of acts converging with historical interpretation, of objects entering historical space.

Melville offers an alternative. Where some would have meaning follow from an encounter with history—where interpretation allows the work to become historical and in that able to realize, as it were retrospectively, the historicalness of its becoming—Melville sees meaning as both a component of the art object as phenomenon and simultaneously undermined by it. Melville's is an art object which can't be contained by the historical because it is what produces history, an art history which is at once historicist but which relies on contextualizing historicism within a field of theoretical reference which gives point to historical method rather than deriving its own meaning from it. Where the discipline has sought, over the past fifteen years or so, to find a historicism shorn of the claims of the past but still firmly in control of its object(s)—so that one historian would now have us believe that painting is an essentially eschatological activity, obsessed with its historical end because it knows itself to have a history, and another that the surrealist revision of the object gave rise to an historicism of the unconscious, in which art after art becomes no more than a mimesis (confused with reification) of a structural model committed to referring through rejection to the one which it replaces—Melville has tended to look not to the problems of the discipline but, more generally, to the problem of description which precedes them. This is the problem of what is being described, and with what, and therefore *for* what. This leads away from history toward the philosophical. Where elsewhere one finds the question of what to do with the art object as an historical object once history has died, in Melville one finds the question of what to do with art as a philosophical subject after deconstruction and the alleged departure of the metaphysical. Where, therefore, the art object after art becomes, enchantingly, no more than a little counter in a miniseries about the end of a form (conceived from the beginning as a process concerned with its own end), or a screen on which to project fairy tales (or other mythological allegories) about the shape of consciousness—a model of advanced consciousness which, like its predecessors, turns out to have a remarkable, but surely coincidental,

resemblance to the neurotic formations characteristic of its author—in Melville's writing it offers complexity rather than awaiting it. Prior to the object, in Melville, is the question of permitting it to be. Unlike too many of his colleagues, he is prepared to raise the question of what it does, rather than assume that all the interesting answers are to be found in the corollary one of what can be done to it. I shall say that Melville's thinking suggests not so much an anxiety as a lively interest in regard to the irreducibly phenomenological status of art objects in a period when the discipline in which he works seems indifferent to that irreducibility. In Melville, the work of art (the non-production of that which comes after art, is now if it is at all) leads from Derrida (*et les autres*) to structuralism and thence to all that both sought to replace or whose dilemma both sought to resolve, reconsidering but not necessarily resolving the dilemma. As such, art can become something which is, something which exists as other than a function in or product of a discourse. As such, it can have an attitude toward the history which it's said to make by those who actually insist that it's made by history. This is a philosophical attitude, but not in that one of resignation or tolerance, that allows Melville to be involved with objects which are not necessarily continuous with their history. Which is to say, to be sensitive to art as producer rather than product, and then as a producer not reducible to (an interpretation of) what is produced.

Melville interests me primarily because he is a thinker who is prepared to begin with the visuality of the visual arts. More than most contemporary writers, he is concerned with the role of phenomena as much as appearance, to cite Heidegger's distinction between that which does not know concealment (and is therefore present in itself) and that which *does* (and therefore is not present, or not entirely). I suspect that it is Melville's background in literature which facilitates this willingness to accept that to see is not necessarily to find lack in all things, because literature itself has largely managed to evade or ignore the government by historical categories and goals which have characterized the visual arts since before the modern period. To be Heideggerian again, I suspect it may be from literature that Melville derived the possibility that to say is not necessarily only to reenact a series of historico-ideological (which would include the psychological)

chains of signification. It's not so much that Melville replaces a theory of art history in which art goes somewhere with one in which it's going nowhere, it's that he makes the *question* of where it's going into an element of what it is, and necessarily one which always has the same relationship to that. Melville has described the situation as follows:

[I]t can be tempting to imagine that "poststructuralism" can be defined in whole or in part by a certain return of or to phenomenology. There is, I think, something to this: but it also mistakes both the extent to which questions of perception and interpretation have been radically recast by the appeal to Saussure's model of language and the extent to which the interests underlying that appeal, outside of its most purely scientific forms, are shaped precisely by a history of engagement with phenomenology and its hermeneutical offspring. This, I would argue, is visible even in the work of Lévi-Strauss—an aspect of his work that is lucidly registered by Ricouer in his remark that what Lévi-Strauss argues is a Kantism without the transcendental ego, a description that opens an easy passage between that work and Heidegger's. This of course would be to suggest that the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism is less usefully thought of as a difference about phenomenology than as the unfolding or repetition of a difference properly within it, marking limits at once internal and external to it. That is, structuralism and poststructuralism alike can be said to belong, in part at least, to phenomenology just insofar as it is not a settled body of practices or propositions but something more like a style or movement—and is a movement just because it is bound to the unfolding ambiguities of its claim to grasp things as they are—ambiguities that importantly pass between "description" and "interpretation". If the emergence of theory marks a crisis for phenomenology, bringing out its internal impasses and demanding its continuation in a radically transformed register (one in which it can no longer or only with great difficulty recognize itself), this is perhaps because the newer work forces the recognition that what presents itself as perceptual cannot be registered except under some condition of legibility—which is to say that the ambiguities within the claim to "grasp things as they are" are not simply infelicitous features of a language we are obliged to use but are a part of the structure of that grasp.²

The question of legibility is, as I've observed elsewhere, one which links Derrida to the phenomenological method of which he has been such a profound critic—a profundity produced, incidentally, by being playful rather than severe.³ Where Barthes' structuralism can imagine a division between "readerly" and "writerly" works, the latter have no place in deconstruction or phenomenology because it can

only be to the extent that they are legible that they can be said to be, or to be about not-being. That which takes writing to a certain limit without regard for the reader can only, in these terms, provide reading with a certain challenge. And in meeting that challenge, reading finds something out about itself, namely that there's yet another form that it can take. There is of course no reason to suppose that a reader could not be swept up in reading, lost in it, left behind only to reappear at the end transformed. But that is only to say that reading is something in which individuals take part rather than something they control. The idea that there could be works which, in their complexity or reduction, become illegible is in this sense founded in a confusion of language with semiotics, legibility with interpretation. What could be more lucid and transparent than the intentionally illegible? The problem, if any, would not be unreadability but too clear a read, since one would see only negation and therefore an untransformed trace of the negated. That, by definition, would be nothing that one hadn't seen before.

If legibility is presumptive in both philosophy founded in perception and in philosophical critique of the very idea of perception and all that it implies, then it is also the case that "the extent to which questions of perception and interpretation have been radically recast by the appeal to Saussure's model of language" is the extent to which that appeal reflects and exacerbates a bifurcation of legibility within the art object. References to Ricoeur aside, what Melville's writing helps to clarify is the need for a method which will account for the work as both a signifying thing and a cluster of signs. Philosophy has never been very good at distinguishing things from concepts—things coming to life only as concepts and concepts living only in things—but in an important sense that is what interpretation is ultimately bound to interpret. If perception responds to phenomena, interpretation seeks to make sense of an incompatibility, on which the legibility of the work is founded, between the mark and meaning, what it is or seems to be and what it says or seems to say. What does not lead back to the object must lead somewhere else, to structure and comparativism and in that to dematerialization, signification as the final resting place of the signified. What does lead back to it must first pass through all that which makes its legibility interpretable as a series of signifieds—the discourses of the historical, psychological, first and

last the ontological—and thus clarify what it does by way of exceeding its appearance as signification, which is to say, what it is as art. Melville's work resonates with the realization that that which "grasps things as they are" does so, currently, in the knowledge that in art any one thing is two things: the one that turns into a text and plays with legibility by leading it into the world (without an earth) of the sign, and the other that signifies by being irreducible to signification while constantly presenting itself as that on which signification and the legibility it promises depend.

To say that the appeal of methods and approaches ultimately indebted to Saussure (or, more likely, to Saussurianism leavened by Peirce and Barthes) reflects interests "shaped precisely by a history of engagement with phenomenology and its hermeneutical offspring" might, in this sense, seem like a bit of an understatement. One genealogy for the postphenomenological hermeneutic is, for example, Merleau-Ponty's. Despairing of ever finding an adequate account of the Chiasm—of the mutuality of perception and cognition in response to an intended object—Merleau-Ponty finally threw up his hands and went in for structuralism instead. Which is to say that at least some of phenomenology's hermeneutical offspring first sprang off out of exasperation with, as much as any desire to elaborate or shore up, the perceiving subject.

The hermeneutical subject which that elaboration produced decodes rather than perceives, while being itself an encoding—of "the structure of its grasp." It sees not objects, but legible messages. It's an historical subject to the extent that it is concerned with the message as a product. Knowing language as a code, it recognizes the role of historical change in the code's formation. Ricouer, intent on finding a theoretical explanation for the connection between the layers of literary texts, ended up stranded in psychologism because the alternative would have been a return to the aesthetic. The search for the hermeneutical subject has, over the past twenty years, similarly led many others to Lacan. Where the phenomenological object *is*, the hermeneutical text *refers*. This capacity permits it to be engaged in all that the object as phenomenon is not. At the same time, in answering the questions left dangling by theories of perception, it finds itself detached from things by its function as a sign. To be present as a sign is to be not present as phenomena; the sign occludes the

object in the act of providing it with an hermeneutic volition. Phenomena give way to appearance, to a world of the hidden or partially revealed, in a word to textuality. Thus it is that one talks about the text as a deorigination; hermeneutic legibility connects the work to discourse, but in so doing loses sight of its origin in and as phenomena—to the extent that it might be as well to think of *reorigination* as the actual task of the hermeneutic (the message came from Zeus, but you're going to get it as one of Hermes' little notes).

For Melville, as for Michael Fried—and for Merleau-Ponty as far as that goes—the hermeneutic becomes the epistemological and also the place of the episteme. Because for Melville and Fried at least it is there that the struggle becomes something other than a question about art. Certainly this returns both of them to the phenomenological hermeneutics of being and essence—structurally speaking, presentness signifying its own presence—but it does so by way of an argument about the place of art in discourse. From the art object to the object of art as an object *for* art (for example, a historical goal or a job as a bulletin board for contemporary theories of consciousness) and back again with a view to seeing what happens to art's objects when they're brought back into some confrontation with the object itself. Melville's treatment of Fried's notion of absorption goes straight to the point. The question is twofold: What does it take to absorb those who are already involved with legibility? In the first place, an image of absorption itself. What is such an image an image of? The perceiving subject perceiving or in some suspended state of not-perceiving (sleep, reverie, reading), i.e., the question of what has taken perception's place expressed in terms which are themselves a question about perception.

An important aspect of this absorption is that it is not based in any sense of the physical. In a sense Fried's notion of absorption threatens to be a kind of professor's dream, the senses engaged but beyond the body as well as discourse: relief from the latter without the threat of the physical. And all in the language that professors understand better than any other, the language of concentration. And Fried is right (I'd say "obviously right" had he himself not once told me that the thing he found least convincing about English writing was its tendency to use the word "obviously"). Clearly the only work that could absorb those engaged in legibility as a virtue—which

would be not only professors, but anyone interested in art and its problematics—would be that which could employ the hermeneutic—the world of decoding—to reach beyond it towards an encounter with the conditions which permit the decoding to occur, the question of engagement or absorption. Melville understands this aspect of Fried's writing very well, and has used it to develop an approach to the methods provided by "phenomenology's hermeneutical offspring" which follows Fried's in certain respects but which also finds within it a number of possibilities for the work of art, and with that for art history, which lead elsewhere.

These begin to emerge in the essay reprinted here as chapter 8, which deals with Fried's methodology at length. "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism" announces itself as a "scattered collection of notes" but is in fact a thorough discussion of art criticism's perennially central theme, which is: What are the works that one may take seriously, once one has accepted that the viewer proposed by the work of art is by definition one who is hermeneutically preoccupied (as, to underscore the contemporary's continuity with the Enlightenment, was Diderot)?

That's not what the essay purports to be about, since it is written in the context of a discussion about art history where no one is ever allowed to raise questions of preference as such because that might reveal too much about the institutional profile of the art historian. To say that one prefers something is, at least to some, bound to reveal something about the one doing the preferring. But that is in large part what the essay is about, and specifically it is about the viewer that would be adequate (i.e., the art historical approach that would be adequate) to an ambitious work. I put it as a circularity because it may be bluntly expressed as such: what does a work have to be to be taken seriously by a sophisticated viewer is a crude restatement of the idea that the work proposes a sophisticated viewer for itself. The sophistication is hermeneutical, the viewer is aware of the work as a sign which seeks to get beyond its signifying function.

Melville understands Fried's contribution as few others seem to do. While there may be a number of reasons why this should be so, the one I prefer is that Melville has no particular loyalties with regard

to this or that sort of art. In any case he sees the general significance of Fried for art history in general, and sees it as being grounded in his rejection of an art which employs a rhetoric of withholding. This rejection of the work of art as the deployment of a kind of coyness is for Fried tied to a necessary preoccupation with renewal on the part of the work of art of its hermeneutic identity.

In my opinion the key to Melville's use of Fried is to be found in the contrast he observes between Fried and Greenberg on the matter of painting's essential (if it is) flatness. It is a contrast contained in two quotes. First, Greenberg:

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.⁴

Elimination of the extraneous returns one then to the surface as a condition of identity which is also a guarantee. Not so for Fried:

... flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of as the "irreducible essence of pictorial art" but rather as something like *the minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting*; the ... crucial question is not what these minimal and ... timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction ... This is not to say that painting *has no* essence; it *is* to claim that that essence—i.e. that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting.⁵

While it is not clear to me how the essence of anything could be non-irreducible and still be essential, particularly not if that which is non-irreducible can still be associated with the adjective "alone," I understand that Melville establishes that the difference between Greenberg and Fried is one which gives a more active role to the play of the historical as rhetoric—the deployment of conventions for effect and as effect—in the latter's theorizing than in the former. Greenberg proposes, in terms which are not irreconcilable with Heidegger's

notion that the world the work makes should lead back to and be in tension with the earth on which it stands, nor with Nietzsche's notion of advance as return, purity as a goal and as a guarantee. Fried substitutes the word "essence" where Greenberg uses "purity," and finds the essential as a problematic at the hermeneutic level of the work. Greenberg's (possibly rather innocent in this regard) perceiving subject becomes in Fried a subject which is obliged to do quite a lot of decoding on the way to perceiving. Fried's is a phenomenological subject encumbered, or liberated, by hermeneutics. Encumbered in as much as the work, in order to be at all, must first negotiate a series of demands derived from, or manifested as, questions of historical appropriateness and acknowledgement. The hermeneutical dimension turns out to be the place where the work announces and articulates itself as a response to—and participant in—a discourse. It is liberated for the same reason, insofar as this acknowledgement of the work as a participant in an argument frees it from a concern for the purity of its means because their historicizing—a convergence with a historical argument that converts the search for purity into a rhetorical position—suspends, or if one prefers, *precludes* that concern in its substitution of a historical materialism for what is either an idealism or a version of Heidegger's earth/world tension which similarly rejects the immediately historical as an authentic component of the work's reconsideration of history as such. As Melville puts it, Greenberg's is a position which wants to argue that "the crucial thing about a work . . . is simply that it is and not that it means," while Fried, though closely associated with and implicitly drawn to it, nonetheless "appears to see in contemporary theory a way neither to recover meaning nor to produce new meanings but a way to grasp objects insofar as they are capable of exerting effects, art historical effects above all."⁶

Anecdotally speaking, it's worth remembering that the opposition to Greenberg was the result of his insistence that the eschewal of meaning in favor of being was the only art historical effect worth achieving. That said, one may then say that Melville sees that Fried has found a way out of Greenberg's preoccupation with a possibly false ontological reduction by diverting attention to the discursive function of what may no longer be seen as a reduction. Fried figures prominently in Melville's writing. In the last few pages I've moved

from one essay to another in the quotes I've used to illustrate the points I've sought to make. Melville sees Fried as the contemporary thinker who has sought a hermeneutic elaboration of the phenomenological object and the perceiving subject it proposes which would not lose sight of the existential actuality of the art work as a thing which is never a thing.

He is of course aware of the evolution of Fried's thought, and makes considerable play with the implications of that development, as the reader of this volume will see. Fried is, however, an ancillary to a larger project, as is Greenberg, in that the figure who recurs most—and most tellingly—in these essays is Heidegger himself, and the reason is that, for Melville, the challenge that the work of art offers art history is to be found in the fact that art objects are indeed objects. For Melville, art history's difficulty is that its objects are not in themselves historical objects. This seems to be what theory, as something which can be opposed to art history as a practice, means for Melville. Phenomenology frustrates historicism even while its own insolubility causes a hermeneutic flowering which threatens to overgrow and obscure the ground on which it grew.

The effect of Derrida's engagement with Heidegger is, in Melville (in his reading of Fried and also elsewhere) to reoriginate through deorigination. Deconstruction restores the Heideggerian work of art while making its relationship to the contemporary more explicit (more legible) and thus complicating and indeed deferring its possible realization of the ground out of which it putatively sprang. It is in this sense that Melville places Heidegger at, as it were, the origin of the tripartite enquiry with which I've identified him here: the artwork plays a game with its own origin; art history is the history of works which have a conscious and therefore not continuous relationship to the historical; the art historian is the historian of, and as the perceiving subject, reconsidered *by* the hermeneutics of—which is to say, generated by—the artwork's own identity. If the difference between Greenberg and Fried is, for Melville, the difference between purity and mutability, his version of Fried takes the latter's thinking, perhaps, toward a more elaborate version of what is present to what. For Melville, the phenomenological object described by Fried, complicated by the (inauthentic because it is not eschatological) historical space it both enters and transforms, is the postmodern object, present as the evasion

of an idea of presence which depends on purity (authenticity), deoriginated and thus reoriginated in its polyvocality, but entirely dependent on what it seeks to evade because it continues to be dependent on the lived body whose embodiment its own invokes. How Melville makes it become this is to be found in the following sentence: “If postmodernism names modernism insofar as it is inevitably its own allegory, deconstruction names self-criticism insofar as it cannot exempt itself from itself.”⁷ Whatever modernism was, it is now only what it can be while being past, deoriginated by and reoriginated within what succeeds it—or, to gesture toward the gloomier side of both Fried and Heidegger, what fails to follow its characteristic failure. Whatever deconstruction deconstructs survives it by being that upon which it depends. Melville—Fried also, but less insistently—returns one as reader (ideal or just real) to the implication that legibility bears: writing writes the reader, signing signs, while art history is the history of readers (hypocritical or not, but hypercritical of necessity) proposed by the objects whose objects, as proposals, they are.

Phenomenological theories of human embodiment have also been concerned to distinguish between the various physiological and biological causalities that structure human experience and the *meanings* that embodied existence assumes in the context of lived experience. In Merleau-Ponty's reflections in *The Phenomenology of Perception* on “the body in its sexual being” he takes issue with such accounts of bodily experience and claims that the body is “an historical idea” rather than “a natural species.”⁸

Thus Judith Butler, while the following is from Melville:

At the level of what one might imagine as a shared intuition into the rhetoricity of vision—what I have been describing as its division from itself, the insistence of a certain heterogeneity at the heart of its transparency—I would point to Lacan and Goethe's insistence that the field of vision is above all a play of light and opacity arising from bodies and images in displacement.⁹

If the field of vision is made out of light and opacity then it comes to us as color, and one thing we know about color is that it doesn't work the way Goethe wanted it to, which was quite similar to the way in which philosophers had always wanted it to work, and