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Re-created Flatness: Hans Hofmann's Concept of the Picture Plane as a Medium of Expression

MICHAEL SCHREYACH

There is a fundamental difference between flatness and flatness. There can be a flatness that is meaningless and there can be a flatness that is the highest expression of life—from infinity depth up to the surface: an ultimately restor[ed] two-dimensionality. [Restoring flatness] is what plastic creation means. Otherwise it is decoration.

—Hans Hofmann, “Lecture I”¹

Introduction

That “flatness” might be equivalent to “the highest expression of life” in modern art is by no means a straightforward assertion. Isn't *flattening*, after all, a key metaphor that has been used to describe the leveling down of communal and personal experience under modernism: its attenuation by increasingly pervasive forms of commercialized entertainment, its depletion by the spectacle of commodity culture and mass media?² Yet, for Hans Hofmann and Clement Greenberg, flatness—more specifically, “re-created flatness,” a term the critic adopted after hearing it used in the painter's important 1938–39 New York lectures—became a key term in their accounts of pictorial meaning. In this paper, I articulate what is significant about that idea and draw out its implications for understanding what Hofmann meant by artistic expression. Ultimately, I will suggest that the concept of re-created flatness, and its pictorial realization, implies or entails a certain view of expression: namely, that what is expressed by an artwork is the art-

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ist's meaning. Although he did not explicitly voice the matter in terms of intention, Hofmann insisted that "[m]y ideal is the [artistic] creation of [my] own inner world."³ It is the implicit emphasis on the priority of the artist's meaning—the framed expression of his or her intention—in contradistinction to the audience's contingent experiences of the work of art—that lies at the root of both Hofmann's teaching and Greenberg's criticism and distinguishes "meaningless" flatness from "restored" and "re-created" flatness.

Although it might at first appear peripheral, the issue of flatness is central to understanding aspects of contemporary debates about modernism and postmodernism. Greenberg, of course, volunteered what has become one of the most famous accounts of modernism in the visual arts. In a number of key essays, beginning with "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940) and culminating in "Modernist Painting" (1960) and "After Abstract Expressionism" (1962), Greenberg suggested that modernist artists, in response both to a historical crisis and to a crisis in standards of quality, became increasingly self-critical. To save the arts from a general "leveling down" (or flattening) in the face of mass entertainment, they felt the need to entrench each art in its "unique and proper area of competence" and to demonstrate that the "kind of experience [it] provided was valuable in its own right."⁴ The project of self-definition demanded the elimination of any extraneous conventions that impeded the discovery of the essential conventions of each particular medium. For painters, this meant acknowledging the "limitations that constituted the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment" (Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, 86). In doing so, they were able to "find the guarantee of [painting's] standards of qualities as well as of its independence" (*ibid.*). But the most important of these limiting conventions or norms was flatness, according to Greenberg, "[f]or [it] alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art" (*ibid.*, 87).

It seems relevant to point out what else, besides delimiting a unique "area of competence," might be significant about Greenberg's flatness. It is not simply that flatness assured quality. Indeed, Greenberg explicitly denied that assumption: "[A] stretched or tacked-up canvas," he wrote, "already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one."⁵ But given the critic's thesis that the self-definition of the arts was fueled by an anxiety over the reduction of art to entertainment, it seems right to say that a concern for flatness expressed a concern for the autonomy of painting, for its independence from the merely diversionary. It also seems reasonable to restate Greenberg's proposition and say that a concern for flatness expressed a concern for distinguishing works of art and their meanings from other kinds of things in the world at large and our contingent experiences of them. And insofar as it was the painter who, in open acknowledgment of the limiting conditions of the medium, was intent on expressing himself, he necessarily

concerned himself with the autonomy of the work of art—which is just to say that accepting the efficacy of flatness as a limiting condition, or norm, of painting entails recognizing that the meaning of a work of art is fixed by the artist's intention.⁶

What I have just described is a familiar trope in the turn from a modernist to postmodernist ontology of the artwork. Whereas the modernist work of art is bounded or delimited and its meaning fixed by the artist, the postmodernist work rejects those framing conditions and opens meaning up to the contingencies of spectatorship. In the case of some postmodernist work, for instance, the meaning of the work becomes indistinguishable from the experiences had by the viewer within the total situation of his encounter with the work.⁷ My aim here is not to rehearse the debate but to introduce my project with these issues in mind. In doing so, I hope that the stakes of clarifying what Hofmann and Greenberg meant by re-created flatness will emerge in relief.

This paper has three principle objectives. First, I overview Hofmann's unpublished writings and lectures on aesthetics. So far, the critical analysis and evaluation of these materials has had little visibility in modernist studies.⁸ I aim not only to contribute a more specific account of Hofmann's concepts as they were introduced through his program of aesthetic education but also to situate them in a wider intellectual and critical context. Second, I interpret the significance of those ideas for modernist criticism by focusing especially on the concept of re-created flatness as it appears in the writings of both Hofmann and Greenberg. Finally, I hope to demonstrate that Hofmann's closely associated notions of flatness, depth, and the picture plane are deeply implicated in the issue of modernist painting's autonomy, especially as formulated by Greenberg.

I

Hofmann's Teaching and Unpublished Instructional Texts

Even in summary accounts of midcentury abstraction, scholars routinely acknowledge the impact Hans Hofmann's ideas and pedagogic practices had on New York School painters.⁹ Indeed, it is hard to underestimate how profoundly Hofmann's views on modern art and aesthetics—views that had been formed through his direct involvement with the European avant-garde—stimulated the aspiring artists and critics who attended his 1938–39 lectures in New York, enrolled in his school, and encountered his writings. The critic Clement Greenberg extolled in 1945: “[I] owe more to the initial illumination received from Hofmann's lectures [on modern art] than to any other source.”¹⁰ Twelve years later, he reaffirmed the painter's position as a crucial disseminator. Connecting contemporary tendencies of abstraction with Hofmann's precedent, Greenberg lauded that “no one in the country

had such a thorough grasp of Cubism as [he did]."¹¹ Yet, while writers often quote Hofmann's statements—his famous dictum of "push-pull" is routinely invoked in studies of abstract expressionism—many of his key concepts remain underinvestigated.¹² It is true that commentators sometimes gloss such critical terms as "flatness," "depth," "picture plane," and "pictorial creation." But the significance of those terms with respect to broader modernist concerns has yet to be articulated. This deficiency is partly the result of Hofmann's intellectual eclecticism. Not only are his views deeply influenced by modern art theory (and particularly by Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Robert Delaunay), but his aesthetics also combines ideas from two disparate strains of nineteenth-century German aesthetics—empathy theory and formalism—and furthermore includes aspects of twentieth-century Gestalt psychology.¹³ From this heterogeneous mix, Hofmann generated a robust but often obscure theory of pictorial creation that has proven notoriously difficult to parse, a task made even more difficult by its multiple iterations, its uneven translations, and the artist's idiosyncratic use of English.

Some of Hofmann's views were published as short essays during his lifetime, and these serve to introduce readers to his ideas.¹⁴ Still, Hofmann's unpublished materials more comprehensively represent his distinct theoretical and pedagogical concerns. Since the 1938–39 lectures that will most concern me below are substantially based on the bulk of these unpublished texts, it will be useful to review them here. Hofmann attempted to codify his instructional method for painting and to present his theory of pictorial creation in no less than five unpublished renditions. The first, titled "Form und Farbe in der Gestaltung," was written in Germany between 1915 and 1930.¹⁵ This book was translated in 1931 by Glenn Wessels in cooperation with the author as "Creation in Form and Color: A Textbook for Instruction in Art."¹⁶ Hofmann extensively revised this book in German during the winter of 1933, giving it the extended title, "Das Malerbuch: Form und Farbe in der Gestaltung."¹⁷ It was then translated by Georgina Huck. By 1948, Hofmann had emended the translation, supplementing its content with notes written in English (it was revised again in 1952). He began to call this material "A Painter's Primer: Form and Color in the Creative Process."¹⁸ In 1963, the artist completed a fifth book-length typescript, substantially based on, but much shorter than, his earlier efforts, titled "The Painter and His Problems: A Manual Dedicated to Painting."¹⁹ Evidently, Hofmann considered his theory of pictorial creation important enough to revise and sharpen it over a period of thirty years. Still, once the confusion caused by the existence of multiple drafts, revisions, notes, and rewrites clears, a remarkable consistency appears in the artist's underlying ideas over the course of their development (ideas that, it bears pointing out, were substantially formed by the late 1930s, when Hofmann was approaching fifty). Rather than limiting my analysis by treating them chronologically, I will refer as necessary to the

multiple iterations of his theory in order to better explain Hofmann's ideas, especially as they were voiced in his 1938–39 lectures.

The Picture Plane

In 1963, Michael Fried suggested that the keynote of *Memoria in Aeternum* (1962) is its effort to involve mutually two distinctly separate elements, namely, the sharply delineated rectangles of yellow and red and the brownish background on which they seem to hover. That background is streaked with more vibrant colors.²⁰ Fried notes:

Between [the rectangles], flooding down through the center of the background, is a forceful streak of blue . . . vibrant with energy. To the left of and above the yellow rectangle are streaks of matching yellow that flare into resonant life and make the background seem an inseparable ambience of the rectangle. . . . The end result is that the background and rectangles are integrated on the strength of color alone. ("New York Letter," 295)

Fried goes on to admire the fact that Hofmann seemed to have posed for himself—and then solved—a particular pictorial problem in terms of sheer color: specifically, to have united figure and ground and, in the process, to have "redeemed" the background's atmospheric effects (Fried at first had found those effects "weak" and "corny"; *ibid.*). But Fried makes another, perhaps ultimately more significant, observation. Drawing our attention to the background once again, he notices that it "stops short of the top of the canvas." "This is important," he continues, "because it asserts Hofmann's awareness of what I have called the background as a skin of paint that, although it evokes the feel of atmosphere and deep space, nevertheless remains not very far behind the picture plane" (*ibid.*) To illustrate the implications of his point, Fried favorably contrasts Hofmann with Kandinsky. The critic finds Kandinsky's work of the 1920s and 1930s to consist of shapes and forms that are, like Hofmann's, placed within an atmospheric space. Yet Kandinsky fails to convey "an awareness of the picture plane as a painted surface" (*ibid.*, 296). (Even though Kandinsky's space is not conventionally naturalistic, it nonetheless creates an optical sensation of indeterminate spatial recession and thus might be described as fictive or illusioned depth.) In contrast, Hofmann both flattens or compresses illusioned depth into a comparatively shallow register and simultaneously acknowledges the canvas as a literally flat, painted surface, a "skin of paint." It is only a "manifest awareness" of cubism—and, specifically, of its struggle to establish a *picture plane* in relation both to the actual surface of the canvas as well as to its illusioned depth—that accounts for the "superiority" of Hofmann's work.

Evaluative judgments aside, Fried's formal analysis helps us target an issue of serious theoretical consequence for Hofmann. In the painter's view,

the creation of *pictorial* space, in contradistinction to what he called “realistic” or “naturalistic” space, demands above all just such a complex acknowledgment of the picture plane:

In the moment when something is not related to the picture plane we are concerned with realistic space. [Although the artist] may not directly imitate nature, [to the extent that] he has *nature* in mind as the basis for creation, his work [will yield] the idea of realistic space. [But] a painter who understands the *picture plane* as the basis for creation will never create naturalistic space, but he will create pictorial space. (Hofmann, “Lecture V,” 1)²¹

Here, realistic or naturalistic space does not necessarily refer to conventional illusionism, the verisimilitude of three dimensions. Even abstract artists are in danger of painting realistic or naturalistic space unless they are conscious of the picture plane. From this point of view, Fried’s account of Kandinsky might prompt us to see his paintings as illustrating the lapse of attention Hofmann warns against. Because he presents deep, atmospheric space occupied by abstract shapes, it is as if Kandinsky still had “nature in mind” instead of the picture plane.²² Nonetheless, it would be insufficient for an artist simply to abandon such a thought and replace it with a mental awareness of the picture plane because, in addition to having it in mind, Hofmann insists that the artist accept it as the *basis* for creation. I take “basis” not only to refer to the conceptual priority of the picture plane in an artist’s practical orientation toward her work but also to invoke the literal grounding of aesthetic creation on a material surface. The dialectic implied by being aware of the picture plane as an ontological condition of pictorial creation while simultaneously being aware of it as a flat, painted surface shares something with, yet goes beyond, more familiar oppositions, such as those obtaining between literal planarity and pictorial space or actual two dimensionality and illusioned or fictive depth.

There are at least two significant points I would like to draw out from these observations. First, Hofmann implicitly rejects the idea that the picture plane exists *in advance* of the creation of pictorial space. While it may be *conceptually* prior to the activity of painting, the picture plane is not a given fact about paintings, nor is it guaranteed to exist for all flat, painted quadrants. “Not every flat surface,” he said, “is *a priori* a picture plane. (“Lecture II,” 1). It must be established, virtually, each time a painting is made. Second, because it is virtual or immaterial, the picture plane is categorically distinct from the surface of the canvas and the paint applied to it—distinct, that is, from the material that is the condition of its possibility. The picture plane is a “translucent relational surface” that is both created by, but irreducible to, the physical nature of any painted surface.²³ I hazard to suggest that when Hofmann employed the term “picture plane,” he meant not only to refer to this translucent relational surface but also to express the successful “transformation” of an actually flat

surface area into an expressive medium that conveys pictorial content (Hofmann, *Search for the Real*, 70). For Hofmann, this content has everything to do with the “spiritual expression” of “inner life” and with the “intensity” of personal and “emotional” experience.²⁴

As the epigraph to this paper indicates, Hofmann thought there were two kinds of flatness, categorically distinct:

There is a fundamental difference between flatness and flatness. There can be a flatness that is meaningless and there can be a flatness that is the highest expression of life—from infinity depth up to the surface: an ultimately restor[ed] two-dimensionality. [Restoring flatness] is what plastic creation means. Otherwise it is decoration. (“Lecture 1,” 5)

Hofmann’s distinction between literal flatness (“meaningless”) and pictorial flatness (“the highest expression of life”) is fundamental to his account of how material is made over into an expressive medium to convey the artist’s meaning. For a painter, having the picture plane in mind as the basis of creation involves acknowledging the fact that the actually flat canvas is the condition that might enable the activity of marking and covering it with pigment to become a *medium* for expression, instead of a mere surface. Actual flatness must be “destroyed” but then “re-created” (*ibid.*). Re-creating flatness means reestablishing the picture plane as a medium for expression, as it had been for great art in the past.²⁵ We might say that flatness restored is mere flatness made meaningful by artistic intention.

Depth

Hofmann holds the painter responsible for acknowledging the limitations of, yet re-creating, the literal nature of his materials. Creating a picture plane is the hallmark of this transformation. Its significance is inseparable from Hofmann’s dialectical concept of flatness and depth. For him, “depth” does not designate the sense of volume and extent we encounter phenomenally in our experience of the natural world, nor does it refer to the abstract and calculable space of physics and mathematics. Neither does it describe the visual perception of three-dimensional reality produced by conventions of verisimilitude. Rather, for Hofmann, “depth” names art’s most significant content and is simultaneously perceptual, metaphorical, and metaphysical:

[T]he first require[ment] in pictorial art [is] the creation of depth in a flat sense—which is pictorial depth—that is to say: depth which has resulted from the intrinsic quality of the picture-surface [that is, the picture plane] which permits the creation of depth without sacrificing the picture’s two-dimensionality. (“Das Malerbuch,” n.p.)

The terms are contradictory and paradoxical and do not make much literal sense. Depth-in-a-flat-sense must refer to pictorial content (re-created flatness) in contradistinction to actual materials (literal flatness). But it is also an

intuitively felt “infinity-expansion,” an “actified space” that has “the quality of flesh—it pulsates, it has sensation; it is not flat.”²⁶ Hofmann deploys potent metaphors in his effort to describe depth’s meaning.²⁷

The proliferation of Hofmann’s vocabulary—he seemed to be comfortable with the complexity that results from defining terms in relation to multiple others—perhaps licenses our thinking of depth-in-a-flat-sense as synonymous with the artist’s establishment of a picture plane, which we have already seen is the medium for the artist’s meaning. In his perceptive analysis of the issue, William Seitz explains the problem Hofmann concerned himself with. It merits extended quotation:

Assertion of the picture plane does not result in patternistic [that is, decorative] flatness but is inseparable from depth. . . . Optically the plane is always in a state of active tension. . . . Not a material wall, the plane is established [in Hofmann’s phrase] “in a spiritual sense.” Much more than a technical or formal criterion, it is at the crux of the problem of translating three-dimensional nature or formless human feeling into a two-dimensional medium.²⁸

It is the relation of the medium to the artist’s meaning that emerges as the essential issue here. Seitz reveals the substance of Hofmann’s concern for depth as re-created flatness. If, as the painter often said, “[T]he medium of expression of painting is the picture plane,” then what that medium expresses, even if it begins as “formless human feeling,” is the artist’s meaning (Hofmann, “Creation in Form and Color,” 158). Hofmann made his intentionalist position clear in his strident closing remark to a lecture he delivered in 1941 at the American Abstract Artists symposium: “Every creative artist works continually to . . . develop to the point where he can say what he has to say, and [say it] in his own language. This language is of course not always at once understood. It makes people furious when you speak your own language.”²⁹

Hofmann’s 1938–39 Lectures

Hofmann’s effort to articulate the nuances of his modernist aesthetic vocabulary permeated his 1938–39 lectures. Because I presently will address how certain aspects of Greenberg’s account of cubism owe something to Hofmann, I pause here to emphasize a few points about that connection. As I have said, Greenberg often remarked on Hofmann’s impact on him. But if it were ever in question, the magnitude of that debt becomes increasingly visible when we attend to some essays the critic began writing exactly two decades later. At that time, Greenberg was simultaneously extending his analysis of cubism in “The Pasted-Paper Revolution” (1958) and “Collage” (1959/1961), drafting “Modernist Painting” (1960) (in which “flatness” plays a key role), preparing his selected essays for *Art and Culture* (1961), and completing his book *Hofmann* (1961). It is also clear that, during this period of work, Hofmann’s 1938–39 lectures were on his mind.

Greenberg's papers contain mimeographed, typed transcripts of all six Hofmann lectures (fifty-three pages total).³⁰ Significantly, the copies are located in the same file that contains essay drafts and notes for his monograph on the artist, so it is likely that Greenberg was actively consulting the lectures again while preparing it. Throughout the decade, Greenberg regularly recalled Hofmann. In 1955, he testified (in "'American-Type' Painting") to the persistent visibility of Hofmann and his school as crucial factors in the development of abstraction in New York.³¹ That same year, he wrote a biographical and interpretative essay for Hofmann's retrospective at Bennington College, where he made specific reference to the lectures: "Few people have absorbed Cubism as thoroughly as Hofmann has, and even fewer are as well able to convey its gist to others."³² The retrospective seems to have stimulated the critic. He began to write extensively on Hofmann, in "New York Painting Only Yesterday" (1957), "Hans Hofmann: Grand Old Rebel" (1959), and "Introduction to an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann at Kootz Gallery" (1959). Finally, his book *Hofmann* constitutes the culmination of Greenberg's critical analysis and evaluation of the painter's art.³³

This detour through Greenberg's writings demonstrates the chronological simultaneity of his most significant work on cubism and his work on Hofmann. It also gives us reason to suspect that the painter's ideas about flatness, depth, and the picture plane—which Greenberg first encountered in the late 1930s but vividly recalled in the late 1950s—deeply informed the critic's accounts of cubist collage (I think they were pivotal for "Modernist Painting" as well).³⁴ But my goal here is not simply to illustrate that Hofmann influenced Greenberg. Greenberg's independence of mind inflects his ideas about flatness with certain nuances without precedence in Hofmann's lectures. Yet, especially in their analyses of cubism, they both fasten on a concept of the picture plane as the means by which an artist transforms painting's material limits into a medium of expression, a formulation that merits some detailed explication. Reading Greenberg, that is, will help us not only to be more perspicacious about Hofmann but will facilitate the re-framing of Hofmann's aesthetic theories more broadly in terms of some issues of critical importance to Greenberg—namely, modernist autonomy and artistic meaning.

II

Flatness and the Re-creation of Flatness

In his 1945 obituary of Kandinsky (written in the form of an exhibition review), Greenberg made a telling reference to Hofmann. The critic was explaining that Kandinsky failed to understand the implications of cubism. (Fried, as I suggested above, would later seem to concur.) In fact, he found the native Russian's paintings of the 1920s to "represent a misconception,

not only of cubism and its antecedents, but of the very art of putting paint on canvas to make a picture.³⁵ What was the problem? The answer comes in two parts. First, Greenberg explicitly invokes Hofmann's concept of the picture plane. Kandinsky, he says, routinely lost "the sense of a continuous surface" that Hofmann stressed must be kept in mind as a basis for creation ("Obituary and Review," 5). While in *theory* Kandinsky seemed to regard the finite limits of the bounded surface as facts to be transformed plastically, in *practice* he failed to establish a picture plane. The result was an "inactive and meaningless" space indeterminately occupied by "an aggregate of discrete shapes" (*ibid.*). His surfaces, Greenberg would say in the *Art and Culture* revision of the obituary, were "mere receptacle[s]."³⁶ Second, he implicitly invokes Hofmann's distinction between flatness and flatness—one meaningful and the other meaningless. It is not hard to fathom that "mak[ing] a picture" is qualitatively different from "putting paint on canvas." The activities differ, and so do the results: a "picture" is something more than "paint on canvas." Yet the latter is a material condition for the former, and it was both the consciousness of and overcoming of this condition that distinguished the cubist achievement, namely, "its recapture of the literal realization of the physical limitations and conditions of the medium and of the positive advantages to be gained from the exploitation of these very limitations" ("Obituary and Review," 5).³⁷ In other words, Kandinsky's surfaces had not become pictorial because an awareness of the limitations of the medium (paint on canvas) had not been made to function as an essential part of his art (making a picture).³⁸

Another consequence of Kandinsky's failure to create a picture plane in Hofmann's sense of the term was to leave his art beholden to conventional standards of coherence. "Academic reminiscences," Greenberg says, had "crept into them" ("Obituary and Review," 5). Because they were non-representational, Kandinsky's paintings may at first have appeared to free themselves from Western pictorial art's dependence on verisimilitude. Yet his continued allusion to naturalistic or atmospheric space qualified that independence. The coherence or integrity of his pictures, instead of being a function of the picture plane, rested on the integrity of an illusion of three-dimensional space, however atmospheric it might be.³⁹

Given these reservations, it is not surprising that in Greenberg's longer 1948 essay, the theme of "pictorial structure" emerges strongly.⁴⁰ Kandinsky thought he found in cubism a model for nonrepresentational painting, but unrepentant abstraction was not, according to Greenberg, what originally motivated Picasso and Braque (far from it, as we will see). Abstraction was a "by-product" of their main goal, which, we are now told, was the "reconstruction of the picture surface" (Greenberg, "Kandinsky," 113). In opposition to the naturalistic space of Kandinsky's box-like receptacles, *pictorial* space—which, as I have explained, is not incommensurate with

flatness—demanded a new, even radical, understanding of the picture plane. This Kandinsky's paintings are unable to demonstrate:

For him, the picture plane remained something negatively given and inert, not something that acted upon and controlled the drawing, placing, color and size of a shape or line, and whose flatness was re-created by the configurations upon it, or at least (as with the Old Masters) reinvoked. (Ibid.)

In saying that the picture plane “act[s] upon and control[s]” artistic activity, Greenberg refers partly to the reciprocal relation that naturally obtains between an artist and his materials. At the same time, his emphasis on a surface that is “recaptured,” “reconstructed,” “reinvoked,” or “re-created” also points to the status of the picture plane as a medium of expression, not merely as a surface that stages an encounter or indexes a feedback loop.

In his 1938–39 lectures, Hofmann too had discussed the way German painters, including Kandinsky, understood the picture plane in contrast to painters in France. German artists, he said, took the picture plane as merely flat, “a flat thing [upon which] to work,” as “a means to create surface beauty” (“Lecture III,” 3), whereas those in Paris “create[d] depth beauty,” the result of “respect[ing] the essence of the picture plane” as a medium (ibid.). In his implicit distinction between the decorative (surface beauty) and the pictorial (depth beauty), Hofmann’s evaluation of Kandinsky’s flatness is somewhat the inverse of Greenberg’s (recall that the critic accused the abstract painter of never really departing from the naturalistic, painting-as-container model). But what is more interesting is the terminology Greenberg will borrow from Hofmann, who distinguishes between the two conceptions of the picture plane by saying that “one stays *on* the surface; the other *re-creates* the surface”: “In [the first] case the surface is not destroyed from the beginning [it remains something to stay on]; in the [second] it is destroyed [in order] to re-create” (“Lecture IV,” 1). Kandinsky’s decorative tendency causes him to stay on the surface and led him, as Greenberg later points out, “to conceive of abstractness as a question down at bottom of *illustration*, and therefore all the more as an end instead of as a means to the realization of an urgent vision” (“Kandinsky,” 112).⁴¹

Greenberg first used “re-created flatness” in a 1947 review of Jackson Pollock’s work.⁴² Commenting on such paintings as *Shimmering Substance* (1946) and *Eyes in the Heat* (1946), the critic noted the “consistency and power of surface” the artist’s pictures exhibited.⁴³ “As is the case with almost all post-cubist painting of any real originality,” Greenberg went on, “it is the tension inherent in the constructed, re-created flatness of the surface that produces the strength of [Pollock’s] art.”⁴⁴ Those who were unfamiliar with the concept’s broader implications as I have discussed them above may have ignored its apparent idiosyncrasy. Or they may simply have taken Green-

berg to be referring to the idea that Pollock's "over-all evenness," which the critic mentions in his next paragraph, returns to the painted—even thickly painted—surface a degree of visual flatness. But given what we have seen of the theoretical weight of "re-created flatness," I hazard to guess more was at stake. I think what was at stake was a conception of the artist's meaning—his "urgent vision"—as conditioned by, but not limited by, the materials of the medium. To re-create flatness was to render the materials an autonomous medium by which an artist could express himself.⁴⁵

Cubism

Greenberg admired Hofmann's "reluctance to cut himself off from Cubism as a base of operations" (*Hofmann*, 25). Still, there were occasions when the critic thought the painter, like Kandinsky, seemed to "stay on the surface," and to adopt cubist forms—specifically its quasi-geometric grid of lines and shapes aligned with the canvas's framing edges—stylistically, as mere devices for ordering pictorial elements and for achieving a certain degree of pictorial coherence in the absence of a model in nature. In such instances, Hofmann seemed to forget the lesson of his own lectures, to abandon his precept that an artist maintain an awareness both of the limiting conditions of painting and of the picture plane as a basis of creation. Indeed, a lapse of attention by any artist would lead to the same problems of space-as-container experienced by Kandinsky, or so at least Greenberg suggests in his book on Hofmann:

The Old Masters were apt to conceive of the picture, with its enclosing shape and flat surface, as a receptacle into which things were put, whereas modernist painting tends increasingly to erase this distinction and make the picture as such coincide with its literal, physical self. (*Hofmann*, 32)

Using the conventional illusionism of the Old Masters as a foil, Greenberg tells us that modernist flatness is "ineluctable": it is a constraint or demand that cannot be ignored.⁴⁶ But it is also what guarantees painting as an expressive medium, as potentially becoming something other than merely "putting paint on a canvas."

Those familiar with Greenberg's writings will notice that the passage I just quoted is similar to a more famous one that appears nearly contemporaneously in "Modernist Painting" (1960). But in that essay, Greenberg makes a crucial revision. He enriches his analysis with terms drawn from Hofmann's lectures:

The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved was

essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather, they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains.⁴⁷

Before, Greenberg had accused the Old Masters of treating their picture surfaces as mere receptacles or containers, but now he corrected that reductive claim. They, too, acknowledged the limitations of painting (“the enduring presence of flatness”) and understood the picture plane simultaneously to signify those limitations and to operate as the medium of their pictorial transformation (to guarantee the “success of their art”). Modernists, too, want success. But, under modern conditions, this success seemed increasingly to depend on the degree to which the work of art could paradoxically distinguish itself from—yet acknowledge the conditions of—its literal materials.⁴⁸ Greenberg seems to be suggesting that paintings’ success depends on establishing what amounts to an ontological distinction between the picture as an autonomous artwork and the picture as an object.⁴⁹ Should the picture remain a mere object, it would be part of the world at large, an occasion or stimulus for any kind of experience whatsoever. But as a work of art, the painting is meant not to generate just any response but to express something that an artist intended. (Alternatively, we might say that it frames the conditions of its own beholding.) In other words, what Greenberg called art’s “success” seems to depend on the degree to which the artist’s meaning—what she wanted to express—could be insulated from the arbitrary meanings imputed to her work by a viewer.⁵⁰

Greenberg’s account of cubism most fully pursues the idea of “re-created” flatness in relation to the issues of the picture plane and expression I have so far discussed. It is hard to ignore the obvious debt his two major essays, “The Pasted-Paper Revolution” (1958) and “Collage” (1959/1961), owe to Hofmann’s teachings on cubism.⁵¹ Although the texts differ in some key ways, I will consolidate my analysis of them here and quote from either one or the other as I deem it necessary to highlight the issues at stake.

Greenberg begins each essay by asserting a somewhat counterintuitive claim. For Picasso and Braque, he argued, cubism remained “an art of representation and illusion” (“Collage,” 70–71). But it was also evident that the “fictive depths” of cubist pictures were becoming increasingly shallow (“Pasted-Paper Revolution,” 61). Indeed, fictive depth was becoming so shallow that it seemed to be in danger of coinciding with the literal, flat surface of the canvas. If that happened, Greenberg thought, illusion would become mere decoration. He insisted that when there is no discrimination between literal surface and fictive depth, the result is just “surface pattern” (*ibid.*, 62) or “cadences of design” (“Collage,” 71). Picasso and Braque want to “restore and exalt decoration by building it, by endowing self-confessedly

flat configurations with a pictorial content, [with] an autonomy" ("Pasted-Paper Revolution," 66).

Braque's solution to the problem, Greenberg explains, is to "spell out" or make explicit the literal flatness of the physical canvas. Applying stenciled letters and numbers to his surfaces allowed the painter to specify literal flatness to the degree that other pictorial elements were "pushed into illusioned space by force of contrast" ("Pasted-Paper Revolution," 62). Once "brute, undepicted flatness" was in view, Braque's paintings could preserve the illusion of a very shallow—but still salient—fictive depth between that literal flatness and the "depicted flatness" of cubist facet-planes ("Collage," 72).

Greenberg is saying that the cubist project was committed to securing or preserving illusion without either (1) capitulating to mere decoration or surface pattern or (2) creating conventional, three-dimensional depth. As cubist space became shallower and as the "process of flattening seemed inexorable," Picasso and Braque were increasingly taxed to advertise the literal surface so that illusion could be separated from it ("Collage," 74). The declaration of the surface reached a "vehement" extreme when they pasted papers onto it, "establish[ing] undepicted flatness *bodily*" (ibid., 75). But that maneuver intensified literal, undepicted flatness to such a degree that illusion had, as it were, no place to go except *in front of* or *on* the literal surface.

At this point, literal, undepicted flatness seemed to be "infect[ing]" illusion ("Collage," 73–74). But as Greenberg puts it,

Flatness may now monopolize everything, but it is flatness become so ambiguous and expanded as to turn into illusion itself—at least an optical if not, properly speaking, a pictorial illusion. Depicted, Cubist flatness is now almost completely assimilated to the literal, undepicted kind, but at the same time it reacts upon and largely transforms the undepicted kind—and it does so, moreover, without depriving the latter of its literalness; rather, it underpins and reinforces that literalness, re-creates it. (Ibid., 77)

Cubism's "reconstructed" flatness yields pictorial content ("Pasted-Paper Revolution," 66). For Greenberg, that content had to do with the way cubism "isolated" plasticity, preserving generalized illusion—illusion *as such*—independently of conventional, three-dimensional representational means ("Collage," 77).

But the crucial point of Greenberg's account is that, in order to achieve pictorial content under the conditions he attributes to the cubist project (that is, under the charge of retaining illusion without resorting to the conventional representation of three-dimensional space and of avoiding mere surface pattern or decoration), literal flatness must be continually "re-created" ("Collage," 77) or "reconstruct[ed]" ("Pasted-Paper Revolution," 65). The literal surface, in other words, must be transformed into a "picture surface"

that can hold or sustain a “surface resonance [that is] derived directly from an underlying illusion which, however schematic, [is] fully felt” (“Collage,” 80 and 77). This surface resonance *is* the picture plane. What is fully felt is what the artist expresses through it.

Nonreconciliation

Having arrived at this understanding of Greenberg’s argument, it will be worthwhile to review one of the most recent, and certainly most considered, readings of the critic’s account of cubism, Lisa Florman’s “The Flattening of ‘Collage.’” Her argument bears directly on the issues of autonomy and meaning that are emerging in my essay. Florman begins her essay by summarizing Greenberg’s account of modernism in terms parallel to those I adopted above. She likewise finds the process of self-criticism to be a kind of defense strategy provoked both by the “deadening effects of contemporary society” and by the threat posed to traditional cultural standards and values by “capitalism’s inexorable commodification.”⁵²

To her credit, Florman refuses to see Greenberg’s appeal to medium-specificity—to modernism’s process of self-definition—as narrowly essentialist (as others frequently do). Rather, it is “fully dialectical”: “Literal flatness,” she writes, “is a condition that modernist painting had to acknowledge, but to which it refused to be fully reconciled.”⁵³ The relevant statement by Greenberg, in “Collage,” reads: “Painting had to spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat, even though at the same time, it had to overcome this proclaimed flatness as an aesthetic fact” (71). The connotation of the word “overcome” as a transcending of contingency seems to draw Florman’s attention and to encourage this summary of Greenberg’s position:

[I]nsofar as the intention was to overcome (and not merely to deny) the literal flatness of the painting’s material support, the effort [of cubism] was doomed to failure. . . . [I]t is precisely this *nonreconciliation* to flatness—to, we might say, the unavoidable conditions of [painting’s] own existence—that characterizes Cubism, and presumably modernist painting more generally. It is also what generated for it a history. Faced with the impossible demand to simultaneously spell out and overcome its literal flatness, Cubist painting was driven to ever more extreme measures; its history appears, as a result, as a succession of retrospective, dialectical responses to its inability to free itself from its own extra-aesthetic contingencies.⁵⁴

In a provocative parallel, Florman finds aspects of Adorno’s negative dialectics harbored within Greenberg’s account of modernism. Modernism’s nonreconciliation to flatness is an instance of making visible in art the constraints on its ideal of absolute freedom, its independence from any external determination: “Every autonomous work,” she writes, “is bound . . . to

show what does not bind it, and in this way necessarily reveals its inability to escape entirely from the world it aims to transcend. [Modernist art] fails to be free and yet remains unreconciled to that failure."⁵⁵

There is much in Florman's account that helps us target the deeper implications of Greenberg's insistence on medium-specificity as an instance of modernist self-criticism and that thus allows us to understand better its internally driven, yet radically contingent, history. For what the "essential" or "intrinsic quality" of the medium is—as both Hofmann and Greenberg were quick to point out—is not given in advance.⁵⁶ But I wonder if the term "nonreconciliation" adequately describes the relation between Greenberg's (and Hofmann's) ideas about flatness as limiting conditions and the nature of the expressive medium as I have explicated it above.⁵⁷

In Florman's essay, there seem to be two possible ways to understand nonreconciliation. First, the nonreconciliation she attributes to cubism—on Greenberg's account of it—could be a nonreconciliation on the part of Picasso and Braque to accept the fact that a literally flat surface, as a necessary condition of painting, *mattered* for pictorial content to be created, for meaning to be expressed. At least, this is how I read Florman's gloss on Greenberg, which I quoted above, that literal flatness is a condition to which modernist painting "refused to be fully reconciled." The suggestion is that the cubist painters were unsure about whether their acknowledgment of the actual surface was a vital aspect of creating pictorial meaning. They were reflexively unreconciled, we might say, to the salience of their own procedures in relation to their actual surfaces. Second—assuming that the cubists did indeed take the literal fact of flatness to matter significantly—there is the opportunity to understand nonreconciliation to mean that Picasso and Braque were unreconciled to the *failure* of "overcom[ing]" literal flatness, unreconciled to the *failure* of "transform[ing]" or "transcend[ing]" it. Here, the transitive sense of the term leads me to suspect that nonreconciliation designates a kind of strained disappointment, an unwillingness to accept the fact that relations between "flatness" and "flatness" have not been resolved or restored—as indeed Florman suggests when she speaks of modernist art's failure to be free, yet "remain[ing] unreconciled to that failure."⁵⁸

I tend to think that it is the latter sense of nonreconciliation that is most important to Florman. And I agree that the struggle to resolve the tension between literal and pictorial flatness is fundamental to modernist painting's history. Still, I think there is room to suggest that Greenberg's and Hofmann's notion of "re-created flatness" underscores a *reconciliation* to the conditions that make expression—make a *medium*—possible. Self-evidently, the literal flatness of the physical support constrains all paintings. But Greenberg does not seem to insist that such constraints should be overcome in the sense of transcended (although he uses the word "overcome," it is to my mind a poor choice): rather, he considers that such constraints must

become “positive factors [to be] acknowledged openly” (as Florman herself recognizes).⁵⁹ Hofmann concurred: “The process of formal creation as such is unthinkable without direct dependence upon . . . material” (“Creation in Form and Color,” 30). Expression, he held, “admit[s] exploration only through the limiting principles which are proper to [a] medium” (ibid.). Finally, he asserted, “No pictorial fixation would be possible without an *a priori* given physical limitation. Pictorial limitation makes [plastic creation] possible” (“Das Malerbuch,” n.p.). It is the positive moment of *being reconciled* to fact—to contingency, to literal flatness, to actual constraint—as the necessary condition of an expressive medium that makes pictorial creation, as Hofmann understood it, a possibility: “The infinite can be created only on the basis of limitation” (*Search for the Real*, 59). And while there certainly is in Greenberg’s writings a suggestion that modernism’s history is comprised of increasingly extreme responses to the inability of painting to free itself from its material conditions, there is also the implication that that history unfolds through painters’ increasing acceptance of (their reconciliation to) the contingencies that are the condition of possibility for their meaning.

Limitations and Expression

As I understand Greenberg’s model of autonomy, the limiting factors of painting secure its proper domain of experience against the deadening and leveling effects caused by modern forms of rationalization, industry, and entertainment. But I also take the implications of his (and Hofmann’s) position to mean that these limits secure the *artist’s* expression, *her* meaning, against the arbitrary meanings a viewer would ascribe to her art.

“A consciousness of limitation,” Hofmann wrote in *Search for the Real*, “is paramount for an expression” (43). To him, re-creating flatness was predicated on the artist’s double awareness of the literal flatness of the support and its enclosing shape and the creative establishment of a picture plane as a medium of expression. That awareness—and particularly the ontological distinction it allows us to discern between the raw materials of expression and the expression of meaning—underpins modernist art:

Your paper is limited. . . . Within its confines is the complete creative message. Every thing you do is definitely related to the paper. . . . The more the work progresses, the more it becomes defined or qualified. It increasingly limits itself. Your paper is a world in itself. . . . The work of art is firmly established as an independent object: this [is what] makes it a picture. Outside of it is the outer world. Inside of it, the world of an artist. (*Search for the Real*, 42–43)⁶⁰

The expression of a “complete creative message” (or the “realization of an urgent vision” as Greenberg put it) necessitates—perhaps it still sounds

paradoxical—limits. The critic elaborated on the implications of this tenet for any effort to generate pictorial meaning:

[T]he making of pictures means, among other things, the deliberate creating or choosing of a flat surface, and the deliberate circumscribing and limiting of it. This deliberateness is precisely what Modernist painting harps on: the fact, that is, that the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions.⁶¹

For an artist to acknowledge that the limiting conditions of painting are what enable it to be made into an expressive medium is for her to recognize the prospect of achieving autonomy—of creating out of limited means her own meaning, which may take unlimited forms. To accept that those material limits are analogous to human ones is to be reconciled to the finitude that makes sharing a possibility.⁶²

Notes

1. Hans Hofmann, "Lecture I," 5. Typescript of six unpublished lectures delivered in New York City, winter 1938–39 (Clement Greenberg Papers, 1928–1995, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 950085). These lectures share themes repeated in the nine lectures from the summer of 1939 preserved in typescript form in the Hans Hofmann Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. Further references to these lectures will be cited in the text.
2. For the classic discussion of what flatness could stand for in the art of Manet and his followers, see T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984), 3–22.
3. Hofmann, "Statement" [1931], in C. Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (Whitney Museum of American Art: Prestel Verlag, 1990), 163–64.
4. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" [1960], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols., ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–93), 4:86 (hereafter cited as *Collected Essays*). Also useful in understanding Greenberg's position is his later essay, "The Notion of 'Postmodern,'" in *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*, ed. I. Hoesterey (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42–49.
5. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" [1962], *Collected Essays*, 4:131.
6. For the intentionalist position, see especially Steven Knapp and Walter Been Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 723–24, and the various responses to it in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
7. The key statement of these issues is Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" [1967], in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72.
8. While scholars often credit Hofmann's ideas with widespread influence, his writings on aesthetics have rarely been given the attention they deserve outside the more narrow scope of Hofmann studies. The most comprehensive work on Hofmann's life and teaching is Tina Dickey, *Color Creates Light: Studies with Hans Hofmann* (Canada: Trillistar Books, 2011). Earlier monographs include Frederick S. Wright, *Hans Hofmann* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); Sam Hunter, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Abrams, 1964); Walter Darby Bannard, *Hans*

- Hofmann: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1976); and Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).
9. Hofmann was the most influential teacher associated with the New York School. Born in Germany in 1880, Hofmann spent 1904–14 in Paris, years that were definitive for his artistic development. From 1915 to 1932, he ran the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in Munich. In 1930, Worth Ryder, later chairman of the Art Department at the University of California at Berkeley, invited Hofmann to the United States. After teaching at Berkeley in 1930 and 1931, Hofmann settled in New York City, where he taught for a year at the Arts Students League before opening his second School of Fine Arts in 1933. By the time Hofmann retired from teaching in 1958, his students had included the art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg; the art theorists Sheldon Cheney and Erle Loran; and the artists Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, and Larry Rivers, among many others. On Hofmann's teaching, see especially Harold Rosenberg, "The Teaching of Hans Hofmann," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 3 (December 1970/January 1971): 17–19; Irving Sandler, "Hans Hofmann: The Pedagogical Master," *Art in America* 61 (May–June 1973): 48–55; Diane Cochrane, "The Teachings of Hans Hofmann: Push and Pull," *American Artist* 38, no. 380 (1974): 26–35 and 63–65; and Cynthia Goodman, "Hans Hofmann as a Teacher," *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 8 (1979): 120–25. A recent dissertation tracks many of Hofmann's students in New York: Jennifer Samet, "Painterly Representation in New York, 1945–1975," Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 2010.
 10. Greenberg, "Review of an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann and a Reconsideration of Mondrian's Theories" [1945], *Collected Essays*, 2:18.
 11. Greenberg, "New York Painting Only Yesterday" [1957], *Collected Essays*, 3:21.
 12. There are notable exceptions, including William Seitz, "Hofmann's Philosophy of Painting," in *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 11–56.
 13. For the relation of Hofmann's ideas to French theory, see Ellen Landau, "The French Sources for Hans Hofmann's Ideas on the Dynamics of Color-Created Space," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 2 (1976): 76–81. For a discussion of German influences, see Barbara Rose, "Hans Hofmann: From Expressionism to Abstraction," *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 3 (1978): 110–14; and Gail Levin, "Kandinsky and Abstract Expressionism," in *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. G. Levin and M. Lorenz (Dayton, OH: Dayton Art Institute, 1992), 192–221. For empathy and formalism, see Michael Schreyach, "Towards Pragmatic Painting: Jackson Pollock's Reflexive Potential," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2005, especially chap. 3, "Hans Hofmann's Theory of Pictorial Creation," 105–30, where I examine in detail another key source for Hofmann's ideas on flatness; Adolf Hildebrand's *The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts* [1893] (reprinted in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893*, ed. H. F. Mallgrave and E. Ikonomou [Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994], 227–80).

The degree to which Hofmann's ideas were influenced by Mondrian deserves further study. When Mondrian published "Toward the True Vision of Reality" (1941) in conjunction with an exhibition at the Valentine Gallery in early 1942, Hofmann studied and annotated the essay (Dickey, *Color Creates Light*, 176). The essay postdates the lectures I will be discussing, but it is obvious that Hofmann had studied Mondrian's writings much earlier (and he certainly had encountered his art). Harry Holtzman, who befriended the Dutch artist after making a special trip to visit him in Paris in 1934 (Holtzman eventually collected and edited Mondrian's writings and became the executor of his estate), was a student and close friend of Hofmann's during the 1930s (*ibid.*, 146–47). Holtzman's advocacy and knowledge of Mondrian's art and philosophy would have been unavoidable, as was Mondrian's first essay published in English, "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1936), which appeared just a couple

of years before Hofmann's lectures and which was widely read by abstract artists in the United States. In any case, Hofmann probably became familiar with Mondrian's theory of neoplasticism independently of Holtzman through the 1925 publication—in Munich, where Hofmann was still teaching—of five essays by the Dutch artist as Bauhaus Book No. 5, *Neue Gestaltung* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925). See Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life: Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 132–74. I thank Todd Cronan for encouraging me to sketch out the Mondrian-Hofmann axis.

14. The best-known anthology of Hofmann's work is *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, ed. Sara Weeks and Bartlett Hayes Jr. (1945; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967). Further references to this work will be cited in the text. See also Hunter, *Hans Hofmann*, which contains five essays by the painter.
15. The original German manuscript notes for "Form und Farbe in der Gestaltung" may be found in the Hans Hofmann Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC (HHP:AAA). The original German typescript of the book is located in the Hans Hofmann Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (HHP:BANC). A carbon copy of the typescript (approximately 204 pages, including diagrams) is housed in the Glenn Wessels Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Sam Hunter suggests that Hofmann intended to call this manuscript *A Grammar of Vision* (*Hans Hofmann*, 14).
16. Wessels was an American painter who became an assistant to Hofmann in Munich in 1930, then returned with him to the United States as an interpreter and guide. Both the Getty and Bancroft typescripts of "Form und Farbe in der Gestaltung" are accompanied by copies of the Wessels translation. References to the manuscript translation of "Creation in Color and Form" will be cited in the text.
17. A draft of the 1933 version of "Das Malerbuch" is held in HHP:AAA (Series 3, Box 6).
18. This corresponds to Dickey's assessment in *Color Creates Light*, 167. I furthermore believe that "Primer" was intended to be a succinct version of "Malerbuch." That short seventy-five-page typed text is located in HHP:BANC (Item 80/27c). There is some indication that Hofmann intended to give his instructional manual a different title: "The Suprasensory Origin of Painting: A Grammar for the Painter" (see handwritten note, HHP:AAA [Series 3, Box 6: Folder "Books—Das Malerbuch Notes and Drafts"]).
19. Typescripts of this book are located in HHP:AAA, HHP:BANC, and the Hans Hofmann Papers, Museum of Modern Art, New York. A comprehensive list of archival material relating to Hofmann may be found in Dickey, *Color Creates Light*, 397–401.
20. Michael Fried, "New York Letter: Hofmann" [1963], *Art and Objecthood*, 294–96. A good reproduction of *Memoria in Aeternum* may be seen on the Museum of Modern Art's website, at http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79621 (accessed June 27, 2014). Further citations to this letter will be cited in the text.
21. Emphasis added, ellipsis suppressed. To eliminate some of the complexities of Hofmann's English phrasing and to make his meaning clearer, throughout this paper I have taken the liberty of making minor punctuation and word-order alterations when quoting him.
22. Compare Kandinsky's theorization of the picture plane in *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* [1926] (*Point and Line to Plane*, trans. H. Dearstyne and H. Rebay (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Press, 1947)), published as Bauhaus Book No. 9 (a year after Mondrian's Bauhaus Book No. 5, *Neue Gestaltung*, discussed in n. 13 above).
23. William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (1955; repr., Washington, D.C.: National Gallery, 1983), 43.

24. Hofmann Lectures: "spiritual expression" (I, 4); "inner life" (IV, 5); "intensity" (IV, 4); "emotion [and] feeling" (I, 3).
25. I say "reestablishing" because Hofmann insisted that his concept of the picture plane had its roots in Renaissance art. Indeed, it was his view that "the consciousness that the picture plane is the medium [of pictorial creation] ha[d] [not] been understood [since the fifteenth century]," and he wanted to reinstate that consciousness for his contemporary moment ("Lecture II," 1).
26. Hofmann lectures: "infinity-expansion," (III, 4), an "actified space" (IV, 6) that has "the quality of flesh—it pulsates, it has sensation; it is not flat" (IV, 5).
27. Greenberg did too. Hofmann "broach[ed] painting as a matter of addressing [him]self to the responsive rather than inert or passive object constituted by a plane surface"; he "reveals the picture surface as something alive and needing only to be touched to show its life—as something that quivers to the touch, and throbs and breathes in answer to paint. This is no hyperbole. Without the help of such a metaphor, it is impossible to understand the *active* effect of Hofmann's paintings, their liveliness of surface, the way they animate the air around them. Something of this attitude to the raw material of one's art has," Greenberg concludes, "spread through American 'abstract expressionis[m]'" ("Introduction to an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann" [1955], *Collected Essays*, 3:245). I think it is worth pointing out that Greenberg's emphasis in this passage on the relation of the raw material of the plane surface as an object to animated pictorial life touches on the very issue I am trying to say emerges from Hofmann's understanding of the picture plane as a medium of expression: that is, as an achievement that transforms an inert surface into a *painting*.
28. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 42.
29. Hofmann, "Address" [1941], in Goodman, *Hans Hofmann*, 167.
30. Cf. note 1 above. In *Color Creates Light* (165–66), Dickey notes these lectures were taken by shorthand, typed, mimeographed, and circulated widely among artists in the 1940s.
31. Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting" [1955], *Collected Essays*, 3:217–36, esp. 219–23.
32. Greenberg, "Introduction to an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann," 242.
33. Greenberg, "New York Painting Only Yesterday" [1957], *Collected Essays*, 4:19–26; "Hans Hofmann: Grand Old Rebel" [1959], *Collected Essays*, 4:67–73; and "Introduction to an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann at Kootz Gallery" [1959], *Collected Essays*, 4:73–74. The first half of Greenberg's monograph, *Hofmann* (Paris: Georges Fall, 1961) reprints "Grand Old Rebel." References to *Hofmann* will be cited in the text.
34. Ellen Landau likewise notes an important connection between Hofmann's ideas and Greenberg's but does not pursue it extensively, in "Space and Pictorial Life: Hans Hofmann's *Smaragd Red and Germinating Yellow*," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 72, no. 5 (1985), 310–22 (see especially 322n25).
35. Greenberg, "Obituary and Review of an Exhibition of Kandinsky" [1945], *Collected Essays*, 2:4. Further references to this essay will be cited in the text.
36. Greenberg, "Kandinsky" [1948/1957], *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 113. Further references to this essay will be cited in the text.
37. "Recapture" suggests that Greenberg, like Hofmann, thought that this sensibility had existed in art prior to modernism.
38. I am guided here by Michael Fried's comments on Manet in "Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism" [1964], republished as part 1 in *Three American Painters* [1965], in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 213–65; esp. 260–61n4.
39. As Lisa Florman pointed out to me, Kandinsky (at least in theory) also understood the picture plane as distinct from the literal surface. His arguments about painting's ability to transcend matter (to become "spiritual") rested on first identifying representation (whether figurative or abstract) with materiality. To negate

- representation with nonobjective painting, then, would be to negate and thus transcend materiality.
40. In *Art and Culture*, “Kandinsky” is noted as being written in “1948/1957,” but it is substantially based on the 1945 obituary and review (it is in the later of the two essays that “re-created flatness” makes its appearance).
 41. The issue of the decorative in Hofmann’s thought is beyond the scope of this paper, but a quote will direct interested readers to possible points of departure: “A plastic work has always, however, a decorative quality, but not every decorative work has a plastic quality. There are therefore two kinds of decorative qualities [just as there are two kinds of flatness]. The one, which I call negative, is without pictorial substance. The other, which I call positive, is pictorial substance” (Hofmann, “Address,” 166). On the theme of decoration and autonomy in Greenberg, see especially “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” [1948]; *Collected Essays*, 2:221–25.
 42. Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock” [1947], *Collected Essays*, 2:125. Note that, in the reprint of this review in *Collected Essays*, the typesetting of the page necessitates a hyphenated “re-” at the line break, possibly creating some uncertainty about whether Greenberg meant “recreated” or “re-created.” It is indeed hyphenated in its original publication (*The Nation* [February 1, 1947], 137). Greenberg later used the variant “created flatness” to describe successful painterly abstraction in “The ‘Crisis’ of Abstract Art,” *Collected Essays*, 4:181.
 43. Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock,” 124.
 44. *Ibid.*, 124–25.
 45. For a discussion of this point in relation to Pollock’s *Mural* (1943), see Michael Schreyach, “The Crisis of Jackson Pollock’s *Mural* as a Painting,” *Getty Research Journal* no. 7 (forthcoming 2015).
 46. Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 87.
 47. *Ibid.* As the paragraph in “Modernist Painting” is more elaborate, I speculate that Greenberg first expressed the idea in a more rudimentary form before 1960, perhaps in an early draft of the Hofmann monograph (eventually published in 1961), then subsequently revised it for the essay (which had originally been written for a radio broadcast in the spring of 1960). Yet evidently, the essay that was written later ended up being published first. Francis Frascina details the origin and permutations of this essay in “Institutions, Culture, and America’s ‘Cold War Years’: The Making of Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting,’” *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 69–97, esp. 72n8.
 48. For an extended analysis of this issue, see Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), esp. 1–44. See also Stephen Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
 49. Greenberg’s analysis prompts a reconsideration of a commonly held, but narrow, view of autonomy. Later commentators have unfairly accused the critic of upholding the clearly untenable view that art is separate from life, detached from the world, removed from or independent of its historical context. Against this reductive cliché, autonomy, on Greenberg’s account, is attained only within and in relation to a set of historical conventions. For him, autonomy is dialectical, its status determined—or rather, achieved—by an artist who acknowledges the conventions of his medium as limiting factors that are the very condition of pictorial expression.
 50. On this point and in following ones, I follow aspects of Lisa Siraganian’s analysis of modernist autonomy in *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The most explicit argument concerning the shift from questions about the ontology of the text (or artwork) to a concern for the primacy of the subject’s experience of an object is Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

- University Press, 2004), esp. "The Blank Page," 1–18. Michaels's title refers to the date of publication of the seminal essay on the distinction between artworks and objects and against meaning's dependence on the spectator: Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" [1967].
51. Greenberg, "Collage" [1959/1961], *Art and Culture*, 70–83; "The Pasted-Paper Revolution" [1958], *Collected Essays*, 61–66. Further references to both essays will be cited in the text. Lisa Florman points out that "Collage" should not be taken as a straightforward revision of "The Pasted-Paper Revolution" (the latter essay is, in fact, a reworking of a 1948 exhibition review of the Museum of Modern Art's *Collage* show). Florman's is the best and most extensive analysis of Greenberg's essays available. See "The Flattening of 'Collage,'" *October* 102 (2002), 59–86. Also relevant for the present discussion is Florman, "Different Facets of Analytic Cubism," *nonsite.org*, Issue #5: <http://nonsite.org/feature/different-facets-of-analytic-cubism> (accessed September 1, 2014).
 52. Florman, "The Flattening of 'Collage,'" 63.
 53. *Ibid.*, 65.
 54. *Ibid.*, 68. Emphasis added.
 55. *Ibid.*, 70. On Adorno, Florman (*ibid.*, 71n36) cites Gregg M. Horowitz, "Art History and Autonomy," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. T. Huhn and L. Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 263–64: "It is . . . the failure to win that keeps art in motion, keeps it unreconciled, thus battling against the realm of external determination, which itself grows more obdurate with each failure."
 56. Hofmann: "The artist's technical problem is how to transform the material with which he works back into the sphere of the spirit. . . . Still, it is not clear what the intrinsic qualities in a medium actually are that make the metamorphosis from the physical into the spiritual possible" (*Search for the Real*, 40). Unfortunately, a reductive reading of Greenberg's medium-specificity dominates the field. Through sheer repetition, commentators have successfully converted his account of modernist self-criticism into a cliché. They take "flatness" only in the literal sense, conflating the concept of medium-specificity with a teleological unveiling of truth or essence. It is such narrow essentialism that essays like Florman's help us overcome. Medium-specificity refers not to a progressive but rather a contingent discovery of what constitutes a medium under particular historical conditions.
 57. Much more about the issue of flatness could, of course, be said. I have barely touched on the intricacies of the issue as it appears in the writings of T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, whose differences on the problem are as instructive as their agreements. Clark claims that the interest shown by Manet and the Impressionists in the "literal presence of the support" was "compelling and tractable for art" because "it was made to stand for something: some particular and substantial set of qualities which took their place in a picture of the world." Flatness could be an analogue for the "Popular" or the plain and workmanlike; it could signify modernity and fashion; and it could stand for the "evenness of seeing itself, the actual form of our knowledge of things" (Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 12–13). Fried discusses Clark's position on flatness in relation to Greenberg in *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15–17. In a footnote to his discussion, Fried remarks that there is a difference between Clark's emphasis on flatness as exemplifying a "skepticism and unsureness about the nature of pictorial representation" and his own sense of Manet's "deliberate strategy of underscoring the 'paintingness' of his pictures of the 1860s": a paintingness that had everything to do with the "flatness and rectangularity of the picture plane" (466–67n61). It is here, too, that Fried firmly repudiates the "ahistorically essentialist notion" that a medium has "intrinsic" qualities that are fixed or determined outside the history of art.

58. "The Flattening of Florman, 'Collage,'" 70. Aspects of Florman's account parallel Clark's view of modernism. Clark invokes Hegel in his account of abstract expressionism, which begins with his ruminations on our inability to make painting by Hofmann and his contemporaries "a thing of the past" ("In Defense of Abstract Expressionism" [1994], in *Farewell to an Idea* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999], 371). Modernism is caught in a "can't go on, will go on" syndrome: stuck in a cycle of wanting "to go on giving Idea and the World sensuous immediacy," finding that it cannot and then making that failure "a persistent, maybe sufficient, subject" for art (372). It seems not unreasonable to hear an echo of the theme of nonreconciliation here (especially in relation to Clark's references to "disenchantment"). For more on that point, see Jay Bernstein, "The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism," *Radical Philosophy* 76 (1996): 7–18.
59. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 86.
60. There is an analogy to be made here with Hofmann's theory of vision. In a section of "Das Malerbuch" that is not often repeated in other iterations of Hofmann's essays, he makes some interesting comments on the limitations of our field of vision as conditions for apprehending the world plastically: "The visual process is limited on all sides by the *field of vision*, [which is] determined by the limited optical capacity of our eyes, and by the physical construction of our eyes. Without limitation of the field of vision we should not be able to [see]. Limitation of perception is an important precondition for [sight]. . . . [Without this delimitation], spatial comprehension would not exist. . . . [Our] visual experience itself contains the sum of [our] visual limitations, and in th[ose] limitation[s] imposed upon [our field of vision] by the eye, we have the basis for [our] spa[tial] concept[s]" ("Das Malerbuch," 86).
61. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 92.
62. The author thanks Todd Cronan, Lisa Florman, and Charles Palermo for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.