

# Rosalind Krauss: between modernism and post-medium

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*Author's introductory note:* The following is the first draft of a section from a proposed new book on Rosalind Krauss. It seeks to make the case for the viability of Krauss' notion of the 'post-medium' against certainly its most sustained and convincing critique in Diarmuid Costello's 'Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts' (*Critical Inquiry* 38, Summer 2012). Our undoubtedly paradoxical argument is that there is no necessary contradiction between a medium being the 'transformation or crossbreeding' of old ones and arising *sui generis*, as Costello seems to think (843). On a proper reading of Stanley Cavell, on whom Krauss draws in her formulation of post-medium, an artistic medium or convention both is a reflection on the past of that medium or convention *and* arises out of nothing. The history of any medium is the history of the invention of a series of new media: to paraphrase Cavell, to produce another instance of an art is to invent a new medium within it (*The World Viewed*, 103).

Costello concludes his essay with the thought that artistic media 'come into focus gradually, and largely retrospectively, as the collective weight of a history of trial and error gathers force' (853), and leaves open the possibility that one day James Coleman and William Kentridge will be seen to have developed new media. But we would say that the development or invention of a medium is never like this. Rather, medium arises either instantly or not at all through something like an artistic *fiat*. Or, to put this another way, even the very first instance of a medium is a certain reflection upon itself, that historical demonstration of the prior existence of a medium that Costello is looking for. In this sense, we would say, contra Costello, that we should not be looking for a 'noncircular' (844) explanation of how a medium becomes a medium. Medium always is circular or even medium is this circularity. (Krauss will call it 'recursive' and a 're-marking' at several points in her *Under Blue Cup*.)

We also include here a brief interview – or perhaps written exchange – with Krauss herself. Of its own inherent interest, it is, of course, not to be understood as any simple endorsement of this reading of her work nor, we hope, any obvious rejection of it.

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An extraordinary moment occurs at the end of *Art since 1900* (2004), the huge *October*-School survey of the art of the twentieth century. In the middle of a roundtable between the book's contributors, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, Krauss says: 'Without the logic of a medium, art is in danger of falling into kitsch.'<sup>1</sup> The reader can almost hear the resulting silence. After all, this is to sound almost exactly like Clement Greenberg's infamous essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', and it is against Greenberg's modernism as much as anything else that Krauss and Annette Michaelson had founded *October* some thirty years before. But if any of Krauss' co-contributors had been reading her recently, they should not have been surprised. For at least five years previously, Krauss had been writing a series of texts on what she called the 'post-medium condition'. Her idea is that, after the end of modernism but against what she describes as the 'deadening generality'<sup>2</sup> of post-modernism, it is time to think again the possibility of artistic medium. The 'post-medium' in this sense would be at once the name of a problem and a possible solution to it. And the artists Krauss puts forward as examples of this new 'post-medium' practice, in which a medium of some kind is once again at stake, include the Irish James Coleman and the slide projector, the South African William Kentridge and the animated drawing, the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers and the museum, the French Sophie Calle and the newspaper and the American Ed Ruscha and the automobile.

Krauss' post-medium writings can undoubtedly be seen to mark a new stage in her career. Indeed, they can even be seen to suggest something of a break with or rejection of what came before. Her fellow contributor's surprise in *Art since 1900* has been shared by most if not all readers of her work, who have interpreted it as a renunciation of that post-modernism with which both she and the journal she co-founded were associated. In fact, this break can even be biographised, insofar as it was in 1999 around the time she began her post-medium writings that Krauss suffered an aneurysm and for a while lost her use of language. In her memoir *Under Blue Cup* (2011), she will speak of her regaining of language and by implication the reclaiming of a certain art-historical discourse after a long period of forgetting.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, these post-medium writings can be viewed as not so much a break with what came before as a return to that modernism with which she began. It is not so much this later period of the post-medium that is an exception as that intervening period of post-modernism. Krauss comes back to the 'true' Krauss after a long period of wandering, reclaiming her 'proper' self against the misunderstanding of her readers, her colleagues and perhaps even herself.

But for us Krauss' post-medium writings mark neither a break with what came before nor a return to her beginnings. Rather, we suggest that what they reveal is that throughout her career there has been a movement or even an

<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss in Hal Foster et al, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, p. 613.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry* 25, Winter 1999, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss will write 'I am approaching the question by my emphasis on the medium as a form of remembering, since the various artistic supports, each represented by its individual muse, serve as the scaffolding for a "who you are" in the collective memory of the practitioners of that particular genre', *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, Mass., 2011, p. 2.

argument between modernism and post-modernism. If these later post-medium writings represent a fulfilment or completion of Krauss' career, it is not in the sense of producing any kind of final synthesis between its parts or revealing its ultimate truth. On the contrary, it is to reveal that throughout her career Krauss has in effect been arguing with herself. So that, instead of any final resolution, Krauss' work is permanently unfinished, incomplete, open to further readings. What she writes is able to be criticised for its inconsistencies – and we will indicate several here, both direct and obvious and indirect and profound – but ultimately we are able to contest Krauss only in the name of Krauss herself. We are absolutely able to criticise Krauss, but this only to repeat what Krauss already says about herself. And this we suggest is the mark of properly powerful thought: not that it is merely consistent and able to be repeated without change, but that it is structurally inconsistent and divided from itself, so that it is able to fit any future circumstance

In fact – and this is a sign of what Krauss calls the 'recursivity' of the post-medium – Krauss can be seen to be speaking of this herself. In 2010 she published *Perpetual Inventory*, which was a selection of writings from throughout her career in light of her subsequent theorisation of the post-medium.<sup>4</sup> Thus she included essays from both her early modernist period like 'The Cubist Epoch' (1970) and 'Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd' (1966) and later post-modern period like 'The Latin Class' (1994) and 'Michel, Bataille et Moi' (1993), along with such actual post-medium essays as 'Lip Synch' (2006) and "'Specific' Objects' (2004), to suggest an inner consistency, the fact that she has always been writing post-medium criticism. However, more than this, in doing so she is revealing how those earlier pieces of writing, both modern and post-modern, are able to be reread and reclassified. More than any actual category, the post-medium is this very activity of breaking down and reassembling. Krauss had already in 1999 written an essay on Robert Rauschenberg entitled 'Perpetual Inventory', in which she speaks of the way that across Rauschenberg's oeuvre not only is each work made up of a certain holding together of disparate elements – an army truck, Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* and a thickly painted white cross in *Crocus* (1962), for instance – that might not be thought to belong together, but that these 'same' elements are broken down and reclassified in other works.<sup>5</sup> (Thus we have the same mirror in *Transom* (1963) and *Trapeze* (1964) and the same cube in *Vault* (1962) and *Die Hard* (1963).) In other words, Rauschenberg's work is engaged in a 'perpetual inventory' of itself, in which the 'same' elements are employed in continuously different configurations, with any meaning they might have being only temporary and open to be recast at any moment. And we suggest that, as the collection named after this essay reveals, this procedure is very much at stake in Krauss' writings themselves.

In what follows, we take up in some detail Krauss' post-medium writings. They have been, as we have suggested, largely disregarded by those previously interested in her work or, if not, dismissed by them as some kind of a renunciation of or falling away from what she had previously stood for. Indeed, there exist very few commentators altogether who have looked at these post-medium writings by themselves, whether to read them in their own terms or apply them to other artists

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory' *October* 88, Spring 1999, pp. 86-116.

or media. For our part, we consider here undoubtedly the most detailed and ambitious attempt to account for Krauss' post-medium work: the essay 'Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts' by aesthetic philosopher Diarmuid Costello, which appeared in a special issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry* devoted to the topic of photography between philosophy and art history. One of the subjects Costello treats there is Krauss' own relationship to philosophy, insofar as the acknowledged inspiration for her post-medium writings is the American 'ordinary language' philosopher Stanley Cavell. Costello will argue – of course, in a way repeating the usually understood hierarchy between philosophy and art history – that not only does Krauss misunderstand Cavell's work but her version of it does not even count as a valid interpretation or application of it. We in this essay will disagree with Costello's verdict, suggesting that something like an 'aesthetic' interpretation or application of something is at stake in the relationship between Krauss and Cavell. Here is Costello towards the beginning of his essay, setting out the alternatives for Krauss' relationship to Cavell as he sees them:

Does Krauss' account shed new light on Cavell's, or is she trying to press his terms into service for which they are ill-served? Both of course could be true, the former as a consequence of the latter perhaps. Conversely, do the philosophical and art historical accounts pass one another by? Note that even if the latter were true, its explanation might still prove instructive in the context of an interdisciplinary volume seeking to bring art historians and philosophers into dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

Where to begin in making our own evaluation? Costello has already done much of the work in presenting two of the principal examples of 'post-medium' in Krauss' writings: Coleman and Kentridge. We might just recap here. Coleman makes work using several slide projectors that are timed to overlap so that one slide gradually dissolves into another. Using this method, he 'shoots' lengthy scenes that look something like early cinema or old-fashioned theatre, frequently using period costumes and make-up. Thus *Seeing for Oneself* (1987-90) is an updated version of *Sleeping Beauty*, and *INITIALS* (1994), based on a Yeats drama, is the story of two dead lovers who are unable to depart this world because of an unsolved crime. There is much to say about the 'content' of their narratives – frequently based on episodes from Irish history – but Krauss in her analysis concentrates on one particular feature of the works: the fact that, instead of the shot-reverse shot between characters talking to or looking at each other in conventional cinema, Coleman will have the characters in such an exchange look simultaneously out towards the audience. However, even though the characters are seen at once, the viewer – and here Krauss points out that Coleman is employing a convention found in both photonovels and cartoon books – is meant to understand that they are to be

<sup>6</sup> Diarmuid Costello, 'Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts', *Critical Inquiry* 38 (4), Summer 2012, p. 821.

looked at one after the other. This is Krauss in “‘And Then Turn Away?’: An Essay on James Coleman’ (1997) on this aspect of Coleman’s work:

There is a concentration in scene after scene on a particular shot, which is also shared by comic books, which we could call the *double face-out*. It occurs when two of the characters are in an exchange to which one is having a strong reaction. In a film this would be handled by the strategy of cross-cutting as the camera looks away... But here the ‘reaction shot’ is conflated with the image of its instigation and both characters appear together.<sup>7</sup>

Kentridge for his part makes what he calls ‘drawings for projection’. By this he means that he produces animated cartoons of a sort, but that, instead of the individual drawings of conventional animation, each depicting a distinct pose of the character, which then come together when the film passes through the projector, Kentridge uses the same underlying drawing for long sequences of his films, adding and subtracting individual elements and laboriously photographing each stage. The effect, instead of invisible motion, is an image that visibly changes before our eyes, breaking down the seamless illusion of conventional animation. Using this peculiar and seemingly old-fashioned technique – Krauss in her essay compares it to the series of optical devices like the zootrope and phenakistoscope that preceded the invention of cinema – Kentridge has made such films as *Monument* (1990), which is the story of an apartheid-era mine owner unveiling a statue of one of his workers, and *Mine* (1991), which continues the story by contrasting those living above the ground and those working under it. This is Kraus in “‘The Rock’: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection’ (2000) on the particular technique by which Kentridge makes his work:

It is just this walking back and forth, this constant shuttling between the movie camera on one side of the studio and the drawing tacked to the wall on the other, that constitutes the field of Kentridge’s own operation... It is a space which, as we have seen, is technical, dictated by an ‘animation’ process in which a single drawing is gradually transformed though a combination of additions and erasures.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the other example Costello discusses in some detail is Krauss’ essay on Ed Ruscha and his photobook *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1966). The notable aspect of this work is that supposedly each of the twenty-six gasoline stations Ruscha photographed to make up the book are where he stopped to refuel his car on a trip from Los Angeles, where he was then living, to Oklahoma, where he was born. In other words, in some ways it was the car in which Ruscha travelled that

<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “‘And Then Turn Away?’: An Essay on James Coleman’, *October* 81, Summer 1997, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “‘The Rock’: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection’, *October* 92, Spring 2000, p. 5- 6.

dictated the form of the work. Here is Krauss in “‘Specific’ Objects’ on the role Ruscha’s motor vehicle played in the final appearance of the piece:

‘Auto’ does not merely express the isolation of the artist, then; it also suggests that the source of the ‘rules’ comes from within the support: ‘twenty-six’, for example, was derived from the number of refills necessary between California and Oklahoma and thus referred to the demands of driving and the exigencies of the car.<sup>9</sup>

Each of these works is an example of what Krauss calls ‘post-medium’ art. By this she means that in each of them we find the use of a medium that is not usually – indeed, before these artists, not at all – employed to make art: a timed slide projector, a successively animated drawing, the artist’s motor car. What explains or justifies this? Krauss’ point is that the conventional, let us say orthodoxly modernist, media appear no longer able to produce aesthetically convincing works of art. They are, in Krauss’ words, ‘outmoded’ or ‘obsolescent’.<sup>10</sup> It is this situation that Minimalism and Conceptualism both responded to and helped bring about with their generic categories – Minimal *objects*, Conceptual *Art* – that no longer implied a specific medium. It is this that inaugurated the whole period of post-modernism, in which the form in which the artist presented the work was not important and what counted instead was what the artist said through it. But it is this that Krauss did not find convincing or acceptable as long ago as the well-known Whitney Biennale of 1993, said to have ushered ‘political correctness’ into contemporary art, when she says of the curator’s essay on the Afro-American artist Lorna Simpson’s *Hypothetical?* (1992), which speaks of it exclusively as dealing with ‘black rage’: ‘The work is seen as having a meaning that one can successfully name and then use that name to pass from the object to a register of important “ideas”’.<sup>11</sup> And it is this several years later that not only led Krauss to think how a sense of medium was necessary to produce aesthetically convincing art but allowed her to observe a number of artists who meaningfully employed medium in their work, although it was no longer those media previously seen in modernism, for example, painting, sculpture, drawing and film.

Krauss’ point is that, if the classic modernist media are no longer possible as the basis for aesthetically convincing art today – and in this sense, she largely agrees with the post-modernist critique of modernist medium, although it is medium here in its literal or material Greenbergian sense – what the artists she looks at make clear is that medium is still nevertheless possible and indeed necessary as the basis on which to make art. Coleman, Kentridge and Ruscha can each be seen to be taking the particular constraints and possibilities of the medium in which they make work and using them to shape both the work and our responses to it. Each seeks to release the particular expressive possibilities implicit in their chosen medium, which of course also do not exist until they have been given expression in this way. The

<sup>9</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “‘Specific’ Objects’, in *Perpetual Inventory*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>10</sup> “‘The Rock’”, pp. 29, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Krauss, in Hal Foster et al, ‘The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennale’, *October* 66, Fall 1993, p. 4.

timed overlapping slide projector with its double face-out of characters because it cannot cut between them as in conventional cinema certainly imposes limits on what Coleman can do, but it also profoundly shapes and mediates our experience of his work, knowing that he has to find 'content' that is somehow appropriate to this form. We can, according to Krauss, as in our usual understanding of modernist art, see Coleman at once taking into account the constraints of his chosen medium and pushing them to find out what else they can do. We can see him, having established a certain aesthetic possibility in one piece, driving it successively further towards what we might call its expressive limit (although, again, reciprocally, what we think of as the limits of any particular medium can be seen only through the examples that successfully test them in this way). This is Krauss again on this aspect of Coleman's practice, but she will say similar things of both Kentridge and Ruscha:

[This imaginative projection] also appears and disappears to the rhythm of the apparatus of Coleman's medium. A medium which he has 'invented', and which, in continually investigating its terms, he continually reinvents, both as a disruption of modernism's certainties and as a continuation of its hopes.<sup>12</sup>

But it is here that Costello intervenes and suggests that Krauss' argument is invalid. Krauss is arguing that medium within post-medium art operates like any usual medium in allowing aesthetic evaluation, the judging of whether the work succeeds or fails, with the artist unable merely to repeat the same work but having constantly to test the conventions by which they operate. However, Costello insists that none of this is possible within the particular post-media that Krauss takes as her examples. To begin with, Krauss emphasises that each of the particular artists she treats effectively 'invents' a medium: Coleman the slide projector, Kentridge the animated drawing and Ruscha the car. No other artist has ever previously or subsequently worked using the same form. Each of them exploits a singular or idiosyncratic 'technical support' that no one either before or after has ever thought suitable to produce art. And Krauss certainly can be seen to be saying something like this. For example, she will speak in her essay on Coleman of the way there was 'an attempt, or rather several quite different ones, to "invent" a medium: not to rescue a dying tradition, but, most improbably to create a new one'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, for Costello, this exceptionality precisely rules out the possibility of the apparatus in question forming a viable artistic medium. Medium and the aesthetic judgement associated with it, by both the artists and their audience, implies a comparability that crosses not only different times but different artists. Without this comparison, those conventions Krauss implicitly suggests are at stake in their work as what go against the 'kitsch' of the refusal of judgement of the post-medium condition are not possible. Conventions are neither able to be put in place nor successively tested, which we would want to emphasise are the same thing. This is Costello on this aspect of Kraus' argument and his objection to it:

<sup>12</sup> "'And Then Turn Away?'" , p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> "'And Then Turn Away?'" , p. 6.

What would count as an inventive – unexpected but compelling – extension of a practice that is, according to Krauss, indexed to no prior tradition of norms, expectations, extensions or solutions to perceived problems governing its ongoing practice? It is hard to see how anything could count in this sense, given the absence of a background history, theory and practice, and associated expectations against which to judge.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, as we have said, Costello is even more sweeping in his critique of Krauss than this. After ruling out ‘the appeal to Cavell’s notion of automatism’<sup>15</sup> as a logical defence or justification of Krauss’ post-medium, he then goes on to refuse the other, wider justification for it. Even if Krauss is specifically wrong about the Cavellian modernism she relies on, he nevertheless allows that it is possible that her argument – and this would be something like the art-historical justification for it – throws new light on the modernist notion of medium altogether. That is, it is possible, admits Costello, that Krauss in her proposed post-medium could be advocating for the transformation of orthodox modernist media. In this sense – as Costello sees for example in the recent work of Michael Fried on photography, in which we see the coming together or even passing beyond of the older media of painting and photography – it is possible that Krauss’ post-medium could be something of a new hybridisation of existing media brought about by their gradual ‘transformation or cross-breeding’. But again this is not the option Krauss takes for Costello. According to him, Krauss’ post-medium is not any kind of conscious remaking of previous media, any gradual coming-together over time in the aftermath of the ‘outmodedness’ or ‘obsolescence’ of present media. Rather, for Costello, these new post-media or technical supports that Krauss posits at once arise instantly as a kind of artistic fiat and are definitionally singular, neither coming out of any prior comparison nor comparable themselves. This again is Costello in a passage that is repeated very closely in two footnotes in his essay, which finally rules out even the ‘aesthetic’ justification for Krauss’s argument, the fact that though she gets Cavell wrong she puts forward a plausible alternative for a new artistic form or practice:

One may be tempted to reply, no such problems [of judgement] need pertain to new artistic media if they are perceived as outgrowths, transformations or crossbreeds of old ones. For in that case, invention can be judged relative to the ‘precursor’ media thereby transformed. And that would be right. But given that Krauss understands the artistic media under discussion as *sui generis* this option is not available to her.<sup>16</sup>

Costello’s case appears very convincing. As we say, we certainly can find numerous passages in Krauss’ writings in which she says that the new post-media are strictly ‘invented’ by artists and ‘can only be practised by one’. But we want to argue here – and this returns us in some way to the question of what is the proper

<sup>14</sup> ‘Automat, Automatic, Automatism’, p. 843.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Automat, Automatic, Automatism’, p. 819.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Automat, Automatic, Automatism’, p. 843.



response of one scholar to another – that, even if Costello is strictly correct in his characterisation of Krauss, this does not mean either that her art-historical ‘invention’ of post-medium is impossible or that her work does not cast important light on the work of Cavell as its intellectual source. Let us begin here with a brief account of Cavell on artistic medium. It is Cavell to whom Fried originally turned in the 1960s as a way of breaking with the notion of medium bequeathed to him by Greenberg: that medium is simply the physical materials and techniques of a particular category of art, and that the history of any artistic medium is driven by the necessity to discover the underlying truth or essence of that medium. In the case of painting, famously, it was ‘flatness and the delimitation of flatness’.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the difficulty of this – and it is this that leads Krauss to regard such modernist media as ‘cashiered’ or ‘washed up’<sup>18</sup> – is that, once this truth or essence is discovered, there is seemingly nothing left for a particular medium to do. It is this that seemingly occurred to painting, which allowed it to turn into the ‘generic object’ of Minimalism. The paradox is that, in ‘having stripped away all superfluous conventions to reduce itself to the defining bedrock of its physical flatness’,<sup>19</sup> painting was no longer aesthetically convincing, even for Greenberg, and it was no longer a painting he wished to recognise. Painting is ‘cashiered’ in this double sense – and we see something similar when Krauss speaks of post-medium – in that it is exactly in being historically realised that it no longer remains viable as an artistic medium.

By contrast, Cavell proposes a different conception of medium, in which it is not a matter of any underlying fact or essence that defines a particular medium, and therefore there can be no implicit teleology whereby it is realised and comes to an end. Rather, for Cavell, medium is something like a series of conventions of the kind that organise and make possible ordinary conversation. Each new work – or at least each work that counts as new – is at once a following of the rules and a certain testing of them. This is the distinction Cavell draws between traditional art and modern art. In traditional art, the artist is simply able to follow the existing rules to produce an acceptable and aesthetically convincing work of art. The example Cavell uses is classical music where, once the composer has set the underlying harmony and arrangement, the performer is able to ‘compose’ elements of the music, as they often did in improvising the arias or cadenzas that were left for them to complete.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the rules of traditional artforms are what Cavell calls ‘automatisms’: instructions that can be unhesitatingly followed and that barely involve artistic choice. However, with the advent of artistic modernism, all of this changes. The established rules no longer hold and artists are no longer unthinkably able to follow tradition. Instead, each particular art form must seek to establish the precepts or conventions that guide it, which must be faithful to what has come before but also find new ways in which it might be thought and applied in changing circumstances.

<sup>17</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘After Abstract Expressionism’, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> “‘And Then Turn Away?’”, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> “‘The Rock’”, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> See on this Stanley Cavell, ‘Music Discomposed’, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 200-1.

This is the formula Cavell uses in *The World Viewed* (1979): 'One might say that the task is no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it.'<sup>21</sup> In effect, art must seek to devise new automatisms when the old ones no longer apply. The example Cavell treats there in great detail is cinema, in which after the old simply mechanical automatism of the spectator being set back from the screen so that the 'magical reproduction of the world'<sup>22</sup> it brings about is no longer possible, individual films must find new ways to produce this effect through their particular narratives and modes of making, in effect restoring the 'automatism' of the medium.

Cavell's conception of artistic medium differs from Greenberg's in that there is no defined goal or endpoint that guarantees the success of the work of art in advance. In effect, that is, Greenberg still holds to a traditional, pre-modern conception of the medium, in which there are rules simply to be followed – what he calls 'a progressive surrender to the resistance of the medium'<sup>23</sup> – whereas in Cavell there is no predicting in advance what form the medium might take in order to attain artistic success. But, in fact, we suggest that Cavell's notion of medium is more ambiguous than it is usually given credit for. The medium for Cavell is ultimately a matter of how the artist or rather artwork speaks meaningfully to the spectator in the continually differing circumstances of everyday life. And this is analogous for him to how we use language, that is, how we first learn the meaning of a word and then use it ourselves, in order to communicate with others. However, the test for Cavell as to whether we properly know the meaning of a word is not merely whether we can use it in the same way and same circumstances in which we originally learnt it, but whether we can use it in a new way in different circumstances. Indeed, implicit in this is the idea that we can *only* use a word in a new way, that we can *never* repeat the meaning of a word in exactly the same circumstances in which we originally encountered it. This is Cavell in *The Claim of Reason*: 'To know the meaning of a word, and to have the concept titled by the word, is to be able to go on with it into new contexts.'<sup>24</sup> And, analogously – this lies behind Cavell's insistence that Wittgenstein, whose work he draws on here, is speaking not timeless philosophical truths, but of the everyday world in which we actually live – this would be like works of art in modernism. The true test of whether an artist properly knows a medium or the rules of art is not by repeating them – as we say, this tradition is no longer possible – but by using them in a new way in different circumstances.

There are two complex and largely unrecognised consequences of this, which are relevant to the criticisms Costello makes of Krauss, both for simply misreading Cavell's work and for not sufficiently recasting it in the light of artistic

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> *The World Viewed*, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoön', in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. P. 122. See also 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 52.

practice. The first is that within Cavell's model it is the case that each particular use of a word or making of a work of art – that is, properly knowing the meaning of a word or authentically continuing a medium – is unique and different. To recall the words Costello holds against Krauss, it involves the potential 'unintelligibility' of something that 'can only be practised by one'.<sup>25</sup> But also – another complexifying fact, which will take us to our second point – no use of a word or making of a work of art counts unless it *can* be repeated by another.<sup>26</sup> So that, in the first paradox or contradiction of 'ordinary language' philosophy and modernist medium, each use or meaning is necessarily singular, but it is not so until it has been repeated by another. The second complexifying point is that, if each use of the 'same' word and each engagement with the 'same' medium is necessarily different, what is to say that all of these uses and engagements have something in common? In other words, what is to guarantee that through an incremental series of changes, each in a way faithful to the one before – and this could be one person replying or thinking they had replied to another in a conversation or an artist following or thinking they had followed the conventions established by previous artists – a word at the end of the conversation or work of art at the end of the history of a particular medium means the same as that word or work at the beginning? All of this is to raise, of course, the well-known Wittgensteinian problem of 'family resemblance', and it opens up the question of whether anything in Cavell's conception of medium is necessarily required for a painting, say, to be a painting, or whether there is any limit as to what can properly be called painting. And yet at the same time – and this is the other half of the 'family resemblance' problem considered by Cavell – we could not even remark this difference unless these various instances could be compared, seen as instances of the 'same' medium.<sup>27</sup>

However, let us consider all of this another way. It is indeed possible that over its long history the medium of painting does not remain the same, that all paintings do not all have one thing in common, so that any particular quality we

<sup>25</sup> 'Automat, Automatic, Automatism', p. 848.

<sup>26</sup> See on this Krauss' (slightly flawed) elaboration of Jacques Derrida's notion of 'iterability' in *Under Blue Cup*, fn. 2, p. 131. There is a whole discussion of that repetition that makes singularity at once possible and impossible in that book, as indeed throughout Krauss' work (for example, 'Grids' and 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the most brilliant literary expression of this is Jorge Luis Borges' essay 'Kafka and His Precursors', in which, after elaborating the Czech writer Franz Kafka's various "precursors" across history and cultures, Borges concludes: 'If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other', *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-86*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001, p. 365. Here we would suggest that 'Kafka' is a certain 'something in common' to what otherwise would have 'nothing in common'. But any attempt to say what 'Kafka' is merely reduces him to another of his 'precursors', as actually happens in Borges' essay: 'The first Kafka of *Betrachtung* [the early short stories] is less a precursor of the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany' (p. 365). We will return to this theme in a moment when we speak of the way that we can only ever see a medium through the post-medium. And in this regard we would call the 'Kafka' of Borges' essay a literary post-medium.

might use to characterise painting is only partial and does not cover all of it. How can this be so? If the task of painting is to test its own conventions, to decide what of the past is still relevant in the present, then each significant new work will seek to draw out that single proper convention that runs like a thread through the past that would allow it to continue into the future. Each important new painting, that is, would attempt to identify some previously unremarked quality in its history that constitutes its authentic lineage and that all paintings worthy of the name can now be seen to have in common. Nevertheless, insofar as the history of a modernist medium is made up of this series of new and always different qualities drawn out from it, it is ultimately possible that not all of this history is covered by each of these paintings, that in fact each great painting at once includes new and hitherto unknown paintings in and excludes old and well-known paintings from the history it constructs justifying itself. Again, therefore, it is possible that the modernist history of any particular medium does *not* have anything in common to *all* of its examples: each new member draws out a partial or particular quality from the 'wider' community of the medium, which – this is precisely what the history of any particular medium is, that sense of 'failure' that drives on each new inclusion to fill in what has previously been missing – is only ever seen as one of these particular qualities. Each new work attempts to speak in the name of a 'wider' medium, but each only ever manifests certain members or particular qualities from it.

It is at this point that we might return to Krauss and her discourse of post-medium. The first point to be made is that Krauss' concept of post-medium is not quite as singular, idiosyncratic and incomparable as Costello makes out. Admittedly, there are any number of moments when we can find Krauss apparently saying this (as, indeed, we can find Cavell), but we can also find examples where this is simply not what is at stake. Let us take two instances from Krauss that Costello does not address, one put forward before his essay was written and the other only after: Jackson Pollock's 'horizontalities' and Frank Stella's 'shaped canvases'. (Costello does in fact consider both artists in his essay in terms of medium, but only with regard to Cavell's treatment of them in the chapter 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting' of *The World Viewed*.) Krauss discusses Pollock's 'horizontalities' in the essay 'The Crisis of Easel Painting', originally delivered at the symposium for the 1998 Pollock retrospective at MoMA, and Stella's 'shaped canvases' towards the beginning of *Under Blue Cup*. In 'The Crisis of Easel Painting', Krauss speaks of the way that Pollock, faced with the sense that conventional easel painting was no longer aesthetically possible, decided to lay his larger-than-easel-painting-scale canvases horizontally on the ground in order to drip paint onto them. This is not the Pollock of the *informe* of Krauss' *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), but one who on the contrary is seeking some medium or convention to make painting possible again. This is Krauss in 'The Crisis of Easel Painting': '[Horizontalities] dislodges the idea of medium from a set of physical conditions and relocates it within a phenomenological mode and address that can itself function as the support for the medium.'<sup>28</sup> And Krauss says something similar

<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', in Kirk Varnedoe (ed.), *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p. 169. Krauss will also speak there of the way that the medium is 'folded into media' (p. 164), which we suggest is how

of Stella in *Under Blue Cup*. Faced with a comparable crisis in easel painting confronted by the non-medium of Minimal objects, Stella proposes the 'depicted' or non-literal shape of the canvas as a way of continuing its practice. This is Krauss again in *Under Blue Cup*: 'Stella "invented" *shape* as a new medium... in insisting on the absolute necessity for prolonging the specific medium as the ground for aesthetic coherence.'<sup>29</sup>

What is to be observed here? If we think of Pollock and Stella both engaging in 'post-medium' practices, we can see that they are not incomparable. We can point to artists who carry on following both Pollock's 'horizontal' (Robert Morris, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol) and Stella's 'shape' (Richard Tuttle, Robert Mangold, even Donald Judd). But perhaps the real point to address here, not unrelated to this, is the relation of Pollock's and Stella's particular post-media to the older and wider medium of 'painting' in which both appear to work. What is, to begin with, Pollock's post-medium of horizontality? It draws out a certain quality or even bundle of qualities from the 'wider' medium of painting. From all of the various qualities or characteristics of painting, Pollock selects just horizontality as the basis of its continuation. And Stella for his part selects another quality or bundle of qualities for his 'shape'. We say *bundle* of qualities because other artists working in the same medium will, as in that Cavellian concept of medium we have elaborated previously, draw out *other* qualities that they say are its true qualities. It is in this way that both horizontality and shape can form the basis of a post-medium practice: both can be seen to run like threads throughout the entire history of painting. It is this 'nothing in common' that makes up painting that is the reason that both Pollock and Stella can at the same time claim to be the continuation of painting in different ways. Both can claim to be the continuation because it is possible that over its long history there is no single criterion that defines painting and two completely different qualities can put themselves forward as its authentic future destiny. And that – this is the real point of post-medium, what it means for Krauss to say that the medium of painting is only to be continued in these specific post-media – painting is only ever seen at one particular moment of its history as one or other of these qualities or bundle of qualities. We never have medium as such, but only ever one of these post-media. The post-medium is possible only because of a medium, and this medium can only ever be seen through one or another of these post-media.<sup>30</sup>

It is at this point, to conclude, that we come back to Krauss' original discussion of Coleman and Kentridge. For what we want to suggest – and it is implicit in the title of Costello's essay – is that each is involved in the invention or discovery of a new 'automaticity' after the traditional 'automatism' of cinema is over. That is to say, we might ask, what do Coleman's slide projector and Kentridge's animated drawings respond to? In what sense can Krauss speak of their

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any attempt to speak for all of a medium is revealed to be only partial, a certain bundling of qualities from a wider selection.

<sup>29</sup> *Under Blue Cup*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> It is in this regard that we might understand Krauss speaking of what she calls the 'singular plurality' (*Under Blue Cup*, p. 2, p. 59) or the 'internal plurality' (*'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 6) of the post-medium.

work in terms of post-medium at all? Crucially, their work arises in response to the problem not merely of medium in general but the medium of *film*. Krauss speaks of both artists finding their new 'technical supports' precisely after the medium of film becomes 'outmoded' and 'obsolescent'. However, in order to do this, in a manner analogous to Pollock and Stella, they each draw out only a particular quality or bundle of qualities from film. Not from *all* of film – as in that classic modernist, indeed Greenbergian, project of structuralist cinema, although that too would be revealed in retrospect to be referring only to some of the qualities of film – but only a particular aspect: the shot-reverse shot in Coleman and the passage of film through the projector in Kentridge. It is on this basis that both think that cinema is still viable – and the fact that both practices exist simultaneously, like Pollock and Stella, tells us that each is only part of a 'wider' cinema, that the two different qualities are possible at the same time, that in the history of cinema there has been both. Indeed, the very fact that both are post-medium tells us that the two practices are inseparable, that the same artists and, qualities can potentially be found in both.<sup>31</sup> Contra Costello, we would say that this particular set of qualities is possible only because of comparison (because it represents a certain subsection of all possible cinematic qualities) and it necessarily allows comparison (it enables another to come along after and say what is really at stake in the shot-reverse shot or progression of film through the projector).

We might say all of this more slowly. In the Cavellian concept of medium, across the history of a medium like film in its modernism phase it is possible that all of the things that have been said to constitute its 'automaticisms', each coming out of and further refining the one before, have nothing in common. There is not only no single continuous physical medium that could ultimately be discovered, as in Greenberg, but also no single continuous series of conventions with some property common to all. This means that any definitive attempt to summarise or stand at the end of this history, which each significant work of art attempts to do, is partial, merely a momentary holding together of qualities and one of any number of similar attempts to say what the medium is. In some sense, all we have in the light of the cashiering or impossibility of some overall medium is a series of post-media, of the kind we have in Pollock and Stella and Coleman and Kentridge. And, indeed, Krauss' point is that this is all we *ever* had within a properly Cavellian modernism (hence her quoting him on the necessity of 'inventing' a new medium). We never had anything that would speak for all of the medium forever in all circumstances. Any particular statement on it is only partial, represents merely a survey or sample of all of its possible qualities. Each represented medium is in effect a post-medium. In other words, we have already had that series of post-media that allow and arise out of a comparison with each other. But this can be said – that there is no overall medium, but only a series of specific post-media – only because of some 'wider' medium. It is a medium that exists only as an empty point of enunciation, which allows the artist making the next move in the history of their 'medium' to say what

<sup>31</sup> It is this simultaneous difference and overlapping of practices in and qualities of the post-medium that Krauss means to evoke with her notion of the 'rules of the guilds' (p. 7) in *Under Blue Cup*. It might even be what she means by alluding to Foucault on the way that 'all authors within a given epoch will unconsciously speak at the same time' (pp. 15-6).

all previous attempts to summarise that 'medium' have had in common. In this sense, there is undoubtedly something Conceptual or even post-modern in this conception of medium. It is indeed something like Joseph Kosuth's 'Art', a 'transcendental' or 'philosophical' point of view onto everything else. But at the same time – and this is Krauss' point against Conceptualism – if post-medium is possible only because of medium (Art), medium (Art) is only ever seen through a particular post-medium.

All of this is how Krauss understands how she might continue the Cavellian project of the modernist medium after its apparent end in post-modernism. It is not the simple revival of modernism after post-modernism, but neither is it a matter of post-modernism coming after and putting an end to modernism. Rather, to paraphrase Jean-François Lyotard – and Krauss will cite him in her work – it is a question of a post-modernism that 'precedes' and makes possible modernism. The successive recastings and recalibrations of modernism are not only successive responses to the potential end of the medium, but are themselves only to be spoken from a position of an empty medium or non-medium (which will nevertheless always prove specific, a particular bundling of qualities, a post-medium). That is, in a paradoxical way, we must associate modernism with a certain post-medium (after the end, partial, only a particular quality or bundling together of qualities) and post-medium with medium (abstract, empty, something in common to what appears to have nothing in common).<sup>32</sup> But, of course, the real point here is that Krauss' hypothesis of post-medium puts modernism and post-modernism into an aporia or circularity, with each making the other both possible and impossible. It is again everything Krauss means when she speaks of post-medium as 'recursive', that is to say, a continual folding back of it onto itself, which is also to say the perpetual search for that place from which it is spoken.<sup>33</sup> This is again why we might speak of Krauss' own writing, as she hints at herself, as itself a post-medium.

Indeed, in an almost orthodox modernist way, we can see the objects of post-medium – which, we can now see, are *all* of the objects in Krauss' work – materially reflect this post-medium condition. It is exactly in this sense that the post-medium is a medium and the various objects spoken of in terms of it – again, against Costello – can be compared to each other. To begin with Coleman and Kentridge, we would say that in both their practices we see a simultaneous sameness and difference – the face-out that is also a cut, the visible stopping and starting of the image through the projector gate – that is the paradox of a 'nothing in common' that is also a 'something in common'. But we might consider as well a classic 'post-modern' object like Krauss's grid, that by which she proves the repetition that makes possible

<sup>32</sup> It is perhaps in relation to this that we might understand Krauss' otherwise strange idea, which she repeats a number of times, of the 'technical supports' of the post-medium somehow 'playing off' the 'white cube' of modernism: 'The inventors of technical supports as a new form of recursivity are challenging the post-medium insistence about the end of the space specific to art's autonomy, what conceptual art dismissed as the white cube; instead they rely on the resistance of its walls to penetration, the way the sides of a pool provide the swimmer with a kicking post against which to propel himself in a new direction' (*Under Blue Cup*, p. 25). Here we might say that it is the empty space or white wall of the medium that allows us to gather together the various directions or deflections of the post-medium.

<sup>33</sup> *Under Blue Cup*, p. 18.

the difference or originality of modernism. We would have to say, considered as a post-medium, the grid is not simply flat, horizontal and homogenous, but a series of recursive remarkings, with each successive square of the grid an attempt to figure that void for which the others stand in, in an escalator-like coming together of verticality and horizontality. This is also to be seen in that other great 'post-modern' conception of Krauss, sculpture in the expanded field, in which again, complicating the simple semiotic conception of endless semiotic difference, this definition by mutual difference is not possible without one element that is different *from itself*. (In fact, this same self-splitting is to be seen both in Pollock's 'horizontality' and Stella's 'shaped canvases' in what we might call an equivalent 'painting in the expanded field'.) And all of this is to be seen more abstractly in Krauss' discussion of the opposition between 'noble' and 'ignoble' in *The Optical Unconscious*, in which the 'ignoble' only stands in for that empty place that allows the 'noble' to be remarked:

The low refuses that neutralisation carried out by the paradigm through which the human is sublated into a system of values (noble/ignoble), insisting instead that the materialisation *low* is itself extrapolated from *human* as a function of *remainder*.<sup>34</sup>

What, in summary, does this late period of post-medium writings represent in Krauss' work? Like the 'noble/ignoble' example itself, a kind of remarking of it from somewhere else. And we mean, in an obvious paradox, a remarking of not only what came before but of *all* of Krauss' work, including Krauss' post-medium writings themselves. It is the post-medium writings that put Krauss' work in opposition with itself, which at once means it is radically inconsistent and that when accusing it of these inconsistencies this can only be in the name of Krauss herself. And this is also to say that, when Costello accuses Krauss of speaking of a post-medium that is unique and cannot be shared by another, this is at once what Krauss is saying and what her work is *about*. In other words, Costello's criticisms are not the end but merely the beginning of discussion. They are what Krauss' work remarks or addresses, that is to say, attempts to understand how they can be possible. And the paradoxical reason she proposes is that each post-medium is singular because it is compared, arises out of comparison. Its nothing in common is possible only because of a certain something in common. And this is the model both for Cavellian conversation and scholarly exchange. It is a matter neither of agreeing with the other, saying the same as them, nor of disagreeing with them, saying something different from them, but of thinking what makes their saying possible. Each side does not simply converse, but speaks about the conversation, seeks to account for it from somewhere outside of it, which the one following will show is only part of the conversation, has already been said. And the conversation only ends, as Cavell demonstrates when he speaks about the end of the genre of the 'comedy of remarriage' in *The Pursuits of Happiness*, when we are unable to add anything to a

<sup>34</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994, p. 191. See on this too Krauss' 'The Neutral', in which she will speak of the 'noble/ignoble' opposition breaking down and pointing towards the 'Neutral', *Perpetual Inventory*, p. 269.



genre and medium that already says it all.<sup>35</sup> And we for our part want to continue the post-medium conversation not by judging Costello and Krauss and deciding who is right and who is wrong, but by speaking of what they have in common, how in effect they are saying the same thing in a way they cannot see.<sup>36</sup>

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## Appendix:

### An interview with Rosalind Krauss on Post-Medium

**Rex Butler:** Rosalind Krauss, in this interview I would like to explore the possibility that your 'post-medium' writings of the last 20 years do not represent any kind of a break with your previous work, but are in fact a continuation of it. And this is to say that they are not simply a return to your early 'modernist' writings, which is how they are sometimes understood, but are consistent also with your intervening 'post-modernist' writings.

This has been little if at all suggested, and it is easy to see why. Your 'post-medium' writings *do* at first appear to mark a break with the immediately preceding 'post-modern' ones. In many ways, you *do* appear to reject the orthodoxies of the so-called *October* School that you helped found and that exerted such influence over art discourse throughout the 1980s and '90s.

<sup>35</sup> Cavell writes that 'a genre emerges full-blown', and then asks: 'But if the genre emerges full-blown, how can later members of the genre add anything to it?' *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 27-8. His answer is that 'each new member must bring with it some new feature or features', and clarifies this by suggesting: 'It might be helpful to say that a new member gets its distinction by investigating a particular set of features in a way that makes them, or their relation, more explicit than its companions' (pp. 29, 30). In other words, this 'new feature or features' is just this 'investigation of a particular set of features' from the past. This is how a genre or medium is at once complete or 'full-blown' *and* new members can continue to be added to it.

<sup>36</sup> We might recall the last words to Costello's essay, in which he seems to allow the possibility of Krauss' argument: 'Initially conceived in terms of extensions to existing media, in time such anomalous cases may demand the development of new media categories to more accurately capture what they involve. Coleman relies on photography and its projection, Kentridge relies on drawing and its projection. Whether either can be said to be working in new artistic media we cannot yet know. For all we now know they may be working in the same medium', 'Automat, Automatic, Automatism', p. 854. The only point we would make here is that this moment has already arrived. For Costello to be talking of Coleman and Kentridge, for him even to be remarking the inconsistency and unrepeatability of their practices, means that the post-medium has already taken place. Again, to repeat Costello against himself, medium always is at a certain point 'ex nihilo' (p. 842) and 'sui generis' (p. 843).

Allow me to give three examples. In the *October* roundtable on the 1993 Whitney Biennale, you reject Lorna Simpson's *Hypothetical?* (1992) – or at least the dominant political reading of it – when we might have thought the introduction of politics into art was one of the things that *October* stood for. In 'Welcome to the Cultural Revolution', you criticise Visual and Cultural Studies even though their rejection of 'aesthetics' might be seen to be something you were sympathetic to. And in the roundtable at the end of the *Art Since 1900*, you surprise your fellow *Octoberists* (you can almost hear their intake of breath) by suggesting that 'Without the logic of a medium art is in danger of descending into kitsch'.

You also appear to change your attitude towards Stanley Cavell (from negative to positive) and Jacques Derrida (from positive to negative). I have some thoughts about the meaning of this apparent 'rejection' of post-modern art and the way it enabled your later work, but could you begin by speaking a little about how this period in your life and work now strikes you and how indeed it might be understood as a break?

Reading your post-medium writings that came after this moment, what strikes me, particularly with regard to your use of 'automatism', is that your attitude towards contemporary art is analogous to the way that Cavell speaks of the way that his 'natural relation' to movies was broken at some point. For you at some point the conventions of art, even those that post-modernism left intact, are threatened and no longer apply automatically. Now these conventions have to be re-invented. Conviction in the 'medium' has to be re-established. In effect, what you are suggesting is that at some time in the 1990s the visual arts go through the challenge of *modernism*, or at least another form of that *modernism* that has been with us since at least Rodin.

Let us try to think how 'automatism' works in your writings, say, on Coleman and Kentridge. At once there is still a physically determinative aspect to the medium, a kind of pressure it exerts on its art, and yet at the same time none of this would exist unless it was somehow 'remarked' by the actual works of art made using it. This, it seems to me, is what is meant by the inseparability of, and indeed circularity between, automatism and fortuna you speak of there. On the one hand, Kentridge is absolutely limited by the constraints of the medium he is working in and yet, on the other, he is able to respond to this medium in any number of ways. What is meant by the medium and even its constraint would have no meaning, would in some way not even exist, until Kentridge had somehow figured it in his art. This seems analogous to what Cavell says about medium in cinema in its post-sceptical moment: the work of art in modernism must respond to, take into account, the physical relationship of the spectator to the screen, re-establish the proper distance between them, but the ways in which it can do this are absolutely specific and ungeneralisable, as seen, for example, in the Hollywood comedies of remarriage and the melodramas of the unknown woman.

May I give you – as some kind of equivalent to those three moments I spoke of before – four possibilities for a post-medium in your classic 'post-modern' writings? My point here is that they are not media in the usual modernist sense of painting, sculpture, film or even video, but 'intersectional', crossing what were previously

seen as distinct media. That is why they are to be found so frequently throughout your writings, across various artforms and involving different artists. I will come back to this in a moment. But my four suggestions for post-media in your post-modern writings are: the grid, horizontality, the *informe* or formless and sculpture in the expanded field. 'Horizontality' you have already dealt with in your essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', but what do you think about those others?

To go back to how a post-medium work relates to its medium and that reciprocity between invention and determination it involves, may I propose the following? You suggest in *Under Blue Cup* that a post-medium work of art remarks a certain aspect of its medium. Coleman and Kentridge are not like earlier structuralist cinema, which is simply modernist, in wanting to capture the 'essence' or even 'all' of the medium of cinema. Rather, their work draws out a *particular quality* of the medium – let us say the relationship between pose and motion. Then this quality can be seen, at least in principle, in other media that are not usually understood as film (drawing, photography, the slide carousel, earlier cinematic devices). It is this quality that is now seen as the medium that remarks these otherwise distinct media, putting them together in a new artform with its own distinct physical facts and artistic conventions. In fact, I would say this of the grid, horizontality, the *informe* and sculpture in the expanded field.

This model seems to me to be an answer to the objections made by some of your commentators that there is a problem with the supposed crossing of media, ie, that you're merely making, say, painting like photography or photography like painting. (This is an objection that is also made against Michael Fried and his *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.) It is not any old medium that is the new aggregator of other media, but some particular aspect or quality of a medium. An analogy that occurs to me is the Borges' famous essay 'Kafka and His Precursors', where after listing Kaka's various precursors he writes: 'If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other'. To me the 'Kafkaesque' would be a new literary post-medium, putting together a whole series of 'partial objects' that were previously seen to have nothing in common.

This is also some way of responding to the other objection often made of your post-medium writings: that any particular post-medium appears to be practised by only one artist (the slide projector by Coleman, animated drawings by Kentridge, the automobile by Ruscha, the art catalogue by Broodthaers). In a way, as you say yourself, this is true; but in another way none of this is to stop another artist coming along like Kafka and proposing a new something in common that puts together what was previously seen as having nothing in common, ie, a new medium and its particular quality. The history of this post-medium art would be a 'perpetual inventory', the continual reclassifying of previous media bringing out hitherto unknown qualities and commonalities. There is always only one artist at a time practising a particular post-medium, but another can always come along after and put them in a new sequence under a new name and with a new quality in common – as Borges effectively does when he makes both Kafka and his precursors his own precursors.

Your notion of post-medium then is neither simply a break with nor a simple continuation of your previous work, but a reclassification of it. You have as it were re-read it, drawing out a new and hitherto unsuspected commonality to it. Certainly, one effect of this is that there is no longer that split or opposition between your modern and post-modern writings. You go back to the beginning of your work and see something else in it: medium there was always post-medium. It is not so much that your work is not consistent, but it is somehow about or even a 'perpetual inventory' of itself. I'd like to think that in some way – this is true of Cavell too – the works of art you are discussing are allegories of your writing about them, or even that what you are writing about and responding is the 'scepticism' induced by your own writing. It is in this sense that we might understand those remarks from the late 1990s we began by referring to: that what you were in a way writing against – like all important thinkers – is yourself. After a while you have to stand against that intellectual movement you helped establish and that made your name. This is modernism. This is why the medium is always post-medium.

– 8 February 2020

**Rosalind Krauss:**

Dear Rex Butler,

You have put your finger on one of the difficulties of my post-medium argument – that the work of each artist is so idiosyncratic – whereas modernism can be seen as the collective enterprise of a whole era of artists. In Foucault's terms it was an *epistémè*.

I came to the idea of the post-medium out of disgust with post-modernism, which, as a working critic I saw as frivolous and narcissistic. The moment I saw the work of Pipilotte Rist, I knew post-modernism was not worth thinking about. My new-found optimism took off when I saw an exhibition of Kentridge: especially the scene in *Ubu tells the Truth* with the prisoners falling off the roof of the police building and descending in front of the lighted window-frames (reflexively producing the image of the ascending film-strip behind the bodies as support of Kentridge's own medium: animated film).

I had been convinced by the post-modernist need to critique modernist orthodoxy; and I saw as well that it meant that a simple return to modernism would not be possible – it would be mere anachronism – a kind of Neo-Modernism. I thought my post-medium rubric was a way to take into account the fact that the artists I was convinced by were also aware that a simple return was not possible – that the mediums of painting, sculpture, drawing, and film were now exhausted – in the way post-modernism had professed them to be.

You ask if I see a break between post-modernism and the post-medium condition. What I've just described is, in my mind, a total break – a refusal to continue a cynical retreat from the kind of reflexive consideration of the nature of the aesthetic support that post-modernism avowed.

You ask about the roles of Derrida and Cavell in my argument. Derrida is the easy one. His idea of the *trace* and the impossibility this constitutes for the 'self-presence' (logocentrism) of the present is the persuasive, post-structuralist argument against specificity, in particular medium specificity. (Structuralism, itself, was not hostile to

the concept of specificity—or what Roland Barthes calls the ‘genius’ of photography.)

In constructing the break with post-modernism’s assassination of modernist belief, it was necessary for me to translate the entire vocabulary of modernism and medium-specificity into new (newly liberated) terms.

Cavell’s notion of *automatism* was the substitute I found for the collective fealty (to a rule) that Foucault had called *epistémè*.

In order to enable the invention of mediums outside the exhausted ones of modernist practice, I adopted the term ‘technical support’. This obviated a rhetorical return to the traditional mediums: painting, sculpture, film, etc, opening the way, instead, for Ruscha’s automobiles and Kentridge’s animated films, as well as Broodthaers’ Museum Fictions. *Technical Support* meant that ‘medium’ could simply be any cultural form of exchange.

Formless: *informe* was my invention of a way to see artists breaking with the orthodoxy of modernism (and the specific medium), without abandoning all allegiance to the rules that specificity implies (Cavell’s idea of automatism). The exhibition I organised, with Yve-Alain Bois, was called *Formless: A User’s Guide*, because we wanted to stress just those rules. In the *Laocoön*, Lessing designates the visual arts as spatially simultaneous as opposed to the sequential unfolding of the temporal arts, such as music and poetry. Bois and I were arguing that the destruction of this simultaneity was tantamount to *systematically* violating the rule for the Visual Arts – a system that re-invoked the modernist reflex of specificity. Examples of this violation were Duchamp’s *Rotoreliefs* and Richard Serra’s video *Hand Catching Lead*.

I realise this is very rambling but I hope it addresses the various questions you’ve asked—about breaks and returns.

Sincerely,

Rosalind Krauss  
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