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# Feeling sorry for Rosalind Krauss

*by* *Roger Kimball*

*On Krauss's book The Optical Unconscious.*

*Art happens, however, to be a matter of self-evidence and feeling, and of the inferences of feeling, rather than of intellection or information, and the reality of art is disclosed only in experience, not in reflection upon experience.*
—Clement Greenberg

*He only thought it respectable to talk about their art.*
—Rosalind Krauss, criticizing Greenberg

Authors really should scrutinize publishers' blurbs carefully before allowing them to appear on their books. Although presumably written to flatter and extol, such endorsements sometimes contain uncomfortable truths. Consider, for example, the blurb that accompanies The Optical Unconscious, Rosalind Krauss's latest contribution to the annals of academic art theory.1 "Rosalind Krauss," we read, "abandons the historian's voice of objective detachment and forges a new style of writing in this book: art history that insinuates diary and art theory, and that has the gait and tone of fiction."

A great deal might be said about that sentence. First, there is the element of exaggeration. It takes only a quick look at *The Optical Unconscious* for anyone familiar with Miss Krauss's earlier essays and books to realize that the blurb-writer is, well, stretching things. Little if anything is "new" here, in style *or* substance. Miss Krauss, a founding editor of the ferociously solemn quarterly *October* and lately appointed Professor of Art History at Columbia University, has simply returned once again to her favorite themes in this book, themes that have earned her a prominent place in the demimonde of chic academic theorizing.

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Billed as "a pointed protest against the official story of modernism," the six, untitled chapters of *The Optical Unconscious* deal with the same knot of ideas that Professor Krauss mooted a few years ago in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* and *L'Amour Fou: Surrealism and Photography*. Once again she is spooring after (as she put it in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*) "a demythologizing criticism" that supposedly will "void the basic propositions of modernism" "by exposing their fictitious condition." Max Ernst, Georges Bataille, Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, and other Krauss regulars are re-enlisted in the project of discrediting—or *deconstructing*—modernism. As before, they are strained through the forbidding argot of the two Jacques—Lacan and Derrida—Melanie Klein, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin, et al. "Phallicism," the *informe*, "part-object," the "paranoiac-schizoid scenario of early development," "the mirror stage": all our old friends have come back for an encore.

Professor Krauss even uses many of the same decorations with which she festooned earlier volumes. Bataille's photograph of a big toe, for example, which I like to think of as her mascot, reappears. As does her favorite doodle, a little graph known as a "Klein Group" or "L Schema" whose sides and diagonals sport arrows pointing to corners labeled with various opposing pairs: e.g., "ground" and "not ground," "figure" and "not figure." Professor Krauss seems to believe that this device, lifted from the pages of structuralist theory, illuminates any number of deep mysteries: the nature of modernism, to begin with, but also the essence of gender relations, self-consciousness, perception, vision, castration anxiety, and other pressing conundrums that, as it happens, she has trouble distinguishing from the nature of modernism. Altogether, the doodle is a handy thing to have around. One is not surprised that Professor Krauss reproduces it many times in her new book.

There is one novelty, though. That is the delicious phrase "the optical unconscious," adopted (with a bow to Fredric Jameson's slogan "the political unconscious") from Walter Benjamin. "*I started calling the hare I was chasing over this historical terrain* antivision," Professor Krauss explains. "*But that* anti *sounded too much like the opposite of a* pro *the all too obvious choice for which would be* pro-text. *Which was not at all the case of what I was tracking. The name that gradually took over was the* optical unconscious."

One need not read far in *The Optical Unconscious* before realizing that Professor Krauss has, with arresting frankness, hit upon the perfect title for her book. Few books claiming to deal with art can be more optically unconscious than *The Optical Unconscious*. Professor Krauss is to be commended for this bit of truth-in-advertising. But why the flurry of italics? This, I believe, is intended to

"insinuate" diary, as the syntactically challenged blurb-writer put it. Much of *The Optical Unconscious*, especially in the first three chapters, is set in italics to give it the aura of a journal entry. Whether we are actually being treated to Professor Krauss's journal entries is difficult to say. One hopes for her sake that we are not.

But all the italics do remind us about her having abandoned "the historian's voice of objective detachment."

But all the italics do remind us about her having abandoned "the historian's voice of objective detachment." Impish readers might wish to point out that Professor Krauss, like so many of her academic peers today, has long made it a point of honor to deny that anything like "objective detachment" is possible. So it is difficult to see how at this late date she can really be said to have *abandoned* it. Nevertheless, everyone can agree that *The Optical Unconscious* lacks the quality of "objective detachment." Does that mean that it possesses the "gait and tone of fiction"? If the tread of a hippopotamus is what was meant, then yes, *The Optical Unconscious* has the "gait of fiction." In any event, it certainly possesses another feature often claimed for fiction: any resemblance to real characters or situations is entirely coincidental.

Lest this seem overly harsh, consider how Professor Krauss begins her polemic against modernism. Her book opens thus:

> And what about little John Ruskin, with his blond curls and his blue sash and shoes to match, but above all his obedient silence and his fixed stare? Deprived of toys he fondles the light glinting off a bunch of keys, is fascinated by the burl of the floorboards, counts the bricks in the houses opposite. He becomes the infant fetishist of patchwork.

One writer called Ruskin "the most analytic mind in Europe," a judgment that Professor Krauss finds laughable. "The most analytic mind in Europe," she scolds, "did not even know how to frame a coherent argument. The most analytic mind in Europe produced *Modern Painters*, a work soon to be known as one of the worst-organized books ever to earn the name of literature." What is true of great artists and writers is also true of great critics: in commenting on them we do not so much judge them as judge ourselves. Professor Krauss cannot forgive Ruskin for lavishing such undistracted attention upon the visual world. She turns one of the greatest critics of the nineteenth century into a figure of fun because he had the temerity to pay attention to what he saw instead of theorizing about it. Ruskin survives undiminished from Professor Krauss's vignettes. Does she?

> *I start with a square. In its upper right corner I write figure and in its upper left I write ground. I want this square to represent a universe, a system of thinking in its entirety, a system that will be both bracketed by and generated from a fundamental pair of oppositions. This of course [!] is the universe of visual perception, the one that is mapped by a distinction between figure and ground. . . .*
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> *Vision as a form of cognition. As a form, then, it reworks the very notion of ground. The ground is not behind; the ground is what it, vision, is. And the figure, too, is reworked. Perception marks this figure that the eye singles out by labeling it "pure exteriority": set off from the field on which it appears, it is even more surely set off from me, the beholder. But cognition—in vision—grasps the figure otherwise, capturing it in a condition of pure immediacy, yielding an experience that knows in a flash that if these perceptions are seen as* there, *it is because they are seen by* me; *that it is my presence to my own representations that secures them, reflexively, as present of myself.*

There are pages and pages of this in *The Optical Unconscious*: Rosalind Krauss talking to herself about herself. It is amusing to contemplate what John Ruskin would have made of it.

There is, however, a thesis lurking behind these soliloquies. Professor Krauss's main idea here—as in earlier works—is that the standard histories of modernism have, like Ruskin, overemphasized the purely visual and the ideal of artistic autonomy. She proposes to correct the record by reintroducing the dark side of modernism: the libidinous, chaotic, irrational, occluded. To this end she draws heavily on Dada and Surrealism—movements considerably more notable for their proclamations about art than for any art works proper. It is better to get it in her own words, though. For example, in place of Ruskin's exacting practice of self-conscious observation Professor Krauss praises the idea, drawn from Max Ernst, of "mechanical *seeing*," of "an autonomist motor turning over within the very field of the visual. This idea," she tells us, "which would come to operate at the center of surrealism's critique of modernism, contests the optical model's schema of visual self-evidence and reflexive immediacy, substituting for this a model based instead on the conditions of the readymade, conditions that produce an altogether different kind of scene from that of modernism's." We can admit, anyway, that this has precious little to do with modernism.

One problem with Professor Krauss's new history of modernism is that, as history, it isn't very accurate. She presents the idea of aesthetic autonomy as a distinctively modernist innovation, something that came along with the likes of Ruskin. In fact, the ideal of aesthetic autonomy dates back at least to the mid-eighteenth century. The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who coined the term "aesthetic," wrote in his Reflections on Poetry that "the poet is like a maker or a creator. So the poem ought to be like a world," i.e., self-contained, ordered, autonomous. One has no sense, in Professor Krauss's account, that the achievements of modernism have their place in an artistic tradition going back to the Enlightenment and beyond.

Among much else, this ahistorical history of modernism tends to transform everything into a species of caricature. Professor Krauss is only really at ease when she has reduced the subject at hand to a formal schema of some sort. This is one reason that she is so attracted by psychoanalytic theories from those of Freud and Melanie Klein to those of Lacan and Gilles Deleuze. The drastic

simplifications presupposed by the rhetoric of "drives" and "stages" and "complexes" has an irresistible appeal for a mind ill at ease with genuine complexity. The down side is that all such speculations are ruthlessly Procrustean: much is occluded in the name of recovering the occluded, not least the emotional pulse and aesthetic texture of art: human, evanescent, real.

What we are left with is a twilight realm in which rootless abstractions war bloodlessly with one another. For example:

> *Would it be possible to modify the L Schema as the basis for mapping a visuality that both subtends and subverts the field of modernist vision in the same way that Lacan's psychoanalytic circuitry erodes the structuralist relations from within? For if the mirror relation as it is graphed in the L Schema divides the subject from the unconscious, by driving a wedge of opacity through the diagonal center of the graph, it is nonetheless true that the subject is the effect of the unconscious, or what needs now to be called a "subject-effect."*

And here she is on Lacan's notion of "the castrative status of weaning":

> *Suppose we were to try to graph this relation. We might start by characterizing the primal appearance of the object within the infant subject's perceptual field as the advent of something that separates itself out from a hitherto undifferentiated ground to become distinct as figure. That object, which is the mother's breast—and by extension the mother—becomes a figure, of course* [of course!]*, by dint of its withdrawal from the contiguous field of the infant, by virtue of setting him up no longer as the amorphous and all-inclusive subject of satisfaction but now as the subject of frustration and longing, the subject, that is, of desire.*

This is pretty thin gruel, as Professor Krauss must realize. Like many contemporary academic "theorists," she seeks to compensate for the choking airlessness of such musings by punctuating every observation with a hint of violence or risqué sex. Hence, you see, "the castrative status of weaning." What, after all, can that possibly have to do with modernism? Or art? Or "the visual"? (One might, in fact, want to ask what castration has to do with weaning, but that is for another day.)

Naturally, all this is supposed to be daring and "transgressive." In small doses it can be quite hilarious. The long-term effect, alas, is tedium. How extraordinary to be told by Lyotard that "Con celui qui voit." (Here's looking at you, kid.) Professor Krauss is obviously deeply impressed by Lyotard's formula, for she repeats it often. "There is," she assures us in one place,

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> no way to concentrate on the threshold of vision, to capture something *en tournant la tête*, without siting vision in the body and positioning that body, in turn, within the grip of desire. Vision is then caught up within the meshes of projection and identification, within the specularity of substitution that is also a search for an origin lost. Con, as they say, celui qui voit.

Some more than others, surely. Still, how amazing that, in simply taking a photograph, Man Ray "enacts the institution of the fetish: the 'glance' that refuses what it sees and in this resistance turns black into white, or rather, insists that black *is* white. In the logic of the fetish the paradigm male/female collapses in an adamant refusal to admit distinction, to accept the facts of sexual difference." Gee. And poor Roger Fry. Like Ruskin, he thought that art had something to do with the way things looked. In lecturing, Professor Krauss tells us, "*Fry places himself in front of the projection screen as he places himself before the chessboard. An eye without a body. Pure giver of form. Pure operation of the law. Pure phallus.*" Pure baloney is more like it.

One gathers that Professor Krauss included so many imitation journal entries in *The Optical Unconscious* partly in an effort to imbue the book with something more personal than off-the-shelf art theory. And there is no reason to doubt that her personality shines through clearly in those passages. Whether one can really call the result "personal" is perhaps another question. In the end, though, the gimmick of italicized text serves two larger purposes. In the first place, it allows Professor Krauss to avoid responsibility for the ideas she floats. After all, can one really criticize a journal entry, which is addressed primarily not to the public but to the writer's own conscience and memory? And second, it allows her to settle some old scores with unusual malice. Professor Krauss presents her argument with modernism as a brave epistemological-political adventure: she is the daring liberator of thoughts and feelings that have been deliberately neglected by orthodox modernism. In fact, her argument is primarily an argument with a few individuals, chief among whom is Clement Greenberg—yet another critic who, like Ruskin, believes that experiencing a work of art is a pre-requisite for critical appreciation and understanding.

Professor Krauss began her career as one of Greenberg's disciples. She wrote her dissertation on David Smith at Harvard under his influence and, later, her essays in *Artforum* bore the stamp of his approach. But that was before Professor Krauss emerged as a minor academic celebrity in her own right. Since then, she has striven to distance herself from Greenberg and everything he stands for. Her rejection of the visual component—in other words, the experiential basis—of criticism is only the latest step in a rebellion that has been unfolding for at least two decades now. We can gauge the pathos of that rebellion by the "gait and tone" of her last chapter.

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Professor Krauss begins by recounting her impressions of Greenberg as he appeared recently in a television interview.

Professor Krauss begins by recounting her impressions of Greenberg as he appeared recently in a television interview. It is not a pretty picture. She speaks of his "flabby and slack face," "the domed shape of the head, bald, rigid, unforgiving; and the flaccid quality of the mouth and lips." She also dwells on the "arrogance of the mouth—fleshy, toothy, aggressive." It is an extraordinarily cruel vignette—all the more extraordinary for being repeated, with slight variations, five or six times in the course of the chapter. Among much else, Professor Krauss coyly hints that Greenberg was implicated in Jackson Pollock's psychological crisis in 1951, a crisis that sent him back to drinking, effectively ended his development as a painter, and culminated in his demise in a drunken car crash in 1956. In truth, Greenberg did more than anyone to establish Pollock's reputation. If he judged that Pollock had "lost his stuff" by 1951, that was a judgment that history supports.

As she does with other central figures in the history of modernism, Professor Krauss diminishes Greenberg by caricaturing him. The cartoon character she fabricates could never have become the formidable presence that Greenberg was for decades. Her list of grievances is long, beginning with the fact that, even now, Greenberg is immensely more influential and important than she. Above all, perhaps, she cannot forgive him for insisting that art is a "matter of self-evidence and feeling . . . rather than of intellection or information." Rosalind Krauss knows nothing of "self-evidence and feeling." For her, art unfolds in precincts far removed from the immediate claims of feeling. She criticizes Greenberg for concentrating on the *art* of the artists he knew and wrote about—"He only thought it respectable to talk about their art"—largely, one suspects, because she does not see what all the fuss is about.

It is easy to be exasperated with Rosalind Krauss. She is pretentious, obscurantist, and mean-spirited. Enjoying a position of great academic respect, she has, through her writings, teaching, and editorship of *October*, exercised a large and baneful influence on contemporary writing and thinking about culture. In the end, however, one's exasperation is likely to be mixed with pity. Here is a woman who has devoted her professional life to art and ideas but who clearly has no feeling for art and for whom ideas are ghostly playthings utterly cut off from reality. In the *Republic* , Plato has Socrates remark that "to be deceived about the truth of things and so to be in ignorance and error and to harbor untruth in the soul is a thing that no one would consent to." No doubt Rosalind Krauss would scoff at the idea of possessing anything so quaint as a soul. But she must, from time to time, wonder what her beloved Lacan and Derrida have to do with life, what her Klein Groups and castration fantasies and "psycho-atmospheric-anamorphic objects" have to do with art. Why, she must wonder, do other people seem to care so much about art and beauty when to her it is all an arid, narcissistic battleground? It is pathetic, really. Her writing and ideas are pernicious, but one cannot help feeling sorry for Rosalind Krauss.

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**Notes**

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1. _ *The Optical Unconscious*, by Rosalind E. Krauss; MIT Press, 376 pages, $24.95. Go back to the text.

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