■ ■ ■ ■ ■ *PREFACE*

THE IMAGE I have chosen as frontispiece for this book is a still from a modified clip from a famous and familiar movie, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, of 1958. The modification was made by the painter David Reed, who has inserted into the shot of a hotel bedroom one of his own paintings—*#328* done in 1990—in place of whatever nondescript hotel picture Hitchcock may have had above the bed to add authenticity, if indeed there was anything above the bed: who remembers such details? The still itself is from 1995.

Reed transformed the clip into a loop, which played repeatedly on a television set, by rights as nondescript as the items of furniture in the hotel bedroom in San Francisco occupied by Judy, the main female character in *Vertigo*, played by Kim Novak. Nineteen fifty-eight was probably too early for cheap hotels routinely to have been provided with television sets, but of course, together with beds, these constitute the minimal furnishings of such lodgings today. The television set, showing Reed's modified clip, was placed by the artist next to a bed which would be quite as nondescript as the one in the film save for the fact that it exactly replicates the latter, and was fabricated for the occasion by Reed himself. With one further item, they formed an installation in Reed's retrospective exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein—an art space in Cologne. The further item was the actual painting, *#328*, hung over the bed on a temporary wall. The painting enjoys two modes of being—it has what the medieval philosophers would distinguish as *formal* and *objective* reality, existing, one might say, as image and reality. It occupies the space of the viewer and the fictive space of a character in a movie.

The modified clip represents two of David Reed's obsessions. He is enough obsessed with *Vertigo* that he once made a pilgrimage to all the remaining sites in San Franciso that appear in Hitchcock's film, and in 1992 he placed an ancestor of the Cologne installation in the San Francisco Art Institute, with bed, a painting (*#251*), and a video screen placed on a steel dolly—a piece of equipment rather too professional looking for the hotel room—which shows the scene in Hitchcock's film in which Judy, standing in her bedroom, reveals to her lover her identity as "Madeleine." In the 1992 installation, the film is unmodified: that idea had not as yet occurred to him.

The other obsession is with the idea of what he terms "bedroom paintings." The expression was used by his mentor, Nicholas Wilder, in connection with the paintings of John McLaughlin. Buyers of those paintings would initially hang them in one of the more public spaces of the home, but in time, Wilder said, "They would move the painting to their bedroom where they could live with it more intimately." Reed responded as if to a revelation: "My ambition in life was to be a bedroom painter." The modified video implies that Judy lives intimately with *#328*, and by putting *#328* in the viewer's space with a bed (in an installation at Max Protetch Gallery in New York, a replica of Scotty's bathrobe was flung casually across the bedspread) Reed directs the viewer how to relate to *#328* should he or she happen to acquire it, or any painting by Reed.

Reed has one further obsession worth mentioning, namely, Mannerist and Baroque painting, and one of his recent works is a set of studies, executed after a painting for a lost altarpiece by Domenico Feti, for the Walters Gallery of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, in an exhibition titled *Going for Baroque*. An altarpiece includes a painting set in a complex framework, usually with other paintings, the purpose of which is to define what we should call the user's (not the viewer's) relationship to the painting. The common practice, of couse, is to pray to whomever the painting is of. There is an analogy between the installation Reed has devised and the complex piece of furniture in which the altarpiece consists, in that it, too, defines what one's relationship to the painting should be. One should live with it, intimately, as its position in the bedroom implies.

The frame of a painting, the architecture of the altarpiece, the installation in which a painting is set like a jewel have a common logic to which, as a philosopher, I am very sensitive: they define pictorial attitudes to be taken toward a painting, which does not, on its own, suffice for these purposes. A preface is no place to work this logic out, and my aim in any case is best served by going directly to what it seems to me Reed's use of the apparatus of the film loop, the mechanism of pictorial dubbing, and the monitor—not to mention the bed, the robe, even the picture seen as part of a bedroom installation—exemplifies in terms of contemporary artistic practice. It is a practice in which painters no longer hesitate to situate their paintings by means of devices which belong to altogether different media—sculpture, video, film, installation, and the like. The degree to which painters like Reed are eager to do this is evidence of how far contemporary painters have departed from the aesthetic orthodoxy of modernism, which insisted upon the purity of the medium as its defining

agenda. Reed's disregard of modernist imperatives underscores what I speak of in one of the chapters of this book as "the passing of the pure." Contemporary art might be thought of as impure or nonpure, but only against the haunting memory of modernism in its virulence as an artistic ideal. And it is in particular remarkable that it should be David Reed whom I am taking as my exemplar of the contemporary moment in the visual arts—for if there were a painter today whose work might seem to exemplify the highest virtues of pure painting, it would be Reed. I have had printed on the jacket of the book the painting one would see if one were standing within the installation—Reed's *#328*—and so were to see, outside the video and on the wall in full color, the painting scratchily seen in filmic space, behind beautiful Judy as she reveals that it was she who had misled the hero into believing she was someone else.

This book grew out of the 1995 Mellon Lectures in Fine Art, which I delivered in the spring of that year at the National Gallery of Art in Washington under the awkward title *Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, now enlisted as the subtitle for this book. The first part of the title made plain that my lectures were to be concerned with contemporary art—itself an unusual topic for the Mellon Lectures—but concerned with it in a way that sharply differentiates contemporary and modern art. It requires a particular imagination to see Reed's installation as having a precedent in the history of painting, but it requires more than imagination to see how such a work is to be approached aesthetically. The aesthetics of purity will certainly not apply, and to say what will apply requires laying bare enough of the comparative anatomy of the modern and the contemporary work of art to see how, for example, Reed's work differs, whatever the outward resemblances, from an abstract expressionist painting which happens to use the sweeping gestural brushstrokes of which, undoubtedly, Reed's are refined and sophisticated descendents.

As for the second part of the lectures' title, that connects with a curious thesis I have been urging for a number of years concerning the end of art—a somewhat dramatic way of declaring that the great master narratives which first defined traditional art, and then modernist art, have not only come to an end, but that contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all. Those master narratives inevitably excluded certain artistic traditions and practices as "outside the pale of history"—a phrase of Hegel's to which I more than once have recourse. It is one of the many things which characterize the contemporary moment of art—or what I term the "post-historical moment"—that there is no longer a pale of history. Nothing is closed off, the way Clement

Greenberg supposed that surrealist art was no part of modernism as he understood it. Ours is a moment, at least (and perhaps only) in art, of deep pluralism and total tolerance. Nothing is ruled out.

Contemporary art, as it has evolved, could hardly have been imagined when the first Mellon Lectures were delivered in 1951—mine were the forty-fourth set in the series. Reed's modified film still illustrates a certain historical impossibility which has somewhat obsessed me as a philosopher. His painting of 1989 cannot have found a place in 1958 bedrooms for the obvious reason that it would not exist for another thirty-eight years. (Reed was twelve years old when *Vertigo* was made.) But more important than this bare temporal impossibility are the historical ones: there would have been no room in the art world for his paintings in 1957, and certainly none for his installations. The unimaginability of future art is one of the limits which holds us locked in our own periods. And of couse there would have been scant room for imagining, when the Mellon lectures were first delivered in 1951, that art would evolve in such a way that the forty-fourth set of Mellon Lectures would be devoted to art such as is implied by the modified still. My aim, of course, is not to address this art in the spirit of connoisseurship, nor in terms of the preoccupations of the art historian, namely, iconography and influence. My interests are speculative and philosophical, but also practical, since a substantial portion of my professional life is given over to art criticism. I am anxious to identify what critical principles there can be when there are no narratives, and where, in a qualified sense, anything goes. The book is devoted to the philosophy of art history, the structure of narratives, the end of art, and the principles of art criticism. It undertakes to ask how art like that of David Reed became historically possible and how such art is critically thinkable. Along the way my text is concerned with the end of modernism, and it seeks to assuage sensibilities which had finally adjusted to the indignities modernism visited on the traditional aesthetic postures toward art, and to show something of what it means to take pleasure in post-historical reality. There is a certain comfort in knowing where it had all been heading as a matter of history. To glorify the art of previous periods, however truly glorious it was, is to will an illusion as to the philosophical nature of art. The world of contemporary art is the price we pay for philosophical illumination, but this, of course, is but one of the contributions to philosophy for which the latter is in art's debt.

New York City, 1996