

Introduction
Late Modernism and the Aesthetics of Embodiment

The relation, or lack thereof, between art and lived experience preoccupied writers and critics throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. As the view that modernism emphasized art's separation from the world – “a way of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,” in T. S. Eliot's formulation – became increasingly dominant, many mid-century writers identified the artist's role as more circumscribed, and even mundane.¹ Take, for example, Charles Olson, “There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it” (1951); or John Cage, “[L]et sounds be themselves” (1957); or Allan Kaprow, “A walk down 14th Street is more amazing than any masterpiece of art” (1959).² Because sharp historical transition defined this era, from world war and social crisis to the economic and social stability of consumer capitalism, from British imperial decline to American global hegemony, this radical rethinking of the relation between art and experience is not surprising. Indeed, this book begins from the premise that conceptions of bodily experience have played a crucial role in twentieth-century literary history.

But where art and experience merge entirely for figures like Cage and Kaprow, consider these related musings on aesthetic form and language by Elizabeth Bishop, Ezra Pound, Ralph Ellison and Raymond Williams, four writers with little in common beyond their shared mid-century moment:

Bishop (1937): form of art – artificiality we *lay over* the world as [we] prepare to grasp it – taking a cloth to unscrew a bottle-cap.³

Pound (1945): the form of the poem and main progress is conditioned by its own inner shape, but the life . . . passing OUTSIDE the scheme cannot but impinge, or break into the main flow.⁴

Ellison (1964): fictional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something much more intimate: a way of feeling, of seeing and of expressing one's sense of life.⁵

Williams (1977): [writing is] a grasping of . . . reality through language.⁶

Insofar as these statements assume a direct relationship between art and the world – whether they reference an active body (grasp, feel, see) or imply immediate physical contact (impinge) – they too might appear to support the idea that postwar artists, dismissing an earlier generation's misplaced faith in art's autonomy, chose instead to engage lived experience directly. Yet while these writers assert a relation between art and the world, they do not collapse the two. Instead, for them, artistic form has a different, and oddly ambiguous ontological status. Neither a thing in the world nor an object separate from it, art offers a mode of relation and engagement through which people access, understand and transform the world they inhabit.

Uncovering the aesthetics of embodiment that informs these four authors' major mid-century works of poetry, fiction and cultural theory, this book reconfigures critical debate about the end of modernism. Critics have traditionally maintained that after World War II, the global triumph of capitalism precipitated modernism's decline into obsolescence; but in fact modernism does not decline after 1945. Neither does it simply dissolve into postmodernism. I argue instead that Bishop, Pound, Ellison and Williams adapt modernism to a new postwar landscape by developing an aesthetics of embodiment. Across differences of race, gender, national and intellectual tradition, genre and form, these authors use ordinary bodily experiences such as perception, memory and laughter to imagine more capacious ways of living and acting in common. To make this argument, I begin with an understanding of modernism different from the one mentioned earlier. Rather than separating art from the world to assert its autonomy, modernism uses aesthetic form to project an imaginative transformation of society through the direct engagement of lived experience. Thus, the turn to bodily experience in the authors I consider does not indicate modernism's decline, but rather its adaptation to a new and inhospitable postwar landscape. This argument requires some critical reflection, which this introduction provides, on philosophical conceptions of subjectivity and bodily experience, and on modernism itself.

In the postwar decades, debates over aesthetic theory and practice increasingly turned on a set of oppositions between meaning and experience, object and process, formalism and realism, autonomy and heteronomy.

For instance, Clement Greenberg's hugely influential account of modernist abstraction instituted a fundamental separation of art from lived experience and mass cultural kitsch. For Greenberg, modernism's "new and greater emphasis upon form" represents the culmination of Western painting, whose historical task is to render art "pure, and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence."⁷ By the 1950s, Greenberg's formalist conception of abstraction in painting, along with a New Critical privileging of individual consciousness and formal craft in literature, had become the standard account of modernism, and a variety of new artistic movements arose in opposition to its cultural authority. From confessional poetry and Abstract Expressionism (understood as "action" or "gesture" painting) to Beat writing, "projective verse" and minimalism, these movements drew art closer to "raw" experience and, in the more extreme cases of experimental music and performance art, even assimilated art completely into lived experience and the broader social world. These movements identified the body (gesture, breath, voice) as a site of immediacy and authenticity missing from both a standardizing mass culture and the formalist abstraction of an institutionalized modernism consolidated in this same period. This emphasis on the body privileged process over product, immediate experience over transcendent meaning and the contingency of performance over the stability of text and authorship.⁸

These cultural formations and their assumptions about art's relation to the world have formed the basis of a now standard postwar literary history oriented around a shift from modernism to postmodernism.⁹ However, by paying close attention to the (often uninterrogated) philosophical conceptions of bodily experience at play in these debates, this book casts postwar literary history in a new light. Drawing on the phenomenological category of embodiment, I question the linear narrative of transition from modernism to postmodernism that has been central to twentieth-century literary studies. Indeed, given the importance of these concepts in the period, it is remarkable that critics have not considered more intently the particular conception of bodily experience on which these postwar debates turned. Though figures such as Greenberg and Olson offered opposed conceptions of art and its relationship to the world, they shared an assumption that has generally gone unquestioned by later critics: that bodily experience entails an immediacy and particularity that is antithetical to art's separation from the world. For both, the body is an immediate physical presence that opposes mental faculties of conscious intention, judgment and interpretation. This picture of subjective experience,

however, is not a natural fact. It originates in Cartesian dualism, which subsequently animates both idealist and empiricist philosophical traditions. Dualism presents the body from the third-person perspective of a more primary disembodied consciousness. Defined fundamentally by consciousness, the subject of experience is abstract and individualized, detached from a living, social world he can navigate but to which he ultimately does not belong.

Yet Bishop, Pound, Ellison and Williams questioned such oppositions. For these writers, art's critical social dimension depended on the articulation of subjectivity in relation to bodily experience, not in opposition to it. In their works we can trace an alternative to the individualist, dualist framework that frequently underpinned postwar debates over art and experience. One of dualism's foundational assumptions is that bodily experience is entirely individual or personal – the body as “one's own.” But the postwar French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that embodiment is not an immediate physical object belonging to an individual “self.” It also constitutes an “invisible” dimension of experience that subjects share with the world and all others in it.¹⁰ Thus differentiated from the body as an object, embodiment is not individual but social. Merleau-Ponty articulates this concept of embodiment systematically, but in the chapters that follow, I show that a number of postwar writers, critics and philosophers, including Bishop, Pound, Ellison and Williams, as well as Theodor Adorno, each developed an aesthetics of embodiment. Because it contests the dominant dualist framework of prominent postwar views on art and experience, this aesthetics of embodiment has been missed. Critics often describe these authors either as turning inward, withdrawing from society and politics into the isolated self, or as merging art with immediate experience and ordinary language. But in fact they all found in embodiment a renewed sense of art's social purpose in a postwar period more typically associated with the abandonment of modernism's social critique amid a resurgent liberal capitalism.

This aesthetics of embodiment thus necessitates a critical reconceptualization of modernism's persistence in a postwar landscape often cited as the “origins of postmodernity.”¹¹ A central claim of this book is that twentieth-century literary history is inextricably tied up with philosophical conceptions of the body and bodily experience, and these have significant consequences for how we think about modernism's political meaning. Since the inception of the philosophical discourse of aesthetics (from the Greek *aesthesis*, or *sense perception*) in the eighteenth century, bodily experience has been the site of both an extension of and an alternative to

capitalist rationality. In the early twentieth century, modernism pushed this dialectical tension to the breaking point, emphasizing the radical particularity of sensual experience in order to explode the hollow forms of bourgeois subjectivity.

As Fredric Jameson argues, modernism's radical focus on the body projected not just a renewed individual self but an entirely new society.¹² Fueled by the revolutionary possibilities of the early twentieth century, modernism dialectically engaged the nonartistic realm of lived experience in order to project an aesthetic transformation of a world increasingly ruled by capitalist exchange. Following Perry Anderson, Jameson links modernism's social critique to the concrete alternatives to capitalism that were actually present in the early twentieth century: both the "traditional" organic communities that persisted on the geographic margins of capitalist expansion and, crucially, the new collectivities emerging within the heart of industrial modernity, most prominently the vanguard parties of revolutionary socialism.¹³ During the first two decades of the century, and in particular the years surrounding the 1917 Russian Revolution, the historical avant-gardes, including Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, Dadaism and Expressionism directly aligned their artistic innovations with the work of political vanguards. Accordingly, for Jameson, the renewal of liberal capitalism that followed World War II, and the expansive social stability that accompanied it, marked the beginning of the end of modernism's critical aesthetic project. Severed from its connection to revolutionary politics, modernism was recast as an aesthetic ideology suited to the newly dominant postwar cultural institutions of the academy, museums and commercial publishing. Suffusing Greenberg's art criticism and the New Criticism, this "ideology of modernism" transformed the practices of modern artists and writers into an "apolitical" formalism aligned with the liberal freedoms guaranteed by American global hegemony.¹⁴

Jameson's fundamental contention is that this postwar period of economic stability and liberal social consensus marks a distinct period of "late modernism" rather than a mere continuation of high modernism. For Jameson, late modernism names a transitional moment in which modernism's revolutionary cultural project declines into institutional hegemony, laying the foundation for the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s as the new "cultural dominant" of a fully developed late capitalism.¹⁵ In what follows, I preserve Jameson's orientation toward periodization; nevertheless, I question the teleological endpoint of postmodernism (or even postmodernity) in his critical narrative. To grasp what David James calls modernism's "continuity and adaptation" in the postwar period, we need a

more nuanced framework.¹⁶ This book argues that these postwar conditions did not necessitate the end of modernism's radical aesthetic project. Rather, postwar economic and social stability resulted in the collapse of the form of oppositional agency specific to the early twentieth century, namely the revolutionary vanguard.

The notion of the avant-garde's failure is a critical commonplace, but as John Roberts points out it conflates two distinct concepts: the avant-garde as a contingent historical formation – a “positivization of revolutionary transformation in action,” which “lasted perhaps no longer than fifteen years from 1917” – and as “the continuing labor of negation.”¹⁷ These phenomena are historically related but not identical. The latter refers to Marx's general conception of the proletariat as the revolutionary negation of capitalist society. Marx argued that the proletariat is the only social group whose interests align not with their own class but with all of humanity. The proletariat thus will abolish itself along with the entire social system that produced it.¹⁸

Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that the terms *vanguard* and *avant-garde* were not rigorously differentiated until the second half of the twentieth century, when the concept of an isolated “avant-garde” tradition emerges.¹⁹ In the nineteenth century, they appear in political discourse initially as military terms, referring to the army's most advanced troops. Marx never used either term, but as Donald Egbert points out, the idea was central to his and Engels's description of Communists in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) as standing at the forefront of the revolutionary movement against capitalism.²⁰ Nevertheless, it was Lenin who subsequently extended the concept of the vanguard to its logical conclusion. Notably, however, when he described the “party” in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) as the “vanguard of the revolutionary forces in our time,” he employed the term *avangard*, a Russian version of the French term “avant-garde.”²¹

While the interchange between artistic and political conceptions of the avant-garde runs across the mid- to late nineteenth century, it is only in the revolutionary period of the early twentieth century that the two spheres converge in an “antagonistic embrace.”²² The artistic avant-gardes that flourished across Europe and particularly in Russia in this moment directly connected their work with the revolutionary project of political vanguards. But at the same time they always operated at some distance from the specific, instrumental demands of the party.²³ As Roberts indicates, the 1930s were the crucial turning point. Amid Stalinist persecution of dissidents, the Communist Party's adoption of socialist realism as official doctrine, and the pressures of economic depression, this unstable

convergence between political vanguards and artistic avant-gardes could no longer be sustained. The now-canonical debates over modernism, aesthetic form, politics, technology and mass culture that occurred in this period can be seen as responding to this collapse by attempting to establish art's historical and political significance on a new basis.²⁴ Indeed, as Jameson points out, Greenberg's theory of abstraction originates from this crucial late 1930s moment. Yet in Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) perhaps most prominently, art's independence is precariously positioned between two divergent ideas: on the one hand, a revolutionary anti-capitalism grounded in a conception of abstraction as a material social practice, and on the other an emerging aesthetic ideology of modernism that completely separated art from history and society.²⁵ This aesthetic ideology of modernism ultimately comes to the fore in the postwar period, as part of a highly successful reconceptualization of the avant-garde completely shorn from history and politics.

This brief reflection on the historical avant-garde's complex interrelation with political vanguardism yields an insight that becomes particularly crucial to accounts of modernism's postwar history. Roberts makes this point cogently: while the socially transformative ambitions of the modernist avant-garde were not realized, this was a *historical* failure, not an artistic one. The end of the modernist avant-garde did not signal the eclipse of art's critical negation of bourgeois society: "the former may have ended – for now – as a historical possibility, but the latter continues inexorably to exert its demands and responsibilities."²⁶ This offers an alternative to the focus on death and decline that has been fundamental to critical conceptions of the modernist avant-garde since the foundational postwar studies of Peter Bürger and Renato Poggioli.²⁷ The vanguard moment of high modernism offered a historically contingent solution to the problem of art's social agency. This solution was made possible by the specific revolutionary context of the early twentieth century, which produced both a mass working-class movement and the vanguard parties that aimed to maintain its revolutionary character. Despite the historical failure of this political project, the "antagonistic embrace" between political vanguards and artistic avant-gardes opens artistic practice onto a political horizon that transcends both the specific historical conjuncture of the early twentieth century and even those particular artists or groups that later claim the avant-garde's legacy. Therefore, in this book I do not ask whether the avant-garde is living or dead, nor do I argue whether or not these writers truly belong to its "tradition" of formal innovation.²⁸ Instead, I consider how these authors' works mediate the avant-garde's historical demise.

I propose that the collapse of modernist artistic and political vanguards generates a post-vanguard crisis of agency that sets the terms of cultural production throughout the postwar period, necessitating that artists reconstitute art's social agency in a period of liberal consensus rather than revolutionary crisis.²⁹ The postwar decades constitute an open and contested field of possibilities shaped by a specific crisis of artistic agency initiated by the renewal of capital accumulation and the liberal political and social consensus it sustained, rather than a period of simple political or artistic regression, as it is often portrayed. Approaching the postwar period in this way, this study supplements Christopher Nealon's important account of the relationship between poetry and economic crisis in the twentieth century by addressing the specific conditions of capitalist expansion in the "long boom" of the 1940s to the 1970s. Nealon points out that the postwar settlement between labor and capital created a new ideological landscape. Collective social aspirations became difficult to articulate, as political and artistic subjectivity were increasingly defined through commodity exchange, and collective social forms came to seem (and often function as) oppressive barriers to transformative politics.³⁰ Though only a temporary resolution of recurrent capitalist crises, this so-called golden age eroded the power of the specific oppositional forms – namely, the vanguard party – that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, at the height of the labor movement's revolutionary agency. Yet rather than signaling the origins of postmodernity amid an ever-expanding global capitalism, these conditions also initiate what T. J. Clark has called a new "cycle" of modernism – a reworking of modernist negation in a postwar landscape without the existing, concrete form of collective agency of the revolutionary vanguard, but marked instead by a powerful liberal consensus and a mass culture dominated by state and commercial institutions.³¹

This book posits that these postwar conditions did not simply mean the end of modernism: they established a set of problems about art's relation to subjective experience and collective politics that postwar writers had to resolve. Indeed, the dominant cultural formations of this period, which have formed the basis of critical narratives focused on the transition from modernism to postmodernism, can be understood as responses to this crisis of collective agency. The writers and artists most closely associated with Jameson's ideology of modernism – e.g. Greenberg, the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics – embraced the newly powerful institutions of the state, academy, art market, museum and commercial publishing. Alternatively, figures such as Olson, the writers associated with

the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance and those surrounding the Beat movement, aimed to re-create the oppositional community and solidarity of the modernist avant-gardes, through coterie groups or alternative institutional forms, such as Black Mountain College. The opposition, and quite often the interaction, between those who embraced postwar cultural institutions and those who sought alternative social and cultural structures has shaped an overwhelming part of the scholarship on mid-century and postwar literary culture.³²

Yet the authors in this study sought a different solution to the problem of art's social agency. Across the readings of Merleau-Ponty, Adorno, Bishop, Pound, Ellison and Williams that follow, I argue that their aesthetics of embodiment powerfully answers the post-vanguard era's crisis of artistic agency. Rather than embracing newly dominant cultural institutions or attempting to reconstitute avant-garde solidarity and community on the margins of mainstream society, these authors withdrew (in some cases actively, others passively) from existing social connections. Not surprisingly, their work has been read as turning inward, withdrawing from society and collective praxis to mere individual experience, to consciousness, ego or self. Yet they turned to subjective experience not to maintain a heroic isolation from society or politics but to locate a universal basis for sociality and collective agency in that most apparently personal dimension of embodied experience.

These figures therefore represent a modernism *beyond the avant-garde*. Their aesthetics of embodiment carries modernism's "labor of negation" *beyond* the particular and contingent historical form of agency that catalyzed an earlier "cycle" of modernist aesthetics.³³ The preposition *beyond* marks a historical shift that is both chronological and conceptual. An alternative to more familiar periodizations of "late" and "post," it signals neither a belated, nostalgic longing for the singular aesthetic achievements of high modernism nor any headlong leap into an undifferentiated present. Oriented toward the future, but without complete rupture with the past, *beyond* foregrounds the awkward ambivalence of an ongoing, though discontinuous, relation to an earlier moment in which art could be directly aligned with (a "positivization" of) the collective agency of the vanguard party. Vanguard political parties brought a universal political horizon – a total transformation of society – into view, thus changing art's relation to collective politics. In the context of a post-vanguard crisis of artistic agency, embodiment provides a new basis for establishing art's relation to collective agency that does not depend directly on any existing social, political or institutional formation. Rather than expressing the unity of a

concrete and delimited community, embodiment offers a loose, open dimension of sociality that is shared by everyone. This is precisely why embodiment becomes so crucial to the authors discussed in this book: without a concrete revolutionary agent (a vanguard party), these authors sought to establish a basis for art's social purpose available to anyone, outside articulated political and social structures or groups.

This study therefore shares important concerns with Oren Izenberg's recent book *Of Being Numerous*.³⁴ However, Izenberg presumes that phenomenal experience cannot ground forms of social relation broader than the particularizing logic of sympathetic identification, and he locates a social claim for poetry based in an abstract conception of personhood grounded in consciousness. By contrast, I argue that in the authors considered here, embodiment becomes the basis for a sociality that extends beyond the particularity of group identity. Unlike the body, which indicates a physical object possessed by an individual subject, embodiment constitutes a prior dimension of experience that is universally shared among all subjects and the world they inhabit. Embodiment is therefore social or collective, rather than individual. But this dimension of sociality is not a delimited or specific community of discrete individuals. For instance, when Merleau-Ponty talks about embodied subjectivity, he refers neither to an individual "I" nor a communal "we," neither an individual self nor a delimited group of individuals united by shared ideas, experiences or practices. Instead, he refers to a generalized, anonymous and universal "one" (in French, the impersonal pronoun *on*) that precedes any individual self or articulated community: "one perceives in me." Merleau-Ponty goes on to describe the universally shared dimension of embodied experience "in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception" (*PP* 250, 411).

Aligning art and culture with embodied experience, each of the figures in this book articulates a similar insight into the social dimension of embodiment. Adorno argues that art is a "wordless gesture" that does not express individual feelings or intentions but rather the "collective essence" of the subject, a collective voice that capitalist society has to deny. Bishop presents poetry as a form of embodied perception, or what she calls "rhythmic looking," that establishes an unstable relation between subjects and world they share with others. In *The Pisan Cantos*, Pound reduces aesthetic subjectivity to mere "scraps," a material, relational structure fragmented across temporal, spatial and social distance. Ellison derives art from laughter, positing that both are embodied social practices that can sustain African Americans' political struggle because these practices do