THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Original citation:
Costello, Diarmuid. (2012) Automat, automatic, automatism : Rosalind Krauss and
Stanley Cavell on photography and the photographically dependent arts. Critical Inquiry,
Vol.38 (No.4). pp. 819-854.
Permanent WRAP url:
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/51087

Copyright and reuse:
The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes the work of researchers of the
University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright ©
and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual
author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the
material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made
available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-
profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and
full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original
metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

A note on versions:
The version presented in WRAP is the published version or, version of record, and may
be cited as it appears here.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk
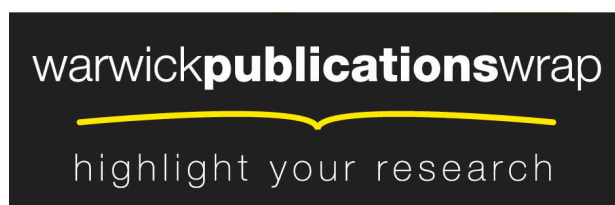
warwick**publications**wrap

highlight your research

http://go.warwick.ac.uk/lib-publications

Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and
the Photographically Dependent Arts
Author(s): Diarmuid Costello
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Agency and Automatism: Photography as Art Since
the Sixties, edited by Diarmud Costello, Margaret Iversen, and Joel Snyder (Summer 2012),
pp. 819–854
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/667426
Accessed: 28/11/2012 07:51

Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts

Diarmuid Costello

1. Crossing Disciplines

How might philosophers and art historians make the best use of one another's research? That, *in nuce,* is what this special issue considers with respect to questions concerning the nature of photography as an artistic medium; and that is what my essay addresses with respect to a specific case: the dialogue, or lack thereof, between the work of the philosopher Stanley Cavell and the art historian-critic Rosalind Krauss. It focuses on Krauss's late appeal to Cavell's notion of automatism to argue that artists now have to invent their own medium, both to provide criteria against which to judge artistic success or failure and to insulate serious art from the vacuous generalization of the aesthetic in a media-saturated culture at large.[1] Much in the spirit of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', paying attention to the medium is once again an artist's best line of defence against the encroachment of

1. A problem that recurs when discussing Cavell and Krauss is how to distinguish claims about *new media* (understood, specifically, as the plural of a new *artistic* medium) from claims about *new media* (understood in the everyday sense of a wide range of technological media which need have no relation to art and which Krauss takes new artistic media to oppose). I will reserve *new artistic media* for the former and *new media* for the latter.

new media, the culture industry, and spectacle. That Krauss should appeal to Cavell at all, let alone in such a Greenbergian frame of mind, is surprising if one is familiar with the fraught history of debate about artistic media in art theory since Greenberg. Cavell's work in this domain has always been closely associated with that of Michael Fried, and the mutual estrangement of Fried and Krauss, who began their critical careers as two of Greenberg's leading followers, is legendary.[2]

   I have written about the close connection between Fried's and Cavell's conceptions of an artistic medium before.[3] Whereas Fried's and Cavell's early conception of an artistic medium was in a sense collaborative, emerging from an ongoing exchange of ideas at Harvard in the latter half of the 1960s, Krauss's much later appeal to the ideas of automatism and the automatic underpinning Cavell's conception of the photographic substrate of film from the early 1970s is not. In what follows, I try to clarify both the

---

   2. Krauss and Fried were near contemporaries in the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard in the midsixties, where Cavell had recently joined the philosophy faculty. Initially two of Greenberg's leading followers, their subsequent criticism and art history took them in opposed directions. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the extent to which Krauss's and Fried's theoretical commitments and critical trajectories form an inverted mirror image of one another bears remarking. Where early Fried was committed to the idea of a specific medium (if not in its reductive Greenbergian formulation), Fried now seems to go out of his way to avoid medium talk; thus he barely considers photography as a medium in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, Conn., 2008), preferring to discuss recent photographic art, perhaps following Jean-François Chevrier and Jeff Wall, in terms of its achievement *qua picture*, a much more generic category comprising the media of photography, painting, and film. Conversely, where much of Krauss's earlier work may be read as a deconstruction, if not outright rejection of medium talk—think of Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 276–90—Krauss now seems to go out of her way to revive it, albeit in noncanonical forms. For more on Fried's and Krauss's earlier responses to Greenberg's equation of medium specificity and aesthetic value, see Diarmuid Costello, 'Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6 (Spring 2007): 217–28.
   3. See Costello, 'On the Very Idea of a "Specific" Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts', *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 274–312.

D I A R M U I D   C O S T E L L O is associate professor of philosophy (reader) at the University of Warwick and chair of the British Society of Aesthetics. He is coauthor of *Adrian Piper: Passing Time* (2013) and coeditor of 'The Media of Photography', a special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2012), and 'Photography after Conceptual Art', a special issue of *Art History* (2009). He is working on two longer projects: *Art after Aesthetics? A Critique of Theories of Art after Modernism* and *On Photography*. He was codirector (with Margaret Iversen) of the Arts and Humanities Council research project, 'Aesthetics after Photography'. His email is D.Costello@Warwick.ac.uk

grounds of this appeal and its upshot. Does Krauss's account shed new light on Cavell's, or is she trying to press his terms into service for which they are ill-served? Both could of course be true, the former as a consequence of the latter perhaps. Conversely, do the art historical and philosophical 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 around the themes of agency and automatism, which is precisely what Krauss's appeal to Cavell turns on.

I begin with Krauss's attempt to provide a nonreductive account of an artistic medium in terms of what she calls differential specificity. Simply put, she means that artistic media are necessarily internally complex or composite, consisting minimally of a technical support and the conventions through which it is articulated.[4] While it is not always clear, on Krauss's account, what *counts* as part of a work's technical support and what does not—is it solely the physical elements and technical processes that support a given practice, or can various skills or abilities when employed in certain ways also count as part of a work's support?—the basic idea of artistic media as irreducibly *complex* is one that Krauss derives from Cavell. In the preface to her little book on Marcel Broodthaers, Krauss presents this as an attempt to 'detoxify' medium-talk, given its strong associations in art theory with Greenberg's reductive characterisation of a medium in terms of the 'unique and irreducible' properties of its support.[5] Against this, Krauss counterposes Cavell's understanding of artistic media as not simply physical materials but physical-materials-in-certain-characteristic-applications.[6]

In examining Krauss's conception of an artistic medium, I concentrate on the relation between its two constituent elements. Given that Krauss claims inventing a medium involves discovering an appropriate set of conventions with which to articulate a given technical support, this goes to the heart of her account. To focus my own, I limit its scope to Krauss's work on artists—such as James Coleman, William Kentridge, and Ed Ruscha—

4. Krauss's move here amounts to concurring with Fried, contra Greenberg in 'After Abstract Expressionism', that a 'stretched or tacked-up canvas', that is, an *unworked* material support, could not conceivably function as a (successful) picture (Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International,* 25 Oct. 1962, p. 30; quoted in Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago, 1998], p. 169 n. 6). Krauss acknowledges as much in her 'Lip Sync: Marclay Not Nauman', *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), p. 37. For Fried's relation to Greenberg on this point, see Costello, 'On the Very Idea of a "Specific" Medium', pp. 280–85.

5. Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1993), 4:86.

6. If one is inclined to wonder about what exactly the term *characteristic* means here, *historically enfranchised* or *conventional* might serve equally well.

working in what I shall call photographically dependent art forms, though nothing I say hangs on this designation, and the worries I raise generalize to Krauss's articles on artists involved in analogous projects in non–photographically dependent art forms.

Once I have clarified Krauss's account of the relation between support and convention, I turn to Cavell's conceptualizations of automatism and the automatic with which she tries to underwrite it. I focus on what Cavell means when he says that once employing tried and tested forms no longer suffices to secure the communication of shared meanings, modernist artists are forced to invent new media or automatisms *within* their respective artistic media in order to secure their works' standing as art. Understanding Cavell's claims, and their compatibility or otherwise with Krauss's idea of reinventing the medium, requires disentangling the often confusing iteration of Cavell's terminology. This applies both to his general account of artistic media (talk about 'media of the medium') and his specific account of the photographic substrate of film as 'a succession of automatic world projections' (talk about 'automatisms of the automatic').[7] Having clarified what Cavell means, and whether or not it gives Krauss what she needs, I go on to raise some more substantive worries about Krauss's understanding of an artistic medium as the kind of thing that could be created and practiced by a single artist. This is not an empirical question concerning the inventiveness of particular artists but a conceptual question about what the very idea of an artistic medium entails. It is to ask whether the ideas of a medium which *is* only practiced by a single artist, or *could* only be practiced by a single artist, respectively, are coherent. Here I draw on a later Krauss article on Ed Ruscha which anticipates some of the worries I raise. Though Krauss anticipates such worries, I suggest that she lacks the resources to resolve them within the terms of her own account.

2. Krauss on 'Inventing' a Medium: James Coleman and William Kentridge

My account relies principally on Krauss's papers on Coleman and Kentridge, but it is also informed by her paper on Ruscha and the preface to her little book on Broodthaers (figs. 1–2).[8] Taken together, these give a good

7. These phrases are used throughout Stanley Cavell, 'Automatism' and 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting', *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 101–7, 108–17.

8. With the exceptions of '" . . . And Then Turn Away?" An Essay on James Coleman', *October,* no. 81 (Summer 1997): 5–33, hereafter abbreviated "AT"; 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 289–305; and *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London, 1999), the relevant essays for Krauss's account of the postmedium condition are collected in *Perpetual Inventory.*

FIGURE 1.   James Coleman, *Lapsus Exposure* (1992–94). Projected images with synchronized audio narration. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. © James Coleman.

FIGURE 2.   William Kentridge, *Mine* (1991). From the *Drawings for Projection* series (1989–). Installation view. Mönchehaus Museum, Goslar. Photograph: Christian Meßer, meßermedia, Goslar.

sense of what Krauss means by the 'postmedium condition' and those artists who aspire to buck it. According to Krauss, the work of artists such as Coleman and Kentridge gives the lie to the 'monstrous myth' that contemporary art in its entirety now inhabits some kind of generic, postmedium condition; for rather than abandoning their commitment to specific media altogether, in light of the widespread belief that established artistic media are now exhausted, such artists look instead to various commercial industries and applications for the succession of near obsolete supports that rapid technological development increasingly makes available to artists. If sufficiently persistent in mining these nontraditional vehicles for their expressive potential—Krauss has in mind technologies such as the commercial light-box, tape-slide advertising displays, stop frame animation, the video portapak, synchronized sound, and, in Ruscha's case, even the car—such artists may thereby invent their own artistic media. To invent a new medium in this sense is to create a new resource for artistic expressiveness with means that, prior to this practical demonstration, could not have been anticipated. Artists such as Coleman, Kentridge, and Ruscha achieve this, on Krauss's account, when they alight upon a suitable set of conventions through which to articulate and thereby transform these outmoded technologies into new technical supports for art; that is, create new vehicles that allow artists to say whatever it is they have to say by engaging with the distinctive possibilities and constraints of a given means of expression. For despite the pervasive and by now rather tired antipathy for talk about intention and expression among art theorists formed in the crucible of structuralism, for whose work Krauss has often served as a model, this is what her late work on the medium commits her to. For Krauss the stakes of reinvigorating artistic media in this way could hardly be higher: 'the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art'.[9]

The question, given the significance that Krauss attaches to specific media, so understood, is *how* these outmoded technological forms come to function as media for artists; if anything *could* in principle serve as a medium for artists, what is required to actualize this general possibility in particular cases? Answering this question requires looking at Krauss's critical writing on specific artists. In each instance it turns on the particular conventions through which a given artist articulates their preferred technical support, thereby transforming what would otherwise be an inert commercial application into something capable of carrying artistic meaning, namely, an artistic medium. But here one would like to know what

9. Krauss, introduction to *Perpetual Inventory*, p. xiii.

kind of *relation*, if any, is required between these new supports and the conventions through which artists seek to animate them. Must the latter arise organically, as it were, from interacting with the distinctive qualities, possibilities, and constraints afforded by the former, or can they be externally grafted on to a technical support with which they would otherwise have no connection? Or can this vary from case to case?

Given that photography has counted for some time—except perhaps in the mind of the odd philosopher—as a well-established artistic medium, one cannot pursue this question directly in relation to contemporary photography itself.[10] Instead, I shall focus on Krauss's account of artists working in what I call photographically dependent art forms. By 'photographically dependent' art forms, I mean those forms among contemporary visual arts that depend, necessarily, on photographic mediation, yet without being photography—or necessarily even photographic—themselves. So, for example, an art form such as animation is not photographic on my usage; at least in its canonical forms, animation was a quintessentially manugraphic art. Nonetheless, animated shorts, as distinct from the individual cells that comprise them, are photographically dependent in my sense. Both aspects of this claim may be brought out by considering the difference between such shorts and primitive flick books. Imagine an animated short and a flick book made up of the same set of individual cells. Only the former is in a photographically dependent art form because the images in the latter appear to move without the mediation of any photographic apparatus. And this would remain true even in the unlikely scenario that the viewing experience of the two

10. See Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation,' *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Spring 1981): 577–603, for the classic instance of this. Scruton's argument takes *as one of its premises* a stipulative definition of the 'ideal photograph' that ensures that any actual, real-world photograph that might seem to falsify his account is neutralized in advance. Scruton's argument has engendered a lively debate in the philosophy of photography that continues to this day. See, for example, Peter Alward, 'Transparent Representation: Photography and the Art of Casting', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (Winter 2012): 9–18, and David Davies, 'Scruton on the Inscrutability of Photographs' and Dawn M. Phillips, 'Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (Oct. 2009): 341–55, 327–40, a special issue devoted to Scruton's aesthetics. For an overview, see Costello and Phillips, 'Automatism, Causality, and Realism: Foundational Problems in the Philosophy of Photography', *Philosophy Compass* 4 (July 2009): 1–21.

It is hard to know what to say about such debates from an art-historical point of view, given that they are responses to a starting point that rules out the majority of photographic art by definition. From this perspective, they are perhaps best seen as a self-contained exercise in philosophical argument, the chief interest of which is to show what follows *if* one defines photographs in purely causal terms. But given that the definition is falsified by a good deal of real-world photography this philosophical demonstration is unlikely to be of interest to many art historians, theorists, or critics, and it no doubt contributes to the indifference to philosophical aesthetics in much art history that might benefit from some exposure to such debates nonetheless.

could be made indiscernible; then one would be confronted by two seemingly indiscernible works only one of which is photographically dependent in my sense. Conversely, film is not merely photographically dependent; it is also photographic—consisting, as it does, of the projection of a succession of still photographs.

Among contemporary forms, the photographically dependent include Coleman's mimesis of the photo-novel in his projected images, that use slide tape, and Kentridge's use of stop-frame animation techniques in his *Drawings for Projection.* Both bodies of work depend on more or less antiquated photographic technologies. The medium of the former is at least in part *photographic*, insofar as the work centrally involves the projection of photographic slides, though without being reducible to *photography*; the multi-image dissolves, narrative horizon, and voice-overs, not to mention the projection itself, situate the work somewhere between photography and film, with which both share certain features.[11] By contrast, the medium of the latter is not even photographic; what one sees when viewing the finished work is animated film—moving images drawn by hand. But one could not see what one does see without an intervening series of still photographs, captured by a stop-frame animation camera, that records the successive transformations of a small number of drawings over time. To that extent even Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* necessarily depend on photographic technology at the level of his medium's technical support and so count as photographically dependent in my sense, even though they are not in the medium of photography.

What, then, is the relation between Kentridge's and Coleman's technical supports and the conventions through which they are animated, such that the latter are capable of transforming the former from mere mechanisms into artistic vehicles? Consider Coleman first. His self-proclaimed *medium* is projected images, while his *technical support*,

---

11. At times, Coleman's work seems to teeter on the cusp between photography and film, inhabiting the projected condition of film, but absent the illusion of movement. This is strongly suggested by those works that self-reflexively thematize the technical and material grounds of film's illusion of movement in a succession of projected still images, by slowing them to the point at which any illusion of movement breaks down. This would make sense of Coleman's decision to foreground the means of projection within the space of exhibition and his attention to various forms of 'cinematic' dissolve, particularly those dilated over hugely extended periods of time. Thus, in *La Tache aveugle* (1978–90), a nine-slide dissolve, consisting of frames taken from a short sequence of the original 1933 film version of *The Invisible Man,* takes eight hours to complete. Though it is taken from the short passage in which the Invisible Man loses his invisibility, enduring the work's glacial progression provides nothing to see. By doing so, the work both acknowledges and frustrates film's narrative drive as inherited by the succession of slides in Coleman's slide tape.
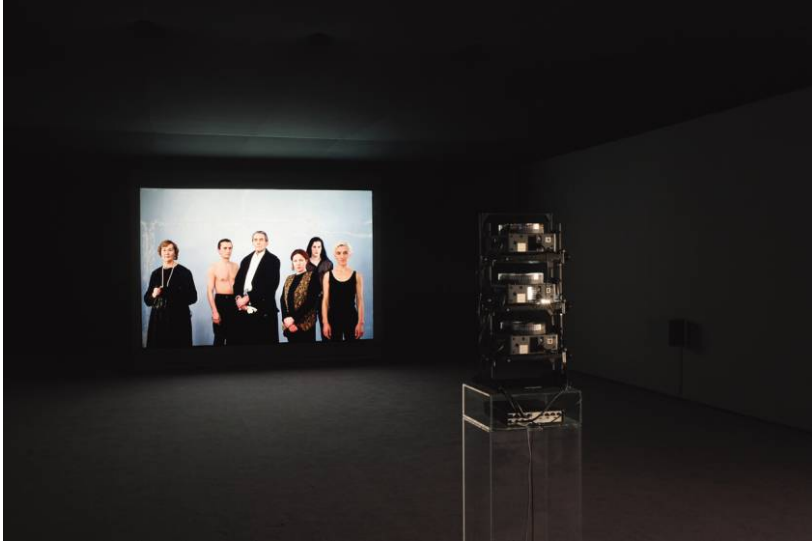
FIGURE 3. James Coleman, *I N I T I A L S* (1993–94). Installation view, Compton Verney, England, 2008. Projected images with synchronized audio narration. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. © James Coleman.

according to Krauss, is the slide tape.[12] This is an automated arrangement of carousel slide projectors (in Coleman's case, typically three), projecting a series of overlapping slides that this arrangement of multiple, autofocusing projectors allows to dissolve into one another in more or less complicated sequences. The technology itself is imported from commercial applications in business and advertising. In Coleman's work it normally takes the form of a vertical stack of projectors housed in a clear perspex unit, itself prominently displayed in the darkened room in which the images are projected. Typically, though not always, it is accompanied by a sound track consisting of a voice-over or narration of some kind (fig. 3).

Coleman animates this technical support with the conventional forms of the photo-novel (picture books for adults with stock photographs in place of the illustrations in comics) in conjunction with various tropes lifted from other popular narrative forms, such as TV hospital soaps and crime fiction (figs. 4a–4b). So described, the conventions Coleman employs might appear wholly external to his technical support, to which they are, as it were, merely externally grafted on. But by focusing on Coleman's use of the photo-novel, Krauss brings out the way in which Coleman's

12. See Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 289–305.

FIGURES 4a–b.   'Notre Amour est impossible'. A photoroman with Rock and Belles Oreilles, by Rocco Belzoreille, featuring Andréo Delcarme, Yvo Pelti, Guido Poggi, Riccardo Cirrozi, and Bruno Landri. Published in *CROC* 76 (Nov. 1985): 67–70.

choice of a *still* rather than moving support for his projected images necessitates recourse to various highly artificial conventions for representing encounters between characters, notably what she calls (citing *Seeing for Oneself* [1987–1990] and *INITIALS* [1994]), the 'double face-out.'[13] This is Krauss's term for the way in which Coleman's stills, like those of the photonovels he draws upon, are obliged to compress action and reaction shots within a single frame; lacking the real-time editing that allows reverse shots in film to represent encounters between two or more characters by cutting rapidly between their respective points of view, he has to employ various mechanisms for telescoping the narrative. As a result, one will often find two or more successive moments represented, as if they were occurring simultaneously, side by side within a single frame. For example, the instigator of some exchange in shallow relief faces the camera, his or her respondent(s) in the foreground, also facing the camera, rather than the protagonist to whom they are responding—the gestures of each frozen at their moment of greatest drama. The resulting images are—quite intentionally—mannered, theatrical, and wooden (fig. 5).

For all their artificialness, however, the conventions Coleman alights upon to animate his support clearly thematize the nature of the resulting

13.   Ibid., p. 300.

FIGURE 5. James Coleman, *Seeing for Oneself* (1987–88). Projected images with synchronized audio narration. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. © James Coleman.

medium, by working with the constraints that projecting a succession of still images places on a narrative art form. Indeed, one could argue that Coleman's work probes the border between still and moving images by working with the rudiments of narrative film—still images projected in succession to generate a narrative—but slowed to the point at which any illusion of movement breaks down.[14] There are various explicit thematiza-

14. In this respect it bears remarking that Coleman's medium, as analyzed by Krauss, despite renouncing any illusion of movement, meets Cavell's definition of film as a 'succession of automatic world projections'. This is Cavell's characterization of the common material support of the various artistic uses or genres—or what he terms *media*—of the medium of film as a succession of images of real, rather than imagined, events and states of affairs (this being 'the world' in 'world-projection')—images which are themselves captured by the 'automatic' means of the film camera rather than rendered by hand. 'Succession' has the double meaning of the capture and projection of one such image after another, twenty-four fps—to depict movement, and of one such sequence after another—to build a narrative. It also gestures towards the metaphysical significance Cavell attributes to the fact that such images are projected on a screen, that acts as a barrier between the viewer and the world viewed. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 72–73.

That the events and states of affairs are real in the sense intended here does not entail that they cannot be fictional. Much film is fictional, but the fiction is created by filming real people and places. This is not true in a world of CGI technology, but that postdates Cavell's account.

tions of this within the work, the most notable being *La Tache aveugle* (1978–90), but they pervade his oeuvre more generally (fig. 6). This self-reflexivity regarding his work's medium and form reaches its high point in the reflexive relation between content and means of presentation in *Charon (MIT Project)* (1989), in which the relation between events in the life and work of a commercial catalogue photographer is explored through a series of studiously banal photo-essays, accompanied by third-person narrative (fig. 7). This culminates in the final sequence, titled 'Dream Homes', in which we seem to see the very images of overstuffed rooms that the accompanying narration describes the photographer taking.

Krauss has a good deal more to say about all this which I am bracketing here, both about the relation between the images, narrated voice-overs, and the sound of the carousel projectors themselves, all of which supports her case that Coleman's medium is composite and internally complex, and about his work's relation to a variety of theoretical sources. These include Roland Barthes's account of 'the third meaning' (the meaning of the film still in opposition to that of the diegetic horizon of which it is a part and to which its status as still refers)[15] and Walter Benjamin's claims concerning the utopian promise encoded in a new technology's origins (in Coleman's case, the distant memory of the magic lantern show) supposedly released once impending obsolescence frees its technological successors from 'the grip of utility.'[16] But I shall bracket these more substantive dimensions of Krauss's account here in order to move on to her account of Kentridge's medium.

Kentridge's *medium*, by his own account, is drawings for projection; his *technical support*, according to Krauss, is stop-frame animation.[17] Krauss focuses on a series of nine animated films, lasting less than ten minutes each, about the life, marriage, and industrial empire of Soho Eckstein, a

---

For an attempt to show that Cavell's account withstands this challenge nonetheless, see David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

15. See Barthes, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills' (1970), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation,* trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 41–62.

16. Krauss, *'A Voyage on the North Sea'*, p. 41. It is important to Krauss's account of artists who invent new artistic media that the technologies they resort to are on the cusp of obsolescence. This is because she follows Benjamin in claiming that, 'freed from the grip of utility,' obsolescent technologies release the utopian potential encoded at their origin. This is an aspect of Krauss's account that I abstract from, just as I abstract from the conception of scepticism underpinning Cavell's interest in photography's automatism.

17. One might reasonably object to Krauss's account of Kentridge's medium at this point that animation is *already* an artistic medium and not merely an outmoded technical support, though Krauss would presumably reply that it functions merely as a technical support in Kentridge's art. In any case I set this to one side here.

FIGURE 6. James Coleman, *La Tache aveugle* (1978–90). Projected images. Continuous. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. © James Coleman.

FIGURE 7. James Coleman, *Charon (MIT Project)* (1989). Projected images with synchronized audio narration. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. © James Coleman.

FIGURE 8.   William Kentridge, charcoal drawing for *Mine* (1991) from the *Drawings for Projection* series (1989–). Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

fictional mine owner in apartheid South Africa (fig. 8). Her primary concern is not the films' subject matter, however, just as her primary interest in Coleman is not his work's relation to Irish history, but the relation between Kentridge's working method and his medium; specifically, she sets out to clarify the two kinds of automatism which she takes to underpin Kentridge's working method and their contribution to the finished work.[18] Kentridge's films are created from a small number of charcoal drawings, perhaps twenty or so over the course of a seven–eight-minute film. Each drawing is responsible for a particular sequence within a given film, that is made by making innumerable incremental modifications to the drawing and recording those modifications with a stop-frame animation camera as the narrative unfolds a few marks at a time. Rather than being planned out

18.   See Krauss, '"The Rock": William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', *October,* no. 92 (Spring 2000): 3–35, esp. pp. 6–13.

in advance, each film emerges slowly from Kentridge's intuitive responses to the drawings as they develop (fig. 9).[19]

Like Coleman, on Krauss's account, Kentridge's medium is an obsolete commercial application transformed by the conventions through which he animates it. Again like Coleman, whose 'projected images' are grounded in a highly self-conscious attitude towards a certain kind of staged photography, Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* are grounded in a self-reflexive drawing practice that thematizes the opacity and density of charcoal as a medium on the one hand, and its ease of erasure and overworking on the other. Also, like Coleman, whose wooden protagonists foreground their own theatricality and staging, Kentridge's drawings thematize their own procedures. The structural parallels run much deeper than the occasional appearance of a draughtsman resembling Kentridge within the work, that is analogous to Coleman taking a photographer's life as his subject matter in *Charon (MIT Project)*. One example is those passages in *Mine* (1991) in which a pneumatic drill blasts away at a rock face, each impact and the resulting removal of rock generated by a single incision of Kentridge's eraser into the drawing's dense charcoal ground, that the depicted drill figures. Another is the windscreen wiper of Soho's car in *The History of the Main Complaint* (1996), that appears to smear or rub out the scene viewed through the window with each swipe of the depicted blade. Such sequences clearly thematize the processes through which the drawings are created by alluding to the mechanics of depiction within what is depicted (fig. 10).

The work's technical support makes this possible, by creating a permanent record of each drawing's gradual transformation, and Kentridge's medium—'drawings for projection'—fully exploits this capacity of his technical support. Krauss is at her most persuasive in arguing that Kentridge's primary interest is in drawing and that this governs his use of animation as a technical support rather than vice versa; animation is, for Kentridge, primarily a way of recording a drawing's transformation over time. In fact, the relation between Kentridge's camera and the drawings it records is fundamental to Kentridge's practice. At the heart of his medium is a structuring tension between the ebb and flow of his line, an autographic mark in the autographic art par excellence, and the automatic

19. The resulting films are typically accompanied by musical soundtracks punctuated by the noise of various everyday objects depicted within the films themselves (old Bakelite telephones, ringing bells, hospital monitors, miners' drills, adding machines, communal showers, and so on). They are without dialogue, though they feature occasional title cards. As Kentridge's name for his chosen medium implies, the films are projected, typically in darkened gallery spaces, but sometimes in screening rooms or theatres with live musical accompaniment. In the latter incarnation, they have much in common with silent films.
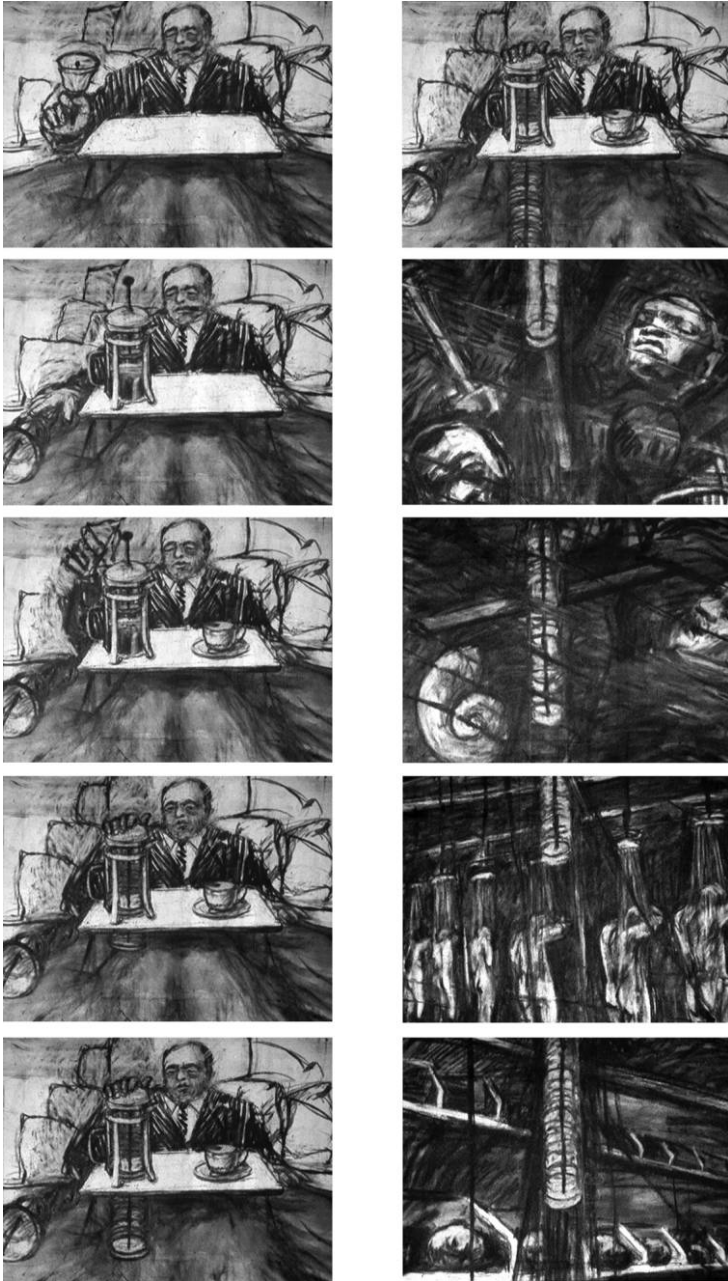
FIGURE 9. William Kentridge, sequence of stills from *Mine* (1991) from the *Drawings for Projection* series (1989–). Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.
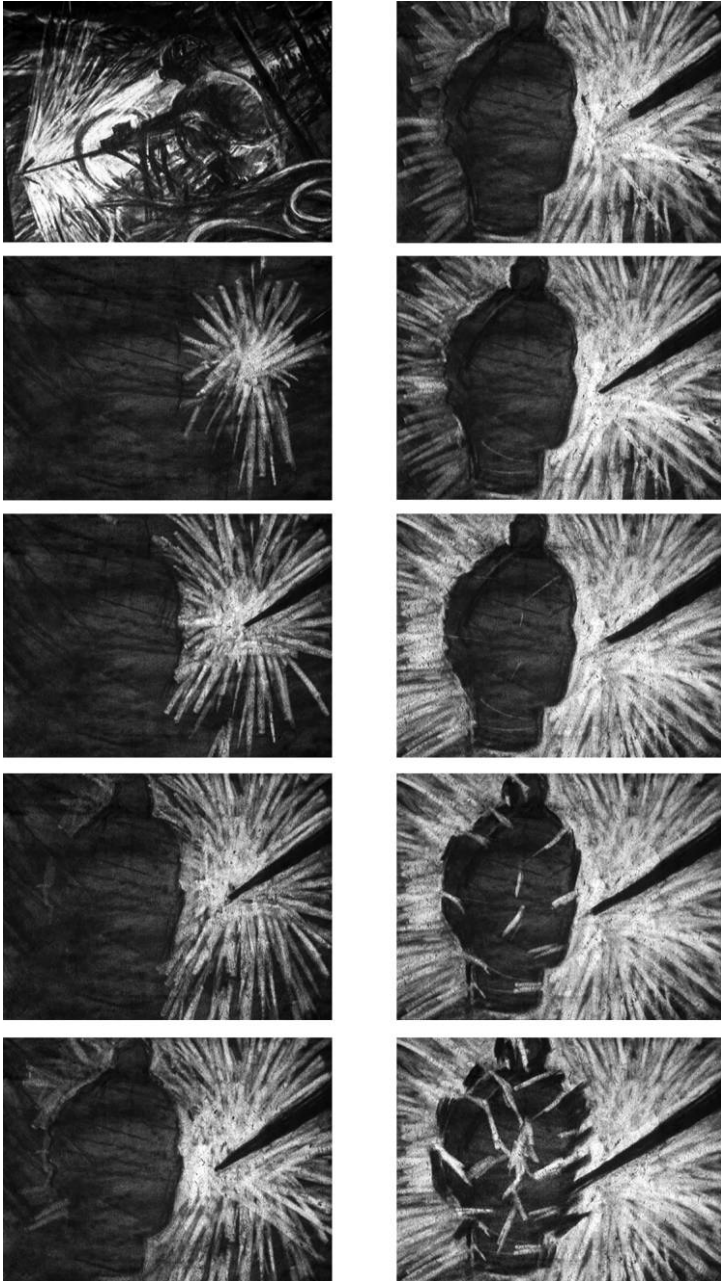
FIGURE 10. William Kentridge, sequence of stills from *Mine* (1991) from the *Drawings for Projection* series (1989–). Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

recording of that mark by the impassive eye of the stop-frame animation camera. This interaction between Kentridge's agency as a draughtsman and the automatism of the camera, regulated by the rhythm of his trips back and forth between drawing and camera to record each modification of the drawing with one or two frames of film, is central to his art. According to Krauss, it is primarily the repetitive nature of the underlying process that liberates Kentridge to improvise while working on the drawings. Krauss is doubtless right about the importance of this process for Kentridge's art; not only is it something that Kentridge himself foregrounds in interviews and talks, but, were this time-consuming process *not* integral to his art, there would be little reason for him to tolerate its inconvenience. He could easily rig up a longer cable release or some other solution to allow him to photograph his drawings without such constant self-interruption (fig. 11).

That said, my own and Krauss's interpretations of what is at stake diverge at this point. Krauss's preferred terms for what I have just called the autographic and automatic elements of Kentridge's process is a distinction between 'two kinds of automatism': what she calls the 'quasi-automatic' aspects of Kentridge's working method (his trips back and forth across the studio to trip the shutter after each new modification of the drawing) and the automatisms of the unconscious (the unexpected associations and solutions) that such a repetitive process allows to rise to the surface.[20] This already points to how different Krauss's use of the language of automatism is from Cavell's. The *brute automatism of the camera itself*, the fact that cameras are capable of producing an image of whatever they record without subjective mediation—which would be the most obvious sense of the automatic for Cavell in this domain—does not even figure.[21] Though she appeals to Cavell, and even employs his terminology, Krauss actually derives her two senses of automatism from Kentridge's description of his working process. Specifically, she takes them from the lecture 'Fortuna: Neither Programme Nor Chance in the Making of Images'. Here Kentridge maintains that images in his work which are not preplanned and which might

20. Krauss, '"The Rock"', p. 6.

21. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 16–23. See also Cavell, 'What Photography Calls Thinking', *Raritan* 4 (Spring 1985): 1–21; rpt. *'Raritan' Reading,* ed. Richard Poirier (New Brunswick, N.J., 1990), pp. 47–65. For criticisms of Cavell's automatism thesis, and the hard and fast opposition it leads him to posit between photography and painting, see Douglas P. Lackey, 'Reflections on Cavell's Ontology of Film', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32 (Winter 1973): 271–73; H. Gene Blocker, 'Pictures and Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (Dec. 1977): 155–62; and Joel Snyder, 'What Happens by Itself in Photography', in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, Tex., 1993), pp. 362–74.

FIGURE 11. William Kentridge at work in his drawing studio, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

therefore seem rationally inexplicable in fact arise from carefully crafted ways of prompting himself to invention. As such they are neither the product of programming everything in advance nor a product of mere happenstance.[22] Kentridge's name for this middle ground is *fortuna,* that he glosses as 'the general term I use for this range of agencies, something other than cold statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control.'[23] Krauss's account of two kinds of automatism—the quasi-automatism of Kentridge's repetitive methods opening the gates to the automatisms (that is, free associations) of the unconscious—are at bottom a gloss on Kentridge's analysis of how his images emerge from a process of controlled improvisation.

I consider the implications of this for her attempt to recruit Cavell's understanding of automatism for the cause of reinventing the medium below. A more immediate and substantive problem I have with Krauss's interpretation of his working method arises when we consider Kentridge's reference to a 'range of agencies' when giving his own explanation of *fortuna.* Krauss interprets Kentridge's description of what is essentially a form of practical know-how as an artist, his intuitive sense of when to push and when to wait while working on a drawing, in such a way that it emerges as a form of psychic automatism. On the resulting account, it is Kentridge's *unconscious*, rather than Kentridge *simpliciter*, that is responsible for what appears in the drawing. But what is at stake here is something more prosaic than this way of describing it sublimes; it is a form of practical judgement that has its counterparts, born of hard-won experience, across almost any domain of human activity one cares to think of. Construing it as a form of psychic automatism has implausible implications for these other domains. Is knowing how tightly to tune an engine or when to refrain from disciplining a child an automatism in *this* sense of the term? If not, why interpret Kentridge's analogous artistic know-how this way? It also fails to capture the

22.   See William Kentridge, '"Fortuna": Neither Programme Nor Chance in the Making of Images', *Cycnos* 11 (Jan. 1994): revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1379. An example that both Kentridge and, following him, Krauss discuss is the sequence in *Mine*, in which the plunger of a cafetiere morphs into a lift in a mineshaft. The difficulty Kentridge faced at this point in the film's evolving narrative, by his own admission, was how to connect the emergence at the surface of a lift carrying miners with an image of the mine's proprietor in such a way as to acknowledge the miners' possession by the mine owner. The solution was to depict Soho, sitting up fully clothed in bed, ringing a bell for his breakfast and in so doing signalling the beginning (or end) of his miners' shift far below. The gift of *fortuna* was to suggest the visual metonym of cafetiere plunger and lift; when Soho plunges his morning coffee, the downward movement pushes the plunger through the bottom of his cafetiere, the tray on which it rests, and his bedding into the murky depths of the mine below. Like the numerous other transformations in the film, this is not an idea that Kentridge set out with in advance but rather something suggested to him by the process of working on the drawing in the studio with his own morning cafetiere to hand (fig. 9).

23.   Ibid.

richness of Kentridge's account of the 'range of agencies' at work; that is, it mischaracterises Kentridge's artistic *agency* in setting out to harness, among other things—such as the cultivated clutter of the studio—his own free associations as itself an automatism. But remaining open to, indeed setting things up in such a way as to solicit and encourage, such promptings is anything but automatic; it is sought out.[24] Construing this as an automatism would be like construing the *activity* of a psychoanalyst, as opposed to the *material* they work with, as automatic—the myriad other differences between Kentridge's working method and that of a psychoanalyst notwithstanding. It is a category mistake of sorts.

This is arguably the only evidence of embarrassment in the face of artistic agency in Krauss's account, and it sits awkwardly while simultaneously attributing to artists sufficient agency to invent their own medium ex nihilo. In what follows I consider the plausibility of what Krauss believes individual artists can achieve with respect to media and whether she can derive such an account from Cavell. I tackle the exegetical question first, as it opens naturally onto some more substantive issues about the nature of artistic media which are raised by claiming that artists can invent their own medium.

3. Krauss's Appeal to Cavell on 'Reinventing Convention'

Until recently in the history of music, according to Cavell, a thorough mastery of conventional forms would have been sufficient to underpin the possibility of improvisation as a response to a felt given need or lacunae in a work's score; what was required at any given point would be apparent simply by virtue of having mastered the conventions of the form and the well-defined expectations that come with them. Krauss explicitly ties Kentridge's idea of *fortuna* and with it her own account of artists reinventing

24. One qualification to the foregoing account is in order: although Cavell never uses automatism in the way that Krauss does, to denote unconscious processes, he does have a generous conception of artistic intention, such that it encompasses intentions that may be attributed to the artist by the perceptive critic that the artist could not have avowed prior to such elucidation, but is capable of acknowledging on having them pointed out. The attribution of intentions, so construed, is a form of reason giving, a way of seeking an explanation as to *why* the work is as it is and not some other way. It involves a conception of intention not as some prior inner mental event inferred from the outward behaviour or consequences (such as a work) that it is taken to have caused but as something visible *in* behaviour (or, by analogy, the work) itself. Asking after intention, then, is not to be understood as seeking the *cause* of an action or a work but as an attempt to better understand what has been done. Note, however, that while intentions so construed need not be explicitly *thematized* by the artist, that neither entails nor even warrants calling them unconscious; they may simply have been nonoccurrent, though, it turns out, relevant to what the artist has in fact done. See, for example, the discussion of Federico Fellini in Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 225–37.

the medium to this formulation. But once those conventional forms are themselves thrown into question, the challenge composers face is to *reinvent convention,* that is, to improvise new conventional forms rather than merely apply old ones. This is the response of modernist composers in the face of either total organization or the institutionalization of chance, neither of which would, on Cavell's account, amount to a way of *achieving* a composed (organized, intended, and resolved) work of art as much as a way of avoiding the burdens of trying.[25]

   The similarities between this account of what is required of artists under conditions of artistic uncertainty and Kentridge's idea of *fortuna* are indeed striking. Note, however, that this account operates at the level of genre or what Cavell calls the 'media of the medium' of music—the aria or sonata form, for example—and not at the level of whatever psychological mechanisms or empirical processes might be posited as *enabling* a particular artist to reconfigure the conventional forms they inherit, assuming that they do. The latter is a matter of empirical psychology and artistic technique, the former a matter of how, given their conventional nature, artistic media are in principle capable of being transformed over time.[26] The fact that Cavell sometimes refers to the conventional forms of artistic media as automatisms that artists once (if no longer) had to master in mastering their art should not disguise the fact that, whereas he is outlining something like the (defeasible) criteria of competence in a given field, Krauss's essays on artists 'inventing their own medium' are, I take it, intended as descriptions of different ways of establishing competence in the absence of such standing automatisms.

   The issue I am trying to flag is *not* that Cavell's account pertains to art in an era of established conventions and Krauss's account pertains to art in the era of their demise. That would be a deeply misleading account of Cavell's enterprise. In this respect the two accounts are clearly compatible, and that they are is hardly surprising: Krauss takes over Cavell's account of the breakdown of established forms as her starting point. Secure automatisms are lost to modern artists on Cavell's account. There are no longer automatisms that can be simply taken over from tradition; instead, what might be capable of functioning or holding as such is what must be continually improvised or discovered anew by each artist in pursuit of their art. As Cavell remarks, in a formulation that Krauss likes to cite, though it is doubtful whether she fully grasps its significance: 'there are no longer

   25.   See Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 198–202.
   26.   What is entailed by calling artistic media 'conventional' in Cavell's sense, and how this is quite different from calling them '*merely* conventional' is the topic of section 3 of Costello, 'On the Very Idea of a "Specific" Artistic Medium', pp. 285–95.

known structures which must be followed if one is to speak and be under-stood. *The medium is to be discovered, or invented out of itself.*'[27] This, I take it, is what Krauss's various accounts of artists inventing their own medium are supposed to demonstrate, namely, what it might look like for artists to reinvent convention today. The difference between these accounts to which I am drawing attention here is that of the levels at which they oper-ate: whereas Cavell is laying down certain conditions that must be met for any work to count as an instance of a given medium under such artistic and historical circumstances, Krauss is describing various determinate ways of meeting those conditions.

But is there any reason to suppose that the two accounts may not be complementary, or, at least, compatible in this latter respect as well? That is, what precludes taking Krauss's reconstruction of Kentridge's working method as one way of empirically filling out Cavell's theory of how art forms develop once their established forms can no longer be taken for granted? That is, why not take Krauss's account of various artists' reinven-tion of the medium as *instances* of Cavell's account of the reinvention of convention? It is certainly presented this way. Thus, in her essay on Ken-tridge, Krauss approvingly cites the 'Automatism' chapter of *The World Viewed* to the effect that the specific challenge faced by the modern artist is not to create a new instance of their art as previously understood but, rather, to discover or invent a new medium or automatism within it—where a 'new medium or automatism within an artistic medium' is to be understood as a new way of securing value within its ongoing practice, in something like the way that the aria or sonata form, the historical tableaux or the nude, once functioned as such sources of value in the histories of music and painting.[28] Artists now have to invent their own automatisms because those they inherit from tradition can no longer be relied upon to secure their works' identities as art or its community with its audience, that has to be convened anew around the establishment of a new set of conven-tions.[29] To cite only examples with which Cavell would have been familiar: think of the drip, the pour, the sprayed or stained or cropped canvas in late modernist abstraction.[30] The way that Jackson Pollock's painting achieves its mature form by dispensing with part-by-part composition and tradi-

---

27. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', p. 221; my italics.
28. See Krauss, '"The Rock"', and Cavell, *The World Viewed*, chap. 14, especially pp. 103–7.
29. See Thierry de Duve's account of the establishing of new conventions as implicitly the establishment of a social pact with a new audience in 'Silences in the Doctrine', *Clement Greenberg between the Lines: Including a Debate with Clement Greenberg*, trans. Brian Holmes (Chicago, 2010), pp. 39–88.
30. See, for example, Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 108–18.

tional means of paint application, for example, might be thought to establish a new automatism *within* the medium of painting, as opposed to merely presenting new instances of painting as previously understood, in just this way.

This account clearly inspires Krauss's idea of artists inventing new media. But it is important to recognize the respects in which all claims to reinventing the medium are qualified in Cavell. It is not the medium per se that must be invented. Pollock does not invent the medium of painting; he reinvents the possibilities afforded by it. That is, he finds a means of making compelling paintings which, in advance of its demonstration, no one would have thought possible. Frank Stella similarly reinvents the possibilities afforded by painting in his early *Black Paintings* by showing how much can be removed from an object still capable of holding as painting. This, and not what Krauss takes him to mean, is what Cavell means when he says 'the medium is to be invented, or discovered out of itself.' That painting as a medium *already exists*, that it has a history of standing possibilities which one cannot know in advance of pursuing them are still effective, that it generates a certain set of expectations and norms that have to be worked within or against are essential to what Pollock and Stella can be taken to have achieved on Cavell's account and to what those achievements demonstrate about previously unrecognized possibilities afforded by painting as a medium.

Krauss's account, by contrast, turns on the idea that artists can invent *entirely new* media by discovering an appropriate set of conventions through which to articulate commercial apparatuses. It is doubtful that Krauss can get what she needs from Cavell for such an account, given that his own account is committed to the idea of artists extending-by-transforming existing artistic media through their ongoing prosecution rather than inventing new ones.[31] In

31.   Here one might be tempted to reply that nothing prevents the creation of new media or even new art forms from the transformation or crossbreeding of old ones. This seems right, and depending on how it is cashed out it may even prove consistent with Cavell's own account; but it is not a route that Krauss herself takes, preferring to start from artistic media created ex nihilo.

Neither Krauss nor Cavell marks a consistent distinction between an artistic medium and an art form—though there is reason to believe that the same art form, broadly construed, can be embodied in different media, and a single art form can employ a variety of media. But in some respects Krauss's account of artistic media created ex nihilo recalls Noël Carroll's idea of 'the self-consciously invented arts' more readily than it does Cavell's conception of an artistic medium. See, for example, his discussion of hybridisation and new technologies in Noël Carroll, 'Medium-Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography', *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 3–24. Unlike Krauss, however, by 'self-consciously invented arts' Carroll has in mind art forms, such as movies and photography, the invention of which can be clearly dated, unlike music and dance, and not artistic media invented ex nihilo by particular individuals and limited in principle to those

a certain frame of mind, one might be inclined to reply: so what? The fact that Cavell only defends the weaker claim—that artists can transform existing media over time—hardly shows his account to be incompatible with the stronger claim that artists might also invent new ones. Given that Cavell does not broach the latter question, such a response might run, we may take his account to be neutral on this point, at least in the absence of compelling reasons to do otherwise. Moreover, even *were* Krauss's account shown to be incompatible with Cavell's, that in itself would do little to invalidate Krauss's account in its own terms; it would merely show its claim to take inspiration from Cavell's to be unearned. That is, it would reduce to an exegetical rather than a substantive issue. But can any of this be right, given the commitments built into Cavell's account of transforming existing media?

Opting for the stronger claim leaves Krauss's account with various debts to discharge that Cavell's does not incur. The most obvious of which, given its difference from Cavell's, is what would count as success or failure in such newly invented media. That is, 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?[32] 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. But if nothing can count in this way, then one move is as good as another, and the very ideas of success and failure lose all purchase.[33] Indeed, the idea of something counting as a move *within* the relevant domain would also seem to fall away; for what could distinguish making work *within* the medium from doing something else? Granted, adjudicating any of this—success, failure, value, relevance—can only be a matter of critical judgement. But the question remains: what could one's judgement be based upon? This is not to ask what would determine it—

individuals. That said, certain aspects of Carroll's critique of the strategic role to which medium-specific arguments are put in elevating new technologies into bona fide art forms might be thought to bear on Krauss's essays in this area.

32. Again, one might be tempted to reply, no such problems need pertain to new artistic media if they are conceived 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.

33. Were one not committed to isolating the *specificity* of artistic media and practices grounded therein, one might appeal to transmedia standards of judgement to settle such questions. But that this option is not only abjured by Krauss but by the very idea of transmedia (that is, *generic*) standards is precisely what her whole series of essays on artists who have allegedly invented a medium with its own specificity sets its face against.

aesthetic judgement, as I conceive it, cannot be determined—but what would give it traction, say by providing a meaningful comparison class or theoretical background against which to judge.

Given that Cavell is committed to an evaluative, intrinsically honorific conception of art, at least under its modernist dispensation, such that to make something that holds up as art is already to have achieved something, already to have succeeded in some way, rather than merely to have done something, it is hard to see how Cavell could sign up to such a position. The most promising line of defence here would seem to be that new artistic media—if that is what they are—generate their own *internal* conditions of success and failure simply in virtue of their ongoing practice. What differentiates good artists from bad—think of Bruce Nauman's use of multiscreen video installations or Jeff Wall's use of the light-box—is that they mine the resources of their chosen medium with sufficient intensity to establish such standards internally (figs. 12–13).[34] Though promising, explaining how this is possible in noncircular terms remains to be made out; for how the medium *becomes* a medium in the first place is precisely what is at issue. Should it turn out that this cannot be done, redescribing what such artists are doing as modifying and thereby extending or transforming—even beyond recognition—existing media remains an open and compelling option. But it is not an option available to Krauss.

Setting to one side the question of whether Krauss can derive such an account from Cavell, I now want to consider several questions that Krauss's idea of reinventing the medium raises, taken purely on its own terms. Most obviously: can individual artists invent their own medium in the strong sense that Krauss's account requires?[35] That is, can a medium that *remains unique to an individual artist* still constitute a medium as

34. Krauss briefly considers Jeff Wall in these terms, before rejecting his practice for muddying the water between painting and photography; see 'AT', pp. 28–29. For my own take on this, see 'On the Very Idea of a "Specific" Medium'. It is hard to take Krauss's response to Wall at face value, in so far as it is hard to imagine a more self-reflexive artist, in terms of his chosen medium, than Jeff Wall. Wall's use of the light-box looks as if it should count, for Krauss, as a *paradigm* case of rendering an outmoded technical support expressive by means of conventions drawn, in Wall's case, from a range of pictorial genres (history painting, street photography, neorealist film, and so on). That Wall draws on a range of pictorial traditions does not entail—*pace* Krauss—that he *could not* be inventing a medium, in her terms, by doing so.

35. I am calling this a strong sense as there are much weaker conceptions of an artistic medium available in the philosophical literature. Dominic McIver Lopes, for example, suggests informally that 'a technology is an artistic medium for a work just in case its use in the display or making of the work is relevant to its appreciation' (Dominic McIver Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* [London, 2010], p. 15). Lopes gives a much more developed account of a medium in Lopes, *Beyond Art* (Oxford, 2013). For an overview of recent philosophical conceptions of artistic media, see David Davies, 'Medium in Art', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford, 2003), pp. 181–91.

F I G U R E 1 2 .   Bruce Nauman, *ANTHRO/SOCIO* (*Rinde Facing Camera*) (1991).

that idea is commonly understood? One may understand this question descriptively or modally. In the former sense it asks whether individual artists can invent media that, as things turn out, it so happens remain unique to those artists; no one, in fact, takes up their inventions, but things might have turned out differently. In the latter, much stronger sense, it asks whether individual artists can invent media that remain unique to them in principle—that is, that no other artist *could* ever work in.

Take these two senses in turn. Understood in the weaker sense, it seems to me that there is room for genuine disagreement here. Some will be inclined to say that, as long as others could, at least in principle, take it up, it's a bona fide medium. Others, myself included, will be inclined to respond that this significantly underplays the role that *publicity*—public norms, expectations, and standards of correctness—plays in constraining the relevant possibilities here.[36] A putative medium which is, even if only as

36. A subsidiary question would be, if the idea of inventing a medium can be made out, what constitutes successful as opposed to unsuccessful attempts to do so? That is, what would constitute trying—but failing—to invent a new medium? For if there are no conditions of failure, there can likewise be no conditions of success. To her credit, Krauss does address the latter question in the concrete case of the light-box, but her reasons for ruling Wall out remain unpersuasive, and she says little about the broader conceptual issues.

FIGURE 13.   Installation view of Jeff Wall exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2007. Left to right: *In Front of a Night Club* (2006), *Basin in Rome 1*, *Basin in Rome 2* (all transparencies in light-boxes). Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

a matter of fact, practiced by a lone artist arguably does not yet *function* as a medium properly so-called; in advance of accruing public standards of success and failure in virtue of being shared by a community of users, the jury remains out as to whether it might one day *become* one.

At this point, the defender of the idea that media can remain unique to an individual artist may be inclined to distinguish between *exponents* and *appreciators* within a community of users. On my account, being in a medium, however it is construed, requires being open to its appreciators' criticism—and so too on Cavell's. But this may seem to allow that the achievements of Pollock or Stella—the new media within the medium of painting which they are said to have discovered on Cavell's account—could remain unique to them, *as long as* they nonetheless remain amenable to informed criticism by a community of appreciators who recognize and value them. This is a nuanced response. But it depends heavily on how remaining 'amenable to informed criticism by a community of appreciators'—other artists included—is understood, and what it is thought to entail as a result.

Though Pollock's and Stella's achievements do not look like the sort of thing that could simply be aped by other artists who wish to make equally compelling work, what they show to be possible, but previously unrecognized, about painting must be taken up by other artists in order to secure

their work's standing as painting and their claim to have discovered a new media *within the medium of painting*. Indeed what they show to be possible, but previously unrecognized, about painting is in large part a *product* of how their example is taken up by other artists. Rauschenberg's 'flat-bed' picture construction, for example, might be regarded as one way of incorporating Pollock's revolutionary way of making paintings—by constructing his pictures as if they were horizontal surfaces on which objects accumulate, only subsequently rotated to the wall for viewing. Stella's *Black Paintings* themselves might be seen as learning productively from Pollock's rejection of part-by-part composition, albeit mediated by the intervening example of Jasper Johns's equally distinctive early work. In neither case are such artists simply mimicking their precursors, yet both incorporate enough of their precursors' example that their own work would be hard to imagine absent that example. Indeed, one might wish to insist on this, on Kantian grounds, as precisely what secures the earlier works' exemplarity *as painting* and thereby saves it from reducing to nonsense, albeit 'original nonsense,' a form of artistic solipsism analogous to fantasies of a private language.[37]

Given that I am inclined to contest even the weaker version of the thesis that media can remain unique to an individual artist and still be understood as instances of a medium as the term is commonly understood, I am committed in advance to contesting the stronger version: if the notion of a medium *is* intrinsically public, the stronger proposal *cannot* pick out a medium. Indeed, even proponents of the weaker version may hesitate to endorse the stronger claim. On the rare occasions that Krauss addresses such questions head-on, her account becomes noticeably more equivocal. At the outset of her essay on Coleman, itself the first in her series on reinventing the medium, Krauss initially seems to flatly deny that artists invent media after all:

> Artists do not, of course, invent mediums. Carving, painting, drawing were all in full flower before there was any socially distinguishable group to call itself artists. But mediums then individualize their practice; they intensify the skills associated with them; and, importantly, they acquire histories. For centuries it was only within and against the tradition encoded by a medium that innovation could be measured, just as it was in relation to its reservoir of meanings that new ranges of feeling could be tested. ['AT', p. 5][38]

37. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), §46, pp. 174–75.
38. Although this remark would seem bizarre if taken to mean *artists* (in general, under any

At least, this is how it was, even if it is no longer: 'surrounded every-where by media, which is to say by the technologically relayed image, the aesthetic option of the *medium* has been declared outmoded, cashiered, washed-up' ('AT', p. 5). In effect Krauss agrees with Cavell's diagnosis, but not with his prognosis. On Cavell's account artists in response have to seek out new ways of securing value *within* their medium, that is, new ways of using its resources and thereby extending-by-transforming the tradition they inherit. On Krauss's account, artists must turn to new forms of sup-port altogether to generate new sources of specifically artistic value. Krauss acknowledges the extreme difficulty that inventing a new medium in-volves, akin, she suggests, to trying to invent a new language. The compar-ison with natural languages is instructive; though a number of nonformal languages have in fact been invented from scratch (think of Esperanto), natural languages are not the sort of phenomena one typically thinks of being constructed from the ground up. On the contrary, artistic media, the analogy with natural languages suggests, are far more likely—as a matter of historical fact—to emerge through a process of gradual accretion, revision, translation, and cross-fertilisation. Though the fact that this is unlikely clearly does not rule out the possibility of constructing a language, and the same is true of artistic media.

Nonetheless, artistic media do come, if not with a formal grammar or established syntax, at least with canons that establish competent use. And that they do is important because it speaks to the public constraints built into the idea of employing an artistic medium. In this respect, artistic media are necessarily nonprivate phenomena; they have public, if con-tested, standards of correctness. That is, they have ways of going on, and failing to go on, that can be *meaningfully* debated, even if these can shift over time, such that what counts as successfully going on today could not have so counted yesterday and may not so count tomorrow. Media in-vented ex nihilo, by contrast, have no established aesthetic lineage to build upon that would be capable of dignifying some extensions, but not others, as meaningful. In Krauss's words: 'each is so singular as a support that to adopt it as a medium is immediately to put a kind of aesthetic patent on it. *Each thus functions as the paradox of a "medium" that can only be practiced by one*' ('AT', p. 8; my italics).

Here Krauss unequivocally comes down on the stronger, modal version of the claim; and here one needs to ask: is the 'paradox' of a medium that

---

and all circumstances) do not invent media, which would preclude the invention of new media altogether and is clearly too strong, I take it that Krauss has in mind *individual artists* here.

'can only be practiced by one' an idea that one can really make any sense of? Isn't the idea of a medium that *could* only be practiced by one incompatible with the background requirements on telling meaningful innovation from arbitrary or nonsensical extensions? Practiced only by one, what basis could we have on which to judge this? And if we can have no basis on which to judge this, what renders the practice intelligible to others? By analogy to Ludwig Wittgenstein's charge against the would-be private linguist, isn't whatever *seems* right to the artist in question going to *be* right?[39] That is, what is to stop whatever seems correct to the practitioner from being correct, there being no publicly available standards of correctness, no norms of established use, no traditions of debating the value of, or even contravening, standard use to judge against? And if that's right, there is nothing to prevent whatever an artist *says* constitutes a work in a medium from constituting such a work, simply in virtue of his or her saying so. But this is incompatible with the kind of debate that has, in fact, greeted challenging new art historically. By leaving no room for such debate, Krauss's conception of a medium makes a mystery of our actual cultural practices.

4. Coda: Ed Ruscha

The problem I am getting at can be seen clearly in a tension within Krauss's own account of Ed Ruscha, and I will conclude with some remarks about this. As a painter, on Krauss's account, Ruscha emerges, entirely plausibly, as an artist obsessed with the medium in a literal sense of that term; he has used a bewildering array of nontraditional media for suspending pigment, arguably to mock the heroic pretensions of high abstract painting. Similarly, his series *Stains* utilizes iodine, oil, chocolate syrup, egg yolks, axle grease, caviar, and chutney, among many others, rather than linseed and turpentine, as media for suspending colour (fig. 14). By contrast, Krauss claims that Ruscha, as the creator of a series of little photographic books—*Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *34 Parking Lots*, *All the Buildings on Sunset Strip*, and so on—is not debunking the pretensions of art photography by creating proto-conceptual exercises in deskilling as much as exploring the mass-produced automobile as an artistic medium

---

39. A proper examination of the relation of my argument against Krauss on what might be called private artistic media to Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a 'private language' and his earlier remarks on 'rule-following' is beyond the scope of this paper, and the literature on this material is huge. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953), §§ 243–315, §§ 134–242. I take myself to be doing no more than laying down a marker for further work here. My arguments against Krauss are intended to stand independently.
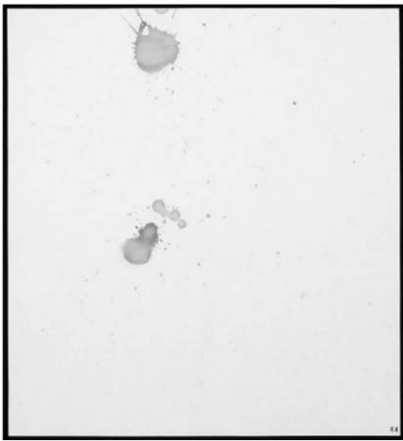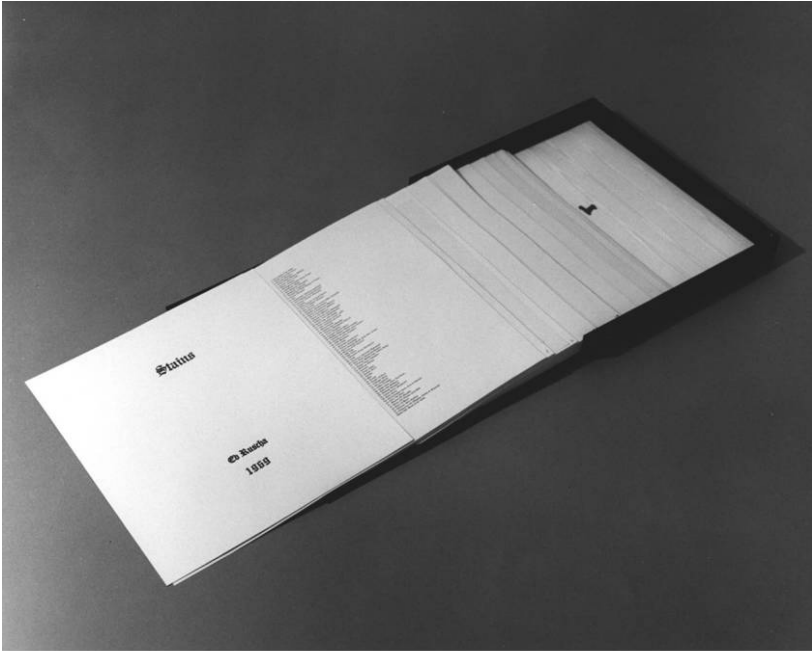
FIGURE 14a. Ed Ruscha, *Stains* (1969). Portfolio of seventy-five mixed-media stains and one stain on the inside cover of the box. Each sheet: 11 7/8" × 10 3/4". Self-published by Heavy Industry Publications, Hollywood. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

FIGURE 14b. Ed Ruscha, *Stains* (1969). Detail: *Worcestershire Sauce (Lea & Perrins)*. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

FIGURE 14c. Ed Ruscha, *Stains* (1969). Detail. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

(figs. 15a–15b).⁴⁰ This is a novel claim, and Krauss is not insensitive to its counter-intuitiveness. Her remarks merit quoting at length:

> If the car can become a medium, then anything might be pressed into such service. It only needs the set of rules that will open onto the possibility of artistic practice. . . . The very idea of the artist's invention of a medium, and thus his or her authoring a set of rules, will undoubtedly make us nervous. A medium is, after all, a shared language developed over centuries of practice so that no individual initiative, we would think, can either organize new sources of its meaning or change established ones. It is as though we were imagining the artist as playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally. Ruscha's inventions are arbitrary, but not as eccentric as the one just mentioned. His *Stains* exult in the exoticism of his choices, but the very term "stains" pays homage to the recent history of painting in which staining provided what was felt to be a necessary alternative to drawing, such that from Pollock to Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, laying down a stain was a way of avoiding the violence of a hardened contour.

40.   What is interesting about Krauss's account of this stretch of Ruscha's work, leaving aside the plausibility of whether the automobile is indeed Ruscha's medium, is her account of how the conventions that animate his exploration of his medium, if that is what it is, emerge naturally from its nature. According to Krauss, the number of gas stations in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* refers to the number of refills required between Oklahoma and California and in this sense grows naturally out of interacting in true modernist spirit with the capacities and limitations of a particular support, if not with the limitations and capacities of a sanctioned artistic medium. Thus there is an internal relation between technical support and the conventions through which it is animated. In Krauss's words, 'the source of the "rules" comes from within the support' (Krauss, '"Specific" Objects', *Perpetual Inventory*, p. 50). To say this is contentious as an account of how this book originated would be an understatement; Ruscha has always claimed that the rule came first as a kind of arbitrary instruction that was then carried out: 'When I set out to make that book, I had this fixation in my mind, through blind faith, that the title was going to be *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Don't ask me why. . . . I just felt like: this sounds good to me. Twenty-five doesn't sound good, twenty-seven doesn't sound good, it's twenty-six. And so I followed that as a guideline as I took these photographs on trips between LA and Oklahoma' (Ed Ruscha, "Nostalgia and New Editions," interview by Sylvia Wolf, in *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, ed. Wolf [exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 24 June–26 Sept. 2004], p. 263). For more on the performative, rule-following dimension of Ruscha's practice, see Margaret Iversen, 'Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography', *Art History* 32 (Dec. 2009): 836–51.
    Setting aside the accuracy of Krauss's account, it is nonetheless instructive for what it tells us about how *Krauss* conceives the relation between a technical support and a set of rules or conventions for animating it. Like erasure in Kentridge, dissolves in Coleman, or stains in Ruscha, the medium is a 'supporting structure, *generative* of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly "specific" to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity.' That is, a self-reflexive experience. See Krauss, '*A Voyage on the North Sea'*, p. 26; my italics.

SELF SERVICE, MILAN, NEW MEXICO
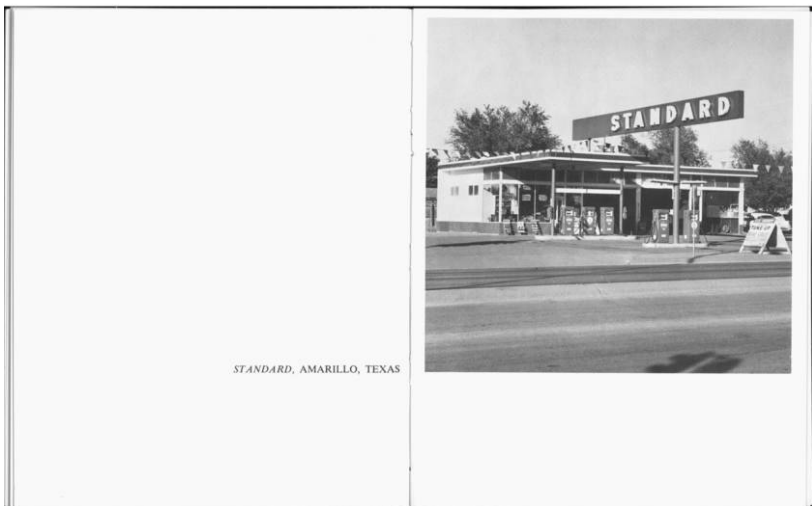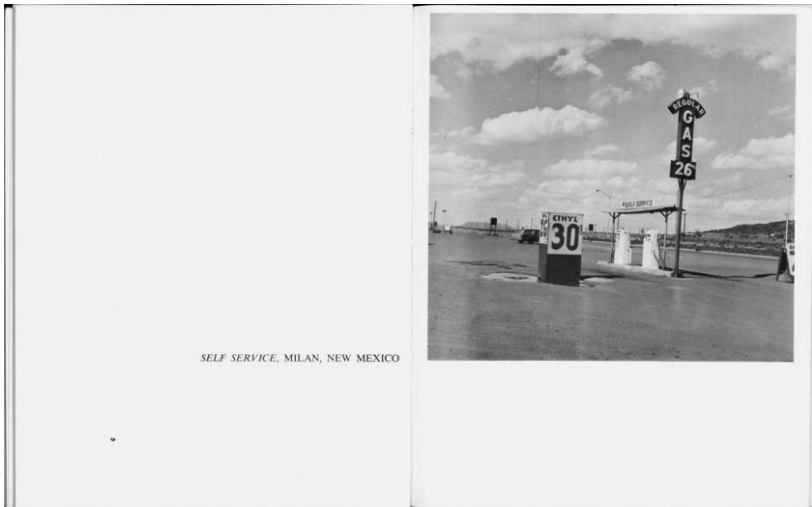
STANDARD, AMARILLO, TEXAS

FIGURE 15a. Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). Black offset lithography printing on white paper. 7 1/16" × 5 9/16." Unpaginated (forty-eight pages), twenty-six black-and-white photographs. Self-published as 'A National Excelsior Publication'. Printed by Cunningham Press, Alhambra, California. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

FIGURE 15b. Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations.* © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

> *The rules for "stains" are thus "invented" within the context of a set of*
> *principles for abstract painting; these principles are presupposed for the*
> *possibility and pertinence of the invention of the rules themselves.*[41]

Krauss is surely right about the *necessary relation* between Ruscha's *Stains* and a historical background of late abstract painting, regardless of whether she is right that they are intended as homage.[42] But the success of Krauss's account of Ruscha's *Stains* only serves to highlight the problems with her account of his books. *Stains* makes sense precisely because it *can* be indexed to a background of staining, pouring, and the like in high modernist abstraction (Pollock, Frankenthaler, Louis, and others) which it arguably lampoons. Theoretically, at least, this could be made sense of in Cavellian terms as an extension of, or perhaps even the invention of a new automatism within, abstract painting. Of course, one can hardly imagine Cavell endorsing this view of Ruscha's achievement, given the latter's deadpan sensibility and the former's commitment to modernist seriousness, but I take that to be a matter of criticism, not theory. But what equivalent background is there to make sense of the automobile as vehicle of artistic meaning, relative to which does doing *x* rather than *y* with a car make sense or hold up as art? It is, as Krauss herself suggests, 'as though we were imagining the artist as playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally.' One could not ask for a more elegant description of the problem: if the norms (or conventions or rules) are determined by the artist alone, then whatever the artist claims constitutes a legitimate move will thereby constitute such a move.

Such difficulties are created by a constant slippage in Krauss's account between what Cavell would call the medium and what he would call media *within* the medium. In Cavell's terms, individuals can create media within a medium but rarely—if at all—can they invent the medium itself. This is much more contentious. Certainly, I have argued, artists cannot invent media that *can* only be practiced by themselves, while remaining artistic media properly so called. Rather, on the line of thought I am proposing, artistic media come into focus gradually, and largely retrospectively, as the collective weight of a history of artistic trial and error gathers force. Ini-

---

41. Krauss, '"Specific" Objects', p. 51; my italics.
42. *Stains* strikes me as much more plausibly the kind of deflationary gesture that can be understood in terms of Krauss's own earlier account of the *l'informé* as an act of desublimation, in this case bringing high modernism down to the level of axle grease, much as Warhol's oxidation paintings reduced Pollock's drip technique to the level of pissing. See Yve-Alain Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York, 1997). But this is a critical not a theoretical difference, and nothing of relevance to my theoretical differences with Krauss follows from it.

tially 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.