ONE

Sick of Purity

In October and November 1970 you could have traced a respectable history of the American avant-garde by going from museum to gallery to museum in New York. Had you wanted, you could have progressed from the glory days of the Alfred Stieglitz circle to Abstract Expressionism and on to Pop. You could have then proceeded to Minimalism and Postminimalism and ended with the most contemporary of movements, site-specific Earthworks. Your tour would have taken you from Georgia O'Keeffe (at the Whitney) to Jane Freilicher and Red Grooms (at Myers), Robert Mangold and Alex Katz (at Fischbach), Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist (at Castelli), Lucas Samaras (at Pace), Larry Poons (at Rubin), Brice Marden (at Bykert), Carl Andre (at the Guggenheim), and, finally, Richard Long (at Dwan). It is not too much to say that the previous fifty years of art all were on view somewhere in the city that fall.

According to Charlotte Lichtblau's survey of the exhibitions then on view in New York, the sheer availability of modernism

gave contemporary artists enormous license. Artists could begin anywhere. Every revolutionary break with the past, she said, had been shown to be "yet another link in the chain of tradition." As the logic of artistic schools and movements had played itself out, it was "up to the individual artist to find his own place."[1] Everything, it seems, was up for grabs.

Against this background we can begin to understand what Philip Guston was up to when he returned to New York that fall to mount an exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery. The show, which featured figurative paintings completely unlike the earlier abstractions that had made him a respected member of the New York School, was his first in four years. The works featured the blocky shapes and open brushwork that had marked Guston's abstract paintings of the early 1960s. Now, however, the blocks had become people and things. They turned into boxy cars, Krazy Kat mesas, and, most important, human figures that Guston called "Hoods" (plate 1).

The size of the works lent them both Abstract Expressionism's sublime heroism and some of the mock heroics of Pop art. The heavy black outlines reminded a number of critics of cartoons.[2] And, of course, they do evoke the comics. But the comic strips to which they refer, whether *Krazy Kat*, *L'il Abner*, or *Mutt and Jeff*, differ from the straight-edge comic books of the 1940s and 1950s favored by Roy Lichtenstein. Guston's figures are the very antithesis of slick industrial draftsmanship and mass reproduction. Their clunkiness stands as a blunt reminder of their status as freehand drawings.

At first glance *City Limits* (1969; plate 1) has little to do with Guston's shimmery abstractions of the 1950s. But as Frank O'Hara noted in 1962, Guston had taken an idiosyncratic path to Abstract

Expression. According to O'Hara, Guston had been led by the cockeyed landscapes of Surrealism and not the flatness of Cubism. Hence his abstract paintings, with their "hierarchical attitude toward form," preserved the distinction between foreground and background that belonged to the history of figuration.[3] He had always been influenced by Max Ernst and the Pablo Picasso of the 1920s, and his later works owed much to Giorgio de Chirico and Max Beckmann.[4] Guston's works imagined another history of modernism—not the one that prevailed in New York in the 1950s and 1960s.

O'Hara wrote that particular impulses and interests had brought Guston to abstraction after World War II. Similarly particular impulses and interests brought him back to figuration at the end of the 1960s. A decade earlier Guston had rejected the abstractionist credo that contemporary art was self-contained and therefore self-referential. In an irritated response to Ad Reinhardt at the "Philadelphia Panel" in 1960, Guston said that there was "something ridiculous and miserly" in the myth that painting was "pure and for itself." Art, according to Guston, was by definition impure and its history was determined by "adjustment of 'impurities.' "[5] Guston was attacking Reinhardt's fierce defense of the notion that art is about its medium, that it guards its boundaries by ignoring what lies outside. While Guston seemed to agree with Clement Greenberg that the history of art was continuous and not a series of absolute breaks, Guston rejected the idea that this history consisted of the progressive elimination of conventions (illusion, perspective, and the like), as Greenberg had argued. Rather, Guston said that adjusting the conventions was the very stuff of art history.

Guston discussed his understanding of "painting's continuities"

in his 1965 article "Faith, Hope and Impossibility." He maintained they were the product of learning over and over again that creation is merely momentary. While it serves as "both the lie and the mask of art," it also mortifies art. Artistic creation maintains art's illusions and serves to critique those illusions. This difficult double play makes up the continuity of art.[6] Aesthetic traditions are never definitively discarded. In order for there to be any art at all, conventions must be continuously undone and rethought. Art's history is really a narrative of the way that single works engage and negate conventions. Single works and not schools or movements. Grand narratives about art did not interest Guston. He wanted to concentrate on the way that every painting justified itself. He felt that there were enough paintings in the world. Every painting had to justify itself, had to "eliminate the air of the arbitrary as completely as possible."[7] Every painting had to prove that its necessity lay in its relation to truth and to the objects of this world.

Guston expressed this view most clearly in a dense, counterintuitive article from the spring of 1965 in which he read the enigmas of Piero della Francesca's Arezzo cycle as the expression of anxiety about where things "can be located," and, more important, he asked, "in what condition can everything exist?" Guston suggested that painting's legitimacy rests on its ability to find where and how things *should* be located in pictorial space. But an individual painting may fall short and present an image—the spatial interrelation of object and people—that ultimately fails to show where everything *really* belongs. And that is where the problem lies. The painter risks freezing things while they are still on the move, that is, before the image reaches its proper disposition. *The Baptism of Christ* displays the double bind that confronts every

painter who tries to get it right and therefore risks getting it permanently wrong. Guston claimed that Piero's painting is not marked by its apparent hieratic calm. It is, instead, "a vast precaution to avoid immobility, a wisdom that can include the partial doubt about the final destiny of forms."[8]

Five months after the Piero essay, Guston claimed that the painter is confronted with the problem of "fixing" a tolerable image. *Fixing* is an ambiguous word. It can mean securing something or repairing it. For Guston, though, the two meanings blended into one, for nailing a thing to its correct place is to repair it. So the artist must decide "what can be where," he said. Personal desire cannot enter the decision because the final state of the world has nothing to do with the painter's emotions or desires. A painting depicts a necessary reality. Desire, on the other hand, is incomplete and arbitrary.[9]

Art, then, was about the process of discovering a truthful image through the act of painting. The painter does not know beforehand what the image will actually look like in the end. This cloud of unknowing is the condition of modern painting. Guston maintained that during the Renaissance the artist and audience shared a "foreknowledge of what was going to be brought into existence." Drawing on Richard Wollheim's article "Minimal Art," which had appeared a short time earlier, Guston called that foreknowledge "pre-imaging." He argued that we can no longer "act as if pre-imaging is possible."[10] The common rules and conventions that made up the "pre-image" had disappeared.

In the Piero essay the problem of the image was the transhistorical problem of painting. Barely half a year later Guston had changed his diagnosis. The anxiety surrounding the image was

historical and described the peculiar fate of modernism. The artist no longer had the benefit of a shared sense of where objects should actually be. No longer could the painter imagine a point from which perspective could capture the final destiny of things. Hence the contemporary painter not only confronted the continual danger of error but was also the victim of the depletion of certainty. Guston had already spoken of this depletion in the late 1950s: "I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image and symbol in our time should be celebrated as a freedom. It is a loss from which we suffer."[11] Abstraction was not the formal emancipation of painting from contingent conventions. Rather, it acknowledged the historical impoverishment of art.

New Place (1964; plate 2) is a good example of what Guston meant when he wrote that the task of painting is to locate things in their proper places. Like most of Guston's paintings of this period, it takes the stages of its own composition as its subject. The margins of the canvas are unpainted, and the broad thick application allows the pink underpainting to show through. White paint cancels black brushstrokes, leaving ghostly traces of gray along an equally ghostly vertical and horizontal lattice. (Guston referred to his technique as "erasure.")[12] Diagonals and the occasional curve disrupt right angles. Shadows of black shapes lower, especially to the viewer's right in the bottom third of the painting. Three unequal masses—one that is roughly square and two that are more oblong—have broken through the gray. To be more accurate, they *remain.* They lurk toward the middle of the canvas. Their interrelation is tense, as is their ambiguous emergence from their background.

At this stage of his career Guston's paintings tended to build

from the edges. This allowed him to signal the way that the revisions had produced the painting's image over time. Despite their insistent mass, the apparitions in his works are ambiguously uneven because their exact contours are always unclear. In this way their relationship to each other is also tenuous, because it is time bound and contingent. The image is nothing less than the drama and uncertainty of its coming into focus. It displays Guston's effort to avoid immobility.

Guston published "Faith, Hope and Impossibility" in 1965, the year after he painted *New Place*. Together they displayed an existential, even moral, urgency. Nevertheless, after Guston showed at the Jewish Museum in 1966, he was unable to paint for another two years. Between 1965 and 1966 the imperatives that had driven Guston's abstract work disappeared.

Even if Guston had not been the most financially successful member of the New York School, he had always been well respected. He had exhibited regularly and had won prestigious awards. He had been granted the very first one-man show at the Guggenheim Museum in 1962. But the world had changed. Critics generally ignored Guston's 1966 exhibition at the Jewish Museum. Barry Schwabsky has speculated that the lack of critical attention made Guston realize that he had "somehow been exiled to the margins of a historical process of which [he] had once been at the center."[13] And indeed the defensiveness of Sam Hunter's catalogue essay for the Jewish Museum betrayed a real fear that Guston's work, because it was abstract and painterly, was no longer relevant. "The obsession of fashion with novelty," Hunter wrote, "makes us impatient with known personalities and styles, often on grounds of familiarity alone."[14] Guston was familiar, and Abstract Expressionism, which had justified itself in terms of its nov-

elty and its definitive breaks with the past, had receded into that past. Hunter appealed to the "finer nuance" of Guston's work, but even that smacked of an old-fashioned connoisseurship.

At fifty-three Guston had become a stolid representative of "older art." But Hunter also indicated that Guston had painted himself into a corner. Guston had become fixated on a "limited ensemble of forms" and exhibited a "restricted range of expressive handling." Because the painter was "dominated by a single idea," he "flirted with monotony." His works "provide . . . little relief in the way of possible change." While Hunter tried to argue that Guston's apparent weaknesses derived from a singleness of vision, the critic was reflecting the reality of Guston's situation. The art audience of New York had become used to novelty, and Guston was stuck. He kept trying to solve an insoluble problem in a limited number of ways.[15] So even the catalogue essay for his own show conceded that Guston had reached an impasse. Guston retreated to Woodstock, New York, in 1966, and we can read this retreat as a pained acknowledgment of his predicament. Once removed to the countryside, Guston rethought and reworked his painting, as he had in 1948—by returning to its origins in drawing. In 1968 he started painting again.

So what *is* going on in the "new Gustons"? The differences between *New Place* and *City Limits* (probably the most famous painting in the Marlborough show in 1970) are as great as the similarities, and we have to ask how we can explain the transition from the claustrophobic narratives of the former to the great pink outdoors of the latter. The inherited language of formalism can help here. Guston's work between 1968 and 1970 attempted to bring his "homeless representation" (the expression is Greenberg's) back home. To understand what this might mean, we have

to return to the unbearable tension Greenberg saw in "painterly" abstraction.

Greenberg borrowed the term *painterly* from the art historian Heinrich Wöllflin. The linear (which is both a style and an orientation) stresses static outlines and the physical limits of isolated objects. The painterly, on the other hand, emphasizes the flux of appearances and blurs outlines.[16] The two approaches represent "radically different interests in the world." The linear emphasizes solid figures and finite forms. The painterly investigates forms in action.[17] Guston's paintings in the Jewish Museum show attempted to square the circle between the linear (with its attempt to catch things as they truly are) and the painterly (with its subjection to time and contingency). They approached the linear through painterly means. The consciousness that this task was, by definition, impossible led to the pathos of "Faith, Hope and Impossibility" and the Piero essay. In such a light Guston's return to drawing after 1966 makes perfect sense. His works are linear in an uncomplicated way. They construct images from the outlines of objects, rather than from the inside, through erasure.

This formalist account of Guston's shift has some interesting implications. Guston's abstractions of the early and the middle 1960s were meant to serve as diagrams of the spatial relations between ultimately indeterminate objects. These paintings meditated on *where* things should be, but, given the paintings' limited repertoire of rectangular shapes, they did not worry so much about *what* those things might be. Their compositions acknowledged the temporal processes of their creation by highlighting the ambiguities that erasure produced. When Guston returned to figuration—as in *City Limits*—he did not mark the instability of his images this way. Instead, he resorted to other techniques,

which rendered his work more "literary," that is, more reliant on language and temporal succession.

In an interview before the Marlborough show in 1970, Guston said that painting revealed the elasticity of forms. He could begin painting a shoe, and its sole could turn into the moon. He might start painting the moon, and it would turn into a piece of bread.[18] Guston's earlier fascination with the passage of images through time and space had given way to the Surrealist practice of visual puns. After 1968 it becomes hard to decide just what you are looking at but in a different way than in *New Place*. In one of his poetic responses to Guston's work, Clark Coolidge played up the semantic ambiguity of this strategy: "A book like a brick loaf. How to/read it?"[19] Three interpretations of the same object: book, brick, and loaf. Two different interpretations of Coolidge's lines: Is he asking how we read the book or how we read the image? Of course, he is asking both at the same time and reenacts in words what Guston enacts in his work. Guston's books did look like bricks, his buildings like books, and his heads like coffee cups.[20]

Sometimes the pun is carried out verbally as well as visually. In *Paw* (1968) a heavily shadowed and hairy hand, a lighter pink against an even more luxuriously pink background, draws a line with what looks like a stick. It might not be a stick, though. It could just as easily (and even more credibly) be a pencil, pen, quill, or brush. The line it sketches might also be nothing more than the shadow that the hand and wrist cast on the ground. The title of the painting points to both the demotic ("Get your paws offa me!") and the evolutionary. What Guston painted here is not clear. It could be a sophisticated primate, an artist, or a thug. Perhaps it is all these at once.

A similar play with semantic indeterminacy can be seen in *Cher-*

ries (1976). These cherries, portrayed in an ungainly lineup that resembles the apostles at the Last Supper, look like a bomb in a cartoon. The painting really depicts cherry bombs. It is a rebus and a rather silly one at that. Like the old Gestalt drawing of the duck that is also a rabbit, Guston's visual puns unfold in a temporal succession that never quite comes to an end because only one aspect is perceptible at any one time. Whereas Guston had previously represented the temporal process of discovering images by giving his lowering objects rather ambiguous contours, he now shifted the onus of this process to the spectator.[21]

The paintings of the Jewish Museum show of 1966 tried to achieve the linear through painterly means, and the works of the 1970 show approached the painterly through linear means. This schematization, though, does not do credit to the way that Guston worked through the tension between the painterly and the linear by pushing each to an extreme. Guston wanted to show stasis and flux, isolated object and the relation between objects. To play with Greenberg's terminology: the Marlborough works were "postlinear representations." Guston's cross-pollination of the painterly and the linear was a hybrid of his own brand of Abstract Expressionism and his own idiosyncratic understanding of Pop. While Guston rejected the purity and exclusiveness that he associated with the New York School, he could not accept the deskilling of the painter's task that he saw in Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art. He could not accept their elevation of the artist's "preexecutive" decisions—those decisions that come before the creation of the work of art—at the expense of traditional craft.

Guston's works of the late sixties and seventies register his complex response to Pop and represent his attempt to effect a rap-

prochement between painterly touch and Pop's "impurities." Elaine de Kooning remembered Guston saying, "Oh, Warhol, he's like giving a Jewish kid a hot pork sandwich on the day of his bar mitzvah."[22] Guston, who was never averse to repeating a good line, used it slightly differently on Thomas Hess. In a 1974 review Hess noted Guston's "comically intense hate-love for the blunt ironic realism of Pop Art" and mentioned how Guston had likened all Pop art (not just Warhol's) to feasting on pork after a Yom Kippur service.[23]

If Guston, a nonobservant Jew, could imagine Pop as a temptingly forbidden ham sandwich or a pork banquet, it was not because he was fascinated by Pop's subject matter. Dore Ashton reports that Guston ended a diatribe against the Pop artists by saying, "What they paint about just doesn't interest me."[24] At no point in his later work does Guston seem at all seduced by the Pop tendency to reproduce mass-produced cultural signs or to represent media representations. Nor is he interested in the industrial methods (silkscreens, airbrushes, and so on) used by the Pop artists. His thick application of paint and his emphasis on brushwork signal his difference from Pop.

Guston did not want to give up the painterly brushstroke. This mark of the craftsman's hand was, of course, a heavily burdened and burdensome aspect of Abstract Expressionism. It was easily parodied and thus called into question, but in its time it had stood as the last vestige of unalienated labor. Guston's friend Meyer Schapiro defended abstraction in the late 1950s. He argued that because paintings and sculptures were the last handmade objects, they constituted, "more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling."[25] In a world that seemed

overwhelmed by mass production, the brushstroke, the application of paint, the trace of the painter's movement all showed that Abstract Expressionism was the last refuge of authentic unexploited personal expression. Guston was still voicing this opinion in 1966, when he asked whether it was still possible to create in America. Art, he said, was "the only thing left in our industrial society where an individual alone can make something with not just his own hands, but brains, imagination, heart maybe."[26] Guston's daughter, Musa Mayer, remembers that in the mid-1960s Guston despaired "over the selling of art, over the slick depersonalized gloss—not only of pop art, but of minimalism as well—that was taking center stage in New York." Art was no longer about struggle. It had become marketing.[27] As Benjamin Buchloh has noted, by the time Guston expressed his despair, the primacy of the studio "had been irreversibly replaced by an aesthetic of production and consumption."[28]

Guston mistrusted the art of the mid-1960s because he disliked the implications of the depersonalized industrial sheen of its surfaces, the absence of the artist's trace. He also disliked the emphasis on choice, not creation, that seemed to animate so much avant-garde work of the period. Guston could not stomach what Brian O'Doherty in 1964 called the avant-garde's modish "total abnegation of the self." O'Doherty's account shows how far things had come in the seven years that separated his article from Schapiro's. Vanguard art, O'Doherty wrote, had become "antispontaneous, its motifs logical, measurable, reproducible." The artist as artist had come to be ignored as "presumably unimportant."[29] In the face of all this Guston's paintings maintained the distinction between the handmade, personally expressive work and the anonymity of the mass product. When Guston summoned

comics to his aid, he called up the visually distinctive, thematically quirky older strips of the teens, twenties, and thirties.

Guston's Marlborough show should have made perfect sense to its viewers and to the critics. After all, it showed precisely the air of independence that Charlotte Lichtblau saw in the New York art scene in the fall of 1970. But not everyone shared Lichtblau's sense that, for the first time in the twentieth century, artists were free to choose, that they were not governed by the imperatives of school and movement. While some critics—most notably Lawrence Alloway in the *Nation*—wrote favorably of the Marlborough show, some other very prominent ones did not. And, evidently, the opening night of the Marlborough show was unpleasant. One colleague from the 1950s reportedly asked Guston, "Why did you have to go and ruin everything?" Guston's wife, Musa McKim, noted in her diary that "P. said Lee Krasner hadn't spoken to him at the gallery; had told someone that the work was embarrassing."[30] More telling, and personally more devastating, Guston's long friendship with Morton Feldman ended in an instant. Guston asked the composer what he thought of a picture, and Feldman said, "Well, let me just look at it another minute." And that was that. Looking back, Feldman wrote that it was "extremely sad that we broke up because of style." In October 1970 Feldman could not get beyond the high modernist valorization of abstraction.[31] The Marlborough show must have seemed to him like an inexplicable regression, if not an outright betrayal.[32]

The three most visible reviews were negative. For all their differences Hilton Kramer, the furious scold of the *New York Times;* Robert Hughes, critic for the middlebrow journal *Time;* and Robert Pincus-Witten, writing for the leading art magazine of the time, *Artforum*, all agreed that something was distinctly wrong

with Guston's show, although they disagreed about what that something actually was.

In an acidly personal attack on Guston, Kramer double-damned the artist for being both ingratiating and behind the times. No doubt referring to Guston's relatively late conversion to abstraction, Kramer accused the painter of having capitalized on other people's risks and revolutions, for being "one of those painters fated to serve a taste instead of creating one." But this time around Guston had gotten it wrong. The taste he was serving had already run its course. Claiming that Guston had now adopted the guise of "an urban primitive," Kramer argued that no one had been taken in by this ruse, except perhaps Guston himself, "who is so out-of-touch with contemporary realities that he still harbors the illusion his 'act' will not be recognized as such." In the end Kramer indicted Guston on four counts. His work was insincere and out of date. It aimed to please, and—worst of all—it failed to please.[33]

Less vitriolic (but no less critical), Robert Hughes's review in *Time* agreed that Guston's work suffered from anachronism. But Hughes felt that its intent, not its style, was outmoded. Hughes argued that it was "a little late in the century to mount an entire exhibition of the Ku Klux Klan." The Klan, Hughes maintained, was no longer a real force in American politics. More to the point, though, the show made it look as if Guston had "flipped back" to the late 1930s, "those remote days when it was still believed that political comment could give art relevance."[34] Like Kramer, Hughes double-damned the paintings. Guston had devoted the show to an irrelevant subject (a point that, for Harold Rosenberg, counted in Guston's favor).[35] What is more, Hughes wrote that painting had become "a clumsy way of reporting a society as turbulent and racked as this." Guston's paintings might be "sump-

tuously painted" and "occasionally moving," but they were "as simple-minded" as the bigotry they attacked.[36] Hughes was kinder to Guston than Kramer. The *Time* critic did not accuse the artist of smarmy insincerity. Rather, he wrote Guston off as a nostalgist.

In the most insightful of the negative reviews, Robert Pincus-Witten argued that Guston's subject matter was really secondary and that Guston was chiefly interested in solving outmoded compositional problems. The nostalgia that Guston seemed to express for old comic strips—particularly for Bill Holman's *Smokey Stover*—was "still about sensitive patches and Abstract Expressionist all-over." So Guston was not telling stories. He was fighting an older battle about the relation of different parts of the canvas.[37] For Pincus-Witten the weakness of the paintings lay quite literally on the surface, in the contradiction between the self-conscious high-style application of paint ("the altitude of the facture") and the "baseness of the humor."[38] The contradiction undid the ideal of compositional unity the paintings seemed to endorse.

At first blush these three reviews of Guston's Marlborough show do not seem to overlap. Kramer doubted Guston's sincerity and showed contempt for the painter's willingness to please. He argued that Guston was nothing more than a newly minted neoprimitivist. Hughes claimed that political painting was no longer tenable, in large part because the movies did politics so much better. Pincus-Witten felt that Guston's aesthetics were out of date and that the paintings' internal disjunctions undermined those aesthetics. Nevertheless, the family resemblances in Kramer, Hughes, and Pincus-Witten are strong.

They all agreed that valuable artistic activity is marked by innovation. They also agreed that artistic innovation needs historical justification, a place in an accepted and acceptable historical

narrative. If innovation is not historically necessary—if it comes too late or does not seem like the logical next step—then it is regressive or merely idiosyncratic. Style can serve as a good gauge of the new, though style was obviously less important for Hughes than it was for Kramer, Pincus-Witten, or Feldman.

These assumptions testified to a loose but insistent vanguardism that owed much to what Caroline Jones has called the "Greenberg effect," the general currency of Greenberg's ideas even among those who seemed to oppose him.[39] The stories that different critics told about modernism could differ—for some Picasso might be the founding father; for others, Marcel Duchamp—but they shared the sense that the progress of art was a logical working-through of formal problems. Guston's Marlborough show did not meet these vanguardist criteria. While Guston's switch from abstraction to figuration marked a new step for Guston, Kramer, Hughes, and Pincus-Witten all felt that it did not mark a new stage in the history of art. In fact, they argued that Guston's figurative work signaled a historical step backward.

Their adverse judgments of Guston's works contained important insights, although not in the way the critics intended. Kramer's dismissal of Guston's desire to court his audience points to something very real. Guston had recognized that the transgressive nature of Pop went beyond its formal license. It really *was* a pork chop in the synagogue. Pop was liberating because it promised a closer relation to its viewers than Abstract Expressionism had ever allowed. For the established critics of the early 1960s, one of the greatest scandals of Pop art was that it cozied up to its public. "Audience" had been a tricky notion for American defenders of the avant-garde since World War II because the audi-

ence could no longer be associated with an uneducated and ungrateful bourgeoisie. Rosenberg had realized this in the 1950s when he maintained that art no longer had a general audience. While the notion of a general audience had always been a myth, the public for postwar art consisted of "a sum of shifting groupings, each with its own mental focus."[40] Pop offended the specialized audience of art professionals, many of whom had staked their reputations on the importance of Abstract Expressionism.[41] They generated angry reviews in no small part because, as far as they could tell, the Pop vanguard did *not* want to tweak that fictive general public.

A number of critics assumed that an apparent lack of antibourgeois sentiment meant that the Pop artists were celebrating the status quo. Some critics went as far as to accuse the artists of practicing the aesthetic equivalent of Goldwaterism. A nicely virulent editorial in *Arts* accused the Pop artists of sharing with a philistine middle class a "vain, almost boastful insistence upon its own cultural limitations."[42] Between 1962 and 1968 this sentiment also colored the editorial polemics against Pop in *Art News*, which were clearly meant to protect abstraction as the only truly avant-garde course worth pursuing. The nature of this polemic was nicely illustrated by Thomas Hess's attacks on the "vanguard audience." This audience had replaced the avant-garde artist, he argued, and it was driven by a relentless "appetite for novelties, for art as an object of conversation, a rung in the social ladder, a cheap investment." Culturally naive, stunningly ignorant, and politically conservative, the vanguard audience ignored "the crisis content of modern art." Instead of understanding the alienation that modernism had expressed, the audience invited the

artist to dinner. These "arriviste" collectors were really celebrating themselves and their wealth and not the genius of art. Their enthusiasm reflected their narcissism, and they "cowered" in their "trim apartments with specially low ceilings among the latest junk."[43] Hess eventually gave up this tone of class condescension and wrote that holding up collectors like "the Sculls for special ridicule merely seems an unpleasant form of a most unpleasant snobbism."[44] But his attack on the "vanguard audience" had become an increasingly standard feature of the reviews of established (and antagonistic) critics, such as Rosenberg, Greenberg, and Kramer.

The snobbism that underlay Hess's critique of the "vanguard audience" rested on a romanticized nostalgia for a recent artistic past when the serious modernist pitted his works against the muddle-headed middle class. The critics who mourned the death of a meritocracy based on taste and not money were also protecting their hard-won cultural authority, an authority they had earned defending a high modernist version of Abstract Expressionism. They had defined the New York School in terms of its opposition to the tastes and preoccupations of the bourgeoisie.[45] Pop art seemed to undermine their position on every front. In a historical twist many established critics found themselves in the odd position of having to attack the public in the name of aesthetic purity because artworks no longer wanted to.

Pop's unpainterly use of paint seemed to get rid of expression—that telltale drip—that had come to look like a cliché. At the same time its subject matter returned painting directly to the realm of appetite and consumption.[46] In this way Pop appeared to pander to inferior taste. In the end, though, it had not really succumbed to philistinism. It had redefined it. Pop did not reward the

philistines by providing them with the ready-made emotions that Greenberg had ascribed to kitsch. One constant complaint about early Pop was that its emotions were so cool that its positions were practically illegible. And Pop did not reject the philistine. It did not make its own formal concerns inaccessible by limiting its aesthetic rewards to the chosen few. By the same token, because it appeared to open the door to everyone, Pop troubled the principles of division—based on style, subject matter, and audience—that had been central to the self-definition of the New York art world in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Pop still maintained the privileges of the avant-garde. It was new and it was provocative.

Guston took up this challenge. He worried his style and changed his subject matter so that his work could become more accessible while maintaining its painterly quality. He did not seek to reject the viewer or split the audience into philistines and cognoscenti. As early as 1966 Guston noted that Abstract Expressionism demanded an unreasonable amount of work from the viewer. It asked its audience to imagine the links between the artist's past, present, and future paintings in order to figure out what precisely is at stake in them.[47] In 1977 Guston repeated this charge by pointing out that the decorum of post-Cubist painting required too much collaboration between the artist and "the all-too-willing viewer."[48] Guston felt that abstract art was self-congratulatory in its exclusions. His appeal for an extended aesthetic franchise worked itself out as the ingratiating quality that Kramer so disliked in Guston's painting.

Guston's figurations of the late 1960s dissolved many fierce dichotomies that drove the New York art world. A certain reductive aspiration seemed to unite postpainterly abstractionists, Minimalists, and conceptualists, who agreed that the most advanced

works of art aspired to the zero degree of art.[49] Of course, the paths these reductions actually took were remarkably dissimilar and could include almost anything, from a formalist emphasis on the "opacity of the medium" in the individual saleable work to an antiformalist fascination with the uncommodifiable act of the artist. In 1970, when Guston dismissed all this with his gruff and provocative claim that he had gotten "sick and tired of all that Purity" and "wanted to tell Stories," he was explicitly embracing storytelling at a time when the term *literary* was still used as an insult.[50] What is more, Guston justified his embrace of figuration by appealing to the vagaries of his personal taste and not to art historical necessity. He thus opened himself to the charge of being merely arbitrary, although he was in fact intensely aware of his place in art history and in the New York art world of the late 1960s. Yet he willingly (if defensively) assumed the guise of arbitrariness because he did not accept the art historical narratives of his critics. Against the relative simplicity of avant-garde genealogies, he presented a complex example of the way artists take positions in relation not only to their past but also to their present. Guston meant this when he said at the Philadelphia panel a few years earlier that the continuities of art were forced by the constant adjustment of "impurities." In this view the history of painting consisted of strings of contingent stops and starts. It flatly denied the narratives (of which Greenberg's was surely the most influential) in which art developed through a set of necessary moves toward a foreordained end. Guston explicitly reversed the terms of this narrative in a letter to Rosenberg in 1977 in which Guston claimed that the art "which accepts its own limitations of its means" becomes "elegant and conventional." It has to and thus loses the "rawness, the inchoate, the heretofore unsaid and

unseen of experience." Guston then restated his conviction that art struggles with its impurities. It "needs to continue, strangely enough, by denying its own means."[51] In Guston's view art maintains its dynamism only by courting the external. Given such an argument, subject matter—for formalists, merely an occasion for experiments with the medium—became all important.