An historiographic contextualization of Leo Steinberg's 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel'

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'In fifty years, a more measured judgment of Steinberg's importance may be possible.'

-David Carrier[1]

In several senses, Leo Steinberg's article 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', which appeared in the June 1959 issue of *The Art Bulletin*, can seem like a relatively minor accomplishment.[2] After all, the article (which proposed that the two Caravaggio paintings on the chapel's lateral walls anticipate an embodied and mobile beholder, limited to a series of oblique views) is only eight pages long. It was written by a graduate student who was rather well known for his art criticism (in 1957, his writing for *ARTS* had been honored with the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award), but whose total published art historical output to that point consisted of a single book review. And it has never been very frequently cited: more than a half-century after its publication, the list of journal articles and books that refer directly to Steinberg's piece is only a few dozen entries long.

Nevertheless, when the article *is* mentioned, it is typically in very generous or even reverential terms. In 1997, Sheldon Nodelman paused in a discussion of interactivity in an essay on the Rothko Chapel to note that 'a remarkable example of such [a] scheme is described in Leo Steinberg's brilliant analysis…' – by which he meant the 1959 article.[3] Samuel Edgerton, the historian of Renaissance art, singled the article out for praise in a 2002 College Art Association conference session honoring Steinberg, remarking that 'I shall never forget encountering his brief but extraordinarily insightful essay… at the very moment way back when I was just getting ready to write my doctoral dissertation.'[4] And in a 2018 book on Piero della

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[1] David Carrier, *The Aesthete in the City: The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, 60.

[2] Leo Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', *The Art Bulletin* 41:2, June 1959, 183-90. Reprinted in Leo Steinberg, Sheila Schwartz and Stephen J. Campbell, *Renaissance and Baroque Art: Selected Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, 131-43.

[3] Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997, 353.

[4] Samuel Edgerton, 'Leo's incessant *Perspectiva*', unpublished talk delivered at the 2002 annual College Art Association meeting. 4. I am thankful to Professor Edgerton for sharing a

Francesca, Joost Keizer traced the general rise of art historical interest in active viewership to Steinberg's article, thereby granting it a status as a consequential originary text.[5] Across the years, then, the piece has consistently generated profound excitement among certain readers.

Strikingly, though, there has never been a study dedicated solely to the methodological and disciplinary contexts in which Steinberg's ideas about the Cerasi Chapel took shape, or a nuanced consideration of the essay's specific impact and intellectual legacy.[6] Rather, much of the praise lavished upon Steinberg's article has tended to be cursory or superficial. One thinks for instance of Michael Fried's passing characterization of it as a 'classic article': a remark that was paired with a summary of Steinberg's ideas that was less than a sentence long.[7] In some cases, too, the praise has been both reductive and misleading. Keizer's claim about the novelty of Steinberg's position, for instance, simply ignores earlier scholarship that had seriously interrogated the active role of beholders. In short, then, a sensitive examination of the piece's methodological antecedents and broader significance would seem to be in order.

Or, rather, its *significances*, for in fact the article's impact can be characterized in several ways. For one thing, Steinberg's article offered an emphatically subjective reading of the chapel that openly blurred the lines between the traditionally separate discursive practices of art criticism and art history, and that contributed to a revision of attitudes regarding the relationship between the two fields of practice. Moreover, it alerted an Anglophone academic readership to the potential value of a close consideration of the position and experience of a beholder: an approach that had a substantial precedent in some German art historical writing, but that had only recently begun to appear in ambitious English-language scholarship. Relatedly, it also constituted an implicit attack on the notion, popular in mid-century critical circles, that an artwork can be responsibly discussed without any attention to the

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typescript of the talk with me, and for offering his thoughts on the significance of Steinberg's work.

[5] Joost Keizer, *The Realism of Piero della Francesca*, New York: Routledge, 2018, 99.

[6] Several recent writings by Daniele Di Cola do, however, offer very valuable discussions of Steinberg's evolving intellectual interests, and include useful analyses of his arguments involving the Cerasi Chapel. See Daniele Di Cola, *Arte come unità del molteplice: I fondamenti critici di Leo Steinberg,* Rome: De Luca, 2021; 'Forms of Reconciliation: Leo Steinberg on the Beholder (1959-1972)', in Guillaume Cassegrain, Claudia Cieri Via, Daniele Di Cola, Jérémie Koering, and Sheila Schwartz, eds., *Leo Steinberg Now: Il pensiero attraverso gli occhi*, Rome: Campisano Editore, 2021, 195-210; and 'Becoming Leo. Steinberg *e* l'Institute of Fine Arts *di* New York: *dall'eredità dei professori tedeschi allo sviluppo di un nuovo* criticism', in *Storia della critica d'arte: annuario della S.I.S.C.A*, Milan: Scalpendi, 2020, 65-97. Also relevant, if primarily comparative and ahistorical, is the discussion of the article in David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, 163-64.

[7] Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 148.

place of the viewer. It thus offered a marked alternative to two of the most influential critical approaches of the 1950s: Suzanne Langer's distinction between real and virtual space, and Clement Greenberg's celebrated mode of formal analysis. And, finally, Steinberg's ideas also impacted the contemporary New York art world in a demonstrable sense, for in 1960 he began to teach at Hunter College, where his emphasis on the impressions of an embodied viewer was embraced and extended by students such as Robert Morris and Alice Aycock. Obviously, there is no value in overestimating a single article's influence. But a more thorough understanding of the contexts in which Steinberg developed his ideas and in which they were received seems necessary to a clear picture of the contours of mid-century art history.

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Steinberg enjoyed telling the unusual story of the genesis of the article, and in 2002 he offered an extended account. While a graduate student at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts in the mid-1950s, he studied with Richard Krautheimer before travelling to Rome in the summer of 1957 for a course in Baroque architecture, which was taught by Wolfgang Lotz. The trip was a consequential one, as Steinberg soon became so intrigued by the work of Borromini that he decided to jettison two years of dissertation research and to focus instead on San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. But he later recalled, too, a second formative moment from that summer. As part of the final exam, Lotz led his cohort of students into Santa Maria del Popolo, assigned each of them a section of the church, and gave them fifteen minutes in which to develop a three-minute presentation. To Steinberg fell the Cerasi Chapel, a dark alcove which had been completed in 1601, and which featured tombs and sculpted busts of the Cerasi donors in an antechamber, an *Assumption* by Annibale Carracci over the altar, and a famous pair of paintings by Caravaggio (the *Crucifixion of Peter* and the *Conversion of Paul*) on the chancel's opposing side walls.

'Twelve minutes ticked off', Steinberg later recalled, and in an anxious attempt to generate useful material for his presentation, he began to ask himself a number of basic questions, including one about the apparent light source in the two Caravaggio paintings. He quickly realized that they seemed to be lit by the glow of a painted dove in the vault of the antechamber, and concluded that the paintings were designed for their location deep in the chapel and well beyond the altar rail. Relatedly, he also sensed that they had been intended to be seen from an oblique angle, instead of frontally. Caravaggio, Steinberg concluded, had thus conceived of the spectator not as a disembodied eye given a privileged frontal view, but rather as 'a person in a body that is never perfectly placed.' That realization, in turn, helped to explain the emphatic foreshortening of the figures, which had been seen by earlier art historians as a sign of Caravaggio's perspectival uncertainty or religious irreverence – but could now be understood as an intentional response to the anticipated position of the viewer. The form of the works anticipated, that is, visiting worshippers' respectful willingness to halt at the balustrade that defines the chapel's perimeter – or, as Steinberg phrased it, 'to keep the altar at a decorous distance.' In the process, the primary axes of the paintings now appeared as prolongations of the sightlines of the painting's expected beholders.[8] They effectively depend upon their intended audience. Energized by these observations, Steinberg conveyed his impressions to the rest of the class, and Lotz replied, simply, 'That's for *The Art Bulletin*.'[9] And indeed it was: his analysis appeared in the June 1959 issue.

Steinberg's account is certainly compelling, as it suggests the spontaneity of the genesis of his ideas. But his approach was not, in fact, as unprecedented as he implied; importantly, it had distinct and relevant antecedents in the work of several earlier scholars. Steinberg had lived in Berlin as a boy, and as a twelve-year-old in 1932 he received a copy of Richard Hamann's *Die Frührenaissance der italeinischen Malerei*.[10] More than twenty years later, when he enrolled at the Institute, he entered an intellectual milieu that was dominated by diasporic scholars from Germany and Austria.[11] As Mark Crinson and Richard J. Williams have pointed out, Steinberg seems to have been especially receptive to Hans Sedlmayr's interest in gestalt psychology and ways in which architecture could elicit specific ways of being seen.[12] But Steinberg could also draw on the insightful work of August Schmarsow, who had emphasized the constantly shifting angles and perspectives from which most viewers perceive a work of art or architecture (and whose writings were well known to Lotz).[13] In addition, Steinberg had closely read the work of Erwin Panofsky, who had once written that 'we see not with a single fixed eye but with two constantly moving eyes.'[14] And he was deeply familiar, too, with the writings of Rudolf Wittkower, whom he thanked in a footnote in his 1959 article. Significantly, Wittkower had offered, in a 1939 *Art Bulletin* article on the Biblioteca Laurenziana, a pioneering account of a viewer's evolving point of view; in the 1950s, his subsequent scholarship repeatedly invoked a mobile viewer in considering architectural environments.[15] In short, Steinberg's interest in architectural settings in the late 1950s 'positioned him', as Crinson and Williams have put it, 'in direct relation to many of the most significant German art historians.'[16]

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[8] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 186.

[9] Leo Steinberg, 'False starts, loose ends', unpublished talk delivered at the 2002 annual College Art Association meeting, 4-5.

[10] Stephen J. Campbell, 'Introduction', in Steinberg, Schwartz and Campbell, *Renaissance and Baroque Art*, xi.

[11] For a discussion of his complex and generative relations with these scholars and the traditions they embodied, see Di Cola, 'Becoming Leo', 67 and 73-4.

[12] Mark Crinson and Richard J. Williams, *The Architecture of Art History: A Historiography*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2019, 37-9.

[13] Mitchell W. Schwarzer, 'The emergence of architectural space: August Schmarsow's theory of '*Raumgestaltung*'', *Assemblage* 15, August 1991, 49-61, and Andrea Pinotti, 'Body-Building: August Schmarsow's *Kunstwissenschaft* between Psychophysiology and Phenomenology', in Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler, eds., *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002, 13-4. On Lotz's familiarity with the work of Schmarsow, see Di Cola, *Arte come unità del molteplice*, 180.

[14] For a full contextualization of Panofsky's observation, see Kerr Houston, *The Place of the Viewer: The Embodied Beholder in the History of Art, 1764-1968*, Brill: Boston, 2019, 148.

Of course, that is not to say that the German art historical tradition was monolithic. Far from it: in fact, Steinberg was forced to turn to Lotz as a replacement advisor when Krautheimer, who opposed what he saw as a tendency towards interpretive excess in the work of Sedlmayr and others, objected to Steinberg's highly experiential readings of architecture.[17] But even Krautheimer (whom Steinberg acknowledged warmly in both his 1959 article and his dissertation) was clearly sympathetic to a mode of analysis that acknowledged the precise angle from which works of art were meant to be seen. Indeed, Krautheimer had considered the physical place of the viewer at several moments in his magisterial 1956 book *Lorenzo Ghiberti*. For instance, in a discussion of the Gates of Paradise, he wrote that 'All visible parts are chased; those parts not intended to be seen were left in the rough with only outlines indicating a cheek, an eye, an ear or a hand. Hence, the beholder is meant to view these reliefs from a given standpoint.'[18] Later in the same book, Krautheimer observed that one of Ghiberti's panels employed a horizon line that 'forces the beholder to view the relief from high above – as indeed an onlooker would have to do when looking at this, the lower of all the panels on the door.'[19] Granted, Krautheimer never developed the implications of such observations in a systematic manner. But his repeated attention to the physical position of the viewer was certainly known to Steinberg, who owned a copy of the text.

To an extent, then, Steinberg was building on an established art historical line of thought. But it is worth noting that his approach was also anticipated by the work of two major philosophers. The first was Søren Kierkegaard, whom Steinberg had read closely, and enjoyed citing: indeed, in a 1960 lecture Steinberg would argue that modern art 'demands a decision in which you discover yourself, something of your own quality; and this decision is always a 'leap of faith', to use Kierkegaard's famous term.'[20] But he was also struck, early in his career, by

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[15] Houston, *The Place of the Viewer*, 155-7. Di Cola also notes that the beholder's experience of space was a recurring subject in Wittkower's work and in Lotz's writings and lectures; see Di Cola, *Arte come unità del molteplice*, 180-3, and 'Forms of Reconciliation', 197.

[16] Crinson and Williams, *The Architecture of Art History*, 39.

[17] Crinson and Williams, *The Architecture of Art History*, 38-9; Di Cola, 'Becoming Leo', 67 and 76.

[18] Richard Krautheimer (with Trude Krautheimer-Hess), *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956, 190-1.

[19] Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 253.

[20] Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 15.

Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the 'single individual' – by the philosopher's elevation, that is, of individual human realities over an abstract idealism. Steinberg's article is thus a productive application of Kierkegaard's position, as it contends that the beholder's relation to Caravaggio's works is 'never ideal, geometric, and neat', but rather in a sort of flux: we see, that is, from a certain limited perspective.[21] But while Steinberg's accent upon the concrete and the individual generally recalls Kierkegaard, his emphasis on the temporal, embodied experience of a viewer also calls to mind the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had been published in French in 1945. The text was not translated into English until 1962, and Steinberg certainly did not allude directly to it in 1959 (although he did explicitly engage with Merleau-Ponty's ideas in later writings).[22] Still, as Robert Hobbs has argued, Harold Rosenberg apparently *had* read the book (in French) before 1959, and Merleau-Ponty's ideas seeped into American art writing in the late 1950s.[23] For instance, as Steinberg composed his article in late 1957, he might have read Anthony Kerrigan's article on Gaudí in the December issue of *ARTS*. In it, Kerrigan wrote that

> A climb in Giotto's Tower at the Duomo in Florence would probably not reveal anything about the Renaissance, except for the resulting view one would get of the surrounding Florentine landscape, and of the classic buildings which dot it… But to climb within the Sagrada Familia reveals all the secrets of the building, and not only to the eye… one also discovers some secrets of hallucinatory knowledge in space, the vision of twisted perspectives, all the romance of cliffs and dangerous heights.[24]

In its emphasis upon an embodied (as opposed to a merely optical) experience, the passage is typical of a developing interest, in late-1950s American art writing, in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. And, given that Steinberg wrote for *ARTS* at the time, such an example was quite possibly directly known to him.

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[21] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 186.

[22] For a consideration of this relationship, see Margaret Iversen, 'Steinberg's other criteria', *Oxford Art Journal* 43:3, December 2020, 390-2. As Michael Hill has pointed out to me in an e-mail, too, Steinberg's 1978 article 'Resisting Cézanne' implies an engagement with Merleau-Ponty's 'Cézanne's Doubt', which was first published in English in 1964; especially relevant in the present context is Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon a 'lived perspective […] not a geometric or photographic one.' See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfuss and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 14, and Leo Steinberg, 'Resisting Cézanne', *Art in America* 66:6, November-December 1978, 114-33.

[23] Hobbs writes that Merleau-Ponty's ideas 'were a direct influence on American art well before the first English translation of his work became available in 1962.' See 'Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Installation Art', in Claudia Giannini, ed., *Installations, Mattress Factory, 1990-1999*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001, 18-9.

[24] Anthony Kerrigan, 'Gaudianism in Catalonia', *ARTS* 32:3, December 1957, 24.

Indeed, the very wording of Steinberg's article seems meaningfully informed by the earlier writings of both Kierkegaard and Merleau-Ponty. At one point in the article, he argues that the form and the meaning of Caravaggio's two paintings depend upon the evolving place of the viewer. The paintings, writes Steinberg,

> are so placed that they are strafed by our glance even before we have entered the chapel…. At this distance we see the paintings as complex surfaces, fretted by catastrophic chiaroscuro, and it is from here that we first recognize the protagonists in their brutal foreshortenings. We pass into the chapel as far as the triumphal arch of the choir – the limit, I believe, of our expected approach – and we still see the paintings obliquely… Now their brutal foreshortenings no longer seem due to any grossness in them, nor to willfulness in the painter, but wholly to our standpoint and distance; they become a function of our situation… And the terrible actuality of these paintings no longer resides in them alone, but invests our relation to them…[25]

Steinberg's striking use of the phrase *terrible actuality* is notable, for actuality is also a central theme in several of Kierkegaard's writings, where it relates directly (as it does in Steinberg, as well) to the relationship between believer and divinity. Simultaneously, Steinberg's analysis also shares a basic affinity with Merleau-Ponty's work. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the philosopher had written that 'If, in a brightly lit room, we observe a white disc placed in a shadow in the corner, the constancy of the white is imperfect. It improves when we approach the shadowy zone where the disc is located. It becomes perfect when we enter into this zone.'[26] The philosopher's use of the first person plural neatly anticipates Steinberg's embrace of the same tactic, even as his word choices – note the shared emphasis upon *approaching* and *entering* – and his account of a perception that is rooted in an ambulatory body also establish an analytical framework that is then deployed by Steinberg, as well.

Finally, it is also clear there was a developing interest, in American art writing in 1957 and 1958, in the embodied viewer and the importance of specific viewpoints. Steinberg was closely familiar, for example, with H.W. Janson's important 1957 book *The Sculpture of Donatello*; indeed, he wrote a positive review of it, in which he registered enthusiasm for the many photographs that recorded several pieces of art from multiple angles.[27] 'As the pages are turned', remarked Steinberg in a reaction published in *ARTS* in June of 1958, 'the camera walks us slowly around every free-standing sculpture; the image repeats with those slight shifts of angle which perpetually recast its silhouette, imposing thereby the integrity of an unhurried, pondered contemplation.'[28] Moreover, in that very same issue of *ARTS*, a young Annette Michelson opened her review of a show of works by Daumier by emphasizing her bluntly corporeal experience in viewing them: 'Locked behind glass, set higher and lower than eye level, somewhat difficult to get at and around, forty-five pieces of Daumier's sculpture are now on view in the commemorative show at the Bibliothèque Nationale.'[29] (Notably, Michelson was then in Paris, where she sat in on several courses taught by Merleau-Ponty.) Even as Steinberg wrote up the impressions that he had initially developed in response to Lotz's onsite challenge, then, he could draw on a wide range of relevant critical, scholarly, and philosophical precedents in developing his position.

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[25] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 186.

[26] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes, New York: Routledge, 2012, 324.

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Nonetheless, the centrality that Steinberg gave to such ideas, and the extent to which he developed them, represented a substantial departure from predominant art historical and art critical conventions of the time. As Edgerton would later point out, Steinberg's approach did contradict a conventional assumption that Caravaggio – or, indeed, that virtually *every* Italian painter operating in the wake of the Renaissance – had planned his works to be seen from a direct, frontal viewpoint.[30] Art historians who concentrated on sculpture or architecture, like Krautheimer, Kerrigan, and Janson, occasionally emphasized the place of the viewer. But even they did so only in passing, and often resorted to the longstanding trope of the ideal, disembodied view. Indeed, Krautheimer's book on Ghiberti is quite typical in this sense. He refers repeatedly to 'the eye' in his discussion of particular sculptures, but that eye is incorporeal and abstract. For instance, in treating the north door of the Florentine Baptistery, Krautheimer claims that 'Terms such as movement and interaction apply to the reliefs of the door in a slightly ambiguous way, and it is largely the gilding which reveals the ambiguity. The eye is focused on the gilded parts, the figures, the rocks from which they rise. A tree, a city gate.'[31] The 'eye' here simply alludes to a generic viewpoint, rather than an embodied observer. Or, as

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[27] H.W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

[28] Leo Steinberg, 'Professor Janson's 'Donatello'', *ARTS* 32:9, June 1958, 41-42. For a fuller discussion of Janson's use of photographs and Steinberg's published reaction, see Houston, *The Place of the Viewer*, 162-3.

[29] Annette Michelson, *ARTS* 32:9, June 1958, 14.

[30] Edgerton, 'Leo's incessant *Perspectiva*', 4.

[31] Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 134. For comparable examples, see 151 and 154.

Steinberg put it in his article, the Renaissance viewer was still 'only an eye, and an eye whose position is fixed.'[32]

By contrast, Steinberg was making a case for something historically novel, which he termed 'a new principle at work.'[33] In the process, he offered a distinct alternative to the standard art historical readings of the Cerasi Chapel, and of Caravaggio's paintings.[34] The early 1950s had witnessed the publication of books on Caravaggio by several major scholars, including Lionello Venturi and Walter Friedländer. Each of these authors, though, had treated Caravaggio's paintings in the abstract, largely divorcing them from their physical context instead of reading them in relation to the contingent, physical act of viewership. Their accompanying photographs of Caravaggio's works showed the paintings from a precisely frontal angle, cropped so that they were unrelated to their larger spatial environment.[35] And the authors only furthered such an approach in their prose. Venturi, for example, employed a familiar combination of stylistic, iconographic, and formal analysis.[36] Friedländer, to be fair, did invoke the viewer in his account – but only as a rhetorical conceit, as when he asserted that 'The unprepared spectator who sees Caravaggio's *Conversion* for the first time would probably not be able to recognize at first glance what the painting represents.' But such a response was hardy due, in his view, to the position of the viewer; rather, it was a function of Caravaggio's surprising composition. And indeed, Friedländer soon resorted to the stock conceit of the eye as a metonym for the viewer, arguing that 'the first thing to catch his eye would certainly be the enormous horse that fills more than three-quarters of the available space.'[37]

Steinberg's accent upon the embodied viewer, by contrast, implicitly indicated the limitations of such readings. In fact, it did more than that, for his article also altered the way in which Caravaggio's paintings were conceived and reproduced. Edgerton has pointed out that Skira, a major supplier of fine arts slides in the 1960s, soon began to issue images that showed Caravaggio's works from the point of view of the altar rail, rather than from an insistently frontal viewpoint.[38] And art historical publications, in turn, slowly began to do the same. Howard Hibbard's well-received 1983 *Caravaggio*, for instance, introduced the two paintings with a photograph of the Cerasi Chapel that was taken from the altar rail and that showed an oblique view of the *Crucifixion of Peter*.[39] Due to Steinberg's article, it would seem, a common art historical approach toward Caravaggio's paintings had given way to a more complex perspective that was rooted in the contingencies of physical experience.

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[32] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 189.

[33] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 189.

[34] For a similar point, and a fascinating sketch of the Cerasi Chapel by Steinberg, see Di Cola, *Arte come unità del molteplice*, 181 and Fig. 22, and 'Forms of Reconciliation', 197 and Fig. 55.

[35] Lionello Venturi, *Il Caravaggio*, Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1952, plates 24 and 25; Walter Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955, plates 33 and 34.

[36] Venturi, *Il Caravaggio*, 3.

[37] Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies*, 7.

[38] Edgerton, 'Leo's incessant *Perspectiva*', 5.

Such a perspective also represented a meaningful alternative to prevailing ideas in aesthetics and art criticism. Especially relevant here is Suzanne Langer's 1953 book *Feeling and Form*, which was widely seen as a major contribution to the philosophy of art.[40] In that lengthy text, Langer developed a central contrast between what she termed virtual space (that is, the implied space within a work of art) and perceptual space (that is, the space in which we live and move). For Langer, virtual space is self-contained and independent; it is, she wrote, 'an entirely visual affair', and consequently it 'has no continuity with the space in which we live.' By contrast, she concluded (using a logic that recalls the arguments of literary New Critics), 'the space in which we live and act is not what is treated in art at all.'[41] Virtual space, as a result, 'dissociates itself from the actual space in which the canvas or other physical bearer of it exists… [S]imilarly the space in a picture engages our vision completely because it is significant in itself and not as part of the surrounding room.'[42] Clearly, Steinberg's reading of the Cerasi Chapel represented a direct attack on such a distinction. In arguing for what he called a restive space, Steinberg was effectively making a case for the dissolution of any division between virtual and perceptual space. Rather, the two were inexorably bound up in one another: again, the 'actuality of these paintings no longer resides in them alone, but invests our relation to them, which is never ideal, geometric, and neat, but in disorderly flux.'[43] To be sure, Steinberg recognized that such a blurring of conventional divisions had been unusual in 1600; as he put it, 'There is surely a new principle at work here which goes beyond traditional devices for coupling aesthetic and real space.'[44] At the same time, though, his overt reference to the intensified coupling of aesthetic and real space implied a dissatisfaction with Langer's model of differentiation. Indeed, his italicized insistence that 'in the Caravaggios our 'intrusion' is *virtual but immediate* as an empathic sensation' can be read as a coy appropriation and redeployment of one of Langer's key terms.

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[39] Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York: Harper & Row, 1983, plate 73.

[40] For a brief consideration of connections between Steinberg's earliest critical writings and the work of Langer, see Di Cola, 'Becoming Leo', 71.

[41] Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 72.

[42] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 83.

[43] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 186.

[44] Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 189.

In the process, though, Steinberg was also pressuring the arguments of Clement Greenberg (who often referred to Langer's writings in his own work).[45] American art criticism in the late 1950s was characterized by a greater diversity than is sometimes recognized, but Greenberg certainly enjoyed an especial influence and authority.[46] Indeed, late in his career Steinberg recalled (in glossing a letter that he had written to *ARTS* in March of 1958, in which he had articulated his enthusiasm for the work of Robert Rauschenberg) that 'To champion that body of work in its emergence in the 1950s, one had to confront the then-reigning orthodoxy, the rule, the tyranny, of Clement Greenberg.'[47] Greenberg's rule, of course, was founded largely upon a strict formalism that insisted on self-criticality in each artistic discipline: in painting, for example, he celebrated a resolute flatness and a frank attention to the shape of the support. Like Langer, Greenberg stressed the self-contained aspect of artworks; he also accented a purported opticality that rendered the spectator's body more or less irrelevant. This was a position that Greenberg developed in several writings, but it is perhaps clearest in his 'Sculpture in Our Time', which was first published in 1948 and then revised and republished in 1958. In that essay, Greenberg argued that modernist painting had achieved purity through abstraction: that is, by 'renouncing the illusion of the third dimension.' Sculpture, in turn, had learned to turn away from attempts to approximate the body, and concentrated instead on the visual image – on what Langer had called virtual space. Thus, as Greenberg put it, 'The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone….'[48] In other words, he was proposing an ideal opticality: an artificial and disembodied form of spectatorship that was flatly rejected by Steinberg in his article.

Of course, Steinberg was writing on a Baroque chapel, while Greenberg was analyzing more recent developments in modern art. Were the differences in approach simply due to differences in subject? Hardly. After all, as we have noted, Steinberg was an active art critic in 1957, and thus wrote frequently on modern art.[49] More importantly, he saw his criticism as related to his art historical writing. As early as 1957, he later claimed, he began to wonder if 'major stylistic changes in art alter art's interaction with the beholder.' This hunch, he continued, was one that he owed to Caravaggio, but it 'seemed confirmed in my experience of contemporary art, which, I thought, constantly questioned what sort of presence the viewer is.'[50] Here, Steinberg was alluding at least in part to Rauschenberg's combines, which he had first seen in December of 1955 – and which he had discussed, too, in terms of a hypothetical viewer. 'Is he a man in a hurry?' asked Steinberg. 'Is he at rest or in motion? Is he one who construes or one who reacts? Is he a man alone, or a crowd?'[51] Reacting against Greenberg's arguments for pictorial self-sufficiency, Steinberg came to feel that *any* novel art recast its own relationship with the spectator.[52] Or, as Alexander Nagel later suggested, Steinberg saw the art of Caravaggio differently precisely 'because he had been looking closely at the art of his own time, which was everywhere breaking down the frame of the work of art.'[53]

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[45] For a useful and detailed consideration of the relative critical stances of Steinberg and Greenberg, see Michael Hill, 'Leo Steinberg vs Clement Greenberg, 1952-72', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 14:1, 2014, 21-9.

[46] See Kerr Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, New York: Pearson, 2012, 55-61.

[47] Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, 23.

[48] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 56 and 59. The preceding summary is also informed in part by Richard Williams, *After Modern Sculpture: Art in the United States and Europe, 1965-1970*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000, 22.

[49] He also spoke on the subject. In fact, in April of 1957, shortly before traveling to Rome, Steinberg participated in a session at the annual meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference that was entitled 'Problems in criticism of contemporary art.'

Arguably, then, Steinberg was not merely urging a dissolution of the division between art and life, or between virtual and perceptual space. Rather, his simultaneous interest in Baroque painting and contemporary theory suggested a possible synthesis of art history and art criticism: two fields that were largely institutionally distinct in the 1950s. The style in which Steinberg's 1959 article was written only reinforced such a possibility; in arguing for the importance of the embodied viewer, he relied heavily on the first person, eschewing the nominal objectivity that dominated art historical writing of the time.[54] Indeed, when he showed a copy of his draft to Meg Potter, a fellow graduate student, she apparently exclaimed, 'But Leo, this isn't written in *Art Bulletin* style!'[55] Nonetheless, the paper was of course accepted, and published in Steinberg's voice – a voice whose willfully personal mode struck some readers as unusual. Jack Wasserman, for instance, once recalled being impressed by the article's tone. 'I remember', he noted, 'the impression that he was approaching his subject in a personal, subjective way.'[56] Indeed: both the style and the content of the article insisted upon an art historical subjectivity that was largely without precedent.

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[50] Steinberg, 'False starts, loose ends', 5.

[51] Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 81.

[52] Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, 31.

[53] Nagel, 'The antipodes of modernity', unpublished talk delivered at the 2002 annual College Art Association meeting, 3-4.

[54] The first page of the article offers two examples of Steinberg's use of the first person to generate a subjective account of the chapel. 'The iconographic interpretation of such an arrangement seems', he writes, 'irresistible: standing at a short distance from the chapel – or, better, walking toward it – we are asked to imagine a miniature Latin-cross church, complete with transept, domes crossing, and choir.' And, a paragraph, later: 'As we enter the chapel we become aware of the bust portraits of the Cerasi…' Steinberg, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel', 183.

[55] Steinberg, 'False starts, loose ends', 5.

[56] Jack Wasserman, personal e-mail to the author.

iv.

It was not, however, without its descendants. As we have already noted, photographers of the Cerasi Chapel soon began to shoot the Caravaggio paintings from the altar rail. Simultaneously, several art historians cited Steinberg's piece approvingly or – in a gesture of indirect influence – applied its logic to other subjects. In 1961, Michelangelo Muraro published an analysis of the Mascoli Chapel mosaics in *The Art Bulletin*; in it, he cited Steinberg's 1959 article, specifically alluding to his predecessor's interest in the 'participation of the observer in the work of art.'[57] Two years later, in an article on the Quirinal Palace, Wasserman – who had been struck by Steinberg's piece – thought in a similarly detailed fashion about the position and the motion of the beholder.[58] And in a 1968 article on the Farnese Gallery, Charles Dempsey considered the likely angles from which the ceiling frescoes were seen, and cited Steinberg's article on the Cerasi Chapel as a meaningful precedent.[59] Attention to contingent, embodied viewpoints had become a relatively regular occurrence in the pages of *The Art Bulletin*.

But it was also common, soon enough, in galleries of contemporary art. In a 1963 show at the Green Gallery, Robert Morris exhibited *Passageway*, a 1961 piece that consisted of a curved plywood corridor that led to a dead end at the meeting of two walls. As James Meyer has noted, 'The spectator of *Passageway* does not stand apart from the work, taking in a painting or sculpture from a distance: she is an active participant in the work's completion… [It] was to be experienced by an ambient body that walked around, and through, the work itself.'[60] Significantly, Morris was a student at Hunter at the time, and he took a seminar with Steinberg; years later, he still recalled his teacher's interest in the corporeal. 'Leo very often demonstrated', Morris once remarked, 'the contorted body positions of Michelangelo's sculpture by striking the poses himself in front of the class.'[61] In turn, Morris developed a body of work that shifted, in Meyer's view, 'the focus of debate from the empirical object of [Donald] Judd, with only an implied viewer, to a sculpture orchestrated as a contingent and inextricable relationship between a subject and an object.'[62] In short, while Morris's work may not have been directly motivated by Steinberg's ideas, it shared a basic affinity with the ideas articulated by Steinberg in 1959.[63] And the same might be said, too, of a second prominent student of Steinberg's: Alice Aycock, who also studied with him while earning her MFA at Hunter, and who claimed to have been deeply impressed by his teaching style.[64] Her consistent interest, in her work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in foregrounding the body and the corporeal experience of the viewer extends and explores some of the ideas that Steinberg had voiced a decade earlier.

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[57] Michelangelo Muraro, 'The statutes of the Venetian *arti* and the mosaics of the Mascoli Chapel', *The Art Bulletin* 43:4, December 1961, 273.

[58] Jack Wasserman, 'The Quirinal Palace in Rome', *The Art Bulletin* 45:3, September 1963, 205-44.

[59] Charles Dempsey, ''*Et nos cedamus amori*': Observations on the Farnese Gallery', *The Art Bulletin* 50:4, December 1968, 363-74.

[60] James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 51.

[61] Robert Morris, personal e-mail to the author.

[62] Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, 166.

Steinberg knew Morris and Aycock personally, but soon interest in a corporeal aesthetic experience was common enough that any attempt to quantify his influence becomes nebulous, or almost meaningless. Rather, it seems wiser to conclude – as Robert Morris did, in 1966 – that there was 'a general sensibility in the arts at this time.'[65] When Earl Rosenthal argued, in a 1964 article on Michelangelo's *Moses*, that '[s]een from below, the figure is transformed', he did not cite Steinberg.[66] But his claim certainly rested on the same logic that had informed Steinberg's 1959 contention that 'at this angle of vision, … the placing of the bodies of Peter and Paul undergoes a marked change of meaning.' Similarly, in 1966, Rosalind Krauss – then a graduate student at Harvard – argued in *Artforum* that Donald Judd's sculpture sparked 'awareness in the viewer that he approaches objects to make meaning of them.'[67] Krauss, too, did not cite Steinberg's piece, which she had no particular reason to know; instead, she invoked the writings of Merleau-Ponty. But her argument, with its emphasis upon self-awareness and approach, nevertheless resembled Steinberg's analysis in several senses. For instance, her claim that a frontal view of a work by Judd gives way to a raking view that reveals any initial reading to be partly illusory closely recalled Steinberg's interest in a series of evolving views, registered over time and through space. And it thus furthered, as well, the growing sense of a dissatisfaction with the abstract opticality of Greenberg. Rather, art historians and critics were increasingly convinced in the mid-1960s that what one saw depended, as Steinberg had argued of the Cerasi Chapel, on one's standpoint and motion. Vision, it seemed, was a function of situation.

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[63] Kerr Houston, 'Leo Steinberg and Robert Morris's 'Notes on sculpture'', *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 33:1, Fall 2013, 38-42. Also relevant here is Craig G. Staff's invocation of Steinberg's essay in a passing claim that Morris' work in the mid-1960s was characterized by 'ideas one finds in the Baroque.' See 'Embodiment, Ambulation and Duration', in Alison Oddey and Christine White, eds., *Modes of Spectating*, Chicago: Intellect, 2009, 215 and 218, n. 43.

[64] Robert Hobbs, *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, 46-7.

[65] Robert Morris, 'Notes on sculpture', *Artforum* 4:6, February 1966, 43. Morris's use of the term sensibility was a conscious reference to Barbara Rose's similarly worded point, made in 'ABC art', *Art in America* 53:5, October-November 1965, 57.

[66] Earl Rosenthal, ''Michelangelo's *Moses, dal di sotto in sù*', *The Art Bulletin* 46:4, December 1964, 545.

[67] Rosalind Krauss, 'Allusion and illusion in Donald Judd', *Artforum* 4:9, May 1966, 26.

David Carrier once argued that 'Other Criteria', a 1968 lecture by Steinberg at MoMA, was '*the* manifesto that marked the end of the era of Clement Greenberg's formalism.'[68] But Steinberg's 1959 article had already portended, in many ways, the beginning of the end. Or, to put it a bit less ominously, it heralded the beginning of several new beginnings. In challenging the common conceit of a disembodied, ideal viewer and in synthesizing art historical and art critical tendencies and historical and contemporary artistic material, 'Observations in the Cerasi Chapel' presaged and even catalyzed a number of significant developments. Importantly, Steinberg's analysis was not, despite his own account of its genesis, completely unprecedented. Rather, its attention to the consequences of mobile viewership ought to be seen in relation to the work of several earlier and contemporary art historians and philosophers whose work was familiar to Steinberg. And yet, his ideas cannot be understood as the mere product of published precedents. Steinberg, after all, liked to complain of the 'tyranny of the written word' and to privilege the eye over a rote reliance on texts.[69] His 1959 article constitutes a complex and productive testimony to the generative power of such an approach.

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[68] David Carrier, 'An extraordinarily suggestive revisionist', *Artcritical* online, March 16, 2011.

[69] Sheila Schwartz, 'Preface and Acknowledgments', in Steinberg, Schwartz and Campbell, *Renaissance and Baroque Art*, viii.