popular art. By this means, Courbet attempted to turn formerly neglected peasant and proletarian Salon spectators into artistic collaborators, thereby potentially emboldening and empowering them at the expense of their putative betters. In the course of the decade following 1848, Courbet enacted an interventionist cultural role that has since been defined as avant-garde. Avant-garde art, I shall argue at the end of this chapter, is exceptional in the nineteenth century, and exceptionally fragile. By the end of Courbet's life, it had mutated into a nearly quietist modernism.

COURBET'S TRILOGY OF 1849-50

Courbet was born in the village of Ornans, near Besançon in the region of central-eastern France called the Franche-Comté. His father Regis was a wealthy farmer who resisted his son's decision to become an artist, but nevertheless paid his way to Paris in 1839. There, Courbet studied in the private studios of a succession of mediocre academic masters, learning at first a somewhat labored Romanticism which recalls the "Troubadour Style" practised by Couture and others in the 1840s. Yet even as a young artist, Courbet demonstrated independence and self-assurance: his self-portraits including Man With Leather Belt (ca. 1845) and The Wounded Man (ca. 1844-54) in fact mark a kind of liberation from the reigning juste milieu. In place of the Neoclassical linearism of contemporary portraits by, for example, Hippolyte-Jean Flandrin and Theodore Chasseriau (Portrait Drawing of de Tocqueville, 1844), Courbet's self-portraits reveal a Romantic painterliness combined with a compositional informality or even awkwardness. In place of the sentimentality found in genre paintings by the emerging official Realists, such as Tassaert, Ribot, and Pils (The Death of a Sister of Charity, 1850), Courbet's paintings convey a psychological complexity, physical proximity, and eroticism that has its only precedents in Caravaggio and Gericault. (The former's Ecstasy of Saint Francis is perhaps a source for The Wounded Man; the latter's "portraits of the insane" are likely sources for Man With Leather Belt).

By 1848 Courbet was dividing his time among the Paris museums, his own atelier on the Left Bank, and the bohemian Brasserie Andler; at the Brasserie he came into contact with some of the most progressive and idiosyncratic figures of the day, including Baudelaire, the anarchist Proudhon, the leftist balladeer Pierre Dupont, and Champfleury. Bohemianism was a relatively new and contradictory subcultural stance in Paris-composed in equal parts of estheticism, asceticism, defiance, and sycophancy—and it functioned as a kind of laboratory for testing the various rhetorics of Realism. In January 1848 Courbet wrote to his family: "I am about to make it any time now, for I am surrounded by people who are very influential in the newspapers and the arts, and who are..."
204. ISIDORE PILS  *The Death of a Sister of Charity*  
1850. 95 x 100 (241 x 305)

205. GUSTAVE COURBET  *After Dinner at Ornans*  
1849. 76 x 85 (195 x 257)
very excited about my painting. Indeed, we are about to for
a new school, of which I will be the representative in the fiel
does not involve any specific question or instruction. However, I can provide the natural text as requested:

According to his letters, Courbet remained on the sideline during the fighting in February 1848, though he was immensely pleased at the overthrow of Louis-Philippe and th establishment of a Republic. In June, too, he kept a safe distance from the shooting, stating in a letter to his family: "I do not believe in wars fought with guns and cannon.... For ten years now I have been waging a war of the intellect. I would be inconsistent for me to act otherwise." Despite this expression of principled pacifism, Courbet's abstention from battle was probably the result of strategic as much as moral calculation: like many others, he quickly recognized the brutality and implacability, of the bourgeois and peasant "party of order," and understood that a war fought for "the democratic and social republic" could not be won on the barricades of June. On the contrary, the struggle for labor cooperatives, fair wages, housing, debt relief, and full political enfranchisement for workers and peasants would require organization, propaganda, and a broadly based mass movement. Disdaining bayonets, therefore, Courbet became resolved to wage his combat with images; the time was ripe for such a battle, and he would not waste his chance.

After February, the exhibition policies of the Salon were liberalized, permitting Courbet free access for the first time. Whereas he had managed to show only 3 paintings in the previous seven years, he exhibited 10 works in 1848 and 11 the following year, including the peculiar After Dinner at Ornans. An ambitious and provocative picture, After Dinner was oddly oversized for its genre, indefinite in its lighting and composition, and indeterminate in its mood and subject. For all these anomalies, however, it sufficiently resembled Dutch genre paintings--then in renewed vogue--for it to garner praise from a number of Salon critics and the award of being purchased by the state.

The historical significance of After Dinner lies in two factors outside of its particular artistic weaknesses or merits: first, the gold medal Courbet received for it in 1849 automatically entitled him to free entry to the 1850 Salon; secondly, After Dinner is a precise mirror of Courbet's interest in the concurrent crises of French rural and urban life. In the wake of agrarian recession and urban insurrection, the definitions and political allegiances of both country and city were up for grabs, and any picture that treated ambiguously both realms could have been incendiary. The figures in After Dinner might as well be bohemians at the Andler as peasants at the home of the artist's Ornans friend Cuenot, thus potentially calling into question the opposition between worker and peasant that had ensured the failure of the insurrection of June. After Dinner was not scandalous in 1849, but its subject was and Courbet knew it. Therefore, in October 1849 Courbet left Paris and returned to Ornans in order to reflect upon and plan his future "intellectual" interventions. "I am a little like a snake ... in a state of torpor," he wrote to his friends the Weys at the end of October. "In that sort of beatitude one thinks so well! ... Yet I will come out of it . . . ." Indeed, in the course of the next eight months, Courbet painted three colossal pictures that changed the history of art--The Stonebreakers (destroyed), A Burial at Ornans, and Peasants of Flagey Returning From the Fair. As the art historian T. J. Clark has shown, and as will be summarized here, each work constituted an attack upon the technical foundations of bourgeois art and a disquisition upon class and political antagonisms of the day.
The Stonebreakers. Its author said, "is composed of two very pitiable figures," taken from life. "One is an old man, an old machine grown stiff with service and age.... The one behind him is a young man about fifteen years old, suffering from scurvy." Stonebreaking for roads was a rare, though not unprecedented, subject for art, but it had never been treated so unflinchingly and so monumentally (the painting was nearly 52 by 8 feet). Two nearly lifesize figures are set against a hillside, in approximate profile. Their gazes are averted from view, their limbs are strained by effort, and their clothes are in tatters. The colors and surface of the picture (such as can be surmised from its prewar photograph and the surviving oil study) are earthen and clotted, and the composition is uncomplicated. The predominant impression, as Courbet's words suggest, is of humans acting as machines: hands, elbows, shoulders, backs, thighs, knees, ankles, and feet are all treated as alien appendages that only serve, as Ruskin wrote in The Stones of Venice (1853), to "make a tool of the creature."

For A Burial at Ornans, Courbet gathered together some fifty-one men, women, and children on the grounds of the new cemetery, and painted their portraits on a canvas almost 22 feet long. The mourners include the artist's father and sisters, the town mayor, Courbet's late grandfather, and a spotted dog. The coffin, draped in white with black teardrops and crossbones, belongs to one C.-E. Teste, a distant relative of Courbet; the ostentatious pair dressed in red with bulbous noses are beadles. No one in the picture is paying much attention to either the coffin or the future resting place of the deceased; indeed, the crowd is composed of at least three discrete groups—women mourners at right, clergy and pall bearers at left, and a bourgeois and mongrel dog at center right—that are compositionally and emotionally disconnected from each other and the funeral ritual. (How different from the postures and expressions of rapt piety among the mourners in Pils' exactly contemporaneous and acclaimed The Death of a Sister of Charity!) Adding to the impression of artifice and distraction in Courbet's work is the insistent black and white of the canvas (compare the dog's coat to the drapery over the coffin), as well as the odd superimposition of figures above one another.

Tonal simplicity, compositional fracture, and emotional
opacity also characterize the Peasants of Flagey. Like th
Burial, its subject was conventional (for example, Thoma
Gainsborough’s Road from Market, ca. 1767) but its treatmen
certainly was not. The Peasants is made up of discret
groupings of figures and animals unified only by a dul
repetition of color and tonality: foreground and middle
ground planes awkwardly collide at the edge of a road
extending from lower left to middle right; a boy and tw
peasant women are oddly insinuated among the inconsistently
scaled horses and cattle; a man being led by a pig seems to floa
cross the surface of the picture. Unlike Rosa Bonheur (1822
99), whose Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of the Vine
(1849) records with patriotic specificity the agricultural
practises of a particular region, Courbet disregards the
cultural and physiognomic particulars of his human and
animal subjects in Peasants. (Are those Jersey or Charolais
cows under yoke?) Unlike Jules Breton (1827-1906), whose
The Gleaners (1854) depicts the poor peasants of Marlotte as a
faceless herd, Courbet provides his protagonists with individ-
ual and class identity, albeit ambiguous. (Is the man with
peasant smock and stovepipe hat the same Regis Courbet who
wears a bourgeois greatcoat in the Burial?) In place of the
reassuring binary oppositions that will soon dominate official
realism-city/country, bourgeois/peasant, proletarian/pea-
sant—Courbet proposes a countryside that is as awkward,
indefinite, and contingent as the immigrant city of Paris.

Like the Stonebreakers and the Burial at Ornans, therefore,
the Peasants of Flagey Returning From the Fair is all about the
awkward antagonisms and injuries of social class. In the
Stonebreakers, two peasants, reduced to penury, resort to
stonebreaking in order to survive; in the Burial, a peasant
community, got up in its Sunday bourgeois best, celebrates a
funeral; in Peasants, a motley group of men, women, and
animals, returning from an agricultural fair, meet a rural
bourgeois in waistcoat walking his pig. This was the
ungraceful form and subject of Courbet’s much attacked
triology shown in Paris at the Salon of 1850-51.

It would be easy to expound further—as the critics and
caricaturists of 1851 did—upon the strange formal and
thematic disjunctiveness of the Peasants, the Stonebreakers,
and the Burial. Yet to do so would be to risk overlooking a new
and provocative coherence in the works. In place of the old
academic and political logic based upon Classical mimesis and
clear class difference, Courbet has erected an alternative
coherence based upon popular culture and social or class
ambiguity and opacity. As Meyer Schapiro and T. J. Clark
have shown, the formal touchstone for Courbet’s trilogy was
the “naive” artistic tradition—Epinal woodcuts and popular
broadsheets, catchpenny prints and almanacs, chapbooks and
songsheets—then being revived and contested across France.
as a component of the political and class war of 1848. Especially in the months before the Napoleonic coup d'état of December 2, 1851, popular culture—best defined negatively as the unofficial culture of the non-elite—was a weapon used by peasants, workers, and their urban, bourgeois allies to help secure the *égalité* promised but not delivered by the first French Revolution. Courbet was a soldier in this war and the trilogy was his weapon.

In its lack of depth, its shadowlessness, stark color contrasts, superimposition of figures, and emotional neutrality, the *Burial* especially recalls the style and aspect of popular woodcuts, engravings, and lithographs, such as those used to decorate the many generic *souvenirs mortuaire* printed to help rural communities broadcast and commemorate local deaths, or the woodcuts that illustrated the traditional *Funeral of Marlborough* or other tales and ballads. (Indeed, in a letter to the Weys from 1850, Courbet cites the nonsense refrain "mironton, mirontaine" from the popular ballad of Marlborough.) Courbet was fascinated by popular culture during this period; in addition to composing several folk ballads and pantomimes, he illustrated a broadsheet of songs dedicated to the Fourierist apostle Jean Journet in 1850, and a decade later executed two drawings for Champfleury's *Les Chansons populaires de France*. Further examples of the artist's interests in popular culture are his 1853 depiction of a wrestling match, and his employment, a year later, of an Epinal print of the Wandering Jew as the basis for his autobiographical painting *

In embracing popular art and culture—its audience, its subjects, and even its ingenuous and anonymous style—Courbet was explicitly rejecting the hierarchism and personality cult fostered by the regime of President and then Emperor Louis Napoleon, and represented in Flandrin's *Napoléon III* (1860–61). Indeed, even as Courbet was exhibiting his works in Paris during the winter of 1850-51, Bonapartists in the rural provinces were clamping down the activities of a legion of *colporteurs*, balladeers and pamphleeters who they judged were active in the revival of popular culture and the establishment of a radical, peasant solidarity. In Paris, too, the popular entertainers—clowns, street musicians, mountebanks and *saltimbangues* were viewed by the police and the Prefects as the natural allies of subversives and Socialists; their activities were curtailed after 1849 for being inconsistent with order and social peace. In this feverish political context, when a celebration of the popular was understood as an expression of support for the "democratic and social republic," it is not surprising that Courbet's works were received with fear and hostility. "Socialist painting," one critic said of Courbet's Salon entries in 1851; "democratic and popular," said another; "an engine of revolution," exclaimed a third.

What appears to have most disturbed conservative critics about Courbet's art, and what prompted these and other charges, was its "deliberate ugliness," which meant its embrace of both a popular ("ugly") content and a popular (working-class) Salon audience. Artwork and audience waltzed in a strange and morbid syncopation, critics of the Salon suggested, and vainglorious Courbet was dancing-
GUSTAVE COURBET  *Peasants of Flagey. Returning From the Fair* 149, 817 x 91 (206 x 275)

ROSALI BOÉHUR  *Plowing in the Nièmois. The Dressing of the Vines* 1849, 69 x 88 (175 x 261.2)
master. After surveying the critical response to the artist's trilogy, T. J. Clark summarized Courbet's historic achievement: "He exploited high art—its techniques, its size and something of its sophistication—in order to revive popular art... He made an art which claimed, by its scale and its proud title of 'History Painting', a kind of hegemony over the culture of the dominant classes." It should be mentioned that the claim was fragile, and turned out to be short-lived, but that to many at the time it appeared powerful enough to threaten the stability of the public sphere. Courbet's grand sophisticated popular art could not survive intact the c d'état and the inevitable dissipation of revolutionary consciousness that followed. Nevertheless, his trilogy has survived until the present as a model of artistic activism.

212 HIPPOLYTE-JEAN FLANDRIN  *Napoleon III 1860-61*. 83 x 58
(212 x 147)

213 GUSTAVE COURBET  *The Meeting* 1854. 50 x 58" (129 x 149)
Indeed, it may be argued that Courbet's three pantings and the scandal they precipitated proved to be the historical point of origin of avant-gardism as a cultural stance of ideological opposition and political contestation. The goal of the artistic avant-garde, from Courbet to the Surrealists, has been to intervene in the domain of real life by changing the language of art so as to turn passive spectators into active interlocutors. Like the many artists who followed-Manet, the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Seurat, and the Russian avant-garde-Courbet sought to effect this intervention by recourse to the "popular," that is to a cultural form or tradition from without the fixed canon of cultural legitimacy and ruling-class authority. Yet like those artists too, Courbet was ultimately unable to pursue his ambition to its promised end-events overtook him and the overwhelming assimilative powers of the dominant culture won out. Thus his trilogy also marks the onset of modernism as a formal procedure of esthetic self-reference and political abstention. The loss of an active and engaged oppositional public following the consolidation of the Second Empire (especially after 1857) led to the abstraction and generalization, as Thomas Crow has described it, of the antagonistic pictorial strategies adopted by Courbet in 1850. From this point forward, the interventionist goals of the avant-garde faded before the ultimate aim of modernism which-from Courbet to Frank Stella-was the achievement of artistic autonomy. Indeed, for Courbet, political insignificance always lurked just the other side of popular engagement. In July 1850, while crating his pictures for shipment to Paris, he wrote to the Weys:

The people have my sympathy. I must turn to them directly, I must get my knowledge from them, and they must provide me with a living. Therefore I have just embarked on the great wandering and independent life of the bohemian.

Don't be mistaken, I am not what you call a flimflammer. A flimflammer is an idler, he has only the appearance of what he professes to be, like the members of the Academy and like toothdrawers who have their own carriages and handle gold.

For Courbet as for later ambitious French and European artists, avant-garde and modern are the two sides of a coin that doesn't add up to a whole; the one connotes community, the other individuality; the one implies engagement, the other an ivory tower; the one invites bohemianism, the other flimflammetry. In fact, however, avant-garde and modern possess the same specific gravity since the technical procedures that make possible the first are the very ones that inevitably conjure up the second. My argument in sum is this: the interventionist stance of the avant-garde entailed a rejection of established academic procedures and an embrace of the formal simplicity, clarity, and flatness of popular art as found in nineteenth-century broadsheets, chapbooks, Epinal prints, and tradesmen's signs, as well as in the performances of saltimbangues, balladeers, and cafe singers. To employ such forms-such a new technique—was to carve out a new position for art within the means and relations of production of the day and thereby potentially to turn formerly alienated or passive working-class spectators into active participants. The cool self-regard of modernism entailed many of the same formal strategies, but in the absence of an oppositional public of like mind, the techniques were no more than vestiges of the dreamed interventionism. After 1852, avant-garde and modern marched in virtual lockstep. Courbet noticed this and made an allegory on the subject in 1855.

COURBET'S THE STUDIO OF THE PAINTER

On May 8, 1853 a decree was published announcing that the Salon of 1854 was canceled, but that a colossal art exhibition would be included among the exhibits of a great Universal Exposition to be held in 1855. The idea of the fair was to display to the world the marvelous industrial, cultural, and social progress achieved in France since Napoleon III's assumption of dictatorial powers in 1851. As a demonstration of his liberalism and magnanimity, the Emperor had his Intendant des beaux-arts, the Comte de Nieuwerkerke, invite Gustave Courbet to luncheon in order to propose that the artist cooperate with his government's plans, and submit to the Exposition jury a work of which the Comte and the Emperor would approve. In a letter to his friend and patron Bruyas, Courbet described his indignant response to this naked effort at cooptation:

You can imagine into what rage I flew after such an overture ... first, because he was stating to me that he was a government and because I did not feel that I was in any way a part of that government; and that I too was a government and that I defied his to do anything for mine that I could accept.... I went on to tell him that I was the sole judge of my painting; that I was not only a painter but a human being; that I had practiced painting not in order to make art for art's sake, but rather to win my intellectual freedom, and that by studying tradition I had managed to free myself of it; that I alone, of all the French artists of my time, had the power to represent and translate in an original way both my personality and my society.

Courbet's letter went on to describe the rest of his tense and abortive luncheon with Nieuwerkerke-additional sparring, dressings-down, and protestations of sincerity and pride-and the artist's intention to press ahead in his artistic project
"with full knowledge of the facts." What is perhaps most salient about the letter, however, is that it announces a kind of program for future work, in particular for the very painting that Courbet would make and then insinuate into the heart of the Exposition grounds, *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*. According to his remarks above, Courbet was seeking in his painting to explore the social and cultural position of the artist; to cast off "art for art’s sake" while nevertheless maintaining independence; and to explore the complexities of reality in order to "represent and translate ... my personality and my society." Courbet’s manifesto in paint was underway by November 1854 and finished six months later, just in time for it to be rejected by the Exposition jury.

*The Studio* is a vast (almost 11 by 20 feet) and somewhat lugubrious depiction of the artist’s atelier and its thirty-odd occupants. The composition is divided into two parts with the painter himself in the middle. He is seen painting a landscape and is accompanied (in perfect Oedipal fashion, as Linda Nochlin has said) by a small boy and nude woman who cast admiring glances. To the right are the painter’s "shareholders,” as he called them in a letter to Champfleury, that is, his various artistic and bohemian friends. These include Baudelaire (at the far right, reading), Champfleury (seated), and Bruyas (with the beard, in profile). To the left are "the people, misery, poverty, wealth, the exploited and the exploiters, the people who live off death." The identification of this group is less clear, but it appears to include Louis Napoleon (seated, accompanied by spaniels), the Minister of State Achille Fould (standing with cask, at far left, and described by the artist as "a Jew whom I saw in England"), the late regicide Lazare Carnot (in white coat and peaked hat), and perhaps the European revolutionaries Garibaldi, Kossuth, and Kosciuszko. The upper half of *The Studio*, above the heads of all of the figures, consists of an expanse of brown paint ("a great blank wall") that inadequately covers the ghost of *The Peasants of Flagey*.

Denied the chance to display the puzzling *Studio* alongside his other accepted works, Courbet decided to erect a "Pavilion of Realism," in the form of a circus tent, on land just opposite the entrance to the Exposition. There he would display his new paintings as well as his most controversial older works, and steal the thunder from the officially sanctioned Ingres, Delacroix, Vernet, and Descamps, among others.

With the financial assistance of Bruyas, the "Pavilion of Realism" was indeed quickly built, but the public response was not what Courbet hoped for and planned: attendance was poor and the critics were largely indifferent. The most considered response to Courbet’s *Studio*, in fact, is found in the private diaries of Delacroix:

Paris, 3 August

Went to the Exposition, where I noticed the fountain that spouts artificial flowers.

I think all these machines are very depressing. I hate these contrivances that look as though they were producing remarkable effects entirely on their own volition.

Afterwards I went to the Courbet exhibition. He has reduced the price of admission to ten sous. I stayed there alone for nearly an hour and discovered a masterpiece in the picture they rejected ... In *The Studio* the planes are well understood, there is atmosphere, and in some passages the execution is really remarkable, especially the thighs and hips of the nude model and the breasts.... The only fault is that the picture, as he has painted it, seems to contain an ambiguity. It looks as though there were a real sky in the middle of the painting. They have rejected one of the most remarkable works of our time, but Courbet is not the man to be discouraged by a little thing like that.

Delacroix’s chief insights occur at the beginning and near the end of this passage. His remark about the "machines ... acting entirely on their own volition” constitutes a succinct account of "commodity fetishism,” a term coined and defined a few years later by Marx in *Capital* (1867) as the disguising of the "social relation between men ... [in] the fantastic form of a relation between things." The 1855 Exposition, which consisted primarily of the mass display of consumer goods and the machines that produced them, was indeed an early important landmark in the fetishization of commodities. It heralded the beginnings of a world that would increasingly identify progress with the rationalization of production, liberty with the freedom to consume standardized goods, and human intimacy with the market exchange of sex. Delacroix appears to have understood something of this historic aspect of the Exposition, and found it (with unusual understatement) depressing. Courbet’s picture was thus judged a triumph in opposition to this sobering exhibition of modernity.

Delacroix’s other insights into Courbet’s *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* are contained in his comments about the "remarkable" execution of the thighs, hips, and breasts of the nude and the "ambiguity [of] a real sky in the middle of the picture." In these few lines, the Romantic painter has encapsulated the woman/nature dyad that constituted Courbet’s personal response to the dispiriting forces of modernization on display at the Exposition. For Courbet, woman and nature are the "real" touchstones for the personal and political "allegory" that began in 1848 and ended with the exhibition of 1855.

The nude woman in *The Studio* (as Delacroix and Courbet both wrote) is a model and nothing more: she is not Venus.
214 GUSTAVE COURBET  The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine 1856-7. 68 x 81 (173 x 206)

21: GUSTAVE COURBET  Sleepers 1866. 33, f 78, 113 x 201
216 GUSTAVE COURBET Seaside 1866. 21 1/2 x 25 1/2" (53.5 x 64 cm)

217 GUSTAVE COURBET Grand Panorama of the Jura With the Dents du Midi 1877. 59 x 82" (151 x 210 cm)