

CLEMENT GREENBERG



AVANT GARDE ATTITUDES

This essay from 1968 is a pendant to and correction of Greenberg's celebrated Avant Garde and Kitch of 1939. Here he expounds what came to be regarded as a defense or justification of his beleaguered position. In fact, his sense of the unique character of art is far from new or defensive; it goes back to his early years (as the recently-published Harold Letters attest. As the title suggests, to Greenberg avantgardism is an attitude, certainly not a style, and was important insofar as it was one of the driving forces behind modernism. But he senses its dissolution, as well, with its implications for high culture -- if everyone is out front, who lags behind? if there's no high, is everything middle?

Although this essay was delivered as a public lecture at a university, it points to Greenberg's separation from the academic world, which had become infested after the '60s with avant garde attitudes, as indeed, had popular culture. The question remains -- though no doubt a pointless one: are present-day academic and popular attitudes really avant, or is their avantness merely assumed?

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THE PREVALENT NOTION is that latter-day art is in a state of confusion. Painting and sculpture appear to be changing and evolving faster than ever before. Innovations follow closer and closer on one another and, because they don't make their exits as rapidly as their entrances, they pile up in a welter of eccentric styles, trends, tendencies, schools. Everything conspires, it would seem, in the interests of confusion. The different mediums are exploding: painting turns into sculpture, sculpture into architecture, engineering, theatre, environment, "participation". Not only the boundaries between the different arts, but the boundaries between art and everything that is not art are being obliterated. At the same time scientific technology is invading the visual arts and transforming them even as they transform one another. And to add to the confusion, high art is on the way to becoming popular art, and vice versa.

Is all this so? To judge from surface appearances, it might be so. A writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 14 March 1968 refers to ". . . that total confusion of all artistic values which prevails today". But by his very words this writer betrays where the real source of confusion lies: namely, in his own mind. Artistic value is one, not many. The only artistic value anybody has yet been able to point to satisfactorily in words is simply the goodness of good art. There are, of course, degrees of artistic goodness, but these are not different values or kinds of value. Now this one and only value, in its varying degrees, is the first and supreme principle of artistic order. By the same token it is the most relevant such principle. Of order established on its basis, art today shows as much as it ever has, Surface appearances may obscure or hide this kind of order, which is qualitative order, but they do not negate it, they do not render it any the less present. With the ability to tell the difference between good and bad, and between better and worse, you can find your way quite well through the apparent confusion of contemporary art. Taste, i.e., the exertions of taste, establish artistic order--now as before, now as always.

Things that purport to be art do not function, do not exist, as art until they are experienced through taste. Until then they exist only as empirical phenomena, as aesthetically arbitrary objects or facts. These, precisely, are what a lot of contemporary art gets taken for, and what many artists want their works to be taken for--in the hope, periodically renewed since Marcel Duchamp first acted on it fifty-odd years ago, that by dint of evading the reach of, taste while yet remaining in the context of art, certain kinds of contrivances will achieve unique existence and value. So far this hope has proved illusory. So far everything that enters the context of art becomes subject, inexorably, to the jurisdiction of taste--and to the ordering of taste. And so far almost all would--be non-art-in-the-context-of-art has fallen rather neatly into place in the order of inferior art. This is the order where the bulk of art production tends to find its place, in 1968 as in 1868--or 1768. Superior art continues to be something more or less exceptional. And this, this rather stable quantitative relation between the superior and inferior, offers as fundamentally relevant a kind of artistic order as you could wish.

But even so, if this were the only kind of order obtaining in new art today, its situation would be as unprecedented, still, as common opinion says it is. Unprecedented even if not confused. The good and the bad might differentiate themselves as clearly as ever, but there would still be a novel confusion of styles, schools, directions, tendencies. There would still be phenomenal if not aesthetic disorder. Well, even here experience tells me--and I have nothing else to rely on--that the phenomenal situation of art in this time is not all that new or unprecedented. Experience tells me that contemporary art, even when approached in purely descriptive terms, makes sense and falls into order in much the same way that art did in the past. Again, it is a question of getting through superficial appearances.

Approaching art in phenomenal and descriptive terms means approaching it, first of all, as style and as the history of style (neither of which, taken in itself, necessarily involves quality). Approached strictly as a matter of style, new art in the 1960's surprises you--if it does surprise you--not by its variety, but by the unity and even uniformity it betrays underneath all the appearances of variety. There are Assemblage, Pop, and Op; there are Hard Edge, Color Field, and Shaped Canvas; there are Neo-Figurative, Funky, and Environmental; there are Minimal, Kinetic, and Luminous; there are Computer, Cybernetic, Systems, Participatory--and so on. (One of the really new things about art in the 60's is the rash of labels in which it has broken out, most of them devised by artists themselves--which is likewise new; art-labeling used to be the affair of journalists.) Well, there are these manifestations in all their variegation, yet from a steady and detached look at them through their whole range some markedly common stylistic features emerge. Design or layout is almost always clear and explicit, drawing sharp and clean, shape or area geometrically simplified or at least faired and trued, color flat and bright or at least undifferentiated in value and texture within a given hue. Amid the pullulation of novelties, advanced art in the 60's subscribes almost unanimously to these canons of style--canons that Wolfflin would call linear.

Think by contrast of the canons to which avant-garde art conformed in the 50's: the fluid design or layout, the "soft" drawing, the irregular and indistinct shapes or areas, the uneven textures, the turbid color. It is as though avant-garde art in the 60's set itself at every point in opposition to the common stylistic denominators of Abstract Expressionism, art informel, tachisme. And just as these common denominators pointed to what was one and the same period style in the latter 40's and the 50's, so the common denominators of new art in the 60's point to a single, all-enveloping period style. And in both cases the period style is reflected in sculpture as well as in pictorial art.

That avant-garde art in the latter 40's and in the 50's was one, not many, in terms of style is now pretty generally recognized. Lacking the perspective of time, we find it harder to identify a similar stylistic unity in the art of this decade. It is there all the same. All the varied and ingenious excitements and "ex-

periments" of the last years, large and small, significant and trivial, flow within the banks of one, just one period style. Homogeneity emerges from what seemed an excess of heterogeneity. Phenomenal, descriptive, art-historical--as well as qualitative--order supervenes where to the foreshortening eye all seemed the antithesis of order.

If this gives pause, the pause should be taken advantage of to examine more closely another popular idea about art in this time: namely, that it moves faster than ever before. The art-historical style of this period that I have so sketchily described--a style that has maintained, and maintains, its identity under a multitude of fashions, vogues, waves, fads, manias--has been with us now for nearly a decade and seems to promise to stay with us a while longer. Would this show that art is moving and changing with unprecedented speed? How long did art-historical styles usually last in the past--even the more recent past?

In the present context I would say that the duration of an arthistorical style ought to be considered as the length of time during which it is a leading and dominating style, the time during which it is the vessel of the largest part of the important art being produced in a given medium within a given cultural orbit. This is also, usually, the time during which it attracts those younger artists who are most highly and seriously ambitious. With this definition as measure, it is possible to see as many as five, and maybe more, distinctly different styles or movements succeeding one another in French painting of the 19th century.

First there was David's and Ingres' Classicism. Then from about 1820 into the mid-1830's, Delacroix's Romanticism. Then Corot's naturalism; and then Courbet's kind. In the early 1860's Manet's flat and rapid version of naturalism led the way, to be followed within less than ten years by Impressionism. Impressionism held on as the leading manner until the early 1880's, where the Neo-Impressionism of Seurat and then the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh became the most advanced styles. Things get a little mixed up during the last twenty years of the century, though it may be only in seeming. At any rate Bonnard and Vuillard in their early, Nabi phase appear during the 1890's, and Fauvism enters the competition by at least 1903. As it looks, painting moved faster between the mid 1880's and 1910 or so than at any time within the scope of this hasty survey. Cubism took the lead away from Fauvism within hardly a half a dozen years of the latter's emergence. Only then did painting slow down again to what had been its normal rate of change between 1800 and the 1880's. For Cubism stayed on top until the mid-1920's. After that came Surrealism (I say Surrealism for lack of a better term: Surrealism's identity as a style still remains undetermined; and some of the best new painting and sculpture of the latter 20's and the 30's had nothing to do with it). And by the early 1940's Abstract Expressionism and its cognates, tachisme and art informel, were on the scene.

Admittedly, this historical rundown simplifies far too much. Art never proceeds that neatly. Nor is the rundown itself that accurate even within the limits set it. (What I see as hurried stylistic change between the 1880's and 1910 may turn out under longer scrutiny to be less hurried than it now looks. Larger and unexpected unities of style may become apparent--in fact, they already are apparent, but this is not the place to touch on them, despite all they would do to strengthen my argument here.) But, for all the exceptions that can rightly be taken to my chronological schema and what it implies, I do think that there is enough unquestionable evidence to support my point, which is that art-historical styles in painting (if not in sculpture) have tended since the beginning of the 19th century (if not before) to hold their positions of leadership for on an average of between ten and fifteen years.

The case of Abstract Expressionism does more than bear out this average; it exceeds it, and would go to show that art actually moved and changed more slowly over the last thirty years than in the hundred years previous. Abstract Expressionism in New York, along with tachisme and art informel in Paris, emerged in the early 40's and by the early 50's was dominating avant-garde painting and sculpture to a greater extent even than Cubism had in the 20's. (You weren't "with it" at all in those days unless you lathered your paint or roughed your surfaces; and in the 50's being "with it" began to matter ever so much more.) Well, Abstract Expressionism collapsed very suddenly back in the spring of 1962, in Paris as well as New York. It is true that it had begun to lose its vitality well before that, but nevertheless it continued to dominate the avant-garde scene, and by the time of its final retreat from that scene it had led art for close to twenty years. The collapse of Abstract Expressionism was as sudden as it was because it was long overdue, but even had its collapse come five or six years earlier (which is when it should have come) the span of time over which Abstract Expressionism held its leadership would still have been over the average for art styles or movements within the last century and a half.

Ironically enough, the seemingly sudden death of Abstract Expressionism in 1962 is another of the things that have contributed to the notion that art styles turn over much faster, and more abruptly, now than they used to. The fact is that the demise of Abstract Expressionism was an unusually lingering one. Nor did the art-historical style that displaced it come into view nearly so suddenly as the events of the spring of 1962 made it appear. The "hard" style of the 60's had already emerged with Ellsworth Kelly's first New York show in 1955, and with the renaissance of geometricizing abstract art in Paris in the mid-50's as we see it in Vasarely. Thus there was an overlapping in time. There was an overlapping or transition in terms of style too: the passage from the "painterly" to the "linear" can be witnessed in the painting of Barnett Newman, for example, and in the sculpture of David Smith, and in an artist like Rauschenberg (to name only Americans). That the scene of art, as distinct from the course of art has known abrupt changes and reversals lately should not mislead us as to

what has actually happened in art itself. (It is again ironical that the overlapping, the very gradualness involved in recent stylistic change, made for the impression of confusion, at least in the first years of the 60's, as much as anything else did.)

What at first did surprise me in the new art of the 60's was that its basic homogeneity of style could embrace such a great heterogeneity of quality, that such bad art could go hand in hand with such good art. It took me a while to remember that I had already been surprised by that same thing in the 50's. Then I had forgotten that, because of the subsequent collapse of Abstract Expressionism, which seemed to me to separate the good from the bad in the art of the 50's pretty correctly. All the same, some of my surprise at the great unevenness in quality of new art in the 60's remained, and remains. Something new is there that was not there in Abstract Expressionism when it first emerged.

All art styles deteriorate and, in doing so, become usable for hollow and meretricious effects. But no style in the past seems to have become usable for such effects while it was still an up-and-coming one. That is, as best as I can remember. Not the sorriest *pasticheur* or bandwagon-jumper of Impressionism, Fauvism, or Cubism in their first years of leadership fell below a certain level of artistic probity. The vigor and the difficulty of the style at the time simply would not let them. Maybe I don't know enough of what happened in those days. I will allow for that and still maintain my point. The new "hard" style of the 60's established itself by producing original and vigorous art. This is the way new styles have generally established themselves. But what was new, in scheme, about the way that the 60's style arrived was that it did so carrying not only genuinely fresh art but also art that pretended to be fresh, and was able to pretend to be that, as in times past only a style in decline would have permitted. Abstract Expressionism started out with both good and bad, but not until the early 1950's did it lend itself, as a style, to specious as distinct from failed art. The novel feature of the "hard" style of the 60's is that it did this from the first. This fact says nothing necessarily compromising about the best "hard-style" art. That best is equal to the best of Abstract Expressionism. But the fact itself would show that something really new, in scheme, has happened in the new art of the 60's.

This schematically new thing is what, I feel, accounts for the greater nervousness of art opinion that marks the 60's. One knows what is "in" at any given moment, but one is uneasy about what is "out". It was not that way in the 50's. The heroes of painting and sculpture in that period profiled themselves against a background of followers fairly early on, and for the most part they remained--and have remained--heroes. There was less question then than now of competing tendencies or positions within the common style. Just who and what will remain from the 60's, just which of the competing sub-styles will prove out as of lasting value--this remains far more uncertain. Or at least it

does for most critics, museum people, collectors, art buffs, and artists themselves--for most, I say, if not exactly for all. This uncertainty may help explain why critics have lately begun to pay so much more attention to one another than they used to, and why even artists pay them more attention.

Another cause of the new uncertainty may be the fact that avantgarde opinion has since the mid-50's lost a compass bearing that had served it reliably in the past. There used to be self-evidently academic art, the art of the salons and the Royal Academy, against which to take position. Everything directed against or away from academic art was in the right direction; that was once a minimal certainty. The academy was still enough there in Paris in the 20's, and perhaps even in the 30's, to assure avant-garde art of its own identity (André Lhote would still attack a salon exhibition now and then during those years). But since the war, and especially since the 50's, confessedly academic art has fallen out of sight. Today the only conspicuous fine art--the exceptions, however numerous, are irrelevant--is avant-garde or what looks like or refers to avant-garde art. The avant-garde is left alone with itself, and in full possession of the "scene".

This hardly means that the kind of impulse and ambition that once went into avowedly academic art has now become extinct. Far from it. That kind of impulse and that kind of ambition now find their way into avant-garde, or rather nominally avant-garde, art. All the sloganizing and programming of advanced art in the 60's, and the very proliferation of it, are as though designed to conceal this. In effect, the avant-garde is being infiltrated by the enemy, and has begun to deny itself. Where everything is advanced nothing is; when everybody is a revolutionary the revolution is over.

Not that the avant-garde ever really meant revolution. Only the journalism about it takes it to mean that--takes it to mean a break with the past, a new start, and all that. The avant-garde's principal reason for being is, on the contrary, to maintain continuity: continuity of standards of quality--the standards, if you please, of the Old Masters. These can be maintained only through constant innovation, which is how the Old Masters had achieved standards to begin with. Until the middle of the last century innovation in Western art had not had to be startling or upsetting; since then, for reasons too complex to go into here, it has had to be that. And now in the 60's it is as though everybody had finally--finally--caught on to this: caught on not only to the necessity of innovation, but also to the necessity--or seeming necessity of advertising innovation by making it startling and spectacular.

Today everybody innovates. Deliberately, methodically. And the innovations are deliberately and methodically made startling. Only it now turns out not to be true that all startling art is necessarily innovative or new art. This is what the 60's have finally revealed, and this revelation may indeed be the newest thing about the bulk of what passes for new art in the 60's. It has become ap-

parent that art can have a startling impact without really being or saying anything startling--or new. The character itself of being startling, spectacular, or upsetting has become conventionalized, part of safe good taste. A corollary of this is the realization that the aspects under which almost all artistic innovation has made itself recognized these past hundred years have changed, almost radically. What is authentically and importantly new in the art of the 60's comes in softly as it were, surreptitiously in the guises, seemingly, of the old, and the unattuned eye is taken aback as it isn't by art that appears in the guises of the self-evidently new. No artistic rocketry, no blank-looking box, no art that excavates, litters, jumps, or excretes has actually startled unwary taste in these latter years as have some works of art that can be safely described as easel-paintings and some other works that define themselves as sculpture and nothing else. Art in any medium, boiled down to what it does in the experiencing of it, creates itself through relations, proportions. The quality of art depends on inspired, felt relations or proportions as on nothing else.

There is no getting around this. A simple, unadorned box can succeed as art by virtue of these things; and when it fails as art it is not because it is merely a plain box, but because its proportions, or even its size, are uninspired, unfelt. The same applies to works in any other form of "novelty" art: kinetic, atmospheric, light, environmental, "earth", "funky", etc., etc. No amount of phenomenal, describable newness avails when the internal relations of the work have not been felt, inspired, discovered. The superior work of art, whether it dances, radiates, explodes, or barely manages to be visible (or audible or decipherable), exhibits, in other words, rightness of "form".

To this extent art remains unchangeable. Its quality will always depend on inspiration, and it will never be able to take effect as art except through quality. The notion that the issue of quality could be evaded is one that never entered the mind of any academic artist or art person. It was left to what I call the "popular" avant-garde to be the first to conceive it. That kind of avant-garde began with Marcel Duchamp and with Dada. Dada did more than express a war-time despair of traditional art and culture; it also tried to repudiate the difference between high and less than high art; and here it was a question less of wartime despair than of a revulsion against the arduousness of high art as insisted upon by the "unpopular" avantgarde, which was the real and original one. Even before 1914 Duchamp had begun his counter-attack on what he called "physical" art by which he meant what is today vulgarly termed "formalist" art.

Duchamp apparently realized that his enterprise might look like a retreat from "difficult" to "easy" art, and his intention seems to have been to undercut this difference by "transcending" the difference between good and bad in general. (I don't think I'm over-interpreting him here.) Most of the Surrealist painters joined the "popular" avantgarde, but they did not try to hide their own retreat from the difficult to the easy by claiming this transcendence; they apparently

did not feel it was that necessary to be "advanced"; they believed that their kind of art was simply better than the difficult kind. And it was the same with the Neo-Romantic painters of the 30's. Yet Duchamp's dream of going "beyond" the issue of artistic quality continued to hover in the minds at least of art journalists. When Abstract Expressionism and art informel appeared they were widely taken to be a kind of art that had at last managed to make value discriminations irrelevant. And that seemed the most advanced, the furthest-out, the most avant-garde feat that art had yet been able to perform.

Not that Duchamp's ideas were particularly invoked at the time. Nor did Abstract Expressionism or art informel belong properly with the "popular" avant-garde. Yet in their decline they did create a situation favorable to the return or revival of that kind of avantgardism. And return and revive it did in New York, notably with Jasper Johns in the latter 50's. Johns is--rather was--a gifted and original artist, but the best of his paintings and bas-reliefs remain "easy" and certainly minor compared with the best of Abstract Expressionism. Yet in the context of their period, and in idea, they looked equally "advanced". And under cover of John's idea Pop art was able to enter and give itself out as perhaps even more "'advanced"--without, however, claiming to reach the same levels of quality that the best of Abstract Expressionism had. The art journalism of the 60's accepted the "easiness" of Pop art implicitly, as though it did not matter, and as though such questions had become old-fashioned and obsolete. Yet in the end Pop art has not succeeded in dodging qualitative comparisons, and it suffers from them increasingly with every day that passes.

Its vulnerability to qualitative comparisons--not its "easiness" or minor quality as such--is what is seen by many younger artists as constituting the real failure of Pop Art. This failure is what, in effect, "novelty" art intends to remedy. (And this intention, along with other things, reveals how much "novelty" art derives from Pop art in spirit and outlook.) The retreat to the easy from the difficult is to be more knowingly, aggressively, extravagantly masked by the guises of the difficult. The idea of the difficult--but the mere idea, not the reality or substance--is to be used against itself. By dint of evoking that idea the look of the advanced is to be achieved and at the same time the difference between good and bad overcome. The idea of the difficult is evoked by a row of boxes, by a mere rod, by a pile of litter, by projects for Cyclopean landscape architecture, by the plan for a trench dug in a straight line for hundreds of miles, by a half-open door, by the cross-section of a mountain, by stating imaginary relations between real points in real places, by a blank wall, and so forth. As though the difficulty of getting a thing into focus as art, or of gaining physical access to it, or of visualizing it, were the same as the difficulty that belonged to the first experience of a successfully new and deeply original work of art. And as if aesthetically extrinsic, merely phenomenal or conceptual difficulty could reduce the difference between good and bad in art to the point where it became irrelevant. In this context the Milky Way might be offered as a work of art too.

The trouble with the Milky Way, however, is that, as art, it is banal. Viewed strictly as art, the "sublime" usually does reverse itself and turn into the banal. The 18th century saw the "sublime" as transcending the difference between the aesthetically good and the aesthetically bad. But this is precisely why the "sublime" becomes aesthetically, artistically banal. And this is why the new versions of the "sublime" offered by "novelty" art in its latest phase, to the extent that they do "transcend" aesthetic valuation, remain banal and trivial instead of simply unsuccessful, or minor. (In any case "sublime" effects in art suffer from a genetic flaw: they can be concocted--produced, that is, without inspiration.)

Here again, the variety of nominally advanced art in the 60's shows itself to be largely superficial. Variety within the limits of the artistically insignificant, of the aesthetically banal and trivial, is itself artistically insignificant.

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