

# CLEMENT GREENBERG



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## TASTE

*Transcript of a talk given by Clement Greenberg at Western Michigan University, January 18, 1983.. Includes answers to questions from the audience. Thanks to [John Link](#).*

*The objectivity of taste is central to Greenberg's criticism -- one of the cornerstones, as it were, of his "critical theory." It's also a central bone of contention for his many critics and detractors, who in some cases misunderstand the concept, in others disagree with (or strongly disapprove of) Kant. In the 20th Century the concept of taste was often conflated with the notion of personal preference and rather elaborate and unconvincing arguments were brought forth to deny the objectivity of taste and to elevate something like personal preference to a kind of pseudo-universality. As this lecture makes clear, Greenberg held fast to Kant and objectivity.*

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**WELL TASTE!** **TASTE** is a word that became compromised during the 19th century. It was in good standing in the 18th, when a philosopher like Kant, and English philosophers of aesthetics took for granted that that's the faculty you exerted in experiencing art and experiencing anything aesthetically. And then in the 19th century it wore down into something that had to do with food, clothes, furniture, decoration, and so forth, and became very much compromised. Now I think it's a much handier word than aesthetic judgement or faculty of taste, faculty, and that it should be rehabilitated, if only because, while we can't define it, we recognize it. And it's got a nice old-fashioned flavor to it that I particularly like. And one other thing, taste is intuitive and nobody yet knows what goes on in intuition. The psychologists haven't been able to take intuition apart, nor have the philosophers. Well, by the same token, nobody yet has been able to take apart art or aesthetic experience. Well, there is talk, especially nowadays, about swings of taste, turns of taste, and so forth. True taste doesn't swing, doesn't veer. The very notion of taste swinging is anomalous. True taste, genuine taste, develops, expands, grows. It changes only insofar as it corrects itself, true taste. And it doesn't do that temperamentally, but as part of the process of its growth. Growth means increasing openness, catholicity, inclusion more than exclusion. As you go along, get older and look at more and more art you find yourself liking more and more art, without having to lower your standards. Taste refines itself; it's true. It discriminates more as it develops, and yet at the same time, paradoxically, it becomes opener. Open in this way: that you look at Hindu sculpture, say, in the same way, by and large, as you look at contemporary art or the art of the old masters or any other kind of art. And you look, it's hoped, with the same honesty.

One of the afflictions of art and of taste is the untruth you may tell yourself about the operations of your taste, or let's say, the results of your taste and the untruth you may tell to others. You're told that Raphael was a great painter and you can't see it yourself, but since you've been told it, you've read it everywhere and so forth, you look at a Raphael and you may look at a failed one and say, "well, it's got to be good because Raphael is so famous, the authorities say he's so good." That's one of the worst ways in which to begin or to continue looking at art. On the other hand, when the authorities do say that someone's good and you can't see it for yourself, it does help, it's almost essential, that you go back and look again, and again. You may still decide that this particular Raphael is no good, but, at least, you've tried and you've been honest, and with yourself above all. I've known collectors who owned Picassos who really preferred Norman Rockwell. If only they had owned up to it, it would have been way better for the life of art, and not that I think Rockwell is so negligible, I have to use his name because everybody knows it. He wasn't that bad of a painter, incidentally, but there are people who lie to themselves that way, and I don't think that that helps art, in general.

Now, taste in the Western world has usually functioned in a pretty normal way, I would say. The resistance to modernist art that started with modernism, it-

self, was new -- the conflict between the going, "cultivated" taste and this new art which happened to be the best art of its time -- but taste itself operated in a normal, and I would say in an honest way. You could say that the people who resisted modernism didn't try hard enough, as I think they didn't. But in the end, after a generation or so, each phase of modernism in painting and sculpture and the other arts overcame, and somehow the resistance faded. But there was already present one fallacious habit -- I can't call it a fallacy -- the business of rejecting a body of art *in toto*, instead of looking at the works one by one. There were classifications -- this happened with the Impressionists and they were dismissed wholesale, at first, and then they became accepted, maybe wholesale. That "fallacy," the business of approaching art generically or categorically, or classificatorily -- that's a bad word, but classification pertains today more than it ever did before. There's a reason for it and there's a history behind it and hardly anybody here is old enough to have witnessed that history in person. I don't think enough people know that modernism as an idea, the whole notion of it, the notion of the avant-garde, of advanced art, really triumphed in a general way. In a wide way, only towards the end of the 1950's and the beginning of the 60's. And that had to do, in the first place, with Pollock's consecration. Pollock really began to go over around 1960; his pictures really began to sell then. He was dead -- had been dead for a half-decade by then -- and that was a kind of turning point. Together with that came Barnett Newman's almost apotheosis which took place '59, '60-'61.

Now Pollock was first greeted when he went "all-over" -- when he began to drip and pour -- by his fellow artists as well by the art public as breaking with art as it had been hitherto. His paintings were thought to be uncontrolled effusions which had nothing to do with painting as such, painting as a discipline; it wasn't a question of liking or not liking them and, finally, his name hung on. He became notorious before he ever became famous, and in the end, there he was: Pollock was this big name, with this big -- not myth, not legend, this big reputation. When Newman had his first two shows in '50 and '51 in New York I remember some of his fellow painters saying to me, didn't I think that Newman was out to kill painting, that this was the death of painting, this was worse than Pollock? How could painting go on if Newman's kind of painting stuck; if this was considered painting? Well, Newman didn't show again for another eight years. He showed again in '59 and for some reason, his success had already been prepared. His show made him a great name and he was taken for granted as a great painter. In fact, the school of Minimalism took off from his example, as some of the Minimalists, themselves, say. And what coincided with this was the collapse, the spring of '62, of second generation Abstract Expressionism. It was as though overnight, between February and May '62, it was wiped out; it was truly dramatic, and I don't use the word dramatic lightly, and that, too, shook cultivated art opinion and for some reason the European, especially the French, equivalent of Abstract Expressionism, "*l'art autre*" or *tachisme* collapsed at the same time -- all in the early '60's. Now it's true the first generation Abstract Expressionists, their reputations floated to

the top in a short while, but in '62 Pop Art became the reigning movement in this country, and the second American art tendency to make an impression in Europe.

Now, certain conclusions were drawn from these events, and from the kind of art involved in them. Even before these conclusions were drawn, it began to be recognized -- more widely than ever before -- that by and large the best art of the preceding three-quarters of a century had been modernist, avant-garde. Some people had recognized that all along, but this time, in the early 60's, the recognition seemed to come with a bang and younger people, for the first time, took the recognition as a matter of course. There was no longer any arguing about it. Then, Pollock's success, Newman's success, furthered the conclusion that the reason for modernism's success in the past was that it had shocked prevailing taste. That it had been far out, that it had been new, new, new, and that that was probably -- this all took place rather unconsciously or subconsciously, that you made your mark in art history by provoking shock and resistance and by doing the unexpected. And doing it in a spectacular way. Well, then, now Pop Art wasn't so much a product of these conclusions, I don't think. I think Pop Art was simply and not so simply a revolt against hard art. I'll go into that a bit later. But after that, Minimal, Conceptual, Inter-media, Performance, Pattern -- all in pursuit of the far out. That was your guarantee of getting into art history. There weren't mercenary motives here. The artists I know -- of course they all wanted to make a living like other normal people, but they wanted above all to get into art history. And that's rather normal, too.

Now, some of the logic, the succession of trends or fashions (and I call them fashions advisedly) like Pop and like Neophotographic Realism and the New Expressionism, proceeded on the logic that if you turned around on the kind of new art that had immediately preceded you, that would somehow count, that would be significant, that had a value in itself. Photographic Realism said, in effect: "we're going to shock you by doing the thing that's been anathema since the mid-19th century. We're going to stay closer to nature, we're going to stay as close to nature as photography does, and we all know that's awful, and that's precisely why we're going to do it." Pattern Painting or Decorative Pattern Painting, now that was a misunderstanding a little bit because everybody knew that to be decorative was to be bad -- in spite of Matisse, in spite of Pollock, in spite of ever so many other modernist painters of the past who were first rejected as decorative. But now after Photographic Realism, "we're going to go in for decoration in its most decorative, most elementary form, as it were. We're going to paint patterns simply because that, too, has been anathema all along, as far as picture making is concerned." Now each trend more or less turned on the preceding one, and so fashion went in the world of contemporary art. But the trouble or the damage of all this was not done so much to art, itself -- good art kept being produced all along, and still is, superior art. The damage was to taste, the taste of the supposedly cultivated art world, that part of the art world that interested itself in current art. It came to be taken as

a matter of course that without knowing it you judged art by the class to which it belonged. If it didn't belong to the class of the "new" or the "experimental" (I hate that word, experimental), if it wasn't new enough, if it wasn't new in a conspicuous, obvious way, it was to be dismissed. John Russell in the *New York Times*, someone I respect a good deal personally but don't think much of him as a critic, would write about, let's say, Darby Bannard, and say "oh, he had this and he had this, but maybe he's repetitive, maybe he's dated." Now datedness is not a valid aesthetic judgment. It doesn't say whether art is good or bad. Dated art can be as good as up-to-date art. (There are qualifications there; but I won't go into them.) You can't dismiss a work of art because it's derivative. There may be a certain degree beyond which derivativeness does hurt art, but derivativeness as such, doesn't, isn't crucial to the quality of a work.

One more thing before I get back to true taste: what struck me, maybe surprised me more than anything else in the audience for new art was its patience with boredom. Conceptual Art was an example of that, quasi-Conceptual art, some kinds of Minimal Art. And it was precisely that because people were bored that they thought the stuff had something -- that it really had something and they were missing it -- and the fact that it was there to be missed meant that it was real new and really important. If they got it, if they got the art, if they enjoyed it some, it was probably slick, it was probably facile and dated. Now, I'm not exaggerating here; this is literally reporting things I've heard.

But back to true taste. True taste in any of the arts focuses on one thing at a time. It doesn't classify. It doesn't accept a class or a genre or a species; it doesn't reject. It looks at one thing at a time. Now I noticed long ago how people would fail to look at one thing at a time. A case of very uneven artists, and an artist who went in several different directions at once like Hans Hofmann. His fellow painters would come in, take one glance at the show and dismiss it and say "well, if he's working in so many different directions he's not serious in any one of them and he's probably being influenced all over the lot." And so forth. The same thing would happen with David Smith who was likewise. A very uneven, great artist, too, and whose overinstalled shows would look like underbrush, the pieces going in so many different directions and too close to one another. You had to work to see a Smith show, had to look at one thing at a time isolated from the next but I noticed that there's a widespread reluctance to do that. Somebody'd walk in, look around and say, "oh, it's no good." [That's what happened in those days when you couldn't] make head or tail out of it. After the early 60's if you couldn't make head or tail out of it, it had to be good. Now, the business of the new for its own sake has erased distinctions of quality. I remember 20 years ago in London -- as long ago as that -- being considered an old fashioned connoisseur because I said there were good Pollocks and bad Pollocks and there were good Rothkos and bad Rothkos and already, at that time, the students at the Royal Art College thought that was beside the point. You didn't look at art that way anymore and

make discriminations of that sort. You bought Pollock *in toto* and you bought so and so *in toto*, or you rejected so and so *in toto*. Now, the failure to make distinctions of quality and the business of classifying, of experiencing art in terms of classes -- the new and the not new -- has also brought on, as you all know, a kind of permissiveness. I'm not saying anything particularly new, but some-thing that I don't think is repeated enough.

Now there's even a tendency to make art, especially in painting, that's ugly. I mean deliberately ugly, which sounds like a contradiction in terms, but there's one artist named Malcolm Morley, he's an Englishman originally who lives over here now, who's a huge success with his oil paintings (his watercolors show he can paint) which go for shocking prices. I'm told his last show just sold out. Morley hardly makes any bones about the fact that he's trying to make ugly pictures, because that would top everything in the way of the new. Well, in a sense it does. As respectable a critic as Hilton Kramer has written that he thinks Morley probably the most important of the New Expressionists. The New Expressionists -- they're the latest success. By way of parenthesis, let me call to your notice the speed with which these trends displace one another. It's supposed to be because art moves faster now than it used to and that's a fallacy, a misconception; it's not so. On the most superficial level, on the most conspicuous level, fashions do succeed one another faster than they used to. They jostle one another more closely. But that's the *level* they're on. At any rate, Pattern Painting was supposed to be the thing two years ago. You can read about it, you could tell by reports of the prices it brought, but then, overnight, along came these Europeans, the Italians, Clemente, Chia, some Germans, Lupertz, Kiefer, Baselitz (I forget the other names), and [the Americans] Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and they push Pattern Painting right out of the picture. All of sudden it's straight painting for a change: you no longer had to put three-dimensional elements into pictorial context to look new. This was straight painting. Pattern Painting went out overnight. The Italians, also wanting to be very advanced, introduced representation -- human figures etc. and there's nothing wrong with that -- but they were put in, you can tell they were put in because it was known that this was naughty. And the same with Schnabel, the same with Salle. Now, the Italians, in my opinion, don't paint so well. I happen to think that Schnabel puts paint on well, but there's more to making pictures than putting paint on well, in handling the medium. You also have to make a picture, which is the most difficult thing, as it was for the old masters, as it was for Pollock, as it was for Mondrian, as it was for Newman -- putting a picture together. That's not just a technical question; you don't have to know the inside of art in order to appreciate a unity, something that sticks together and something that doesn't. The Europeans and Schnabel and Salle and Morley suddenly don't have to make pictures. All they have to do is put paint and maybe a little figuration on a rectangular surface or oval surface -- it doesn't matter. Schnabel puts crockery in his pictures or seashells or so forth, but that's beside the point. ([It's possible to] make great art doing that, but the

trouble with Schnabel is that when he puts crockery in, he usually puts it in in an academic way, following Pollock "all-over.")

The point is going back to straight painting to show you don't have to make pictures anymore. I'd rather see preposterous sculpture as you see so often in the Whitney Biennials or in Soho. For me that's not as bad as seeing people paint without making pictures. I feel "good God," I could paint some; I wish I'd enjoyed that liberty. Then there wouldn't have been any struggle when I tried to paint abstract 30 years ago; I'd have just put things together on a support. Now, it suffices that Schnabel and the Europeans, the New Expressionists, look new -- and they are new; with all their academic elements they're new works of art I'd never seen. Now, [newness] is enough: people have said to me, "It's something new. It's something new." [Today] that's what matters most.

Now art, the production of art, goes on in surprising ways, or surprising given the context. Ever since Manet's time, ever since the 1860's the new art that got attention first was inferior art. Any painter or sculptor, or any writer for that matter as T. S. Eliot can testify, or any composer who went over fast, didn't last. (That's an unconscious rhyme.) That's the record. I don't say it has to be that way, but the record is unbroken. And those who go over fast occupy the foreground of attention as far as current art is concerned. That's been true since Manet's time, since the 1860's. Meanwhile, the best new art is there in the background, almost behind the scenes. And that's what the record says too. We look back at the path and things tend to telescope into one another. We think that Picasso went over very fast and so forth; but that's not true. Degas said sometime in the late 1890's that "in our time you didn't succeed." Picasso could have said the same thing. So could Matisse. So could Pollock. So could Newman. So could David Smith. So could Anthony Caro. In our time, meaning by our time before we were 40 or before we were 35 or before we were 50, in our time you didn't succeed; "*Dan notre temp on n'arrive pas.*" That remains as true today as ever. But art has its malice. That's one of the many things to relish about art. After the early 1960's, there was a general resolve that we art lovers weren't going to repeat the mistakes of the past with regard to new and advanced art. We were going to run to greet it, as a matter of fact. Nothing is going to be too new, too scandalous or too shocking for us not to accept and, if we can afford it, buy. That became the rule, I'd say, a rule that still pertains. "I'm not going to be an old fuddy duddy, I'm going to keep up with the newest thing. Because of those 50 years of uninterrupted errors made by the cultivated art world, from Manet's time on; 60 years, more. No more! We're not going to be caught out again. If it's new enough, it's good. And if it isn't new we know it's academic, it's to be discarded. We're not going to go for Bouguereau again. We're not going to go for Gerome again" -- good Lord, Gerome wasn't such a bad painter when he stayed small. And now they know enough to reject the best new painting, art with its malice has contrived to make the best new painting come along rather softly. It comes as straight painting, so called. It comes along as straight sculpture. Abstract, for the most

part, yes, but not always. But it's coming, as it were, too stealthily. It looks too dated to people, like John Russell, who don't look hard enough. And so there's a lot, relatively, a lot of good new art being produced in our time, and by young people, too. Curiously enough, among painters, an unusually high proportion of women. I'm not saying that as a sop to the feminists in the audience.

But as I indicated, art moves more slowly than it used to. These fads and fashions are all in the foreground, they're not part of the bottom history of art as Manet and the Impressionists and the Post Impressionists and the Fauves and the Cubists and the Abstract Expressionists and the Stijlests were. No, these fads and fashions, these far-out things, they're part of the froth on top, the froth that's been with us since the 1850's. And it's not as good froth as it used to be because then there were good painters like Gerome and Meissonnier or Landseer even and others, who at least when they stayed small were good. No, the down underneath art periods change more slowly than they have at any time since the 1820's. Main trends, I don't like to use that word "main" right now, but I mean still all that [it implies], have taken longer to wear themselves out as the leading movements for ambitious, serious, younger artists. Abstract Expressionism lasted 20 years. Fauvism lasted five. Cubism, a dozen years. The '60s have been with us for 22 years now, because I consider everything since Pop Art the '60s. Art at bottom, the best art, drags its feet, as it were. That's nothing against it, I mean that's not a value judgement, but it drags its feet. The '60s are still with us! That isn't the most important thing I have to say, but I'll conclude on that and welcome your questions.

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Q: I would like you to expand on your ideas of what is good art. Is art good in relationship to the societal context, and with that is dated art important because of its historical context? What is the relationship of good art as a universal, as a specific, in relation to individual pieces of art in their societal context.

G: That question depends on a further question, of whether how can you tell the difference between good and bad art. That's what it really depends on. Nobody knows! I don't want to be short with you, but I have to be. That's an unanswerable question Everybody has to acquire taste for himself. You don't learn taste from someone else, you don't learn it through communication. You only acquire taste through your own experience. By the same token, the difference between good and bad in art, in any art, any medium, is not something that can be formularized, that can be defined, that can be pointed to as a rule that can be applied. So your question in the end has to stay up in the air.



Q: How can you say that some art is good and some art is bad other than for your own self? I prefer this or that piece of art. Now you were just saying a while ago that this painter was good when he stayed small, insinuating that he was bad when he got larger. Now, you are making a judgement and I'd like to know why you can do it.

G: How I arrived at that? May I interrupt you, I'm going to sound rude. How do I arrive at the judgement? Through my taste which is intuitive and may be wrong. But as Kant said -- I have to quote him over and over again, he took care of these questions 200 odd years ago -- you can't demonstrate an aesthetic judgement the way you can demonstrate that two plus two equals four, or a scientific proposition. You can't verify it, because taste is subjective. But as Kant said again, though he didn't solve this I don't think, it's also intersubjective. That's one of those polysyllabic words I don't like either, but I can't find a better one. Somehow there's an amazing amount of agreement over the course of time about the good and the bad. It's amazing, given how subjective taste seems to be. We all agree (I'll bring Raphael's name in again) that if you can't see how good Raphael is when he is good, you can't see painting. I'll go further, and this is going to sound as though I'm patting myself on the back, but it's the example I have closest to hand. When I was in Japan I got far more interested in their old art than in their new. I made a point of seeing as much of the older Japanese art as I could as I went around Japan and then checked [what I liked against] what the Japanese thought. Now, when it came to contemporary Japanese art, recent art, we didn't get anywhere, but it came to the older masters [there was] a surprising amount of agreement. Here was I, a Westerner, coming to a country I'd never been to before, not knowing the language and yet -- and here I'm patting myself on the back -- being able to discriminate between the good and bad, to their surprise. And no, I didn't set it up for myself, by saying "I like so and so and so and so;" that would have defeated my purpose. I asked them what they thought of so and so, what they thought of (likely Hasegawa Tohaku) or (likely Nonomura Sotatsu) and what they thought of medieval Japanese and so forth. I had a similar experience in India a year later -- the fact that some of the very best Indian sculptures, the Hindu sculpture done between the 13th and 15th centuries, no, the 12 and 15th centuries in Southern India. Well sure, the connoisseurs of Indian art knew that, but I found it out for myself. I wasn't surprised at the agreement, but it did show me something, that the cultural barriers in certain arts aren't that formidable. Now there are all sorts of arguments: How can you get at it? You don't know the social context; you don't know the religious context; you don't know the cultural and so forth. I don't care! We go and look at Paleolithic painting in South of France and in North of Spain and we see there some damn good painting. (They don't make pictures, by the way, they just make images.) There's some damn good painting on those walls. And I don't have to have been a Cro-Magnon to know, or to know anything about the Cro-Magnons to appreciate them. And many other people don't. Now that's a fact of experience. The questions you ask are unanswerable, really. Marx, who's responsible

for a lot of these mistaken questions, himself knew better. Marx laid off art. He said his ideas had nothing to do with art. He was a sucker for Ancient Greek art, the worst as well as the best, but that was beside the point. The questions are unanswerable. You know sometimes you can enjoy unanswerable questions. And there's nothing mystic about it, either, or mystical. That's the best answer I can make to your question. And if you're interested enough, read Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and then read Croce. If you're interested enough, read Croce's *Aesthetics*. You'll see far better minds than mine wrestle with these questions and come up with no good answers.

Q: Do you think that the succession of popular movements in visual arts that have occurred since the late 50's have been generally an advantage to all of us to develop our tastes, or in general, a disadvantage?

G: I don't think it's been an advantage in any way except as one. As my daughter -- who's at college now and hadn't been particularly interested in art, hitherto, or not until the last two or three years -- said, art has become chic now. That's why there are 100 students in her art survey course. That's why down at Duke there are 300 students in an art survey course. 200 freshmen, you know. And that's about all I can see. Art's become lively, in a sense. It doesn't require much application to, I won't say enjoy, but to get titillated by it. But otherwise, I think that taste, in general -- cultivated taste, I'm talking about, not talking the taste of the majority who don't care about visual art, who care mostly about popular music, which is no criticism -- I don't think that the cultivated taste for current new art has improved. I think on the contrary, that it has deteriorated. Sad fact and I'm embarrassed by it because ever since I was old enough to write, get printed, and so forth, I would like to think that things have gone down hill. It was then the right attitude to have if you wanted to be highbrow. It's a paradoxical situation because, as Berenson observed in a monograph on the *Arch of Constantine* which was put up in Rome in the 4th century AD, it was recognized at that time that contemporary sculptors couldn't match the quality of sculptors of the past. And how did that recognition betray itself? Because they had to strip some reliefs off the *Column of Trajan* and stick it up on that arch. This is an example of where taste stayed alive but the production of art, the production of sculpture anyhow, I won't say that it's true of painting, went downhill. You would think [the production of] art were dependent on taste. Now Berenson, along with many others, said Graeco-Roman art went downhill because it was corrupted by Oriental influence and so forth. I say that if Oriental influence, so called corrupting Oriental influence, could penetrate Greek or Roman culture that way, there was something wrong with the culture, with the art; it was vulnerable. Now in our time, I think taste sinks monumentally, but I don't see art failing: the art in the background, the art that doesn't sell so much, that doesn't get much notice in the art press. What will be the outcome of this paradox, I don't know. You never predict, when it comes to art anyhow. That's another wonderful thing about art: you can't predict where the next good art's coming from, and I like that.

Q: I was wondering if the increased access to communication, to information, through the new developments in communication just recently, will hinder or help the development of taste in general?

G: Well, no, it shouldn't necessarily help; it shouldn't necessarily hurt; in itself it's a neutral factor. I see it as a negative factor in so far as trends spread worldwide too fast nowadays. You can see it here in student work at Western Michigan, from the art magazines. People didn't read art magazines that much 25 years ago. You may not know that. And even when they read them, they didn't pay that much attention to them. That's changed considerably over the last 25 years and I've gone to whatever colleges, whatever universities, student courses, so forth, since the early 60's. I've seen the latest New York trends catching on immediately, being repeated immediately in the work of undergraduates. I noticed the same thing in Europe where they have their own art magazines. And to that extent I think the speed of communications has been a negative factor. It's hurt more than it's helped. But in itself, it's neutral. I think that, also this has something to do with the crisis in art education, because you know since the triumph of abstract painting, since the real time of modernism, the old curricula have gone out. Students [in the past were] not supposed to express themselves; they learned to draw from life or from still lifes, or even how to handle paint, though that's not so tough. Art isn't taught like that anymore and so they, people who devise art curricula, are at a loss. This isn't true everywhere, but it's true most places. And, so you let the students express themselves. Abstract Expressionism did a lot of damage in that respect. And so off they go chasing the latest trends. What do you expect young people to do? I can see myself in college doing the same thing. I can see myself at the Art Students' League, which I attended, doing the same thing, with things the way they are now

Q: Do you think perhaps a moderation can be instilled, or some kind of a way of projecting the idea that you can take stuff with a grain of salt, or a chunk of salt could that be a solution?

G: In the hands of a forceful enough teacher, maybe. It would depend on the person, I hazard. Maybe -- and I say maybe. But now, I haven't taught art -- oh, I did for six weeks at Black Mountain, but there weren't undergraduates there anyhow. It would take a forceful character, one that got a lot of respect, to turn young people away from what they saw going over around them. Let me add to that: I think it's very hard for an aspiring artist -- or for any visual artist, cause I don't think visual art reproduces well enough no matter what -- to have some contact with a place where a lot of art is shown, a lot of current art and old art too. And in this country that means New York; in France it means Paris; in England, London. Germany is different, they've got several centers. But what I saw happen in New York in the latter 50's when the avant-garde really won, after '55 when Abstract Expressionism triumphed, ever so many young artists, most of them from outside New York coming, and suc-

cumbing to the general trend because they were too young to stand alone. I think New York destroyed artists. I think it still does. My advice would be to live about 50 to 100 miles away from New York, if you can take it, and come to New York often enough to see not only the best of current art but to see the kind of art you don't want to make too. And that's important, to see what you don't want to do even though you know it's going over.

Q: Your case, or the case, for an individual , personal aesthetic, is admirable and certainly needed, but it raises two questions to my mind. One of them would be that your name has been associated, often for the wrong reasons, sometimes, perhaps, for the right reasons, with a system called formalism. And the second one being that you have been accused in the past by various people of a tyranny or exercise of a tyranny of taste. Could you address yourself to both of those?

G: About formalism. Formalism was originally the name of a Russian art and literary movement before the First World War. And then it became used by the Bolsheviks (Communists is a dirty word) for any kind of art that was for its own sake. It became a dirty word like "art for art's sake," which is a valid notion. Sometime in the '50's the word formalism came up again in the mouths and at the pens of people I dare to call middlebrow. And then, it's true, I was made responsible for it, though I wasn't the only one, and by one of these easy inferences that plague human thought, it was held that I advocated a certain way of painting. Now, I haven't written a word in favor of a certain kind of painting that hasn't been made yet. You only write about art that's already been made. My prejudice, as Professor Link says, is towards representational painting, and it's the only kind I can do, but I had to accept the fact that the major painting of our time, and the major sculpture too, after a while, was abstract, because you can't choose what to like and what not to like. I say major because the difference between major and minor is very important. It became very important for this country in the '40s when the Abstract Expressionists finally decided they could compete with the French and stop being in tutelage. But my rhetoric wasn't very careful, otherwise I couldn't have been misunderstood to the extent I have been. I recognize that and I don't put the blame entirely on the people who misunderstood me. Though I still say I haven't written a word that gives you reason to think that I'm for abstract art, as such, as against other kinds of art. I wrote a piece called "Modernist Painting" that got taken as a program when it was only a description, and I was thought to believe in things that I was describing [as a program]. Again, it was the fault of my rhetoric. I was in favor of "pure" art in spite of the fact that I put quotation marks around "pure" or "purity" whenever I used them, because I don't believe there's any such thing as pure art. It was an illusion. It was a necessary illusion, apparently, for modernist artists and it helped produce some great art and some great poetry. A necessary illusion for Mallarmé, say, and for Valéry, and maybe even for Ezra Pound. It was a necessary illusion for Picasso and for Cézanne. There is no such thing as pure art, or pure poetry, or pure music.

Anyhow / don't believe there is such a thing. But I made the mistake of contenting myself with quotation marks and not saying "look, I don't believe this as a program, I'm simply describing." And so people assumed that was my program. I'd been describing what I thought had happened under modernism, and nothing more and nothing less. It was also inferred that I had said there was some necessity working in this although I said nothing to that effect. But I blame myself. I should have been more careful.

As far as being a tyrant, good Lord, people I don't see what evidence there is for that statement. I don't assign Pollock's success to me. A lot of good my praise did for him he still had to sweat out his ten years and was badly off for money and for attention, anyhow. And the so-called "color field painters" -- that's a label I hate -- I didn't praise them in print all that much, nor did they go over all that fast. That's an illusion, another telescoping of the past. They sweated their time out and nothing I said, nothing I did or could do, could have speeded their success. But that is, well I'll use the word illusion again. That's an illusion. If I were tyrannizing over taste someone like Olitski or Barnard would have been recognized as two of the best painters of the time. Olitski would be recognized for the painter where painting is at. when I say "where painting is at" I don't mean that he towers above everybody else, no. But his reputation is not up. He does make a living; that's the big difference now since '55 when inflation started. Young, serious artists, aspiring artists had to struggle much harder economically back in the '30's, 40's, most of the 50's, than they have since. I guess I make the general art boom responsible for that, but the general art boom is responsible for those fantastic prices that Professor Link mentioned young artists were getting nowadays. Tyrannize over taste, you know, you do like to be listened to and you do like to have people agree with you, in your judgements, but if there's one thing that doesn't go with art or any of the arts, it's power: they don't mix. And anybody who cozies themselves with the idea of having power is deluding themselves and is in for sad disappointment. I know one such person. He's dead now. And there's the Latin saying "Don't speak ill of the dead" and it's -- and I'm speaking and I'm being personal and he was a gentleman I much admired in some ways and some other ways didn't. That's Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art. You all know who he is. Mr. Barr quite evidently thought he could lead art and he found out he couldn't. I said before, you don't talk or write about art that hasn't been made yet. By the same token you are not for a class of art that's still open, if you know what I mean. Here's what I mean. Mr. Barr decided, in 1939 or 40, I forget, that the American Abstract Artists group I don't know whether you know who they are, they kept abstract going a good deal in New York in the 30's while not producing much good abstract art themselves. They held annual shows and '30 or '40 they went to Mr. Barr and asked whether they could have space at the Museum of Modern Art for their next annual. And he said, regretfully no, because he didn't think art was going in their direction. He thought -- that was the time neo-romantics were up and nobody here except someone as old as myself remembers the neo-romantics; Christian Berard, not

a bad painter, a Frenchman, Leona Berman, and they were painting from nature. Berard was a good painter, incidentally, and he's unjustly forgotten -- and Mr. Barr said he thought, he didn't say it at that time, he said it on another occasion, he thought that was the way art was going now. Now, I think, whether he was right or wrong, in turning down the triple A, I won't say. Op Art, and Anuszkiewicz, you all know what Op Art is, don't you? In effect, he tried to put *it* over. Well, it didn't last long and I thought from his whole attitude -- I knew him personally and I'd see him from time to time -- that he was being arrogant and he ended up disappointed. You let an artist lead. No critic or museum person leads art. Art goes its own way and once again, I say, if you think you have power you're sadly deluded. Where do I want to see art go? I want to see art go back to the kind of realism that a minor Impressionist, like Caillebotte practiced or that Fantin Latour practiced in his still lifes, not in his figure compositions. But it's very unlikely it will go that way, but I'd be overjoyed to see major art go that way. And I'm talking about major art. There's always been good minor art and there still is, and it's not to be sneezed at. But the issue in New York in the 40's, and I keep harping on it, was, are we going to make major art or not? That was the issue for Pollock. That was the issue for Rothko. It became the issue for DeKooning and Gorky. We're going to be major artists. We're not going to be minor. We're not going to be just American minor artists anymore. We're not going to be content with the lot of a painter as good as Eakins. And you know how good a painter Eakins was. But he still is unknown in Europe for all practical purposes, whereas Pollock became known worldwide. That doesn't say necessarily how good he was, but I think there's justice in that and it'd make me smile when I go abroad, and people would mention Warhol's name, or Andrew Wyeth and I would say they both flew overseas on Pollock's wings. Not that they were in Pollock's class, though I don't think Andrew Wyeth's such a bad painter. I think he's better than Rauschenberg anyhow, and many other recent celebrities.

Q: Would you say something about Pablo Picasso?

G: Something about Picasso? You'll have to be more specific than that, sir.

Q: How about an anecdote?

G: I never met him.

Q: What do you think of his stuff?

G: Oh, he was a very great artist when he had it. And he stopped having it about 1926 and he had it somewhat until about 1940 and then I think he lost it except here and there in sculpture and he was always a good draftsman, a good printmaker. I think he stayed a good draftsman, a good printer, until the end of his life. But as a painter he went downhill after '26. That's my opinion.

Q: I was wondering, what was Pollock like as a person? The only thing that someone my age knows is from reading biographies or something like that. I was just wondering what he was like as a person and as a painter.

G: It gives me satisfaction to answer that question. When Pollock was sober he was one of the nicest human beings on earth. One of the gentlest, too. When he was drunk, he changed, he changed personality. He was the most radical alcoholic I have ever had first hand contact with. He became Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jeckel. He never painted when he was drunk... But in the last year of his life when he was going to a psychoanalyst in New York, he had to come into New York from East Hampton, and like all of the other artists of his generation, not knowing what the devil to do with themselves, the most famous as well as the most obscure, went straight to the Cedar Street Tavern. There he'd get himself roaring drunk and that's the Pollock who became known to most people. The drunken Pollock, who flirted with violence, as far as I know, struck a person only once in his whole life, and then, you know, in a peculiar, irrational way, and didn't hit him very hard either. I think one of you may know Ruben Kadish, one of Pollock's best friends; out of the blue, Pollock hit him once outside the Cedar Street Tavern and then immediately embraced him, said he was sorry. This is the only time, and here's this fellow known as a brawling, noisy he got struck at times because people mistook him, they thought he was about to hit them. It couldn't have been a bigger joke. But, sober Pollock, that was the real Pollock and by the way, he was a tutored and sophisticated artist. He had a better eye than deKooning and even Gorky, in my book. And he knew the past, though, he did one thing once, that didn't shock me, but sort of he was looking at a book of reproductions of Rubens landscapes, and he snapped it shut, threw it down on the floor, and said we can do better nowadays. Well, I said, go ahead, that's all. I thought well, he better... Now the curious thing here is there must be about ten or twelve Ruben landscapes extant. Are there more? I think there were only about that many reproduced in the book and when I saw them in the flesh I found I liked only two of them; that that wasn't Ruben's thing. But that isn't why Pollock said this. Pollock said this out of a certain impatience. I don't know It wasn't an impatience with the past. He wouldn't go to museums in the last 20 years of his life but then I noticed Morris Louis wouldn't either. Morris Louis would drive me up to the door of the National Gallery in Washington and then say goodbye. But Louis knew why he didn't want to go in, he said why, he said if he got in there he'd get infected by the old masters, that all that syrup would creep into him and it would creep in because it was such wonderful syrup. Well, I guess that's it.

Q: You stated that decorative pattern art had terminated as a popular art form at least a year ago.

G: As a trend, as a trend.

Q: As a trend, right. I was wondering, in your view, where and when did it have its origin.

G: Damn! I should know, but I don't know where Decorative Pattern Painting started. I know that there's a girl named Joyce Kozloff who was showing these awful paintings at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. And I'm surprised that anyone took them seriously. But then, a year later, she was part of this, this wave, and you could always tell about a wave when German art dealers came over and asked for Pattern Painting, Decorative. It went on for about two years and it's only within the last 18 months that it's been pushed out of the limelight. I wouldn't say that it terminated, but it's no longer the trend, no longer the going thing.

Q: Do you think it has any hope for revival?

G: Did everybody hear--does it have any hope for revival? I can't say.

Q: Can you predict?

G: I don't predict!

Q: Do you consider photography, like commercial photography, fashion photography, as art?

G: It can be. When photography's good, let me put it that way, it's as good as painting. That's all I can say and I've seen some photographs that are great, and that's why I say it. But I don't put it on a lower level, no. But you don't do that with art anyhow, see? You don't, I don't take too much interest in prints for reasons of convenience. We can't pay attention to everything. But I wouldn't presume to say prints have a, are on a lower level than painting. You don't say things like that. Croce already pointed that out. And some of Rembrandt's late prints are better than a lot of his late paintings. There you are. One last question and that's all.

Q: I must say that I disagree with you on the point that you say taste is called instinct.

G: Intuition! I didn't say instinct. I feel it's learned.

Q: And you so stated in a couple points in your speech, that in giving it characteristics of being learned, by saying that it developed when cultivated.

G: Oh yeah! I think that clears up some of the ideas that people ask questions about good and bad art; that there is such a thing. I think it's often confused with popular art and that's the reason people like "good" and "bad." Miss, I didn't say that taste couldn't be developed!



Q: I said that development is giving it characteristics of being learned and (interrupted by G.)

G: The word development, yeah, you're right, you're quite right, it overlaps with the meaning of learned. But, so I should have been more careful. I should have said taste can't be communicated. You have to learn it for your-self, Okay? I didn't like the word "learned" in that context. I prefer developed, or acquired. Learning means too much, listening to someone else. That's why I avoided the word. Otherwise I agree with you. And remember, it's intuition, not instinct, that's involved. Well, I'm not in a hurry, I'm not looking at my watch for that reason, but I guess there should be one last question. (laughter)

Q: Is Mark Rothko a major painter?

G: Yes. (laughter, applause) Thank you. He did. Okay, I guess that's it, huh? Though he lost his stuff after 1955. Okay. (applause)