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Examining the possibility of a postmodern avant-garde

Jenna Kaufmann-Madison
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EXAMINING THE POSSIBILITY OF A POSTMODERN AVANT-GARDE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Art History Program

School of Art and Design

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jenna Kaufmann-Madison

May 2004

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Patricia Sanders", written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE POSSIBILTY OF A POSTMODERN AVANT-GARDE

by Jenna Kaufmann-Madison

This thesis examines the possibility that Low Brow art, a contemporary art movement that developed in response to Conceptual and Activist art by reintroducing figuration, banal imagery, and narrative content, suggests that avant-garde artistic activity may exist within the context of postmodernism. Although postmodern theory typically rejects the idea of an avant-garde occurring in the postmodern era, a re-evaluation of postmodernism reveals that it only negates the resurgence of modernist avant-garde art and the dominance of the Formalist aesthetic.

The main argument is developed through general discussions of the art and art theory of the modern and postmodern periods in order to outline the factors that prompt avant-garde activity and establish the presence of a dominant style or trend in contemporary art against which an avant-garde might react. The paper concludes by presenting the work of several Low Brow artists whose art and ideology display both avant-garde and postmodern characteristics.

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Introduction

This paper examines Low brow art and its artists in order to demonstrate the potential existence of an avant-garde art movement or trend in the postmodern era. Because postmodern theory declared the end of modernism and the avant-garde activity of the modern period, it is generally thought that postmodernism excludes the possibility of an avant-garde arising in contemporary art. However, an examination of postmodern theory shows that postmodernism did not call for an end to all avant-garde thought and artistic expression, it only advocated for the end of the modern Formalist abstract aesthetic. In order to show the possibility of an artistic avant-garde emerging in the postmodern era, one must begin by examining the theory of the avant-garde and distinguishing it from the specific avant-garde activity and art movements of the modern era. This paper focuses on avant-gardism as a general ideology which presents an alternative to the dominant style(s), promotes aesthetic and stylistic change, and informs an artist's approach to art making. Understanding avant-gardism in this way allows for an avant-garde art movement to occur in any period provided that a dominant style or set of aesthetic principles are present in the mainstream art world.

The first chapter outlines the development of the concept of an artistic vanguard and the general aesthetic and philosophical motivations that formed and fueled avant-garde ideology. This overview is followed by a discussion of the avant-garde artist, the ideas regarding the artist's role in the creative process, and

the function of the avant-garde art object in society and culture. The chapter concludes with an examination of the avant-garde in the modern era to provide an understanding of the relationship between avant-garde activity and the developments of modern art, as well as to establish the distinct between the theories of avant-gardism and modernism, which is central to the argument for the possibility of a postmodern avant-garde.

The theories of modernism and some of the late modern avant-garde movements discussed in chapters two and three offer further explanation on the distinction between modernism and avant-gardism and show how avant-garde activity changes according to new aesthetic and/or cultural conditions. Chapter 2 presents a general discussion of the major developments in modernist theory and criticism—Formalism and Contextualism—and the key contributors to each of these methods of art analysis. A thorough examination of art critic Clement Greenberg's ideas about art making and aesthetics provides a framework for the Formalist approach to art theory and the promotion of the modern abstract aesthetic. In addition, the section on Greenberg is necessary because it lays the foundation for the postmodern attack on modernism and the rejection of Greenbergian Formalism by the next generation of critics and theorists, particularly Rosalind Krauss. To balance Greenberg's assertions and to demonstrate an alternative approach to the analysis of modern art, a brief examination of Contextualist theory and the contributions of art critic Harold Rosenberg, completes the discussion of modernist theory.

Chapter 3 looks at several avant-garde art movements during the late modern period. An examination of Pop art, Graffiti art, and the Neo-Expressionist and Neo-Geo movements reveals a change in the perception of the relationship between avant-garde art and popular culture. The art and artists associated with these movements also reflect a change in the status of the artist (largely due to Andy Warhol's notion of the artist as celebrity), and the effects of the economic climate of the 1980s on the commercial art market. This period in avant-garde art marks a transition from the modern to the postmodern and the issues mentioned above became important factors in the development of postmodern art and theory. Furthermore, the aesthetic tradition of Pop art and the other late modern movements discussed is continued in the work of the Low Brow artists, a group (examined in chapter six) that may very well represent a contemporary avant-garde school.

An examination of postmodern theory and the postmodern declaration that avant-garde activity is not applicable outside of the framework of modernism and therefore could not occur in contemporary art, composes the fourth chapter. Following a general summary of the issues upon which postmodern theory was founded, including the reaction against Formalism, this chapter focuses briefly on those branches of inquiry (primarily semiotics and Structural Linguistics) that were crucial in the formation of postmodern art theory. A discussion involving theories of literary criticism and linguistic analysis—explored through the theoretical works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Jean François

Lyotard—creates a context for Post-Structuralism and the critical writings of Rosalind Krauss. Among the many contributions Krauss made to the development of postmodern art theory, those that are pertinent to this paper are her critical re-evaluation of modernist theory on the grounds of the concepts of artistic autonomy and originality and her application of Post-Structuralist theory and binary systems to art analysis. Krauss's ideas not only informed the subsequent developments of postmodern art and theory, but her work has created a premise for the critical reassessment of the theoretical tenets of a dominant style or movement, which becomes relevant in the reexamination of postmodernism.

The final two chapters culminate by presenting those factors necessary for avant-garde activity to emerge and demonstrating that (although clearly not considered to be a possible outcome in the development of postmodern theory and art), these factors exist within the postmodern art world. A description of several postmodern art movements is included in order to show the differences between the artistic developments of the late modern period and those of the postmodern period. This discussion also serves to establish the gradual development of a dominant trend in postmodern art, setting the stage for the possible occurrence of an avant-garde reaction.

Finally, once the parameters for both a dominant style or trend in postmodern art and for the possibility of new manifestations of artistic avant-gardism within the contemporary culture have been defined, the paper examines a school of American artists known as Low Brow. Working intentionally in reaction against

the dominant art of the mainstream culture, these artists developed a counter style concurrently with the development of postmodern art and theory. Interviews with the artists and their supporters in the underground art community provide valuable insight into formation of the Low Brow school and the creation the Low Brow aesthetic, as well as specific information regarding individual artistic processes and choices of subject and media. Presently, the work of the Low Brow artists continues to maintain its stylistic diversion from the dominant contemporary styles and continues to reflect the characteristics of avant-garde activity while presenting an updated, contemporary version of avant-garde art.

Chapter 1

The Theory of the Avant-garde

The term avant-garde was originally a French military term used for the forward guard or “advanced guard.” With the upset of the political infrastructure brought about by the French Revolution, the avant-garde came to symbolize revolutionary thought and social change.¹ During the nineteenth century, the concept of the avant-garde as an artistic vanguard began to emerge. The avant-garde in the visual arts is most commonly associated with the modern era,² however, the motivation behind any avant-garde school or movement and the idea of one’s art being advanced or forward thinking, could conceivably traverse art historical periods. Therefore, it should not be assumed that avant-garde thought requires a specific cultural climate, but rather that it is dependent upon a general desire for change.

Avant-garde³ art and literary movements are typically defined as ones that reject the ideas and aesthetic of the mainstream or popular culture. The intentional upset of the status quo is also a key component to identifying avant-garde activity. Although, these basic traits were present throughout the many stages and styles of modern art, there is no reason to assume that once the modern

¹ H. Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades of Art, Culture, and Politics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 75.

² The modern period is generally dated as beginning in the 1860’s and ending in the 1970’s. It is also widely accepted that the rise of industrial production coupled with an increasingly scientific world-view were the primary influences that would define the modern age.

³ Throughout this paper, a distinction will be made between an avant-garde artist or group and *the* avant-garde of the modern era. The latter will always be specified as such.

era came to pass, so too, did avant-garde ideology. A close examination of the theory behind avant-garde art in its various incarnations reveals that the impulse toward avant-garde activity is not necessarily anchored to modernism and could arise in any era, provided that certain conditions were present within the sphere of art production, theory and criticism.

Avant-garde activity within an artistic community tends to be characterized by a shared belief in the importance of both the artist and the work of art as a catalyst for change.⁴ The basic principles upon which most avant-garde art is founded can be summarized as follows: first, the belief in the ability of art to effect change, either on an individual or a societal level; second, the belief in the autonomy of the art object and a commitment to the value of artistic expression; and third, the belief in the supremacy of the creative individual, based on the unique ability of the artist to think beyond his or her own time. The promotion of at least one of these convictions typically identifies an art movement as avant-garde. But, perhaps the most distinguishing trait of avant-garde thought is the insistence that art belongs outside of the realm of popular culture and must remain separate from the masses in order to be effective.

Art critic Harold Rosenberg explains that, “There is an affinity between shock and freshness in that both occur when the mind has passed its customary boundaries. This condition gives rise to another typical avant-garde quality, that

⁴ S. Everett, *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modern Thought* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, Inc, 1991), x.

of estrangement or cultural distance.”⁵ Because avant-garde art is separate from, and often in revolt against, the standards and operations of the mass and/or bourgeois culture, it is usually dismissed or rejected by mainstream society.⁶ In *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modern Thought*, Sally Everett describes the basis for the public’s reaction to avant-garde art, stating “Avant-garde art affronts the sensibilities of the popular culture”⁷ because it does not promote the accepted tastes and values of the masses. The art of avant-garde movements is meant to be unpopular and ceases to be avant-garde if the imagery or ideas become accepted. “No work is avant-garde that does not induce uneasiness, at least to the extent of arousing doubt that it is art, and once its effect of uneasiness is lost the work ceases to be advanced.”⁸

The relationship between an avant-garde and the society at large is one in which the two sides are simultaneously at odds with one another and dependant upon each other. The imperfections of the popular culture and its traditions give momentum to avant-garde activity while the avant-garde seeks to move society forward by exposing these imperfections. Donald Kuspit defines avant-gardism as “a phenomenon whose disruptiveness signals the underlying contradictions and tensions in society.”⁹ It is in this way that avant-garde art actually expresses the overall cultural climate through its opposition to the mass culture. “[T]he avant-

⁵ *Discovering the Present: Three Decades of Art, Culture, and Politics*, 81.

⁶ Everett, x.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rosenberg, 81.

garde is not only the direct expression of a negative cultural relation, but is also the expression of the human and social condition that created this schism in the cultural order.”¹⁰ According to Renato Poggioli, “avant-garde ideology is a social phenomenon precisely because of the social or antisocial character of the cultural and artistic manifestations that it sustains and expresses.”¹¹ In his book, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, he explains what he terms the avant-garde “state of alienation.”¹² “As a minority culture, the avant-garde cannot get by without combating and denying the majority culture it opposes.”¹³ In other words, an avant-garde must assert itself as an alternative to the mass culture, in order to flourish. Furthermore, avant-garde activity most often occurs among fringe groups because it is generally overlooked or not tolerated within the larger society. However, Poggioli goes on to say that “The concept [of the avant-garde as a general phenomenon]¹⁴ cannot involve an absolute negation of culture (which would be a contradiction in terms), except by the way of metaphor.”¹⁵ Therefore, Poggioli maintains that avant-garde activity is inevitably connected to the society it rejects, because it is only through its opposition to the mainstream society that an avant-garde “succeeds in working.”¹⁶

⁹ D. Kuspit *Cult of the Avant-garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 15.

¹⁰ R. Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² 103.

¹³ Poggioli, 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Poggioli, 103.

The impetus beneath all avant-garde activity is to threaten the establishment on some level, be it aesthetic, social or political.¹⁷ As Poggioli explains, the idea is that art functions as “an instrument for social action and reform, a means of revolutionary propaganda and agitation.”¹⁸ The purpose is to cause friction, because in doing so the avant-garde establishes an opposition between itself and the mass culture and, more importantly, friction often provokes action and action promotes change. Whether the action taken as a result of such provocation favors avant-garde activity or discourages it becomes irrelevant; what is significant is that the viewing public has been forced to react.¹⁹ Donald Kuspit asserts that “The avant-garde artist intended to cause ‘open insult’,”²⁰ because attacking the power structure or value system within a society allows for both a re-evaluation of current practices and the introduction of “revolutionary ideas.”²¹ This was a critical issue during the modern period precisely because it supports the belief that society itself is unable to effect change, therefore making the avant-garde a necessary component for generating change and progress.²² But, when considering this concept that art can motivate society, Poggioli points out that it is important to remember that, “However, and whenever, this spirit of hostility and

¹⁷ Everett, x.

¹⁸ Poggioli, 9.

¹⁹ M. Aronson, *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-Garde* (New York, Clarion Books, 1998), 13.

²⁰ Kuspit, 112. This appears in footnote no. 27 in which Kuspit quotes Erving Goffman’s “On Face-Work,” *Interaction Ritual* (New York, Pantheon, 1982), 14.

²¹ Everett, x.

²² Ibid.

opposition appears, it reveals a permanent tendency that is characteristic of the avant-garde movement.”²³

The avant-garde inclination towards agitating and combating the conformity perceived in whomever or whatever it has chosen to oppose is best understood as a form of antagonism, according to Renato Poggioli.²⁴ He explains that while antagonism is one of several postures that can be assumed by an avant-garde,²⁵ it is evident in almost all avant-garde activity. “The innumerable expressions of this antagonism can be reduced, almost without exception, to the lowest common denominator of nonconformism.”²⁶ Commonly, avant-garde antagonism is directed at specific artistic issues including academic traditions, previous or dominant styles and the aesthetic taste of the bourgeoisie or mass culture. However, on occasion, the antagonistic stance extends beyond the art world to the general circumstances of the age, such as political infrastructures, socio-economic conditions or social injustices. Poggioli notes that in judging the antagonistic intentions of an avant-garde group, it is wise to make “the distinction between antagonism toward the public and antagonism toward tradition.”²⁷ The antagonistic avant-garde is characterized as strongly defiant and tends to display exhibitionist and anarchistic tendencies.²⁸ These qualities serve to further alienate the avant-garde group from the mainstream culture. Poggioli maintains

²³ Poggioli, 25-26.

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁵ Antagonism is one of four avant-garde “moments” defined by Poggioli in *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 25-30. The other three are Activism (in terms of action or gesture), Nihilism and Agonism, 25-27.

²⁶ Poggioli, 31.

²⁷ Ibid., 30.

that the antagonistic posture signifies the “the individualistic revolt of the ‘unique’ *against* the society...” while at the same time it reinforces the sense of “solidarity within the community of rebels and libertarians.”²⁹

The Avant-garde Artist

Harold Rosenberg once remarked that “Historically, the concept of an avant-garde is fused with the consciousness of a changing world.”³⁰ Avant-garde ideas are put forth through the work(s) of art, and it is the responsibility of the avant-garde artist not only to reflect changes in society, but also to express the need for change and ideally, to create a climate for change. This sense of responsibility constitutes the belief in the necessity of the avant-garde as a vehicle through which society moves forward. The avant-garde artist is one who takes a stance of non-conformity and who typically aligns himself or herself against the politics, values and aesthetic of the mainstream. Marc Aronson states, “In the arts, the avant-garde are people who have devoted their talents, even their lives, to confronting us with their visions.”³¹

The art produced by the avant-garde individual or group is not merely the expression of the artist’s frustration or dissatisfaction with the dominant aesthetic, social standards, or governing powers of the majority culture. The work of art

²⁸ Ibid., 31-32.

²⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

³⁰ Rosenberg, 75.

³¹ Aronson, 9.

functions as an arena in which the avant-garde artist uses the artwork to confront and reject the preexisting ideals and propose a new set of ideals,³² which, in turn, presents new aesthetic possibilities. The confrontational position assumed by an avant-garde artist or school lends itself to the production of art that expresses disdain toward conventional artistic standards and traditions. Avant-garde art is always provocative precisely because the artists intend to upset the aesthetic expectations of the audience. The work is deliberately shocking. In the attempt to dislocate the comfortable perceptions of the viewer, avant-garde artists have employed a myriad of artistic techniques and stylistic approaches. The range encompasses everything from the use of explicit imagery and content,³³ to experiments with the formal arrangement of the art object, which often results in disharmonious compositional or spatial relationships and color combinations, to the unusual presentation of the subject matter or even the lack of a discernible subject.

Avant-garde artists tend to see themselves as spirits in revolt. They are the enlightened few, who have become burdened with the recognition of the hypocrisies embedded in the artistic traditions and cultural institutions of mainstream society.³⁴ All avant-gardes are vehemently anti-establishment, which lends itself to the formation of groups of artists and individuals who are like-

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ This includes explicit nudity, sexuality, violence, vulgar humor and the expression of altered or abnormal mental and emotional states.

³⁴ Kuspit, 15.

minded.³⁵ An avant-garde and its supporters comprise one aspect of artist/audience relationship in which both parties agree upon not only the aesthetic intentions of the art object, but also any philosophical or political ideals expressed within the content of the work.³⁶ For an avant-garde, there is, however, another side to the artist/audience relationship which involves the avant-garde artist (or group of artists) and the viewing public. According to Donald Kuspit, in either case, “The artist’s sense of his audience informs every aspect of his art, from its material medium to its aesthetic manner.”³⁷ In *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist*, Kuspit explores some of the ways in which an avant-garde approaches its dual audience and the attitude toward each. When the avant-garde artist addresses the familiar viewer – another avant-garde thinker – a certain need for “reciprocity”³⁸ emerges. Although the avant-garde artist always intends to challenge the viewer,³⁹ when another member of the avant-garde or a supporter of the movement experiences the art object, the artist seeks a dialogue about the work, through the work. Kuspit explains that the “character” of the work of art is determined by the fantasy of the audience the artist imagines he is relating to in the processes of making the art. The artist has a wish for a certain kind of audience that amounts to a wish for a certain kind of self. His art embodies both wishes.⁴⁰

Unlike the interaction between the avant-garde artist and the intended avant-garde viewer, the relationship between the artist and the expanded audience tends

³⁵ Aronson, 9.

³⁶ Kuspit, 83.

³⁷ Ibid., 84.

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Aronson, 13.

to be hostile with each side demonstrating overt criticism of the other. Avant-garde activity is perceived by the greater society as defiant and at times scandalous, which in turn makes avant-garde art all the more unpopular.⁴¹ This lack of popularity among the general art-viewing public only further encourages the avant-garde activity, because to be popular or accepted would signal the failure of an avant-garde agenda. Donald Kuspit describes the avant-garde attitude toward the expanded audience of the majority culture as analogous to an adolescent child rebelling against the parent or authority figure.⁴² Kuspit suggests that this revolt against the audience at large is partially responsible for the artistic innovation found in avant-garde art. He states:

the avant-garde artist, implicitly and often explicitly critical of his audience, tends to be innovative in medium as well as manner, or else stretches a known medium and manner to their breaking point. He moves his art toward radical unreadability, as if it that were a position of defiant strength.⁴³

The critical orientation with respect to the mass audience is most likely a factor in the artistic experimentation that occurs within avant-garde schools and movements. But, in Kuspit's view, the artist's anticipation of the audience's reaction to the art object is the impetus which actually compels the artist to push the boundaries further with each work in the attempt to shock and alienate the bourgeois and/or mass culture. Although the relationship between the avant-garde artist and the expanded audience tends to be combative, Kuspit maintains that the relationship is still a reciprocal one. "In a sense, avant-garde art's original

⁴⁰ Kuspit, 83.

⁴¹ Poggioli, 32.

⁴² *Cult of the Avant-garde Artist*, 84.

offensiveness and aggressivity had to do with its assertion of subjectivity, reminding the audience of its own subjectivity...”⁴⁴

Harold Rosenberg offers a slightly different assessment of avant-garde artists and the inherent innovation in their work. He maintains that the avant-garde work of art is not merely a manifestation of the desire to challenge the viewer, but is a reflection of the artist’s need to continually challenge him or herself. Rosenberg believes that this is the impetus behind the individual artistic development of the avant-garde artist and the subsequent evolution of avant-garde art and its movements.⁴⁵ In his book, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics*, Rosenberg explains that, “To the avant-gardist, remaking the maker is the primary art act, the basis of style in the thing to be made.”⁴⁶ This concept suggests that the artists themselves be in a constant state of transformation in order for the art to evolve from one stage onto the next. It seems safe to say that the artistic innovation present in the avant-garde work of art tends to be the result of both the artist and viewer relationship and how the artist relates to the art making process.

The Avant-garde During the Modern Period

To be in the avant-garde is to be in a constant state of rebellion. That can be a very creative state of mind. At its best, the avant-garde makes visible on-stage, in print, and on canvas the hidden thoughts, the deepest yearnings, and the dawning conflicts of our time. Through it [avant-garde art] we are

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ 112. Kuspit cites Erving Goffman for this passage in note #18 to page 112.

⁴⁵ Rosenberg, 75.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

plunged into the dreams and nightmares that churn just below the surface of average, everyday life.⁴⁷

Rebellion, a defining characteristic of every avant-garde, was certainly a strong impulse in the development of modern art. The presence of certain pivotal issues and major artistic concepts would inform the development and secession of each modern avant-garde school or movement. Aside from the belief that art can move society forward, perhaps the most common themes for the modern avant-garde were the theory of “art for art’s sake”⁴⁸ and the insistence on the newness of the artistic idea as the driving force behind the creation and evolution of the art object. While artists from every period in the history of art have taken the ideas and styles from the previous period and either revised or rejected them, this was the cornerstone of the modern avant-garde art movements. Harold Rosenberg elaborates on the general avant-garde attitude toward the art of the immediate past, as well as pointing to an underlying concept that identifies the art of the present avant-garde with the art of the future. He states:

Oriented toward the future, avant-gardism is a mode of sensibility that experiences existing entities as foreshadowings—it sees in Cézanne an anticipation of Cubism, in a Cubist painting an early form of art that will grow increasingly mathematical. In the avant-garde mind, objects, people, events keep disappearing into the future, are already half vanished at the moment they are apprehended.⁴⁹

For the modern avant-garde, the progressive development of art is contingent upon the constant revision of pre-existing artistic styles and techniques and the

⁴⁷ Aronson, 11.

⁴⁸ This concept refers to art created without any intended social or religious function and that exists for no other purpose than as an art object.

discovery of new innovative approaches to the creation of the art object. This not only requires the courage to challenge artistic traditions and to push the boundaries of the understanding of an object as a work of art, but also an ability to predict the next phase in the evolution, or revolution, of art before it comes into practice. According to Rosenberg, "Every avant-garde embodies an attempt at prophecy. It wagers its survival on the relevance of its intuition of the future, of which its creations are presented as the model."⁵⁰

A changing perspective on both the past and the future is a key element in understanding the emergence of the modern avant-garde. As science and technology began to dominate the Western world-view at the close of the nineteenth century, the notion of progress became ingrained in almost every aspect of Western culture. In the arts, this idea continued to manifest itself as the belief that the prevailing aesthetic tradition⁵¹ had hindered creativity and artistic progress. Avant-garde artists of the early modern period called for new aesthetic standards that would be the antithesis of art works executed in the Realist and Romantic styles.⁵² They also began to rethink the validity of popular taste as a legitimate form of art criticism. From this initial re-evaluation came the breaking down of tradition which led to the exploration of new formal possibilities and

⁴⁹ Rosenberg, 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁵¹ Referring to styles that upheld the classical ideal of antiquity and the Renaissance.

⁵² Renato Poggioli places the official beginning of artistic or aesthetic avant-gardism within the Romantic period, citing that the much of the avant-garde ideology originated with "the culture of Romanticism." 13-14.

ultimately artistic innovation.⁵³ Kuspit explains, “The primary quality of avant-garde art is freshness. The advanced work represents a *new* reality, in contrast to the ‘eternal’ reality of traditional art.”⁵⁴ The importance placed on the newness or “freshness” of creative endeavors by avant-garde thinkers of the modern era is closely tied to a utopian vision. The idea revolves around the belief that the introduction of new possibilities, aesthetically or otherwise, will prompt positive change within a given society and humanity as a whole, ultimately creating a better world.

The importance of the new had an impact on every aspect of modern avant-garde artistic production. As well as manifesting itself within the philosophical motivations behind the various stages of modern avant-garde activity, the emphasis on newness also informed the understanding of the role of the avant-garde artist and the formal relationships and visual appearance of the works of art. In asserting her own artistic impetus to be receptive to new or unfamiliar creative processes and aesthetic results, the Surrealist artist Eileen Agar declared, “One must have a hunger for new color, new shapes and new possibilities of discovery.”⁵⁵ It was imperative that the avant-garde artists seek out new ways of presenting imagery by exploring new, or previously unconsidered, arrangements of the formal qualities of the composition. Furthermore, embedded in the

⁵³ Kuspit discusses the innovation resulting from the new or fresh creative approaches taken by early avant-garde artists in terms of an artistic “breakthrough,” and refers to Baudelaire’s idea of the “two stages of imagination.” 29-30

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, 74.

⁵⁵ Eileen Agar, “Am I a Surrealist?” from M. A. Caws, *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2001), 3.

ideology of the modern avant-garde is the belief that in order for modern art to progress and usher in change, the avant-garde artist should be in a continuous state of creation or re-creation.

Renato Poggioli analyzes the evolution of avant-garde activity during the modern period by outlining three categorical phases. The author considers the first phase to be composed by Romanticism, Symbolism and Impressionism. The second phase encompasses Cubism, Futurism, Abstraction and German Expressionism and the third phase is the progression to Dada and Surrealism. Poggioli also suggests a fourth phase, which would involve contemporary art of the 1950s and 1960s,⁵⁶ but he does not specifically mention any art movements post-dating Surrealism.⁵⁷ The art of each phase reflects the stylistic and technical concerns of the group as well as the philosophical issues that informed their creative endeavors. Although Poggioli would have it appear that these movements in avant-garde art lead from one to the next, many occurred simultaneously and there are more distinctions to be made among them than there are similarities.

Poggioli's first phase groups together three of the primary art movements of the nineteenth century. Both Romanticism and Symbolism tended toward an idealized and allegorical treatment of the subject and shared an interest in visually representing the sublime, although the Symbolists were more inclined toward creating visual interpretations of ethereal or occult ideas. The Impressionists,

⁵⁶ Presumably, Poggioli is referencing Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.

informed by the concept of “art for arts sake,”⁵⁸ focused on the formal and technical issues in the creation of the artwork. Rather than concerning themselves with spiritual or conceptual issues, the Impressionist artists explored optics and optical reception, most notably in the pursuit of accurately depicting the effects of light on color and forms. However, it should be noted that the Impressionists’ emphasis on the naturalistic depiction of the everyday world, contributed to the rise of Symbolism, whose artistic aims were developed in reaction to both Impressionism and Realism.

The second phase is seemingly more unified because of the various levels of abstraction that occur in each of these styles of art. However, this phase juxtaposes both the formal (Cubism) with the emotional (German Expressionism), and the utopian attitude of many of the Abstractionists.⁵⁹ For them, art becomes a vehicle to redeem or save mankind, as opposed to the combative nature of Futurism in which destruction accompanies innovation. In Poggioli’s final phase, there is an actual progression from one movement to the next in that Surrealism was, at least in part, born out of Dada. Surrealism inherited Dada’s notion of the absurd and emphasis on the laws of chance, but the Surrealists’ elaborated on the desire to evoke artistically the primordial and incorporated their own interest in Freudian psychology and the workings of the subconscious mind.

Although many aesthetic and philosophical differences can be identified between the various stylistic incarnations and art movements of the modern avant-

⁵⁷ *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 228-229.

garde, there is a common denominator. To be avant-garde during the modern era was to assume a particular stance against the mainstream of society, specifically the middle-class or bourgeoisie. This is a universal trait exhibited in each stage of modern art. Marc Aronson states:

Throughout its history the avant-garde has been posed against bourgeois society. Radical art has carried the attitude of the outsider criticizing the absurdity and materialism – the emptiness – of middle-class life and popular culture.⁶⁰

André Malraux was among the first to remark that “the origins of modern art coincided with the artist’s repudiation of bourgeois culture.”⁶¹ For the modern avant-garde artists, the middle-class represented the uninformed or unenlightened audience, as well as the portion of society most responsible for dictating the popular tastes and upholding traditional artistic and moral standards. Rosenberg suggests that “Avant-garde art may be defined as art in the creation of which awareness of the presence of the middle class as audience is an essential ingredient.”⁶² The modern avant-gardists recognized that it was the members of the middle-class who supported the status quo, be it social, political, or religious, and that in order to effect change on any level their art must upset the middle-class audience. He concludes, “Hence every avant-garde movement is defined by its relation to that class, [to] its outlook and preconceptions.”⁶³ Even the stylistic variation that occurs in modern art and the aesthetic choices made by avant-garde

⁵⁸ See footnote #44.

⁵⁹ Particularly members of De Stijl and the Russian avant-garde movements.

⁶⁰ Aronson, 141.

⁶¹ From Malraux’s *Psychologie de L’art* (Geneva: 1947-50). Cited in and quoted from Poggioli, 119.

⁶² Rosenberg, 79-80.

artists directly reflect a reaction against the prevailing bourgeois tastes at the time the art object was produced. Marc Aronson concurs with this interpretation of the avant-garde rejection of the aesthetic preferences of the middle-class, commenting that,

Because avant-garde artists seek to be ahead of their time, their work is often deliberately disturbing. Nudity, explicit sexuality, provocative or purposeless acts, and rage, are commonplace. Shocking the bourgeoisie (average middle-class citizens) is one of the great joys of such artists.⁶⁴

Harold Rosenberg asserts that “The chief antagonist of the avant-garde is the middle class.”⁶⁵ Rosenberg explains that the avant-garde saw the middle-class as both a “rival” and an obstacle in the reshaping of the present society and in determining the future state of the world. The bourgeoisie impedes the progress of the advanced thinker and his or her art as a catalyst for reform.⁶⁶ For the modern avant-gardist, the middle-class represented the mass culture and therefore was symbolic of everything that the avant-garde was opposed to, most notably, conformity and tradition. He goes on to propose that,

To be obsessed with the conformity of the middle class, the baseness of its tastes, its concupiscence and frustrations, the clichés of its sentiments and ideas, the absurdity of its politicians and military men, the hypocrisy of its preachers, the chicanery and petty careerism of its intellectual representatives is to be avant-garde a priori.⁶⁷

The concepts of originality and change are integral to the modern avant-garde ideology, therefore the values of the middle-class were viewed as stagnant and

⁶³ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁴ Aronson, 10-11.

⁶⁵ *Discovering the Present: Three Decades of Art, Culture and Politics*, 79.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Rosenberg, 80.

intellectually uninspired. The “advanced” or enlightened thinkers of the avant-garde represent the intellectual minority who must take it upon themselves to attack and overthrow the institutionalized artistic traditions of the majority middle-class culture. The modern avant-garde envisioned the eventual “affirmation of the avant-garde spirit in all cultural fields.”⁶⁸ In a 1990 *Arts Magazine* article, Donald Kuspit eloquently summarizes avant-gardism and the modernist position regarding the middle-class as follows:

Whatever its form, avant-garde art achieves an aura of authentic identity through its struggle to be sincere. Indeed, sincerity expresses the wish to be irreducibly, unmistakably authentic. Moreover, sincerity in modern times [...] exists as a critique of the inauthenticity of society.⁶⁹

The modern period made concrete the ideas that have come to represent the avant-garde ideology and laid the foundation of avant-garde art as an art historical category. However, it is imperative that a distinction be made between *the* avant-garde of the modern period and *an* avant-garde. An avant-garde is simply a group of individuals who conduct their intellectual and artistic activity in a manner that is deliberately in contrast to the practices and standards of the mainstream society or popular culture. Where as, *the* avant-garde specifically refers to the philosophies, aesthetics and objects associated with the modern avant-garde art movements. The importance of making such a distinction becomes particularly

⁶⁸ Poggioli, 25.

⁶⁹ “Sincere Cynicism: The Decadence of the 1980s,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 65 (November 1990) 60.

relevant in light of the theoretical and critical developments that arose in the postmodern period.⁷⁰

A critical evaluation of the art of the modern era resulted in a strong reaction against both the modernist aesthetic, which grew increasingly abstract through the period, and the avant-garde movements that created it. Therefore, the end of the modern period was also thought to signal the end of *the* avant-garde. But this end applies to only one phase of avant-garde activity and does not account for the inclination toward avant-garde ideology among artistically creative individuals.

As Aronson affirms,

Surely there will continue to be artists who are a step more advanced than the rest. Of course there will be seers who understand just that much more about the past, the present, and the future than their peers. Undoubtedly there will be visionaries whose disturbing dreams carry truths everyone else tries to deny.⁷¹

Avant-gardism should not be understood as a historical moment, but rather as a value system that promotes individuality, non-conformity, creativity, intellectual freedom and freedom of expression. These are the basic tenets of avant-garde thought which, when coupled with the issues that inform its subscribers, comprise the specific character of each avant-garde movement.

⁷⁰ The postmodern position toward the modern avant-garde will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁷¹ Aronson, 166.

Chapter 2

Modernist Theory

In defining avant-gardism, in both theory and practice, it is necessary to examine modern art theory and, later, postmodern¹ art theory, in order to retain the distinction between avant-garde ideology and the subsequent theories that either quote it or refute it. This distinction must be upheld if one is to accept the theoretical possibility of a postmodern avant-garde. The concept of an artistic avant-garde was solidified during the modern era and, eventually, the avant-garde became the driving force behind a succession of international art schools and movements that define the period. Modernist art theories make use of avant-garde ideology, but it is important that avant-gardism and modernism² not be viewed as mutually exclusive. The avant-garde artists were striving for new forms of expression; modernists wanted to create art that was both specific to and the expression of the modern age. In a similar vein, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood point out that, “modern art cannot simply be equated with modernism.”³ Instead, they suggest that modernism be understood on two levels: “Modernism stands on the one hand for a cluster of notionally independent values associated with the practice of modern art and on the other for a particular form of critical

¹ Postmodern refers to the art and art theories which developed after the dissolution of the modern art aesthetic. The postmodern era is the art historical period that occurred after the modern period, chronologically (approximately 1970-2000). Postmodern art theory will be examined in depth in Chapter 4.

² Common usage of this term refers to the theories of the development of modern art, composed during the modern era (approximately 1860-1970).

representation of the modern in art.”⁴ However, in light of the theoretical inter-relatedness between avant-garde art and modern art, it is imperative to examine the fundamental principles of modernism to fully understand avant-gardism and the postmodern reaction against them both.

As the twentieth century approached, the Western world underwent a period of transition and adjustment in order to adapt to an economy based on industrial technology and a more secular society. As Western culture became increasingly modernized, artists developed new avenues to record and reflect the changing world. Some art historians mark the beginning of modern art with the shift away from historical subject matter to the depiction of contemporary life in painting that occurred during the mid-nineteenth century. This move towards greater naturalism and realism is attributed, most notably, to Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet.⁵ Their rejection of the dominant academic style of their day signaled the beginning of an era in which artists would continually challenge the boundaries of acceptable subject matter, style, technique and media. This rejection, as well as innovation were two of the primary factors in the development of the early philosophies of modern art, and would similarly become key concepts in avant-garde ideology.

³ (Just as the theory of avant-gardism cannot simply be equated with modernism). *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 3.

⁴ Harrison and Wood, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

Although artistic experimentation has come to characterize modern art, it was the dissolution of the patronage system⁶ that allowed for this experimentation to occur. The end of artistic patronage and beginning of the free market during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries proved to be extremely important in the development of modernism. Under the free market system, the artists themselves determined the formal and conceptual elements of the work of art, rather than confining themselves to the tastes and specifications of the commissioning individual or institution. By the mid-nineteenth century, art had been liberated from its former function as a vehicle for religious, political or social propaganda, art was produced for the sole purpose of artistic expression. The concept of “art for art’s sake” began to emerge.⁷

Artists who were reluctant to conform to the traditional or popular styles were prompted to investigate new aesthetic and technical possibilities.⁸ Such stylistic experimentation coupled with the idea that a work of art need not rely on cultural reference or significance to justify its existence, created modernism’s most essential concept, the theory of “art for art’s sake.” “Art for art’s sake” is a theory that proposes that art objects are autonomous and that the value and evaluation of art should only be based on the qualities intrinsic to the work. This concept

⁶ Under the patronage system, an artist is commissioned by a patron or benefactor (a high ranking or wealthy individual, a governing power or a religious institution) to execute a work of art according to specifications dictated by the patron. Such commissions are usually in exchange for debt relief or an ongoing financial arrangement or future commissions.

⁷ It should be noted that the transition from the patronage system to a capitalistic art market often required catering to a largely uninformed art buyer, which eventually led to the rejection of bourgeois tastes and the formation of avant-garde groups.

asserts that works of art are independent of meaning, and should be viewed as purely aesthetic objects.⁹ In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood explain that the late nineteenth century was:

a time when modern art was being advanced as a form of independent culture, its critical bearing upon the world secured [...] by virtue of the very independence of its values. Art, it was then proposed, is an exemplary realm. What might be done, seen, experienced within this realm would have a critical bearing upon the actual conditions of social existence, but only in so far as art maintained a moral independence from those conditions.¹⁰

“Art for art’s sake” is closely associated with what came to be called Formalist theory. Formalism refers to art in which the formal elements of the work dominate the expressive elements. As early modern artists expanded the perimeter of art, they began to create works that described the process of art making; the formal and stylistic choices made by the artist, the techniques employed and the selection of the medium.¹¹ In *Art Theory and Criticism*, Sally Everett explains that, in an effort to avoid content with overt social or political commentary, modern artists placed increasing emphasis on form. She states that as a result of focussing on the arrangement of the visual elements of the artwork, “Imagery was subordinated, often abstracted and distorted, to composition.”¹²

⁸ These artists were working primarily in France, and it should be noted that this type of artistic experimentation occurred only marginally in other European countries, Russia and the United States until the twentieth century, at which point it becomes rampant.

⁹ Everett, x.

¹⁰ Harrison and Wood, 2.

¹¹ Everett, x. For specific examples see works in the following styles, Fauvism, Cubism, De Stijl and Geometric Abstraction.

¹² Ibid.

Another, and perhaps more significant, factor in the implementation of a formal approach to art making and art analysis was the advent of photography. Prior to the development of the photographic plate in 1833, painting was the medium charged with creating a visual representation of the world. Because the photographic image was able to reproduce reality, the very function of painting changed.¹³ According to the Richard Appignanesi, the author of *Introducing Postmodernism*,¹⁴ the invention of photography led to what he has dubbed “the crisis of representation” in painting.¹⁵ He asserts that “painting pictures of reality had simply become obsolete,”¹⁶ due to the impact of the photograph. Painting could no longer claim authority in the accurate presentation of an object or scene, which ultimately resulted in the end of Realism and marked the beginning of the gradual elimination of representational imagery in modern painting and sculpture. The development of photography contributed to the progressive move toward abstraction in modern art, and it could also be argued that, in an attempt to reassert the value of the original in an age of photographic reproducibility,

¹³ R. Appignanesi and C. Garratt; et al., *Introducing Postmodernism* (Cambridge, UK: Icon Books, Ltd. 1999), 13.

¹⁴ Appignanesi is the primary author of the text, but was assisted by two contributing authors, Ziauddin Sardar and Patrick Curry. Chris Garratt is responsible for the illustrations and supplemental text.

¹⁵ *Introducing Postmodernism*, 13. Appignanesi’s “crisis of representation” is largely and admittedly based on Walter Benjamin’s critical essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” (the essay is cited on page 18). Benjamin examined the implication of photographic technology on the concept of the original, and therefore authentic, work of art. Benjamin argued that the element of reproducibility –such as the multiple nature of photographic prints and the eventual mass production of art objects –would disintegrate the “aura” of originality that is associated with the unique work of art. The original work of art is authentic in that it is the genuine article or first of its kind, therefore a reproduction of the image or object becomes an imitation of the original. Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was originally published in 1936 in New York in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the Frankfurt Institute journal; as cited in Harrison and Wood, 512.

¹⁶ Appignanesi and Garratt, 13.

modern art became an unwavering testament to the autonomous, authentic work of art.

The styles of modern art did not always evolve in a linear way, with each style developing out of the previous style. More commonly, the various styles of modern art – particularly those from the early modern period – grew out of experimentation with compositional and formal arrangements, investigations into the use of new (or atypical) media and new technologies, or the desire to create an artistic expression of a philosophic or spiritual belief. Many of these styles or schools of art developed concurrently and often traversed cultural or national origins, for example Cubist artist Juan Gris was Spanish, not French, and Wassily Kandinsky, who helped found Der Blaue Reiter in Germany, was Russian. In a manner reminiscent of Renato Poggioli's breakdown of the developmental stages or "moments" of avant-garde activity,¹⁷ Richard Appignanesi summarizes the developments of modern art as a progression through three fundamental stages.¹⁸ But unlike Poggioli's stages, which are understood in terms of intellectual or psychological impulses or phases, in Appignanesi's model each stage revolves around a central concept under which the major avant-garde movements are grouped according to their aesthetic intentions or similarities.¹⁹ The first stage is the previously mentioned, "crisis in the representation of reality" which applies to

¹⁷ Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 25-30.

¹⁸ Only stages one and two are relevant to this discussion. Therefore, the third stage, termed "non presentation [or] abandoning the aesthetic process," which addresses post-Minimalist developments in Conceptual art, is not covered. Appignanesi and Garratt, 45.

¹⁹ For further clarification of Poggioli's stages refer back to Chapter 1.

the motivations of Cézanne, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.²⁰ By departing from the idea that art should imitate nature, the artists included in Appignanesi's first stage developed new and more conceptual approaches to the depiction of their subjects. Beginning with Cézanne, who applied his theory of color modulation to the rendering of landscape, each of these manifestations of early modern avant-garde art represents a subsequent phase of the aesthetic experimentation that occurred during the first half of the modern era. The aesthetic possibilities that resulted from what Appignanesi terms the "crisis in the representation of reality" culminate in Dada's anti-art and in Surrealism's aim of presenting a psychological or unconscious reality.

The second stage represents the move toward totally non-objective art, encompassing Suprematism, De Stijl,²¹ Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. According to Appignanesi, these movements focussed on what he called "the presentation of the unrepresentable."²² This refers to the presentation of concepts (be they intellectual, psychological or spiritual) that are usually not graphically depicted in the imagery, but are intended to be related through the arrangement of forms or the art making process. The common denominator among these movements seems to be the elimination of the object and the reduction of the composition of the artwork to geometric forms and formal relationships. Although Appignanesi doesn't differentiate between the specific

²⁰ Appignanesi and Garratt, 45.

²¹ Here Appignanesi cites "De Stijl etc" presumably referring to Neo-Plasticism, Geometric Abstraction, Art Concret, Abstraction-Création and the Cercle et Carré group. 45.

²² Appignanesi and Garratt, 45.

aims of each of the non-objective movements cited, it should be mentioned that with Suprematism, De Stijl and Constructivism there is also a content that exists outside of the artwork, one that points to a spiritual, universal or social, utopian objective. Whereas, with Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism the art object is self-contained and references nothing outside of the artwork itself.²³

The common thread that connects each phase of modern art (regardless of the aesthetic, philosophic or political agendas of the avant-garde movements) is the belief in and commitment to “absolute creative freedom.”²⁴ This belief not only inspired the various incarnations of the modern avant-garde to continually seek out new ways of challenging middle-class values and tastes, but also encouraged the experimentation in the depiction of new subjects and in the creation of new forms and styles of art. The idea of artistic freedom allowed artists to reject the illusion of pictorial space and to invent the increasingly abstract artistic vocabulary that has come to define the art of the modern era.

One of the more distinctive and enduring tendencies in modern art is the inclination to reduce art to its fundamental elements. But the most conspicuous quality in modern art is abstraction, regardless of the degree to which it was employed or the intentions for which it was utilized by each of the numerous schools and movements. From Cubism to the Bauhaus to Abstract

²³ Here it should be clarified that with Abstract Expressionism there was the additional focus on the process of creating the work of art; while Minimal art removed both outside and inside (all traces of the artist's gesture and intention) references from the art object.

²⁴ R. Blake, *Essential Modern Art* (Bath, UK: Paragon Publishing, 2001), 10.

Expressionism, abstraction was an international and multi-generational signature of modern artistic expression.

Abstraction was an enduring quality of modern art and was an aesthetic characteristic shared by many of the avant-garde groups. However, abstraction was certainly not an entirely universal mode of expression nor was it the only commonality among the modern art movements. Although the art of the modern era is composed of a variety of stylistic schools, some themes and types of content recurred in different styles and among different generations of artists. The most prominent of these recurrent themes are the artistic exploration of spirituality and a celebration of modern technology, both of which appear in works of art produced in different styles. Furthermore, many modern artists shared an interest in non-traditional art forms and children's art, and others in the expression of dream imagery and the unconscious mind. However, overall modern art is unified more by theory than by content, style or aesthetic.

The Post World War II Abstract Aesthetic

Prior to World War II, modern art theory tended to be based upon the specific philosophical or spiritual agendas of the various modern avant-garde movements. After the Second World War, Modern art theory and criticism became dominated

by Formalist theory.²⁵ As a philosophy of modern art, Formalism is a combination of the idea of the autonomous work of art, the abstract aesthetic and the art historical narrative that proposes that all art movements and periods progress through a beginning, a high point and a decline.²⁶ For the Formalist critics, Clement Greenberg among them, the arrangement of the visual elements of the composition took precedent over content and artistic intention, and the success of an artwork and its subsequent value was judged on the integrity of its formal qualities. The Formalists perceived that abstract art progressed toward a state of purity through the refinement of the essential qualities of each medium. In the case of modern painting, this involved an exaggerated emphasis of the qualities of color and flatness or the flattened treatment of the pictorial space. Formalist analysis also lent itself to a progressive reading of modern art posited on a direct line of influence running from Impressionism to Cubism, to Expressionism, and onto Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Subsequently, the interpretation of post-war modern art was greatly impacted by the Formalist evolutionary model of the development of modern art history.²⁷

Prior to the 1940s, modern art was a European phenomenon, or at least that was the general consensus. Paris had long been considered the center of avant-garde art activity and by 1945, Cubism, above all the European avant-garde styles, remained the dominant influence in the art world. Through the adherence

²⁵ Until Harold Rosenberg proposes the Contextualist approach to understanding Abstract Expressionist art. Rosenberg and Contextualism will be examined later in this chapter.

²⁶ Originating in Renaissance, this historical model of the linear evolution of art and culture is based on human developmental stages. This model comes under attack during the postmodern era. See Chapter 4.

to the two-dimensionality of the pictorial surface, the abstract treatment of the subject matter and the creation of art objects completely devoid of philosophical, social or political content, the Cubists truly pioneered the Formalist aesthetic. The influx of European artists into New York during World War II helped to shift the focus away from Paris and onto New York, but the art receiving critical recognition was still produced by European artists. However, these European artists, namely Mondrian, Duchamp and many of the Surrealists, would profoundly influence a group of young American artists in New York, where the first recognized American avant-garde school emerged.

The emergence of the New York School, later dubbed the Abstract Expressionists, marks a turning point in both American art and art history. For the first half of the twentieth century, Americans looked abroad for the latest artistic styles and innovations. By the 1950s, American art was influencing the Europeans.²⁸ Abstract Expressionism was embraced by the Formalist critics and became the dominant style. Herschel B. Chipp remarked that “For the first time an artistic movement originating in America was recognized on the international scene as one of the significant epochs in the development of contemporary art.”²⁹ Abstract Expressionism is regarded as the first independent American avant-garde

²⁷ Everett, 110.

²⁸ H. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 501.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 507.

school. With it came a new understanding of both the work of art and the artist.

The art object came to be viewed as the “free expression of the individual.”³⁰

Unlike the tradition of the European avant-garde movements, the New York School did not share a “guiding ideology” or a common artistic style.³¹ Although all of the artists included in the New York School employed at least some degree of abstraction in their work, each had developed his or her own unique style and method of working. As a group, they were more connected by the community they inhabited – the Lower East Side of Manhattan – than by their aesthetic aims.³² However, Chipp states that some of the Abstract Expressionists did concede that due to their social and professional interaction,³³ “it was inevitable that their painting, while demonstrating the ultimate in individuality of style, should have tended strongly toward abstraction, and furthermore, that it should be deeply expressionistic in its general feeling state.”³⁴ Regardless of the differences or similarities among these artists and their work, the art that became identified as Abstract Expressionist marks not only a historic moment in the development and reception of American art, but also demonstrates bold stylistic advancements and technical achievement in the composing of abstract art.

³⁰ Ibid., 513.

³¹ Ibid., 518.

³² Ibid.

³³ Many of the members of the New York School attended classes at the Art Students League in New York and worked on the WPA Federal Art Project during the war. So, they would have had similar experiences in their later development and shared influences, as well as the occasion to influence one another.

Clement Greenberg and Modernism

Abstract Expressionism found its greatest supporter in the Formalist art critic Clement Greenberg.³⁵ Greenberg has been called “one of the most important observers of contemporary trends in painting and sculpture.”³⁶ He was one of the first critics to promote the artists of the New York School and he later coined the term “Post-Painterly Abstraction,” naming a new style of abstract painting.³⁷ His ideas regarding art and aesthetics have played a pivotal role, not only in the cultivation of post-war abstraction and its artists, but in shaping the theoretical and art critical developments of the second half of the twentieth century.³⁸

Greenberg viewed modern art as a vital component of Western culture. In fact, he believed that modern art, or specifically modern avant-garde art, gave society its forward momentum. Therefore, in keeping with avant-garde ideology, Greenberg maintained that modern art must remain in a continual state of evolution in order to advance the culture. Furthermore he insisted that modernism’s aesthetic development must evolve toward greater formal purity or the art object is unsuccessful and fails to propel the culture forward.³⁹ Greenberg

³⁴ Chipp, 519.

³⁵ Greenberg was one of the three major critics of modernist art. The other two [as cited in Chipp, 517] were Harold Rosenberg and Hilton Kramer. Rosenberg will be discussed later in this chapter.

³⁶ Chipp, 517.

³⁷ The term was introduced as the title of an exhibition held in 1964 of paintings by artists who followed on the heels of Abstract Expressionism, but diverged from the earlier style while continuing the tradition of abstraction.

³⁸ Greenberg’s impact on postmodern art theory will be discussed in Chapter 4.

³⁹ Everett, 110. From the editor’s introduction to Greenberg’s essay, “Modernist Painting” (1963), originally printed in *Arts and Literature*, 1963. Reprinted in Everett, *Art Theory and Criticism*, 110-118.

attributed the stamina of Modernism to an inherent self-critical nature.⁴⁰ “The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench more firmly its area of competence.”⁴¹ In this statement Greenberg claims that modernists evaluated the disciplines of art and literature from a critical stance and he suggests that through this self-critical approach⁴² one is able to discern the qualities unique and exclusive to each literary genre or art medium. By focussing only on the essential elements or characteristics of each art form, the work of art and the modernist aesthetic is ultimately improved.⁴³ Greenberg advocated for the increasingly abstract artwork as being the epitome of the modern avant-garde tendency. He maintained that the more a work of art explores the formal elements of the given medium, line, shape, form, composition, color and texture, the more rigorously the work must adhere to *only* the formal principles, thus making it more and more pure.

Greenberg’s interpretation of successful artistic development as an evolution toward purity, becomes the justification for his central argument which not only asserts that the Formal aesthetic was the appropriate expression for modern art, but also demands that modern art adhere to the concepts of truth to materials and

⁴⁰ Everett on Greenberg, 110.

⁴¹ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in Everett, *Art Theory and Criticism*, 110.

⁴² Greenberg cites the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who used logic to critique the rules of logic, as establishing “the self-critical tendency.” In Everett, 111.

⁴³ Everett, 110.

truth to the medium.⁴⁴ Greenberg maintained that the essential quality of modernist painting was the emphasis on the flatness of the picture plane. From Greenberg's Formalist point of view, it is flatness that distinguishes painting from other artistic media and emphasizing flatness enabled modernist painters to avoid the sculptural effects created by the modeling of pictorial forms.⁴⁵ In his groundbreaking essay, "Modernist Painting" (1963), Greenberg states,

It was the stressing [...] of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art. The enclosing shape of the support was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm or means shared with sculpture as well as with the theater. Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.⁴⁶

The resistance of the sculptural, or resistance toward creating the illusion of space, depth and volume on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas, was a requirement of modernist⁴⁷ painting for Greenberg.

Greenberg's "modernist" aesthetic reduces the work of art to its basic characteristics by limiting the composition to the presentation of the formal elements and allowing nothing more than the qualities inherent to the medium to define and determine the appearance of the object. According to Greenberg, this

⁴⁴ This means the artist should uphold the integrity of the media and materials employed. Specifically, sculpture should be entirely three-dimensional and exist in a three-dimensional space, while painting should be entirely two-dimensional and adhere to both the surface of the wall and to the flatness of the canvas. Truth to materials refers to the idea that raw materials should not be manipulated to cover up their natural state or appear as if made of a different material.

⁴⁵ Everett, *Art Theory and Criticism*, 110.

⁴⁶ Greenberg in Everett, 112.

⁴⁷ Greenberg used the term modernist, as opposed to modern, in order to distinguish works of art rendered in the "modern" or Formalist aesthetic from styles of art produced during the late modern era (which was for him contemporary), that rejected the Formalist approach and the abstract aesthetic that he championed.

reductionist approach brought about a more authentic art – in comparison to the art of previous eras – because the modernist work of art referenced nothing outside of itself. He believed that, “so many factors thought to be essential to the making and experiencing of art have been shown not to be so by the fact that modernist art has been able to dispense with them and yet continue to provide the experience of art in all its essentials.”⁴⁸ Greenberg viewed art as an end in itself; therefore, the art object is self-contained and should not be viewed or used as a reference to or an indication of anything other than art. Greenberg’s critical assertions regarding the function and aesthetics of art resulted in the elevation of abstract and non-objective works of art as the art of modernism. However the implications of his point of view also resulted in the exclusion of art works that did not completely conform to his rigorous aesthetic, as well as works containing any content whatsoever, from his critical considerations.⁴⁹

Greenberg staunchly supported the ideology of the avant-garde and argued vehemently for the separation of the arts and the mass culture. He maintained that tastes of the masses constituted a low form of culture and that fine art⁵⁰ belonged to the realm of the high culture and its connoisseurs. For Greenberg, “esthetic”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Greenberg “Modernist Painting,” in Everett, 116.

⁴⁹ These implications became far reaching once Greenberg appointed himself spokesperson for the American avant-garde. Throughout the American art world, Greenberg’s aesthetic became synonymous with “good” art, leaving little room and no critical voice for works that deviated from it. The narrow definition of a successful work of art under the modernist tradition eventually led to the postmodern backlash and the Pluralism of the 1980’s.

⁵⁰ It is important to distinguish the traditionally accepted fine arts—painting, sculpture and architecture—from the applied arts, because Greenberg’s concept of high art did not include any of the applied arts and for the purpose of the discussion of Greenberg’s concept of art versus kitsch.

⁵¹ Greenberg’s preferred spelling.

judgments [and] verdicts of taste” were synonymous concepts.⁵² He believed that taste was a factor in both the appreciation and the creation of art. Subsequently, one was not truly capable of either if one had bad taste. Greenberg’s essay “The Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939),⁵³ provides insight into the foundation of his theories on modern art and aesthetics, and it lays the ground work for what will become a continuing debate about the issue of kitsch versus high art and the incorporation of kitsch elements in fine art.⁵⁴ In this essay, Greenberg examines the role of avant-garde art and its relation to culture by contrasting the art of the modern avant-garde with the art of the mass public – popular or commercial art – commonly dubbed kitsch. Before a clear distinction can be made between avant-garde art and kitsch, it should be understood that Greenberg developed his argument for such a distinction on a perceived division regarding the aesthetic capabilities of the viewing public. The idea that culture is separated into “high” and “low” forms becomes the foundation for the existence of each type of art. Through the course of his discussion, Greenberg used the separation between high and low art and culture to support his argument and prove his thesis: that the autonomous avant-garde work of art is a catalyst for cultural progress.

Greenberg prefaced his argument for the necessity of the avant-garde by explaining that what he termed “avant-garde culture” is unique to Westernized

⁵² C. Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

⁵³ First published in *Partisan Review*, 1939. Reprinted in Everett, *Art Theory and Criticism*, 26-40. Here it is important to note that Greenberg does not distinguish between avant-gardism and modernism.

⁵⁴ This will be thoroughly examined in Chapter 3 and Greenberg’s views on kitsch will be revisited throughout this paper.

societies and that it is a phenomenon only able to occur within the framework of an existing bourgeois social order.⁵⁵ He states that it was “A superior consciousness of history – more precisely a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism – [that] made this [the emergence of an avant-garde] possible.”⁵⁶ In essence, Greenberg is confirming that the avant-garde arose out of the modern sensibility and the political and socio-economic climate specific to this age.⁵⁷ He goes on to explain that avant-garde “concept of the bourgeois” was established as a means of defining “What they [the avant-garde artists and poets] were *not*.”⁵⁸ In other words, the bourgeois culture became viewed as the “Other” or opposite to the avant-garde bohemian culture. The avant-garde is charged with discovering the “new” and is therefore in a constant state of motion and experimentation. While the bourgeoisie does not create, it consumes cultural product and is, therefore, static. For these reasons, the modern avant-garde detached itself from the mass culture it opposed. “Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving [...],”⁵⁹ according to Greenberg.

Greenberg proposed, “Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard.”⁶⁰ In his analysis of art and kitsch Greenberg reinforced the

⁵⁵ Based on the Marxist concept of the middle class or capitalist class of a given society.

⁵⁶ Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in Everett, 27.

⁵⁷ The nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 31.

importance of the original, authentic work of art and defended Formalist, abstract art by promoting it as the aesthetic of high culture. Greenberg maintained that the desire to separate art from culture led to the creation of art objects intended to express an “absolute.”⁶¹ He explains that “art for arts sake” and abstract or non-representational art developed because artists sought to avoid the “subject matter of common experience.”⁶² In an effort to maintain the “high level of his [or her] art,” the modern avant-garde artist turned to a Formalist approach and invoked what Greenberg calls “the values of aesthetics.”⁶³ This is the avant-garde for Greenberg; the rear-guard is Kitsch.

Greenberg states that, “To fill the demands of a new market,⁶⁴ a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.”⁶⁵ Kitsch represents the product and aesthetic of the masses, which changes according to stylistic trends. Fine or high art is a product of high or superior culture and reflects the cultivated taste and aesthetic of an advanced, elite segment of society. Because kitsch belongs to the mass culture it is automatically lesser than high art and even bad, in terms of quality, aesthetic and taste. The kitsch work of art is popular art. Kitsch encompasses everything from commercial art, such as illustration and advertisements to paintings on velvet and cheap imitations of art masterpieces.

⁶¹ Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in Everett, 28.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶⁴ Greenberg is referring to capitalist mass consumption.

Greenberg's definition of kitsch was by most accounts too broad, and went so far as to include Jazz music, Tap dancing and Hollywood films.⁶⁶

Kitsch relies on the art of high culture for cues as to the prevailing aesthetic and for artistic styles to imitate. As Greenberg explains,

The preconditions for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends.⁶⁷

Gillo Dorfles, in his book *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, agrees with Greenberg regarding the purpose and function of kitsch art in its relationship to high and avant-garde culture. He states that kitsch artworks "represent a basically false interpretation of the aesthetic trends of their age."⁶⁸ Kitsch distorts the prevailing taste of the era in which it was produced. Aleksa Čelebonović states, "The kitsch tendency," is pregnant with "pretence, imitation and affectation."⁶⁹ Gillo Dorfles further classifies kitsch as "pseudo-artistic or un-artistic,"⁷⁰ because kitsch art tends to be decorative or have a decorative purpose and is evaluated on pleasurable effect not artistic merit. According to Hermann Broch, "The essence of kitsch is the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category; a 'beautiful' work not a 'good' one, is the aim; the important thing is an effect of

⁶⁵ Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in Everett, 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁸ He also notes that the modern age is really the only period concerned with issues of taste by way of aesthetics. G. Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1968), 10.

⁶⁹ A. Čelebonović, "Notes on Tradition Kitsch," in Dorfles, 282.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11.

beauty.”⁷¹ Dorfles maintains that kitsch not only imitates high art but also produces substitutes for it.⁷² This refers back to Greenberg’s assertion that the masses yearn for culture but because they do not have access to high or avant-garde culture, they must imitate its aesthetic. In Greenberg’s view,

There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful – and therefore the cultivated – and on the other the great masses of the exploited and the poor – and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.⁷³

However, on the contrary, Čelebonović suggests that “Kitsch becomes part of the reaction by the masses to the elite culture that venerates high art and dictates good taste.”⁷⁴

Greenberg cites that the masses “constituted a steady threat to high culture, and the avant-garde is part of high culture’s answer to that threat.”⁷⁵ Greenberg continually stressed that to be avant-garde meant to be part of an art historical continuity and did not require a “radical break from the past.”⁷⁶ In his view, without the art of the past there would be no traditions to question or stylistic conventions to abandon or revise; there would be no precedent for modernist art.⁷⁷

⁷¹ H. Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” in Dorfles, 71.

⁷² Ibid., 18-19. It should be noted that this imitation is not the same as appropriation, even when pop culture imagery is appropriated. The use of popular and banal imagery by avant-garde artists will be examined and discussed in Chapter 3.

⁷³ Greenberg “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in Everett, 36.

⁷⁴ Čelebonović, “Notes on Tradition Kitsch,” in Dorfles, 286.

⁷⁵ Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, quoted in the introduction by Charles Harrison, xxiii.

⁷⁶ Charles Harrison from the introduction to Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, xvi.

⁷⁷ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in Everett, 117.

For Greenberg, to be avant-garde was always about the transformation of the work of art – the object and its medium – from within.⁷⁸

For Greenberg, the most critical feature of modern avant-garde art was its ability to present totally new, and previously unconsidered, approaches to the visual and technical composition of an art object.⁷⁹ In his view, this was accomplished most successfully by Cubism. However, Greenberg also felt that in order for the avant-garde artist to uphold the expectations of originality and newness, one had to “reject more deliberately those directions of art in his own time that did not press him toward newness and innovation.”⁸⁰ In the mid-1940s, Clement Greenberg would be among the first to champion a group of American artists who, not only deliberately rejected the Regionalist style dominating the American art of their day, but who rejected Cubism which had dominated avant-garde art internationally. Abstract Expressionism became Greenberg’s newest cause and he set out to explain the importance of this art – in the contexts of both the Formalists aesthetic and art history – to the art-viewing public. There were a few artists whose work Greenberg singled out as the best of “The best new art,”⁸¹ the sculptor David Smith and, of course, Jackson Pollock. Deborah Solomon explains Greenberg’s attraction to Pollock as follows:

He believed that Pollock was not just a great painter but a historical force that could free modern art from its subservience to Cubist tradition. Greenberg, who had started his writing career during the radical thirties, applied Marxist ideas about historical inevitability to painting. He defined the evolution of art

⁷⁸ Charles Harrison from the introduction to Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, xvi.

⁷⁹ Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 36.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 87.

since Manet in terms of the gradual elimination of illusion and felt that Pollock's primary accomplishment consisted of going beyond Picasso and Braque; he eliminated more illusion than they had. The Cubists had flattened out space while continuing to differentiate between shapes. Pollock's "all-over" paintings, with their even dispersion of accent and emphasis, broke down hierarchical distinctions.⁸²

It is important to be apprised of the fact that Greenberg's support was not entirely altruistic, the work of the Abstract Expressionists supported Greenberg's theories on art and aesthetics and gained him as much recognition as the artists he championed.⁸³

The most important idea that Greenberg put forth regarding Abstract Expressionist painting was his declaration of the "death of the easel painting."⁸⁴ He proposed that modernist art was progressing off the easel and onto the wall.⁸⁵ For Greenberg the dissolution of the easel tradition signaled that his Formalist ideal of preserving the integrity of painting – by demanding absolute flatness and adherence to the two-dimensionality of the pictorial space – could now be fully realized. Although Clement Greenberg never deviated from his strict Formalist approach to art,⁸⁶ he did concede that the ideas put forth in his critical and theoretical writings were not absolute. In *Modernist Painting*, he clarifies:

⁸² D. Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1987), 170.

⁸³ Solomon notes that, "Though Greenberg is now known as one of the chief theoreticians of post-war art criticism, his writings were mocked and scorned in the forties." She goes on to explain that this criticism came from both his colleagues and mass-circulation magazines. *Jackson Pollock: A Biography*, 170.

⁸⁴ Solomon, 170.

⁸⁵ This theory was first introduced in a review for *The Nation*, February 1947, of Pollock's one man show at the Art of This Century gallery, in which Greenberg was discussing the monumental scale of Pollock's canvases and how they seemed to reference mural painting. From here, Greenberg continued to develop his theory and later applied it to Color Field paintings as well. Excerpts from the review are reprinted in Solomon, pages 169-170.

⁸⁶ Greenberg even maintained his position throughout the postmodern era when art was being conceived and created as the intentional antithesis of his aesthetic and theories. When confronted by such works, he

It is understood, I hope, that in plotting the rationale of Modernist art I have had to simplify and exaggerate. The flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations of a Mondrian still suggest a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, can travel through, only with the eye.⁸⁷

This statement may have been Greenberg's effort to thwart any anticipated criticism that could be leveled against him on the most obvious points of his argument. One thing is certain, that Greenberg believed his interpretation of modern abstract art, its place in art history and, to a large extent, the future of the whole of art to be correct and basically indisputable. In any case, Greenberg's theories and assertions regarding modernist art have remained highly influential to artists and critics alike. However, Greenberg did not represent the only school of thought on modern art criticism. Other methods of interpretation involving modern abstract art and specifically Abstract Expressionist art, were being simultaneously developed and presented, the most notable of these being Contextualist theory, promoted by Harold Rosenberg.

merely dismissed them as non-art. Greenberg's influence and the critical attack launched against

Contextualism and Harold Rosenberg

Like Greenberg, art critic Harold Rosenberg was an early advocate for the Abstract Expressionists. In describing the gestural brush work and sense of movement he recognized in some Abstract Expressionist works, he coined the term “Action painting.” Rosenberg’s 1952 article, “The American Action Painters” introduced the term to the art public.⁸⁸ Rosenberg wrote that the Abstract Expressionist painter’s canvas was “an arena in which to act.”⁸⁹ This statement evoked both the motivation of self-expression that fueled the artists of the New York School and the Existentialist philosophical doctrine of the responsibility of the individual action to which he himself and many of the Abstract Expressionists subscribed.⁹⁰ In the same article, Rosenberg described the artistic process of Action painting and the resulting art work as follows:

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.⁹¹

This “encounter” functions like a conversation between the painter, the paint and the “arena” of the canvas. At the foundation of Rosenberg’s understanding of the creative process in these terms, was an approach to the interpretation and analysis of art, known as Contextualism.

Greenbergian Formalism by the postmodernists will be further examined in Chapter 4.

⁸⁷ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in Everett, 115.

⁸⁸ The article originally appeared in the December issue of *ARTnews*, 1952. Cited in Chipp, 569.

⁸⁹ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” excerpts reprinted in Chipp, 569-570.

⁹⁰ Atkins, 41.

⁹¹ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in Chipp, 569.

Contextualist theory states that a work of art is determined by the context in which it is created. The context or situation necessary for art activity to exist must include the expression of ideas or feelings by an artist, the art object as the vehicle for said expression, and a recipient viewer.⁹² Sally Everett explains that, in the Contextualist view, the art object functions similarly to language or, more precisely, as “a channel of communication,”⁹³ by which the artist communicates the idea or emotion that inspired the piece or even sensation of the creative process to the viewer through the work of art. This theory is anti-Formalist, in that it completely omits the idea of an autonomous art object and points to circumstances and contexts outside of the intrinsic elements of the artwork.⁹⁴

Harold Rosenberg presented a counterpoint to Greenberg’s Formalist approach to analyzing Abstract Expressionist art by applying the Contextualist approach to his interpretation of Action painting. In Rosenberg’s view,

The new American painting is not “pure” art, since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the aesthetic. The apples weren’t brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting. In this gesturing with materials the aesthetic, too, has been subordinated. Form, color, composition, drawing, are auxiliaries, any one of which—or practically all, as has been attempted logically with unpainted canvases—can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act.⁹⁵

For Rosenberg, Abstract Expressionism does not represent another stage in an artistic evolution toward formal purity. He sees the achievement of this new style

⁹² Everett, x.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., x-xi. This concept gains greater importance when viewed in relation to the development of the postmodern idea that artists are informed by cultural information that shapes the creation of the art object (again, omitting autonomy). See Chapters four and five for further clarification.

of painting as being its visual expression of the interaction between artist and materials – the expression of the act of painting. Furthermore, Rosenberg emphasized the importance of the process, whereas Greenberg emphasized the end result. In his 1964 essay, “The Art Object and the Esthetics of Impermanence,” Rosenberg briefly reprises his discussion of Action Painting, again focussing on the creative process. “Its [the artwork’s] vocabulary tends to describe its creation in terms of their coming into being: expressions that conceive of a painting as beginning to ‘happen’ or as ‘working itself out’ are typical.”⁹⁶ He goes on to explain the communication of the process to the viewer: “In Action painting the artist is the first spectator, and the audience is invited to repeat with him the experience of seeing the work take shape.”⁹⁷

Although Rosenberg and Greenberg differed in their theoretical and analytical approaches to modern abstract art, they were both strong supporters of Abstract Expressionism and, perhaps more importantly, they shared a common view on the nature and function of the avant-garde. Like Greenberg, Rosenberg believed that avant-garde art had the capacity to provoke culture into moving forward. He also agreed that promoting change within society meant that the art of the avant-garde had to continually change or be constantly new. Through his writings Rosenberg often encouraged artistic innovation through the use of non-art materials and new

⁹⁵ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in Chipp, 570.

⁹⁶ Rosenberg, “The Art Object and the Esthetic of Impermanence” (1964). Originally published in Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*. Reprinted in Everett, 119-124.

⁹⁷ Rosenberg, “The Art Object and the Esthetic of Impermanence,” in Everett, 122.

media and promoted the exploration of new processes, styles and forms of expression.⁹⁸

Through the efforts of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, on the behalf of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting, America gradually grew accustomed to the abstract aesthetic of modern art and the international art community was forced to take notice of American art. During the post-war era, the values of modernism were entrenched in Western culture and modernist art had become synonymous with the concept of high art throughout an international art world. Harrison and Wood explain that, “What was once a marginal aspect of the culture of a few metropolitan centres in Western Europe has effectively achieved the status of the accepted and characteristic art of its time the world over.”⁹⁹ The modern abstract aesthetic was used to measure the success of a work of art and came to define what art was and what art could be.¹⁰⁰ The modernist definition of art became increasingly narrow as modern art moved into the Minimalist aesthetic of the late 1960s. The unconditional acceptance of tenets of modern art theory and the narrow parameters of the modernist aesthetic eventually led to critical questions about and opposition to the tradition of modernism, which, in turn, undermined the modernist position and its hold over the art world. Harrison and Wood summarize the reasons behind the decline of modernism as follows:

⁹⁸ Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (1959). Cited in Harrison and Wood, 581.

⁹⁹ Harrison and Wood, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Critique of the premises of modernism and the narrowness of the modernist aesthetic will be explored in depth with the discussion of postmodernism in Chapter 4.

In becoming hegemonic, Modernism opened the way for a widespread critical reappraisal of its own principles and assumption. Modernism had always had its Others, but in the West at least their subordinate status was generally assumed over a long period. During the final quarter of the [20th] century this assumption has been widely questioned. The notion of 'Pluralism' has been associated with a loosening of the authority of Modernist judgements.¹⁰¹

Regardless of any flaws that may exist in modern art theory, the fact remains that modern art broke boundaries. It presented new aesthetic possibilities and new technical and stylistic innovations. The institutions of modernism afforded artists, for the first time in art's history, the opportunity to question and challenge the status quo, artistically, socially and politically. In the contemporary era, artists continue to question and challenge the dominant trends and the art authorities, but could such questions – including the critical re-evaluation of modern art theory – have come to pass without the precedent set by modern artists?

¹⁰¹ The term, "Pluralism" refers to the plural or multiple styles and media of the art of the 1980s. Harrison and Wood, 7.

Chapter 3

Some Late Modern Avant-gardes

The modern aesthetic of the post-war era reached its climax with Color-Field and Hard-Edge painting. During the 1960s, artists with avant-garde tendencies began to explore new ways to push the boundaries of art and ideas about art. Fueled by the desire to challenge the norms of the art establishment – which at this point in time favored avant-garde art and ideology – and to loosen the strict confines of the Formalist abstract aesthetic, many artists sought to redefine the concept “avant-garde.” Some artists began to look back at the ideas and objects of earlier avant-garde artists and movements, particularly the Surrealists and Marcel Duchamp.

The avant-garde art movements that emerged and thrived in the later half of the twentieth century returned to and re-asked the questions that lay at the foundation of modern avant-garde dogma. Among the most important questions addressed were those concerning the differentiation between the ordinary object and the art object, the original creation versus the reproduction, and the distinction between the avant-garde and the mass public, or more specifically, the separation (and reuniting) of art and contemporary life. The artists who initiated this dialogue became the representatives of the new avant-gardes.

During the mid-1950s, a generation of young artists, who had developed their talents in the shadow of Abstract Expressionism, sought to move away from the

psychological content embedded in the process of art making and revisit the world of objects. They launched an exploration into the modernist definitions and constraints regarding the qualities that characterize avant-garde practices and high art. Marcel Duchamp's presence during the post-war years in New York undoubtedly contributed to the resurgence of a more Dada-like attitude among the young participants in the American avant-garde. These artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Jasper Johns, looked to the mundane and the banal for their subject matter and returned to presenting ordinary, commonplace objects as art.¹ The act of re-presenting non-art objects in a high art context often involves a reintroduction of a certain amount of irony into the work of art, a tendency which finds its precedents in Dada and Surrealism and enjoyed a resurgence in the work of the Neo-Dadaists or Proto-Pop artists.² It was the combination of these two elements, banal imagery and irony, that laid the cornerstone for the emergence of Pop Art in the United States.

The appropriation of popular or consumer based imagery and objects in works of high art started to make its appearance around 1955, in England and concurrently, if not shortly thereafter, in America. At a 1956 London exhibition of art and design titled, *This is Tomorrow*, Pop art made its debut in a work by the now famous artist Richard Hamilton.³ Hamilton's *Just What Is It That Makes*

¹ It should be clarified that, in the work of these artists, the appropriation and depiction of everyday objects and imagery was within the context of the artwork, and not merely the reinterpretation of Duchamp's *Ready-mades*.

² As Johns, Rauschenberg and Edward Kienholz, among others, came to be known.

³ Hamilton's piece is considered the first Pop artwork and the exhibition is credited as the venue that first showcased the style.

Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing? 1956 [fig. 1], an image designed primarily for the exhibition catalogue, is a collage of pop culture artifacts and ephemera taken directly from contemporary mass media, advertisements, and entertainment, and positioned within the context of the modern interior environment. Charles Harrison describes the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition as:

the first redolent of the power and vitality of an emergent popular culture, or rather a popular culture packaged and distributed for mass consumption; [...] [the exhibition was] the retrospectively established occasion of the emergence in Britain of Pop Art.⁴

The art critic Lawrence Alloway used the term “popular art,” (from which the abbreviation “Pop” originated) as a stylistic label for the work of Richard Hamilton and his colleagues in the Independent Group,⁵ in the 1958 essay “The Arts and Mass Media.”⁶ Alloway discusses the crucial role that the popular or mass media arts play in defining Western culture, and the implication of its encroachment on high culture and fine art. He explains that because the aesthetic of the elite high culture is not universally accessible or applicable, it should not be used to determine what appeals to the tastes of the masses. Furthermore, Alloway, like the artists of the Independent Group, questioned the validity of

⁴ *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 683.

⁵ A group of London based artists concerned with the issues and implications of popular culture. The resulting work of the painters, sculptors and critics of the Independent group are credited with developing much of the vocabulary used in Pop art. In addition to Richard Hamilton, the Independent Group included the sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, the architects Alison and Peter Smithson and the historian and writer Reyner Banham, among others. Lawrence Alloway himself was also marginally involved with the group.

⁶ Originally published in *Architectural Design*, London, February 1958, 34-35. Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, 701-03.

allowing an elite cultural body to decide which types of artistic subject matter and media appropriately represents the whole of a society.⁷

It is Alloway's contention that the popular or commercial arts – advertisements, motion pictures, cartoons and comics, pulp fiction and science fiction – actually encapsulate and describe contemporary life more accurately than the works of fine art produced during the post-war decades. He states, “Sensitiveness to the variables of our life and economy enable the mass arts to accompany the changes in our life far more closely than the fine arts which are a repository of time-binding values.”⁸ Because aesthetics and/or tradition do not govern the popular arts, this type of media is able to change along with and accommodate the rapid consumption of information and imagery by the mass audience to which it caters.

Alloway concludes his essay by stating that, in his opinion, “the new role of the fine arts is to be one of the possible forms of communication in an expanding framework that also includes the mass arts.”⁹ This idea that popular culture, or at least the imagery of popular and/or commercial culture, could be incorporated into a fine art context was the subject of the works of the Independent Group and the impetus behind the show, *This is Tomorrow*. However, it also became the point of departure for numerous young artists seeking to once again shock a seemingly complacent art world and cause aesthetic upheaval. The integration of

⁷ Alloway, in Harrison and Wood, 701.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 703.

popular imagery and high art was at the very base of a new sensationalist avant-garde; Pop became the next international¹⁰ art phenomenon.

Appearing almost simultaneously in England and the United States, Pop art was not only a reflection of post-war consumerism, it was the visual expression of a youthful optimism arriving on the art scene just as the existential angst of the New York School was becoming cliché. Pop art marks a return to figuration in art and, taking its cues from the early twentieth century Dada movement, Pop reexamines the element of irony and its place within artistic presentation and content. Harrison and Wood point out that during the final years of the Abstract Expressionist era, young artists were increasingly motivated by “The need to achieve representation of a new sense of modernity.”¹¹ The work of this up and coming generation of artists, particularly among the Americans, seems to express a certain amount of frustration toward the seriousness and bravado of Abstract Expressionism. Certainly, Pop art was as much a reaction against Abstract Expressionism as it was a celebration of postwar consumerism.

By the early 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was being marketed as a testament to American originality and autonomy, praising the individual artist(s), his or her vision and his or her process. Pop art developed as a response to these ideas concerning the function of art and the role of the artist. In Pop art, all imagery is an appropriation, a representation or a reproduction, fabricated by the maker's

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, which will present Pop as the precedent for both the late modern avant-garde groups and the Low Brow style, only a few key artists from the American and British facets of Pop art will be discussed.

¹¹ *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 684.

anonymous hand. Picking up where Duchamp and Dada left off, Pop reopens the question of the original work of art, becoming the first in a new sequence of artistic ventures to play with and manipulate the concept of originality and its implications during the last half of the twentieth century. Edward Lucie-Smith explains that,

Pop art was the first major challenge to Abstract Expressionism, [...] The way in which Pop artists identified themselves with the consumer culture was for many critics and theoreticians a major intellectual betrayal. Abstract Expressionism had seemed to them, and indeed to the artists themselves, an art of aspiration, a celebration of the individual and of artistic individuality, a generous outflowing of the psyche, careless of all risks. In fact it was an art of paroxysm, [...] Pop, deliberately cheap, deliberately blank, came like a slap in the face.¹²

The Pop artists sought to reintroduce common place or banal imagery into high art and in doing so they resurrected a neglected, if not subjugated, piece of avant-garde ideology: the depiction of modern life as a subject for art.¹³ What better way to characterize modernity and progress than to represent its people and products in and as works of art? Pop art captures the zeitgeist of the 1950s and 1960s in all its ephemeral glory and enduring optimism, as well as the impending decadence of the decades that followed. Charles Harrison describes the Pop tendency and its emerging artists as being fixated on “the fascinating iconography of the consumer society.”¹⁴ Pop artists drew their inspiration from contemporary life and its artifacts. Some Pop artists took as their subject matter mundane objects and mass media imagery and employed techniques borrowed from graphic

¹² Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 9.

¹³ A precedent set in the 1860s and 1870s by the Impressionist movement.

¹⁴ *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 683.

design and commercial advertising. While others adopted and appropriated the styles of pop culture media, such as comics, movie posters, advertisements and magazine spreads. Some specific examples of the ways in which artists extracted everyday images and objects from the pop culture landscape and then appropriated this content into their own work can be seen in Andy Warhol's use of imagery taken directly from the media or in Claes Oldenburg's transformative treatment of commonplace objects, such as clothespins and lipstick, into large-scale sculptures.¹⁵

Klaus Richter explains that "Pop art pursued no profound aesthetic or social aim. The idea was simply to bridge the gap between mundane contemporary life and art."¹⁶ However, Pop does make a dramatic aesthetic statement, in that the visual appearance and technical rendering of Pop art virtually eliminates all traces of the artist's hand, gesture or "signature."¹⁷ The smooth, slick treatment of both surface and subject in Pop painting and sculpture – which serves to remove all reference to a personal handling of the material and all evidence of the artist's touch – was a direct and deliberate jab at the Abstract Expressionist canon.

The work of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol best exemplifies the fabricated quality of Pop art and the implications of its graphic aesthetic.

Harrison and Wood characterize the work of these two artists as displaying "The

¹⁵ E. Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1999), 322.

¹⁶ K. Richter, *Art: From Impressionism to the Internet* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2001), 114.

¹⁷ A term used by the critics associated with the New York School in reference to the mark or gesture made by an artist's personal technique or approach to his or her chosen media. It came to symbolize the

tendency to treat the modern as a form of surface, which is revealing of meaning and value by virtue of its very artificiality.”¹⁸ Both artists were fascinated by the visual and ideological presentation of the mass culture through its various forms of media and popular entertainment; exploring, if not exploiting, the superficiality and artifice of the public image of modern America. Andy Warhol’s portraits of Hollywood icons and other celebrity personae immediately address this issue.¹⁹ In contrast to Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein took a more formal, and slightly subtler, approach in representing this issue of the surface treatment of the popular culture and the fiction of its commercial imagery. Lichtenstein appropriated the technical and stylistic conventions used in comic strips and comic books and transformed the commercial process and aesthetic into giant paintings.

Lichtenstein took his imagery directly from comic book storyboards. His images, complete with speech balloons and Ben Day dots,²⁰ duplicate the familiar comic-strip style. For example, *Drowning Girl*, 1963 [fig.2] is a replica of a panel titled *Run For Love!*, from the DC Comics romance *Secret Hearts*.²¹ Lichtenstein made very few alterations to the original source material, only modifying the color and simplifying the image.²² However, removed from their original context,

individual artist and signify each artist’s work as being uniquely his or her own. It is not meant to refer to the act of signing one’s artwork.

¹⁸ Harrison and Wood, 684.

¹⁹ Warhol’s work and contribution to Pop and subsequent art movements will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

²⁰ A technique used in commercial printing which renders an image through a series of small dots of color. Lichtenstein adapted the device for painting and Ben-Day dots became part of his signature style.

²¹ Tony Abruzzo, *Run for Love!* (1962), illustration from *Secret Hearts*, 83 (Nov. 1962), DC Comics. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 199.

²² Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 313.

the individual frames loose their narrative structure, so that the imagery and text can no longer be read as a series of events unfolding and instead develop a statement-like or commentary quality.

Lichtenstein's use of familiar imagery was not limited to comics and pulp literature. He also reinterpreted famous and well-known works of fine art, such as Monet's Rouen Cathedral series. In his *Rouen Cathedral Set V*, 1969 [fig. 3]²³ Lichtenstein takes on Monet's subject, but varies the palette and recreates Monet's painting in Ben Day dots. Lichtenstein's choices of source material reflect his interest in exploring the overlapping of popular culture and high art and the reciprocal influence between the two. His paintings illuminate their pop culture sources by utilizing and transforming the original imagery.

Like Lichtenstein, other Pop artists, such as Robert Indiana, James Rosenquist and Tom Wesselmann, utilized techniques and imagery that are most commonly associated with graphic art, commercial illustration and advertising. Although their subject matter was drawn from various sources and each artist approached the presentation of their chosen imagery and its references to pop culture individually and differently, there exists an undeniable commonality among their work. The tendency toward appropriation or reinterpretation of the aesthetic, content and processes of graphic and mechanically fabricated or industrial art was

²³The work illustrated in figure 3 is the final panel in a triptych. Lichtenstein used a different palette for each of the individual panels, but shows the same view of the cathedral, based on Monet's original, throughout. All three panels (labeled A-C) belong to the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

one approach toward the artistic representation of modernity, contemporary life and the new consumer oriented “pop” sensibility.

On the other side of the camp were artists like Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg, who, instead of appropriating preexisting imagery or commercial art styles, tended to either incorporate or exaggerate everyday objects within their artworks. Oldenburg created enormous sculptural objects of banal and commonplace items, such as household appliances, cosmetics and even food, using industrial fabrics and materials. These two approaches which the Pop artists took in presenting the items, products and imagery that was saturating the commercial culture of the post-war era, came together in the work of the artist whose name has become synonymous with Pop, Andy Warhol. His concept and creation of both the work of art and the artist made Warhol the most celebrated of the Pop artists and the quintessential spokesperson for the American Pop art movement.

It was primarily Warhol’s vision of the interaction between art and life that set the stage for Pop to become a unique avant-garde phenomenon. Pop art differed from earlier avant-garde movements, in which the artists positioned themselves and their artistic goals outside of or in opposition to the popular or mass culture. In contrast, Warhol and his colleagues absorbed the preoccupations and fetishes of the popular culture. Rather than exposing or criticizing the flaws of the mass culture or the dominant aesthetic to which the masses subscribed, the Pop artists used their art to reflect an often exaggerated version of media images and consumer objects back onto the culture that had initially desired and devoured

them. In the book *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-garde*, author Marc Aronson explains that,

Warhol realized that in an age that glorified television, advertisement, and market research the avant-garde did not have to be against mass culture, mass culture already was avant-garde [...] In a civilization that was made entirely out of publicity, this moment's avant-garde art could only be style, attitude and plastic.²⁴

Like Duchamp before him, Warhol redefined what constituted a work of art and the role the artist plays in the creative process. Warhol's reproductions of press photos of celebrities and his images of items as familiar as dollar bills and Campbell's soup cans, challenged the accepted criteria of appropriate artistic subject matter.²⁵ Furthermore, as Edward Lucie-Smith explains,

A Warhol *Soup Can* or *Marilyn* aimed to reduce a familiar object or icon to the simplest form in which it would remain immediately recognizable. Something was represented, but all the overtones and undertones associated with most attempts at representation were summarily abolished.²⁶

Warhol sought to duplicate the aesthetic of mechanically created imagery, in turn minimizing the discernable presence of the artist's hand or gesture. By using the technique of silk-screening to transfer his images onto canvas, Warhol achieved a completely flat, graphic and objective – if not objectified – presentation of his subjects. Warhol's images are as slick and fabricated as anything produced or reproduced mechanically, creating the appearance that artist was no more involved in the creation of the image than a printing press operator.

²⁴ M. Aronson, *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-garde* (New York: Clarion Books, 1998), 141.

²⁵ Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 316.

²⁶ E. Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 10.

The silk-screening process afforded Warhol the ability to blow-up photographs and pre-printed (or pre-drawn) images to an incredibly large scale, resulting in the enormous, minimally detailed, color saturated prints that became his signature style. His choice of medium further supported his indifferent approach to his subjects. Warhol wanted to maintain an objective distance between himself, the work of art and the viewer;²⁷ thus his famous statement that “he wanted to be a machine.”²⁸ He executed this concept to such a degree that eventually it was impossible to determine whether Warhol himself had been at all involved in the physical creation (or production) of his pieces.

Following the tradition established by Duchamp, Warhol maintained that it was the idea behind the artwork for which the artist was responsible and that this is what gave the artist his importance, not the actual hand-crafting of the image or object. With Warhol, the idea of “the artist” was turned on its head. Warhol’s silk-screens were used to transfer images from photographs or graphic designs composed by other people. Similarly, he employed numerous assistants in his studio – aptly named the “Factory” – so that one could never be sure which works Warhol had a hand in, literally or even conceptually. It was his claim to the title of “maker” coupled with his assumed persona of the *Famed Artiste* that secured him entry into the New York art world of the 1960s. An unsigned letter that

²⁷ According to Edward Lucie-Smith, Warhol’s approach was most likely influenced by Bertold Brecht’s theory of alienation, which states that “the work of art deliberately distances the spectator and invites judgement, rather than identification with what is shown.” *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 316.

²⁸ P. Plagens, “What Andy Saw,” *Newsweek* (July 2003), 53.

appeared in the December issue of *Newsweek* (1964) eloquently summarizes

Andy Warhol, the artist:

From the fetishes of commercial art [Warhol had a background in advertising] to the super-fetishes of painting was a logical step for Warhol. Like all pop artists, he saw the pathos and charm of the obsolescent images of mass culture, from a comic strip to an overwhelmingly unattainable movie beauty. Like all artists, the content of his life dictated the obsessions of his art. "I used to have the same soup lunch every day for twenty years. So I painted soup cans."²⁹

The two technical devices most commonly found in Warhol's paintings are magnification and repetition. Both contribute to the sense detachment resident in Warhol's impersonal approach to his subject matter and creative process. This impersonal manner in which Warhol presents his subjects is poignantly exemplified in his *Celebrity* portraiture. Warhol was enthralled with fame, celebrity and stardom. He was as impartial in depicting the glamorous aspects of fame as he was in exposing the tragedies that would befall so many of his iconic models, among them Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Jackie Kennedy. One of his more interesting portrait subjects was Elizabeth Taylor, of whom Warhol did several works, featuring her during different stages of her film career.

Warhol's fixation on the violet-eyed movie queen is evident in the silk-screen painting titled *National Velvet*, 1963,³⁰ for which the artist captured a film-still that shows an idyllic young Taylor astride the horse, the image is then repeated in silver paint forty one times. The serial portraits of Liz seem to chronicle her

²⁹ "Saint Andrew," author unknown, *Newsweek* (December 7, 1964) 100-104. Reprinted in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, Steven Henry Madoff, ed., 279.

³⁰ Silkscreen ink and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 136.37 x 83.5 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Accessions committee gift. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

development from girlhood into maturity. A subsequent work in the Liz series, *Blue Liz as Cleopatra*, 1963,³¹ depicts the actress as seductress, the original image taken from the publicity photo for the film is reproduced multiple times from left to right across the canvas. Perhaps the most revealing of the Liz portraits is *Red Liz*, 1962 [fig. 4]. The singular image presents an extremely frontal close-up view of Taylor's face. The image is almost garish in both its color scheme (dominated by pink and red) and the depiction of the actress, with her bright blue eye shadow and apparently smeared red lipstick. Like the other Liz portraits, this one addresses both the prestige and power of stardom and the issue of Elizabeth Taylor's image as a commodity. However, this particular work also seems to be a comment on beauty as a commodity and the consequences of aging in Hollywood.³² David Antin of *Art News* described the image as follows:

In this work the image lies in a very narrow space slightly in front of the canvas, and it is in this narrow field that the "ideal," expressionless face separates into a series of floating superimposed colors [...] – the eye shadow, the lips, the hair. The "ideal" face is transformed into a curious mask. It is not to be doubted that this is an "ideal" face despite the terrifying flesh tones out of Woolworth portraits, the mad eye-shadow and the wig-like hair. This is, after all, *Liz*.³³

Consistent with all of Warhol's serial images of American icons, the portraits of Liz Taylor reveal more about the artist than they do about the actress. Warhol

³¹ Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas, 82.25 x 65 in. Collection of the Andy Warhol Foundation, Inc. / Art Resource, NY. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

³² The idea of visually presenting decadence and decay (specifically tied to or in conjunction with images of women) resurfaces within the work of the Los Angeles Low Brow artists; many of whom were strongly influenced by Warhol's iconography and the ideas and aesthetic of Pop art. These artists and their work will be examined in detail in Chapter 6.

³³ David Antin, "Warhol: The Silver Tenement," *Art News* (Summer, 1966) 47 ff. Reprinted in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, Steven Henry Madoff, ed., 289-90.

made no attempt to capture any sense of the women behind the movie star, but managed to convey quite clearly his own fascination with the idea that one can be famous “simply by being famous.”³⁴

Warhol’s interest in celebrity extended beyond his artworks, it permeated his whole existence right down to the development of his own celebrity persona and the cultivation of an entourage. In his book *Cult of the Avant-garde Artist*, Donald Kuspit states:

Warhol was a celebrity’s celebrity: that is, he was celebrated for showing how to become a celebrity. His art presented the formula for celebrity and fetishized it. His persona especially reified celebrity into a hollow tautology. It became a theatrical act anyone could learn; anyone would do as a celebrity.³⁵

Warhol’s own fame stemmed as much from his self-presentation as a celebrity figure as it did from his accomplished artistic career. He was as brilliant a propagandist and businessman as he was an artist; devising his own promotional tactics to mass market his images, objects, films, and even his name until all became synonymous with the 1960s pop culture that his art reflected. The painter and art critic Peter Plagens explains that Warhol was so clever and so acutely aware of the appetites of the American consumer public, that he allowed himself “to be exploited by the commercial culture just as he was exploiting it.”³⁶

According to author Andreas Huyssen, “Warhol made the switch from ad man to artist with a single idea: not to advertise products, but to proclaim those same

³⁴ Warhol paraphrased by Plagens in “What Andy Saw,” *Newsweek* (July 2003), 53.

³⁵ Kuspit, 73.

³⁶ “What Andy Saw,” *Newsweek* (July 2003), 53.

products and their graphic reproductions as art.”³⁷ Like many critics and art historians, Huyssen views Warhol’s artistic approach as coming from the same vein as Duchamp. Huyssen not only cites the ideological similarity between the two artists, but also draws an interesting comparison between Warhol’s portraits and Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1930.³⁸ In the creation of this work, Duchamp appropriated a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and inscribed it with the letters L.H.O.O.Q (which in French reads as “elle a chaud au cul”),³⁹ as well as adding a mustache and goatee.⁴⁰ Duchamp intended to be provocative; in toying with the concept of the “masterpiece” and the sanctity with which the art establishment of his day revered the works of the great Renaissance masters, he once again challenged aesthetic traditions and the distinction between art and non-art. Huyssen is quick to point out that Duchamp was always firmly positioned on the side of art, whereas he questions whether Warhol’s aims were strictly artistic or if the “ad man” was equally motivated by capitalist consumerism.⁴¹ Warhol himself would more than likely have conceded to a bit of both.

Huyssen’s statement regarding Warhol’s “idea” to elevate product and product imagery to the level high art hints at two of the central issues which arose in the criticism of Pop art. The first involves the subjugation of art to commodity, implying that the Pop artists were “selling out.” Huyssen explains that because

³⁷ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 148.

³⁸ Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1930. Private Collection. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

³⁹ A slang term that is loosely translated as “she has a nice ass.” Huyssen, 147.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that Warhol produced a serial image of the *Mona Lisa* (in black and white), paying homage, not to da Vinci, but to Duchamp. Cited in Huyssen, 147.

“Pop artists took the trivial and banal imagery of daily life at face value, [...] [they] were accused of surrendering to the capitalist mode of production in their techniques and of glorifying the commodity market by their choice of subjects.”⁴²

The accusation that Pop art was nothing more than kitsch, accounts for the second of the issues most frequently raised in unfavorable critical responses to Pop. The concept behind Pop art eluded many of the critics, therefore the incorporation of banal imagery and consumer goods coupled with the aim of appealing to (or at least not excluding) the audience of the mass culture, in their view, made Pop indistinguishable from kitsch.

Clement Greenberg never accused Pop art of being kitsch outright, instead he skirted the issue by refusing to acknowledge any image or object executed in Proto-Pop and Pop art styles as works of art. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, “Post-Painterly Abstraction” (a 1964 exhibition organized by Greenberg for a group of young abstract painters whom he championed as the heirs to the Abstract Expressionist legacy), Greenberg stated,

[A]s diverting as Pop art is, I happen not to find it really challenging. Nor does it really challenge taste on more than a superficial level. So far [...] it amounts to new episode in the history of taste, but not to an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art.⁴³

⁴¹ Huyssen, 148.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Clement Greenberg, “Post-Painterly Abstraction,” (1964). Qtd. in B. Rose, *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art 1963-1987*. (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 43. It should be reminded that for Greenberg, judgements of taste and aesthetic judgements are basically one in the same. For more clarification refer back to Chapter 2.

In the end, he completely dismissed the Pop artists (with the exception of Jasper Johns) and their art as “novelty.” In a 1962 essay titled “After Abstract Expressionism,” Greenberg elaborates on his anti-Pop position:

Where artists divide in the last resort is where safe taste leaves off. And this is as true in what begins to look like the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism as it ever was. [...] This applies even more, I feel, to those [...] artists in this country who have now gone in for “Neo-Dada,” or construction-collage, or ironic comments on the banalities of the industrial environment. Least of all have *they* broken with safe taste. Whatever novel objects they represent or insert in their works, not one of them has taken a chance with colour or design that the Cubists or Abstract Expressionists did not take before them. [...] Nor has any one of them [...] yet dared to arrange these things outside of the directional lines of the “all-over” Cubist grid. The results have in every case a conventional and Cubist prettiness that hardly entitles them to be discussed under the heading “After Abstract Expressionism.” [...] Not that I do not find the clear and straightforward academic handling of their pictures refreshing [...] yet the effect is only momentary, since novelty, as distinct from originality, has no staying power.⁴⁴

Suffice it to say that Pop art did not meet the criteria for inclusion in Greenberg’s history of the evolution of modernist art.⁴⁵ However, others have since taken a different approach to issue of the blurred edges between Pop art and kitsch. Gillo Dorfles, the author of *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* briefly examines the potential for kitsch in Pop art. In his observation, “the work of some of the best of contemporary American and European pop artists,⁴⁶ [...] contains the often insidious and subtly dangerous presence of the kitsch element.”⁴⁷ However, in contrast to Greenberg, Dorfles viewed the possible

⁴⁴ Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” *Art International* (October, 1962: 24-32). Excerpt reprinted in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, 13.

⁴⁵ For further explanation of Greenberg’s ideas regarding modernist art, refer back to Chapter 2 under the subheading “Clement Greenberg and Modernism.”

⁴⁶ Dorfles cites Baj, Del Pezzo, Gaul, Blake and Hamilton, 300.

⁴⁷ Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 300.

connection to or utilization of kitsch in works of Pop art as potentially positive, serving the important function of re-contextualizing kitsch elements or imagery, thereby elevating the very status of kitsch by translating it into “authentic,” high art.⁴⁸

Regardless of any one critic’s dislike of or affinity towards Pop or kitsch, the fact remains that Pop art is not kitsch. Pop artists incorporated base and banal imagery from the mass culture but did not make an attempt to imitate the aesthetic of the high culture for the masses. Nor was Pop art merely an aggressive marketing ploy or profiteering strategy. Although many of the Pop artists enjoyed a high level of success, the subsequent commodification of their work was not, for the most part, the artists own doing (with the obvious exception of Warhol), but a consequence resulting from an art market based on a capitalist consumer society. Art historian Barbara Rose addresses both of these premises which have been used to criticize the aesthetic and questioning the validity of Pop art. In her view, “the grounds on which pop art has been attacked are spurious: it is not commercial art made by commercial artists, [...] Neither is it sell-out art made by artificially created personalities to legitimize the values of the commodity culture that makes them rich.”⁴⁹ Rose explains that because Pop art follows the pictorial conventions of abstraction, it cannot be dismissed as kitsch or even as commercial art (although it derives many stylistic traits from commercial art). She links Pop directly to the modernist tradition, citing the flatness of the surface, the adherence

⁴⁸ Ibid., 298.

to the two-dimensional space of the picture plane, the use of basic contour lines and closed shapes and forms.

Presenting Pop art as a continuation of the modern Formalist aesthetic is key in rebutting unfavorable criticism based on the allegations that Pop was merely elevated kitsch. Because the concept and imagery of Pop involved an appropriation of the symbolic language of the mass culture, it was often perceived as the antithesis of avant-gardism. As Charles Jenkes explains, “With the Pop artists equating high culture with low, kitsch with avant-garde, the old garde [sic] could no longer be ‘avant’ anything; rather it could reflect and playback mass culture on a different, aesthetic level.”⁵⁰ However, Rose maintains that despite its use of and appeal to the mass public, Pop art remains an “elite art.”⁵¹ In its relationship to the mass culture, Pop art does not validate the consumer society; it merely reflects it, “accepting its values instead of trying to reform them.”⁵² However, Rose does acknowledge the reasons why the relationship of Pop art to the contemporary culture is a difficult concept for many advocates of the old guard. She states:

It is easy to understand why pop art can be seen as lowbrow⁵³ art. It is compromised on all scores by the caliber of its supporters. To aggravate matters, discussions of pop art descend quickly to the lowest possible level, serving to discredit it that much more. Worst of all is the ghastly if

⁴⁹ B. Rose, *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art 1963-1987*, 47.

⁵⁰ C. Jenkes, “The Post-Avant-Garde,” 109. *New Art: An International Survey* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1991), 107-111.

⁵¹ Rose, 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵³ Here, Rose’s use of the term “lowbrow” refers to arts and crafts that are excluded from the realm of “high art” because the given image or object fails to meet the academic criteria for high or fine art on one or more levels. This term should not be confused with the style of art that calls itself Low Brow discussed in Chapter 6.

unforeseeable irony that the public really *does* love it: they look at it, talk about it, enjoy it as they never have abstract painting. All this tends to make the high-minded justifiably suspicious. Moreover, pop art is open to serious questioning, on the one hand because it is compromised by its relationship to commercial art, and on the other because of its link to the commodity market through the publicity apparatus that supports it. Even on the level on which motives are no longer questioned, there is still resistance not only to the debased imagery but to the introduction of commercial techniques into fine art.⁵⁴

For many of the supporters and connoisseurs of avant-garde art, the integration of fine art with popular or ‘low’ art forms presented a difficult challenge both aesthetically and conceptually. For two decades the members of the high-culture – among the Americans in particular – had forced themselves to become accustomed to an art that was devoid of figuration and all external reference. They had learned to accept, if not embrace, the abstract aesthetic of modern art and the often pretentious philosophical views and liberal politics of its avant-garde artists. And then came Pop art, which undermined all of the art principles that the elite culture and its art connoisseurs had so diligently learned. As for the critics, many had spent the past two decades explaining and defending Abstract Expressionism to the American public, so Pop seemed to them to be a bit of an affront.

In an article titled “The Art World: Marilyn Mondrian” (1969) Harold Rosenberg explains (and defends) the intentions of Pop art in the following terms:

Pop art is thought to be the art of everyday things and banal images – bathroom fixtures and Dick Tracy – but its essential character consists in redoing works of art. Its scope extends from Warhol’s rows of Coca-Cola bottles to supplying the “Mona Lisa” with a mustache. All art is based on

⁵⁴ Rose, 44.

earlier art, either consciously or by absorption, but no movement has ever exceeded Pop in alertness to aesthetic cues.[...] If we count as art the comic strips, lettering, posters, sign paintings, and industrial designs adapted by Pop artists, the Pop movement takes on the character of an exhibition in an art school that combines courses in fine art and applied design. In Pop, America's two cultures, highbrow and popular, meet on the neutral ground of technique.⁵⁵

Pop unified the “high” and the “popular” through the seamless combination of fine art and graphic techniques, creating a style that evoked both modern art and mass media. Technique certainly facilitated the development of the Pop aesthetic, but the combination of these two branches of the visual arts does not entirely account for the quality of the works produced by the Pop artists. The technical and formal success of Pop art rests largely on the accomplished artistic skill of its artists and their reliance on the pre-established aesthetic principles of modern avant-garde art.

Pop art eventually won critical acclaim (although Greenberg never came around) and the Pop style was genuinely liked, appealing to a broad audience that included members from the elite culture and the general public. As Richard Hamilton blatantly stated in 1957, “Pop art is popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business.”⁵⁶ But Pop art was also something more, it was truly the first avant-garde that did not maintain a separation between art and the mass public. Furthermore, Pop art always remained avant-garde, pushing boundaries, breaking rules and, above all, reasserting the authority of the artist as the sole and decisive voice in naming an

⁵⁵ H. Rosenberg, “The Art World: Marilyn Mondrian,” *The New Yorker*, (November 8, 1969), 167-76.

object “art,” thus maintaining the status of the modern artist as the creative elite among the masses. The ideas and images generated and regenerated by Pop art, and its artists’ inclusive approach to the work and its audience, influenced the next several generations of artists to create art on their own terms for whoever cared to look at it.

1970s and 1980s Avant-garde

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the definition of the idea and origin of the artist continued to be expanded upon. From the late 1960s onward, one of the most significant contributions in changing the role and status of the artist was Andy Warhol’s creation and promotion of the image of the artist as a celebrity. Warhol continued to be a driving force in the art world (most prominently in New York). In fact, association with Warhol was enough to elevate many young artists to the status of art superstar.⁵⁷ Author Allan Schwartzman explains that Warhol had successfully “converted the image of the artist from bohemian outsider to pop star.”⁵⁸ Warhol facilitated the idea that the artist is as important and salable as the

Reprinted in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, Steven Henry Madoff, ed., 180.

⁵⁶ Richard Hamilton quoted in Richter, 114.

⁵⁷ One such artist was Jean-Michel Basquiat who will be discussed in the Graffiti subsection of this chapter. It should also be noted that another Graffiti artist and member of Warhol’s circle in the 1980s, Keith Haring (also discussed later in this chapter) adopted Warhol’s image of the artist as celebrity and the artist as entrepreneur. Following Warhol’s model, Haring mass-produced his images and mass marketed his art. (I. Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern: From the late 1960’s to the early 1990’s*, 471). Similarly, Jeff Koons capitalized on the “artist as celebrity” persona and exploited the concept to its fullest in his works from the mid-1980s. Koons will be discussed in the Neo-Geo subsection of this chapter.

⁵⁸ A. Schwartzman, *Street Art* (New York: The Dial Press, 1985), 12.

work of art itself, he then refined this concept by making the artist's celebrity status integral to the overall aesthetic of an artist's oeuvre.⁵⁹

Along with Warhol, art dealers and gallery owners became essential to the discovery of new art trends and the promotion of young talent.⁶⁰ The increasing commodification of art created a platform on which works of art were being offered up as sound investments, which led to a high demand for works of art likely appreciate in value. By the end of the 1970s, the New York⁶¹ art market had become very lucrative and was catering to an international clientele. Promoting the idea of art as a commodity, the art dealers placed themselves in the position of continually seeking out the "new" in order to satisfy the demands of the buyers. The challenge to be the first to present a fresh visual language or mode of artistic expression prompted art dealers to mine the art community for promising unknown artists.⁶² The impetus to discover the next bright art star generated a continuous turn over of styles and art trends.⁶³ As a result, the art market became saturated with up-and-coming contemporary artists who were experiencing instant success.⁶⁴ The showering of attention and promise of opportunity created an intensely competitive atmosphere within the Manhattan art

⁵⁹ Paraphrasing a quote by Bob Colacello in Pheobe Hoban's *Basquiat* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 202.

⁶⁰ I. Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern: From the Late 1960's to the Early 1990's* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 429.

⁶¹ From the earliest stages of American avant-garde art and forward, New York was largely considered the hub of the American art market. However, it should be noted that beginning around 1940, Los Angeles and San Francisco emerged as contenders to the New York market and between the 1970s and the 1990s, these two cities figured prominently in the international art trade.

⁶² Eventually, New York art dealers began to look beyond the established art community in search of raw talent.

⁶³ Schwartzman, 12.

community and gave rise to a climate in which artists and their representatives were increasingly concerned with prestige and financial success.

Many young artists and art students felt prompted to react against the commercialism and elitism prevalent in the New York art institutions and galleries. Trained artists were looking outside of the art establishment for alternative venues and public forms of art. Art students converged on New York City's East Village to explore alternatives to the gallery system from which they felt excluded.⁶⁵ At the time, the youth culture of the East Village was beginning to participate in the nascent Punk Rock music scene. The East Village nightclubs showcased counter-culture music and art, providing an ideal venue for young artists having difficulty gaining representation or even showing their work in the mainstream galleries. The environment of the East Village in the late 1970s fostered a school of young (primarily student) artists that developed concurrently with Punk Rock and New Wave music. The aesthetic combined appropriated images from popular culture with content that was anti-establishment and anti-authority.⁶⁶ Similarly, in Los Angeles, a group of young artists with strong ties to the West Coast Punk Rock music scene, began reacting against the growing art trend of socially active and politically informed artistic content. These artists went on to found the Low Brow style which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

In *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-garde*, Marc Aronson explains that in the late 1970s, "Avant-garde artists still wanted to challenge the

⁶⁴ Sandler, 429.

old, explore the new, and push for new ways to envision society. But, like the high-decibel Punk bands, they could not believe in the old ways of being a challenger.”⁶⁷ Punk Rock music expressed the frustration and nihilism felt by a generation of disenfranchised young people who saw themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture or alienated from it. The music and its message were aggressive, confrontational, rebellious and even riotous. In keeping with its anarchistic attitude, the performers and participants in the Punk Rock movement⁶⁸ made frequent references to “old avant-garde rebellions,” such as Dada and Futurism, while calling for a contemporary avant-garde revolt.⁶⁹ The Punk counter-culture fostered more public, urban and non-traditional forms of expression and provided venues in which music, poetry, works of art and performance were showcased. For young artists and art students who were being denied access to the increasingly elitist art communities and exhibition venues in New York, Los Angeles, and other major metropolitan cities in the United States, the Punk Rock scene presented an alternative, as well as an unrestrained creative outlet.

⁶⁵ Schwartzman, 5.

⁶⁶ Sandler, 462.

⁶⁷ Aronson, 150.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that Punk Rock was an international movement in art, poetry, and music, but announced itself slightly differently in Europe than in the United States. For Example, in London, where the music scene originated, the content and lyrics spoke of the oppressiveness of the British class system and was directed toward working class youth. Although American’s could not specifically relate to the cause, they easily identified with the rebellious attitude and anti-authority stance of the message.

⁶⁹ Aronson, 153-154.

Graffiti

Graffiti art originated as way for disenfranchised youths to assert their identities; it rapidly developed into an artistic expression. Graffiti began appearing on the walls and empty billboards in and around London, Berlin, Paris, Los Angeles, New York City, and a handful of other U.S. cities concurrently, taking the form of poetic statements, slogans and monikers know as “tags.”⁷⁰ Graffiti writers tagged and bombed⁷¹ the city streets with permanent marker pens and spray paint, utilizing public property as their canvases. The Graffiti style is executed freehand; it tends to be gestural and usually incorporates text. By 1980, Graffiti writing had taken on bubble letters, influenced by underground comic books, and abstract lettering forms that became known as “Wild Style.”⁷² In New York, Graffiti emerged out of the lower class neighborhoods⁷³ in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Graffiti art came into Manhattan by way of the MTA subway trains⁷⁴ on which graffitiists were creating large, mural-like compositions [fig 5].

The recognition of Graffiti as an art form coincided with the rise of the counter-culture music scene in the East Village during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁷⁵ Graffiti presented a new visual system, one that developed independently from the New York art market and its institutions.⁷⁶ According to

⁷⁰ One-word names or symbols used as signatures. Schwartzman, 13.

⁷¹ Spray painted compositions and murals. Ibid., 5.

⁷² Sandler, 474.

⁷³ In other cities, particularly in the United States, Graffiti tended to come out of the suburbs and should therefore not necessarily be associated with lower class and/or inner city youths.

⁷⁴ The Metropolitan Transit Authority subway trains.

⁷⁵ Sandler, 461.

⁷⁶ Schwartzman, 12.

Schwartzman, the art students hanging out in the East Village were “inspired by the graffitiists’ efficiency at seizing public space for private advertisement,”⁷⁷ as well as, its brazen anti-authority statement. For art students, like Keith Haring, Graffiti was appealing because it provided young artists an arena in which to work and be publicly recognized, while commenting on an art establishment that would not give them access.⁷⁸

Keith Haring was a student at the School of Visual Arts in New York when he became a member of the East Village Punk Rock scene. Inspired by the Graffiti art he was exposed to on the MTA trains, he began to experiment with working in public environments.⁷⁹ Haring incorporated Graffiti elements – such as simple, gestural lines and cartoon imagery – into his drawings, which he executed in white chalk on the black paper used to cover up advertising spaces in subway stations. In the subways, Haring developed the imagery that would become his signature style; simple, heavily outlined forms and cartoon like figures drawn in thick black pen or chalk (and later paint). In his early works, Haring explored a variety of subjects, beginning with his “Radiant Baby,” a crawling infant with rays of line emanating from it, and later including “barking dogs, animated appliances and dancing and copulating figures”⁸⁰ [fig. 6]. When he combined these images, Haring’s drawings took on the quality of narrative compositions.⁸¹

While his imagery and aesthetic tended to be playful and assume a child-like

⁷⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁹ Sandler, 470.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

manner, the content addressed serious issues such as, nuclear war, the drug epidemic, racism, homophobia and AIDS.⁸² By taking his art out of the studio and utilizing the subways as a public forum for his work, Haring aligned himself with the graffitiists and eventually caught the attention of New York's art critic and dealers.

In 1980, Haring participated in the *Times Square Show*,⁸³ an event that launched Graffiti art into the mainstream. The show presented artwork by both street artists and trained artists who incorporated graffiti elements and those who embraced the style completely. The *Times Square Show* was the first major exhibition that presented Graffiti in a high art context; as a result, graffitiists were summarily brought to the attention of the New York art establishment. Allan Schwartzman views the rise Graffiti as particularly unusual due to its "initial subversive tendencies and retrograde status."⁸⁴ Graffiti was generally rejected as a valid art form by the art world elite; including most critics, curators, dealers (even the more progressive ones) and successful artists.⁸⁵ The typical response to Graffiti was "It's definitely something on the subways, but somehow loses its meaning when you isolate on the canvas and put it in a gallery."⁸⁶ Nevertheless,

⁸¹ C. Nadelman, "Graffiti is a Thing That's Kind of Hard to Explain," *ARTnews* (Oct. 1982), 77.

⁸² Sandler, 471.

⁸³ An exhibition of Graffiti and Graffiti influenced art. The show was co-organized by Fashion Moda, an alternative gallery committed to bringing art back into the community, and Colab (Collaborative Projects), a group which developed student organized exhibitions that showed at night clubs, lofts and store fronts in the East Village. Schwartzman, 78-82.

⁸⁴ *Street Art*, 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 85.

⁸⁶ Quote by an unidentified speaker appears in Schwartzman, 85.

the Graffiti style was eventually absorbed into the mainstream art world, subsequently elevating its status and taming its artists.

The Graffiti aesthetic entered the mainstream art world through the combination of art students doing street art, alternative spaces and venues exhibiting Graffiti, and publicity generated by the *Times Square Show* and another major exhibition titled *New York/New Wave* (1981).⁸⁷ Held at P.S.1, New York City's biggest alternative space and a premier East Village gallery, the *New York/New Wave* show brought Graffiti into a fashionable art world venue and marks the occasion when Graffiti had officially come off the subways and onto the canvas. Rene Ricard, an early champion of the Graffiti art movement and a staff writer for *Art Forum* magazine, wrote a glowing review of the show. In *Art after the Postmodern: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, Irving Sandler explains that soon after the publication of Ricard's *Art Forum* review, Graffiti began to be referred to as "the latest manifestation of Primitivism in modern art."⁸⁸ Ricard also wrote several articles in praise of some of the artists showcased in *New York/New Wave*, among them Keith Haring and the "recently retired graffitist Jean-Michel Basquiat."⁸⁹

In the late 1970s, Jean-Michel Basquiat began writing poetic statements on public walls all over New York City; signing them with his tag Samo (an abbreviation of "Same Old Shit").⁹⁰ According to Phoebe Hoban in her book,

⁸⁷ Schwartzman, 83.

⁸⁸ Sandler, 475.

⁸⁹ Ricard quoted in Schwartzman, 83.

⁹⁰ P. Hoban, *Basquiat* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 25.

Basquiat, Samo would become Basquiat's "unofficial entrée into the art world."⁹¹

By 1979, Basquiat was an active participant in the East Village art and music scene. However, from the beginning, Basquiat set his sights on New York's high art world. Sandler states, "Basquiat always had the art world in mind, often hitting walls near the SoHo galleries."⁹² Basquiat also created small paintings, collages, postcards and drawings on T-shirts, which he sold in SoHo, Washington Square Park and in front of the Museum of Modern Art.⁹³ Basquiat considered himself a painter and not a street artist; in fact, he resented being labeled a Graffiti artist.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Hoban notes that Basquiat never drew on subway trains and was not considered to be a graffitist by the Wild Style artists.⁹⁵

In 1981, Basquiat was offered his own room for an upcoming exhibit at P.S.1. Consequently, Basquiat's paintings were the sensation of the *New York/New Wave* show because his work stood out from the traditional Graffiti art on view.⁹⁶ His compositions did not adhere to the slick Wild Style aesthetic instead they were a combination of text and figurative imagery [fig. 7]. Edward Lucie-Smith describes Basquiat's paintings as:

graffiti-like in the sense that they made use of roughly scribbled images, interspersed with words – often long inscriptions – and abbreviated signs. They made reference to popular culture, notably cartoons and comic-strip characters, and also to the art of tribal Africa, and to African-American hero figures, such as musicians and boxers.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

⁹² *Art of the Postmodern: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, 466-67.

⁹³ Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 343.

⁹⁴ Sandler, 475-76.

⁹⁵ *Basquiat*, 9.

⁹⁶ Hoban, 67.

⁹⁷ *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 345.

Sandler states that following the *New York/New Wave* show Basquiat suddenly came to be regarded as “the primitivistic new painter,”⁹⁸ whose work was generally viewed as naive, ultra-urban expressionism [fig.8]. Basquiat’s instant success gained him access to the elite of the New York art establishment, including Andy Warhol, whom he had long idolized. Basquiat viewed Warhol as a vehicle into the art world, and the ambitious young artist admitted to soliciting Warhol on several occasions in an attempt to “find out how to get closer to it,”⁹⁹ that is, how he could make the transition into the gallery scene. Basquiat even boasted that he was going to be the next Warhol.¹⁰⁰ He did in fact become one of Warhol’s protégés as the result of a series of collaborative paintings begun in 1983.¹⁰¹

According to Phoebe Hoban, Jean-Michel Basquiat was the “first contemporary African-American artist to become an international star.”¹⁰² Rene Ricard believes that Basquiat’s work was elevated above the Graffiti movement and “singled out for acclaim” because New York’s art educated elite agreed that “It looks like art.”¹⁰³ Although Basquiat was untrained, he was fairly well versed in art history, often referencing the work of da Vinci, Dubuffet, Picasso and

⁹⁸ Sandler, 469.

⁹⁹ Basquiat quoted in S. Gablik, “Report from New York: The Graffiti Question,” *Art in America* (Oct. 1982), 36.

¹⁰⁰ Hoban, 220.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰² *Basquiat*, 11.

¹⁰³ R. Ricard, “The Radiant Child,” *Art Forum*, (Dec. 1981), 38.

Twombly.¹⁰⁴ Many art historians, including Irving Sandler and Edward Lucie-Smith, maintain that Basquiat's figurative style and his appropriation of art history aligned his work more closely with Neo-Expressionism¹⁰⁵ than with the Graffiti movement.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the entire East Village art scene became associated with the Neo-Expressionist art movement as a result of Basquiat's transition into the mainstream art world.¹⁰⁷

Graffiti did not enjoy a long run in the mainstream galleries. On some level, it was always viewed as "outsider art"¹⁰⁸ and even the best of it was seen and inferior to conventional art. Nevertheless, the Graffiti movement marks the first time in the history of art that an independent, urban art form, occurring outside of the traditional art environment, became elevated by and absorbed into the high art world.¹⁰⁹

Neo-Expressionism

In the early 1980s, occurring almost simultaneously with the beginning of the Graffiti movement, the high art world gave rise to a new school of avant-garde artists. A small and diverse group of traditionally trained young artists mounted a dramatic reactionary movement against Minimal and Conceptual art, the

¹⁰⁴ Hoban, 89, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Neo-Expressionism will be discussed in the next subsection of this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ See Sandler, 469 and Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists*, 345.

¹⁰⁷ Hoban, 150.

¹⁰⁸ Art created by untrained artists that originates outside of the conditions under which art is usually created. Often used to classify the art of the mentally challenged and the emotionally or psychologically disturbed.

¹⁰⁹ Schwartzman, 103.

dominant styles of the previous decade. Inspired by a new style of German painting which reclaimed traditional media, imagery, and subject matter, young artists – primarily in Germany, Italy and America – began creating works of art that were the antithesis of the austere, objective, non-representational art of Minimalism and Conceptualism. This new international aesthetic, dubbed Neo-Expressionism, (a term that the artists themselves reject),¹¹⁰ recalled and referenced earlier art historical styles and traditions and marked a bold return to figuration, gesture and content. The art of the Neo-Expressionists also reflects a strong reaction against the modernist rejection of representational imagery and symbolism. Kay Larson explained the impetus behind the revival of Expressionism as follows:

Artists are desperate to reconnect with feeling...There is a compulsion to make contact—whether with materials. Or with the heroic possibilities of painting, or with the myth of the artist-creator, dormant during twenty-odd years of irony and intellectual distance in art.¹¹¹

The Neo-Expressionist artists sought to liberate art from the strict boundaries of the dominant styles of the 1970s and 1980s. But unlike the earlier avant-gardes, the Neo-Expressionists did not look ahead to the “new,” instead they reached back into the past in an attempt to recapture those artistic elements and qualities which had been replaced or rejected by each successive manifestation of modernism. Neo-Expressionist art not only resuscitated retired formal and stylistic conventions; it reintroduced the pictorial narrative, complete with

¹¹⁰ As with the New York School being grouped together under the umbrella of “Abstract Expressionism,” Neo-Expressionism is another example of the art critics and historians creating a broad label to categorize works which share similar characteristics, stylistically or otherwise.

metaphor and allegory, while presenting the subject matter in contexts that reflect contemporary ideas and issues. As a style, Neo-Expressionism is eclectic; each artist drew from a variety of sources and referenced or appropriated content and imagery that best achieved their own symbolic intentions and/or best defined the subject or expressed the emotion they wanted to convey. For this reason, it is difficult to discuss the artworks and their content in a generalized manner.

However, the characteristics that typically describe Neo-Expressionist art are, large-scale figurative works that often incorporate symbolism, iconography, language and appropriated imagery and content.

In addition to reviving more traditional artistic presentations of subject, format and media,¹¹² the Neo-Expressionists also returned to the creation of emotionally charged works, which often depicted or addressed taboo subject matter. Many of the German artists made individual attempts at expressing the ramifications of World War II on German history and national culture. For example, A.R. Penck appropriates the aesthetic of early twentieth century German Expressionist art, while Anselm Kiefer's apocalyptic imagery recalls the destruction brought on by the reign of the Third Reich, and Markus Lüpertz boldly invokes Nazi symbolism in his paintings.¹¹³ In the work of Neo-Expressionists hailing from Italy and the

¹¹¹ Kay Larson, "Art: Pressure Points," *New York*, June 28, 1982, 59. Quoted in Sandler, 223.

¹¹² Although it should be noted that several Neo-Expressionist artists also employed craft elements and other non-traditional materials. For example, Anselm Kiefer incorporated natural materials, such as straw and sunflower seeds, for textural effect. Similarly, Julian Schnabel often included broken china or crockery into his paintings, for texture and tactile effect (but also serving as a reference or homage to Antonio Gaudi). Both Schnabel and Sigmar Polke painted on non-canvas fabrics; Schnabel's affinity for velvet will be discussed later in this section of Chapter 3.

¹¹³ Sandler, 297-299.

United States, this type of overt social commentary is less prevalent but does make the occasional appearance. The focus of works by these artists is directed to the use of historical and art historical material for biographic purposes.¹¹⁴ Among the American artists, Julian Schnabel is perhaps the most notable example of this approach to Neo-Expressionism in painting.

Schnabel's work as incorporates a wide array of historical imagery to create a uniquely personal and allusive style. Schnabel's early works are characterized by his use of archetypal symbols and mythic or religious imagery,¹¹⁵ which is stripped of its original symbolic or iconographic references and place in a contemporary, and subjective, context. Schnabel's compositions are tight and dense, filling the pictorial space in manner reminiscent of Byzantine and Medieval art. Schnabel deliberately employs a heavy, painterly brushstroke and incorporates additional textural elements; most commonly ceramic shards and broken plates embedded into the surface of his paintings. His interest in working with richly textured surfaces led him create a series of impressively large paintings on velvet [fig. 9].¹¹⁶ By choosing this surface, Schnabel makes reference to the luxuriousness of the fabric and its historical associations with royalty, while simultaneously quoting from the world of kitsch. However, Schnabel claimed that, although he was aware of these associations, he chose

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 222.

¹¹⁵ Much of Schnabel's iconography is drawn from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and the *Old and New Testaments*.

¹¹⁶ The illustrated in figure 9, is one of four paintings from Schnabel's *Huge Wall Symbolizing the Fate's Inaccessibility*. Collection Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich.

velvet for its formal qualities – namely its texture and sheen – and for the possibilities it presented for experimentation with the medium of oil paint.

Schnabel later abandoned painting on velvet in favor of other alternative surfaces, including animal hide. In the late 1980s, he did several works on tarpaulin¹¹⁷ in which he incorporated text in the form of one-word statements, such as *Diaspora* and *Spinoza* (which double as the titles of the paintings).¹¹⁸ These words, which serve as the only recognizable imagery in the artworks, clearly reference theological or psychological themes, yet provide only a vague allusion to a concept or topic of discourse, giving no indication of the artist's intended meaning. For Donald Kuspit, the ambiguity of Schnabel's work (and of Neo-Expressionist art on the whole), lends a sense of "intimacy of [...] communication" to the dialogue between the artist and the viewer which, in his view, makes the work more authentic and its impact more profound.¹¹⁹

While the wealth of imagery and diverse thematic style of Schnabel's paintings presented a refreshing alternative to the stripped down aesthetic of Minimalist works and the intellectually driven content of Conceptual art, he was also widely criticized. Schnabel epitomized the 1980s "art star" along with all of the connotations inherent with the title; a meteoric rise to fame, tremendous

¹¹⁷ Waterproofed canvas.

¹¹⁸ Julian Schnabel, *Diaspora*, 1987, oil and gesso on tarpaulin, 132 x 181 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Museum purchase.

Julian Schnabel, *Spinoza*, 1987, oil and enamel on tarpaulin, 145 x 120 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Zoya and Ivan Gerhath.

¹¹⁹ D. Kuspit, "Sincere Cynicism: The Decadence of the 1980s," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 65, (Nov. 1990), 65.

financial success, and the reputation of being spoiled and narcissistic.¹²⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith calls Schnabel “the artist who best represents both the ambition and the hubris of the New York art world.”¹²¹ Suzi Gablik discusses Schnabel in her essay “Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God,”¹²² stating:

During 1982 Julian Schnabel was the most talked about artist in New York. In that one year he had eight solo exhibitions and was included in twenty-two group shows [...] It became impossible in certain circles to attend a dinner party where Schnabel was not the center of conversation. Everybody, it seemed, was asking everybody, [...] “What do you think about Julian Schnabel?” Meanwhile, like some storybook prince with sunset-colored hair, the artist himself stood poised on the edge of his own spectacular success. Paintings which in 1977 had sold for \$3,000 were now alleged to be worth upwards of \$60,000. To [...] Schnabel, [...] it must have seemed as if his ambition to become “the greatest artist in the world” might be realized before the age of thirty.¹²³

More than a few critics, Robert Hughes among them,¹²⁴ felt that in comparison to the art of other Neo-Expressionists, the quality of Schnabel’s work did not warrant the high level of recognition it was receiving. However, for the majority of his critics, the most offensive aspect about Schnabel’s instant success was his unmasked ambition and his unapologetic self-aggrandizement. Edward Lucie-Smith explains, “Schnabel’s bombastic pronouncements, and his tendency to

¹²⁰ S. Gablik, “Secularism—The Disenchantment of Art (Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God),” in Everett, 215.

¹²¹ *ARTODAY*, 318.

¹²² Title as it appears in the original publication in S. Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* Re-titled “Secularism—The Disenchantment of Art (Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God),” for subsequent publications. The version used here is reprinted under the later title in Everett, (1991), 215-227.

¹²³ Gablik, “Secularism—The Disenchantment of Art (Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God),” in Everett, 215-16.

¹²⁴ As cited by Gablik, in Everett, 216.

imply – even through the titles of his paintings¹²⁵ – that he is on a level with the very greatest, have caused widespread offense.”¹²⁶ Similarly, Suzi Gablik addresses the hostile reaction to Schnabel, while making an attempt to avoid diminishing the importance of the aesthetic alternative which Schnabel and Neo-Expressionism presented. She comments,

In a sense, Schnabel’s desire (along with other Neo-expressionists) to reinstate subject matter of a mythic and symbolic kind, and even to draw on traditional religious iconography, ought to be a corrective breath of fresh air, after so much reductive abstraction. And in many ways, it is: the mystical world view that emerges from many of these pictures strikes a lot of people as right. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe in the prophetic consciousness of someone so frankly out to get what he wants – personal success in the New York art world, not metaphysical truths.¹²⁷

Despite the unfavorable critical response to Schanbel and his artworks, which persisted throughout his painting career,¹²⁸ he is largely credited with igniting the art market in the 1980s.

Neo-Expressionism’s revival of bold, emotive works of art executed in traditional media rejuvenated the art world and its micro-economy, providing fuel for the phenomenal success of the 1980s international art market.¹²⁹ Neo-Expressionism offered an alternative to the more concept oriented and intellectually based art of the 1970s and ‘80s, but unlike Graffiti, it originated within the high art establishment and was therefore more easily embraced and

¹²⁵ In the following paragraph, Lucie-Smith cited Schnabel’s piece titled *Rebirth III (the Red Box) Painted after the Death of Joseph Beuys*, stating that Schnabel appeared to be “making a claim to the throne Beuys has just vacated.” *ARTODAY*, 318.

¹²⁶ *ARTODAY*, 318.

¹²⁷ Gablik, “Secularism—The Disenchantment of Art (Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God),” in Everett, 223.

more easily acquired. In addition, Neo-Expressionism shifted the focus of the international art community away from American art, relinquishing its predominance over contemporary European art. Perhaps the most salient outcome of Neo-Expressionism (and other movements of the 1980s, such as Neo-Conceptualism or Neo-Geo) was that it represented the aesthetic transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Neo-Geo

Neo-Geometric Conceptualism or Neo-Geo can be discussed as either the last of the modern avant-gardes or the first of the postmodern movements. Neo-Geo, also referred to as Neo-Pop, is a term used to represent the work of a small group of trained, but stylistically varied artists, including Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley, Haim Steinbach, Meyer Vaisman, and perhaps most famously, Jeff Koons. Michael Compton aptly defines the Neo-Geo aesthetic as, “the art of appropriation, transformation or simulation of commercial products.”¹³⁰

Although appropriation, simulation and (geometric) abstraction are the prominent stylistic devices employed by the Neo-Geo artists, however in terms of appearance and approach, the work of these artists is quite diverse. Irving Sandler divides of styles of the Neo-Geo artists into two categories: commodity art and Neo-Geo. He explains the division as follows:

¹²⁸ Julian Schnabel's has spent the past decade making films. Among his more noteworthy titles is *Basquiat*, a cinematic biography the artist and a telling portrait of the 1980s New York art scene.

¹²⁹ Sandler, 225.

¹³⁰ M. Compton, “Pop Art II: Jeff Koons & Company,” in *New Art*, 145.

The neogeos are best treated as two closely-connected groups. One, consisting of [Ashley] Bickerton, [Jeff] Koons, [Haim] Steinbach, and [Meyer] Vaisman, appropriated commodities and their labels from consumer culture [...] Bickerton, Koons, Steinbach, and Vaisman contrived a shrewd amalgam of conceptual art, pop art, and minimal art, which added up to a novel variant of media and deconstruction art. Consequently, their art is more accurately labeled commodity art than neogeo. The second group, consisting of [Peter] Halley and [Allan] McCollum, were neogeo, because they simulated modernist geometric painting.¹³¹

While there is no cohesive style among the Neo-Geo artists, their work does occupy common ground, at least in terms of aesthetic and intent. The works of art produced by the Neo-Geo and commodity artists reflect a shared interest in the irony employed in Pop Art and the use of Conceptual art practices to address issues related to the nature of the art market during the 1980s.¹³² Certainly, the artist whose work best reflects and exploits the culture of the 1980s art world (Warhol excluded), is Jeff Koons.

Jeff Koons began attracting the attention of the New York art world right out of art school, at the age of twenty-five.¹³³ Michael Compton comments that in the late 1980s, the leading art journals were publishing “more articles of Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol than any other artists.” He goes on to say, “The simultaneous dominance of two such figures is plainly no coincidence, nor has the resemblance of certain art of the late 1980s to Pop passed unremarked.”¹³⁴ The parallel to Warhol is one that is drawn continually throughout Koons’s career, linking him to the tradition and fame of Pop art and, on some level, justifying his unbridled

¹³¹ Sandler, 482-483.

¹³² Ibid., 482-484.

¹³³ D. Littlejohn, “Who is Jeff Koons and Why Are People Saying Such Terrible Things About Him?” *ARTnews*, (April 1993) 92.

entrepreneurial pursuits. Following Warhol's example, much of Koons's artwork consists of reproductions of popular objects from the commercial culture and altered presentations of advertisements and mass media imagery. Koons himself claims to "believe in advertising and the media completely," stating, "My art and personal life are based on it."¹³⁵ Acknowledging Koons's blatant appropriation of advertising and consumer culture and his unabashed commercialism, Museum of Modern Art, (New York) Curator, Robert Storr credits Koons with picking up where Pop art left off.¹³⁶

Koons has been described as a pivotal artist with a profound ability to recontextualize the commonplace and raise the "trashy spectacle" to the level of high art.¹³⁷ In his commentary on Koons's *Banality* series (1988),¹³⁸ Storr describes the works of art as ordinary objects and "kitsch icons," transformed into totemic sculptures in porcelain and polychromed wood.¹³⁹ Among the pieces in the *Banality* series are enlarged versions of Hummel figurines, as well as several doll-like portraits of cartoon characters, such as the Pink Panther, and celebrity superstars, past and present, including Buster Keaton, Jayne Mansfield and Michael Jackson. Koons's *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) [fig.10], reproduces the image of the "King of Pop" (and his chimpanzee) in the form of a

¹³⁴ Compton, "Pop Art II: Jeff Koons & Company," 145.

¹³⁵ Koons quoted in Compton, 151.

¹³⁶ R. Storr, "Jeff Koons: *Pink Panther* (1988)," online (November 2000).
www.moma.org/exhibitions/dannheisser, 1.

¹³⁷ R. Rosenblum, "Notes on Jeff Koons," in Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 16.

¹³⁸ The series consists of a collection of over-life-sized ceramic and painted wood sculptures depicting a iconic objects or figures from contemporary pop culture, including Hummel figurines, devotional statues, cartoon characters and celebrity portraits.

larger-than-life-size cream and gold ceramic statue. Koons depicts the likeness of his subjects as almost identical, even dressing them in matching outfits (none other than the infamous Sgt. Pepper's uniform). The sculpture has a Baroque quality, which is exaggerated by the slick finish of the porcelain and garish palette. In a review of the 1992-93 Koons retrospective exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, David Littlejohn describes the image of Michael Jackson and "his look-alike pet monkey" as "disturbingly strange."¹⁴⁰ While art critic Mark Van Proyen had a wholly different response, stating that with the "gilded Michael Jackson [...] the fashionable conflation of what once were called 'high' art and low culture reaches its most opulent and humorous pinnacle."¹⁴¹

Jeff Koons's success lies in his ability to transform imagery and objects from popular culture into works of art. He invites the viewer to reconsider the commonplace through works that are the visual reinterpretations of commercial objects and familiar styles of imagery, only placed in a context, which Robert Rosenblum has described as, "a language of total artifice, fraught with art-historical echoes."¹⁴² Rosenblum asserts that Koons's appropriation and celebration of popular culture connects him, not only to Warhol and the other Pop artists, but also ultimately to Duchamp.¹⁴³ In fact, much of Koons's early work

¹³⁹ "Jeff Koons: *Pink Panther* (1988)," 1.

¹⁴⁰ "Who is Jeff Koons and Why Are People Saying Such Terrible Things About Him?" 91.

¹⁴¹ M. Van Proyen, "Puppy Love: Jeff Koons at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art" *Artweek*, (January, 21, 1993), 19.

¹⁴² "Notes on Jeff Koons," 27.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

concerns the recontextualization of pre-fabricated, commonplace objects or “ready-mades”¹⁴⁴ [fig.11]. Mark Van Proyen also acknowledges that Koons’s art follows a “long and respectable lineage of [art] work,” giving as examples “Duchamp’s proto-dadaist readymades or the semiological realism of Pop art.”¹⁴⁵ However, Van Proyen goes on to caution against connecting Koons to the tradition of Duchamp and banality in art, stating:

[Koons] parades under the tattered banner of avant-gardist disruption (without realizing that there little left in the world of art that deserves disruption) while supplicating himself to the values of the popularity he pretends to parody.¹⁴⁶

In other words, unlike Duchamp (and to a lesser extent the Pop artists), Koons is not incorporating banal imagery into his work in order to shock and disrupt in an avant-garde tendency, but to gain attention and notoriety for its own sake and his own egoistic agenda. Like Van Proyen, critic David Lee recognizes the obvious associations between Duchamp, Warhol and Koons, but remains skeptical of Koons’s aesthetic and intention. According to Lee,

Koons is the natural heir to Warhol and Duchamp: the artist as career-minded personality and businessman. His motto might be: The quality of my art is directly proportionate to the number of column inches of publicity it generates. He has said: “I believe that taste is really unimportant.” The problem with assessing his work is that despite its apparent dadaist cynicism, the suspicion is that he is actually just a kitsch sentimentalist.¹⁴⁷

While some critics view Koons’s art as a tasteless, lower version of Pop art, or as kitsch, others have praised his work as a brilliant transformation of consumer

¹⁴⁴ D. Lee, “American Art: The Good, The Bad and Julian Schnabel,” *Art Review*, (November 1993), 38.

¹⁴⁵ “Puppy Love: Jeff Koons at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,” 18.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ “American Art: The Good, The Bad and Julian Schnabel,” 38.

culture into high art.¹⁴⁸ Robert Rosenblum concedes that much of the criticism Jeff Koons has received is valid. However, he maintains that,

If Koons storms the galleries as a ruffler of feathers, it is because he jangles our perceptions of the beautiful and the ugly, forcing us to look head-on at the weird, intricate fusion of the repellant and enticing that marks the world of kitsch.¹⁴⁹

In *Art on the Edge and Over*, Linda Weintraub comments that although it is easy to cite the modernist tradition of appropriating or incorporating elements from popular culture in to high art, she explains that “unlike his predecessors, Koons neither elevates the commonplace nor criticizes it. He allows kitsch objects to retain their own identity and thereby retain their ability to delight the multitudes.”¹⁵⁰

In discussing his own work, Jeff Koons has said that his objects are purely aesthetic; they are intended to viewed for pleasure and are not meant to be “looked at in a contemplative way.”¹⁵¹ He goes on to assert that his artwork

will be accessible to all, for art can and should be used to stimulate social mobility [...] For the lower class and middle class (my art) will lead to a state of rest: for the upper class it will lead to an unprecedented state of confidence... There will be no losers.¹⁵²

In response to this statement, Michael Compton once again points out the relationship (and debt) to Andy Warhol. He concludes that “like Warhol,”

¹⁴⁸ Littlejohn, 93.

¹⁴⁹ R. Rosenblum, “Jeff Koons, Christ and the Lamb,” *Art Forum*, (September 1993), 149.

¹⁵⁰ L. Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Arts Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970-1990*. (Lichfield, CT: Art Insights Inc., 1996), 199.

¹⁵¹ Jeff Koons in an interview with Giancarlo Politi titled “Luxurey and Desire: and interview with Jeff Koons,” *Flash Art* 132 (February-March 1987). Quoted in Compton, 151.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Jeff Koons is explicit in seeking to re-empower the artist and to take advantage of the position he is given and to exploit every vehicle of popularity in his work. [...] In short, although speaking at much greater length, [Koons] playing the role of Warhol, the artist who, more than any other, taught the world to see that, if the medium of the painter is paint and canvas, the medium of the artist (Koons says he is not a sculptor) is himself in the art world.¹⁵³

By 1986, the popularity of Neo-Geo had already begun to diminish, although the artists representing the style, including Jeff Koons, continued to generate publicity and acclaim. More than any other style or movement, Neo-Geo reflects the commercialism and capitalism that defined the 1980s art world. However, Neo-Geo also demonstrates the culmination of three decades of post-war avant-gardes and finally achieves the goal set by Pop art: the reunification of high art and popular culture. According to Donald Kuspit,

The reason the '80s were remarkable is not because they produced remarkable avant-garde art – although much of it was – but because, at long last, avant-garde art and society reconciled, in however a perverse way. [...] Until the '80s, avant-garde art and society remained irreconcilable in principle; in the '80s, they finally fell into each other's arms, welcoming the other almost as though its life depended on it. Avant-garde art was openly appropriated by society.¹⁵⁴

Kuspit's statement reflects a new avant-garde sensibility, one in which art and mass culture are no longer separate and conflicting entities but have come together and embraced what each has to offer the other.

The precedent set by Pop Art and Warhol in the late 1950s continued to manifest in the avant-garde activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The various styles and means of artistic expression which have come to characterize the avant-

¹⁵³ Compton, 151.

¹⁵⁴ Kuspit, "Sincere Cynicism," 60-61.

garde movements of the late modern era demonstrate how artists and artworks can remain avant-garde even as the aesthetic standards, theories and the very definition of avant-garde art and high art change. Graffiti, Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo were all art movements that challenged the dominant aesthetic of mainstream art (even contemporary avant-garde art), as well as its standards of appropriate media, subject and content. In doing so, each of these bold artistic styles reinterpreted avant-garde activity and subsequently came to represent the last of the major modern avant-gardes and signaled the dawn of the postmodern era.

Figure 1. Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* 1956. Collage, 10¼ x 9¾ inches.
Kunsthalle Tübingen, Germany.
Courtesy of Gerlinde Engelhardt, Kunsthalle Tübingen, 2003.

Figure 2. Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963. Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 67 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 66 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 3. Roy Lichtenstein, *Rouen Cathedral Set V*, 1969 (panel C).
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 63 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 126 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2003.

Figure 4. Andy Warhol, *Red Liz*, 1962. Synthetic polymer and silkscreen on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 5. New York Subway Graffiti, *Style Wars*, by NOC, ca. 1981.
Photograph by Henry Chalfant.

Figure 6. Keith Haring, *Untitled, October 19, 1981*, 1981. Sumi Ink on paper, 38 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 49 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art.

Figure 7. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans*, 1983. Synthetic polymer and mixed media on canvas, 84 x 84 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Figure 8. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *LNAPRK*, 1982. Synthetic polymer and oil stick on canvas, 73½ x 72¼ inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art.

Figure 9. Julian Schnabel, *Geography Lesson*, 1980. Oil on velvet, 8 x 7 feet.
Collection of Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich.
Courtesy of Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich, 2003.

Figure 10. Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988. Porcelain, ed. 2/3, 42 x 70½ x 32½ inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 11. Jeff Koons, *Two-Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Spalding Dr. J. Sliver Series, Wilson Aggressor)*, 1985. Glass, steel, sodium chloride reagent, distilled water, and basketballs, 63x 36^{13/16} x 12^{13/16} inches.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Fractional Gift of Norah and Norman Stone.

Chapter 4

Postmodern Theory

Postmodern art theory began to take form during the period between the last years of the 1970s and early 1990s.¹ One single theory or set of aesthetic principles cannot define postmodernism; the unifying factor of the postmodern is the call for a critical reevaluation of the theory and practices of modern art. Among the declarations of postmodern theory is the symbolic “death” of the modern avant-garde. The theoreticians of postmodernism, Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, and Jean François Lyotard, among others, maintain that avant-garde art and activity cannot reassert itself within the framework of the postmodern culture.² The basic point of departure from the modern into the postmodern was the establishment of “a new set of characteristics”³ in both art and theory. These characteristics developed as the expression of the desire to abandon the ideas of modern art theory and practices, which were perceived as outmoded.⁴ In terms of art making, author Ihab Habib Hassan asserts that these characteristics were expressed as new and highly conceptual art forms and new kinds of media, particularly those which could be widely dispersed. He states that with the postmodern generation of artists, “All the

¹ The period between “the end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of Germany.” Harrison and Wood, 987.

² While these presuppositions may be true in theory, this paper aims to demonstrate that certain, perhaps unanticipated, factors can create a climate for avant-garde activity and allow for new avant-garde art to emerge in the postmodern or any era.

³ Harrison and Wood, 988.

⁴ Ibid.

physical materials of the arts changed.”⁵ Postmodernism arose as a critical response to modernism and the Formalist aesthetic, which during the 1960s and 1970s advocated an increasingly reductive approach to abstract art. Charles Jencks explains that, the impetus to create conceptually based works of art stemmed from a reaction against the Formalist aesthetic that “has dominated art and architectural politics from the ‘20s to the present.”⁶

During the late 1960s, a new set of standards for both art and culture began to emerge. By the 1970s, the modernist view regarding the value and function of the art object came under scrutiny. Modernism held the autonomy of the art object in the highest esteem and the valuation of art reflected its function as a commodity within the economy of the Industrial age.⁷ The postmodernists, including Andreas Huyssen, Charles Jencks, Rosalind Krauss and Barbara Rose, state that an art object is not autonomous - - rather it is an “integral part”⁸ of the culture that produced it. They maintain that cultural factors necessarily inform the art because these factors have shaped the artist and his or her understanding of society and their place in it.⁹

The postmodern critique was originally focussed on the most prominent tenets of modern art dogma; specifically the linear historical narrative upon which modernism was based, which came to be viewed as both artistically and culturally limiting. The art historical time line incorporated into modernist theory designates

⁵ I. Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 40.

⁶ Jencks, The “Post Avant-Garde,” 108.

⁷ Everett, xi.

⁸ Everett, xi.

⁹ It should be noted that this is a Marxist position that was adopted by the postmodernists.

that the art production of Western civilization develops through three stages: from birth to maturity to death. The mature stage represents the culmination of the age, marked by the highest achievement in art and culture. The problem here is an obvious one: that any art following the period of maturity is regarded as decadent because it reflects a culture in decline. If the twentieth century represented the high point of the Industrial age then modern art was the creative climax, leaving nowhere to go but down. In response to this deterministic view of artistic and cultural production, artists and art theoreticians began questioning the narrowness of the modernist aesthetic and the relevance of such universally applied historical narratives. As Charles Harrison and Paul Wood point out in *Art and Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, these questions were being raised at a time “when the virtue and authority of Modernism itself came under sustained examination from within the actual practice of modern art.”¹⁰ The validity of modern art theory became the focus of critical inquiry and the principle tenets of modernism and its advocates came under intense scrutiny.

Critique of Modernism

And the Reaction to Greenbergian Formalism

The critical reevaluation of modernism revolves around three major points that became the foundation of postmodern art theory. Harrison and Wood outline the

¹⁰ Harrison and Wood, 987.

postmodern argument as follows: “Postmodernism as a critique of historical narratives; Postmodernism as a critique of the myth of originality; and Postmodernism as a critique of the grounds of difference.”¹¹ The rejection of art historical narratives involves a belief that artistic achievement of a culture or historical period cannot be accurately or thoroughly characterized by imposing predetermined categories or linear models of development. The postmodernists analyze of the relationship between art and culture and assess the value of the art object in terms of the information contained in it and what that information reveals about cultural contexts outside of the work itself.¹² Finally, because postmodernists view art as information, there cannot be an original idea or work of art.

In her book, *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, Sally Everett explains that according to the postmodernists,

Each piece of information has already been a part of a context outside of the work. Often this context is one about art, such as art history or connoisseurship. When the pieces of information are brought together in art they are decontextualized.¹³

In other words, the work of art has no intrinsic meaning and it is merely a product of the artist’s interpretation of information gathered from his or her cultural environment. Furthermore, the postmodernists contend that the art object has no “internal system”¹⁴ by which to explain the images, signs and symbols present in the work. In the postmodern view, the art object contains a multitude of cultural

¹¹ Ibid., 989.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Everett, xi.

and historical associations but is, in itself, meaningless. This idea undermines the modernist assertion that art is self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Everett states that according to the postmodernists, “There is no special ambiance, aura or aesthetic quality that identifies art activity. Art cannot be experienced as a unique entity.”¹⁵

Postmodernism asserts that there cannot be originality in art, due to the external contexts and associations that have informed the artist before and during the creation of the art object.¹⁶ The premise upon which modern avant-garde art and art movements were founded was the idea of creating something new and original. The denial of the originality of a work of art laid the foundation for a critique of the ideas and activities of the modern avant-garde. In fact, it is the postmodernist contention of the unoriginal work of art that theoretically eliminates the possibility of an avant-garde or any homogeneous art movement in the postmodern era.

Rosalind Krauss’ book *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, addresses what she termed, the “myth of originality,” in relation to the idea of the authentic work of art promoted by modern avant-garde artists and critics. She recognized that the common denominator among the avant-garde groups and art movements of the modern era was the “theme of originality.”¹⁷ She begins by examining the meaning of the concept of originality, as she believes it was

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., xii.

¹⁶ Harrison and Wood, 992.

¹⁷ R. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 157.

understood or embraced by the members of the early twentieth century avant-garde groups.

More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth [...] originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naïveté. The self as origin is the way an absolute distinction can be made between a present experienced *de novo* and a tradition-laden past. The claims of the avant-garde are precisely these claims to originality.¹⁸

In other words, according to Krauss, early modern avant-garde literary and visual artists believed themselves, their creative imaginations, to be the soul source from which the original work of art was derived. They differentiated between their own art and the art of the past in terms of detaching themselves from traditional artistic styles and practices; without reference to history or tradition, they were creating something completely new. Krauss maintains that,

the avant-garde artist above all claims originality as his right—his birthright, so to speak. With his own self as the origin of his work, the production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes.¹⁹

Like Benjamin²⁰, Krauss based her argument against the idea of an original image or artwork on the copy or reproduction. The “myth” of originality cannot be upheld without the simultaneous repression of the reproduction or copy. She believes that the success and continuation of the modern avant-garde was not only dependent upon the concept of originality, but also, and perhaps more so, dependent

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 160.

²⁰ For clarification on Walter Benjamin’s theory regarding originality and the reproduction of images, see footnote #16 in Chapter 2.

upon the devaluation of reproductions of “original” works of art.²¹ In Krauss’ view, modernism and its avant-garde movements were pillars whose primary function was to uphold the notion of authenticity and thereby assure the value of the original work of art. By calling into question the legitimacy of the notions of authenticity and originality, Krauss and other postmodernists sought to undermine the foundation of modern avant-garde art. Using the copy or reproduction to expose the “fiction”²² of the original and render the concept of originality (as it refers to works of art) invalid, the postmodernists announced the symbolic death of the avant-garde.

The so-called “death” of the avant-garde was a crucial premise for the development of postmodern art and art theories, because the end of the modern avant-garde signaled the end of modernism. Charles Jencks offers valuable insights into the postmodernist views on the modern avant-garde, in his essay, “The Post-Avant-Garde” (1990), where he examines some of the aspects of the concept “avant-garde,” which the postmodernists find problematic. He states:

The avant-garde is a curious term and idea; partly a military metaphor applied to the art and cultural worlds, partly a synonym and substitute for the anodyne ‘Modern’ or ‘Modern Movement’, partly a sociological description of a patronless class of individuals. To some extent it is also a pseudo concept used to confirm the reputations of those who have arrived safely in the Vatican of Modernism [...]²³

In the postmodernist view, modern avant-garde artists had appointed themselves the saviors of art and culture and took upon themselves the responsibility of leading the

²¹ Ibid., 168.

²² Ibid., 161.

²³ Jencks, in Papadakis et al., 107.

way toward social progress.²⁴ Jencks explains that the avant-garde “was itself to be the replacement for the older institution of the elite, with its intelligentsia, professionals and aristocrats. Thus its styles and virtues would be picked up by the rest of society.” The participants in the modern avant-garde movements believed that they were leading Western culture out of the past and into a socially better future. Jencks goes on to note this “ideal was strong enough to carry ten generations of Modernists right up to the 1960s.”²⁵

During the 1960s, works of art were being bought and sold as commodities; avant-garde art – specifically Pop Art – was being presented as the aesthetic of high culture, and art dealers began to seek out and promote new styles of art in a rapid succession with the hope of discovering the next big art trend. The result, according to Jencks, was that “the period of the classic avant-garde as high culture came to an end as its critical and revolutionary implications were reabsorbed by a consumer society,” by way of the demands of a thriving international art market.²⁶

Jencks believes that the success of many of the modern avant-garde artists and the price value placed on works of art by “Modern Masters,”²⁷ helped to ensure the demise of the modern avant-garde.²⁸ He asks, “Can the avant-garde, which has suffered so much disdain and disregard for 160 years, survive all this success and

²⁴ Ibid., 108.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Jencks cites Van Gogh, Pollock Rothko and Johns. His use of the term “Modern Masters” is meant to evoke the works by Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, and all of the major modern avant-garde artists that were fetching high prices at auction during the 1980s and ‘90s. In Papadakis et al., 107.

²⁸ Jencks, in Papadakis et al., 107.

still be ‘avant’ anything?”²⁹ Financial success indicates widespread recognition and acceptance of the art and once the ideas and creative endeavors of an avant-garde group or movement become mainstream then an avant-garde can no longer function as something outside of or in opposition to the mainstream culture.

Another factor in the denial of a postmodern avant-garde springs from “the critique of the grounds of difference.”³⁰ This critique attacks the modernist concept of the “Other” and thus exposes the lack of diversity and the exclusion of minority groups within modern art. It specifically addresses the elitist ideals associated with the avant-garde.³¹ Modern avant-garde art movements prior to Pop art, maintained that art and culture should remain separate because the avant-garde works against or in reaction to popular culture. As Jürgen Habermas explains, the modern avant-garde “revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; [it] lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative. This revolt is one way to neutralize the standards of both morality and utility.”³² According to postmodernist art scholars and critics, such as Krauss, Rose and Jencks, modernism’s stance of neutrality actually denies diversity, in the sense that it negates any specific environmental or cultural contributions that may have informed the artist and their creative process. In the postmodern view, art and culture are interconnected and postmodern art movements seek to reconcile art and popular culture.³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Harrison and Wood, 989.

³¹ Ibid.

³² J. Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” (1983), in Harrison and Wood, 1000-1008.

³³ Everett, xii.

Daniel Bell explains that from the postmodern perspective, modernism was self-contradictory. In his essay “Modernism and Capitalism” (1978),³⁴ Bell discusses modernism and its theories as a general concept or ideology, stating that

Thematically Modernism has been a rage against order, and in particular, bourgeois orderliness. The emphasis is on the self and the unceasing search for experience [...] In that exploration, one cannot set aesthetic limits (or even moral norms) to the protean reach of the imagination.³⁵

From this view, the rigid limits of the Formalist aesthetic contradict the original aims of modern art: to break the boundaries and to place aesthetic judgements into the hands of the artists. It appeared to many postmodernists that, within the Minimalist art movement, it was the critics, and not the artists that were determining the style and function of the art object.

In addition to the theoretical problems concerning the relationship between the doctrine of modernism and the actuality of the artistic and art critical practices of the late modern art world, the postmodern critique examined other factors that indicated the erosion of the integrity of modern art theory. Bell points out that the free market economy weakened the authority of modernism because art became available to the masses, at least by way of affordable reproductions. Furthermore, Bell maintains that modernism’s attack on orthodoxy resulted in the desensitization of the mass public, therefore modern art can no longer shock the popular culture.

³⁴ D. Bell “Modernism and Capitalism” (1978). First published in *Partisan Review*, vol. 45 (New York:

He explains that,

if capitalism has been routinized, then Modernism has been trivialized. After all, how often can it continue to shock, if there is nothing shocking left? If experiment is now the norm, how original can anything new be? And like all bad history, Modernism has repeated its end, once in the popgun outbursts of Futurism and Dadaism, the second time in the phosphorescent parodies of Pop paintings and the mindless minimalism of conceptual art. The exclamation points that end each sentence of the manifestoes, have simply become four dots that simply trail away in the tedium of endless repetition.³⁶

The repercussions were that modern art was now (in the postmodern era) considered ineffective in upsetting the status quo, and worse, that modern art had failed to remain important because its radical ideas had become absorbed by and assimilated into the mainstream culture.

Harrison and Wood mark the beginning of postmodernism by the Conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s.³⁷ Conceptualism was also the first of several new styles of art that defined the 1970s as the decade of Pluralism.³⁸ The concept behind Pluralism involved the recognition of multiple styles of art occurring simultaneously, theoretically eliminating the possibility a dominant aesthetic. In addition, such stylistic Pluralism would allow for a return to subject matter and art practices previously scorned by modernism and the introduction of new, non-traditional media, as well as intellectually driven (rather than perceptually driven)

1978). Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, 993-998.

³⁵ Bell "Modernism and Capitalism," in Harrison and Wood, 994.

³⁶ Ibid., 997.

³⁷ Harrison and Wood, 988.

³⁸ Additional Pluralist art styles include Arte Povera, Earth Art, Feminist Art, Media Art, Performance Art, and Video Art.

art forms.³⁹ The plural nature of the art of this period came about as a direct reaction to Minimalist art of the previous decade and Greenbergian Formalism.

In an essay titled “Criticism as Propaganda” (1970),⁴⁰ Barbara Rose examines the postmodern reaction to Clement Greenberg. She begins by explaining that the impulse behind the criticism leveled at Greenberg was part of a greater “reaction against the limitations of an exclusively remote formal criticism.”⁴¹ But she also acknowledges that many members of the art community were specifically concerned with Greenberg’s presumed authority in the areas of taste and art critical judgement.⁴² Rose maintains that eventually even Greenberg himself had ceased to “question his own assumptions.”⁴³ This prompted many of Greenberg’s colleagues to question not only the validity of Greenberg’s aesthetic judgements but also the motivations behind them.

Examining Greenberg’s potential motivations, Rose cites Leo Steinberg, who asserted that,

Greenberg’s effectiveness as a tastemaker depended on his ability to reduce art to a single standard of quality [...] Greenberg’s reduction of all aesthetic values to a single value – that of quality – was immediately translatable into terms of real value, i.e., dollars and cents.⁴⁴

³⁹ Richter, 140.

⁴⁰ B. Rose “Criticism as Propaganda” (1970), in B. Rose *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art. 1963-87* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 220-228.

⁴¹ Rose, “Criticism as Propaganda,” 220.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁴ Rose paraphrasing Leo Steinberg’s argument, 221.

Whether, as Steinberg suggests, Greenberg was motivated by the equation of “big money and the avant-garde,”⁴⁵ in terms of a monetary valuation of art as an affirmation of the quality of the work, or not is uncertain. What is clear is that Greenberg enjoyed a great deal of professional success and accolades as a result of his advocacy of the work of certain avant-garde artists. Rose states that “Because he is reputed to have spotted [Jackson] Pollock, as well as, [Barnett] Newman, [Morris] Louis, and [Kenneth] Noland, before they were generally recognized, Greenberg’s own fortunes became tied to theirs, and their acceptance by collectors and museums meant his own as well.”⁴⁶ Greenberg’s reputation as a discoverer of great artists contributed to his legendary status, which according to Rose, accounts, at least partially, for the assumed validity and authority of his judgements.⁴⁷

A more central issue in the reaction against Greenberg was the thought that his critical evaluations had devolved into mere value judgements based on his personal likes and dislikes. Many artists and critics believe this to be the reason that Greenberg tended to overlook or omit any art that fell outside of his formal system of art analysis and his personal Formalist taste. For this part of her discussion, Rose cites Hilton Kramer, paraphrasing his review of Greenberg’s book *Art and Culture* (1961), as follows:

Greenberg’s judgements, if they were to carry any weight, *had* to be made in the name of history [...] Implicit in his thinking is the foundation of a logical, linear progression from Manet to Cézanne to cubism to abstract expressionism to present-day stained color abstraction,⁴⁸ representing the “mainstream” of

⁴⁵ Leo Steinberg quoted in Rose, 221.

⁴⁶ Rose, “Criticism as Propaganda,” 222.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ This references the Color-Field paintings of the 1950s and ‘60s.

modern art. By developing the idea of a mainstream [...] Greenberg was able to justify the exclusion of any material that did not contribute to its development. Thus far in the twentieth century, this has meant the exclusion of Dada, surrealism, and pop art or any representational styles, which Greenberg banned some years ago from the history of art.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Rose observes that according to Greenberg's writings, it would appear as though the history of American art begins with Abstract Expressionism, which seems to be the product of an immaculate conception on the part of the School of Paris.⁵⁰ In other words, the manner in which Greenberg presents the development of American modern art does not allow for any influence from earlier American styles of art. Rose calls Greenberg's "refusal to acknowledge the contribution of 'minor' artists and movements, not part of the mainstream of development as he sees it, [...] more than a gross simplification. It is a distortion of history."⁵¹

Rose's stance leads back to the general critique of modernism based on the grounds of difference. Under the scrutiny of a postmodernist evaluation, the validity of Greenberg's aesthetic judgements and artistic theories began to diminish and his approach was eventually completely discarded. Just as new and more open-ended styles of art emerged in the wake of the modern period, similarly in the discipline of art theory, new, more all-inclusive approaches to art interpretation and analysis were proposed.

From the critique of modernism rose several new theories regarding the function, production and understanding of art in a postmodern society. Sally Everett writes that with the dissolution of Greenbergian modernism, postmodern artists and art

⁴⁹ Rose, paraphrasing Hilton Kramer, 222-223.

critics and theoreticians began developing new methods of art analysis in terms of “what art means to our culture rather than what art does for our culture.”⁵² The belief that art functions as a part of society reflects the influence of Marxist ideology on early postmodern theory. However, the discipline of linguistics was the biggest contributor to the development of the theoretical works of postmodernism. In *Introducing Postmodernism*, Richard Appignanesi maintains that,

Postmodern theory is a consequence of this century’s obsession with language. The most important 20th century [linguistic] thinkers-Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and others-shifted their focus of analysis away from ideas in the mind to the language in which thinking is expressed.⁵³

Structuralism

The first writings on postmodern art theory evolved from the discipline of semiotics⁵⁴ and Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of Structural Linguistics.⁵⁵ As Richard Appignanesi explains, this branch of linguistics analyzed the underlying structure of language and “viewed the meaning of language as the function of a system.”⁵⁶ Saussure proposed that language systems function by means of signification. In this theory, language is broken down to its essentials, the word, which carries the meaning, and the concept to which the word refers. Saussure

⁵⁰ Rose, “Criticism as Propaganda,” 223.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Everett, xi.

⁵³ Appignanesi and Garratt, 59.

⁵⁴ The scientific study of signs used in communication.

⁵⁵ Appignanesi and Garratt, 56.

termed these two parts of the structure of language the “signifier” and the “signified.”⁵⁷ The combination of the word and the concept create a sign. In a brief discussion on the process of linguistic signification, Appignanesi states that “Signification is the process which bands together signifier and the signified to produce a sign. A sign must be understood as a relation which has no meaning outside the system of signification.”⁵⁸ Saussure stressed that the signs created by language systems are actually arbitrary. Words and concepts have no meaning in themselves; they are merely products of systems of communication. Furthermore, the meaning of these language signs changes from culture to culture and each form of language creates its own signifier to explain a signified concept. Appignanesi notes that as a result of the impact of cultural variables on the development of lingual signs, according to Structuralist thought, “Meaning is therefore a product of a system of representation which is itself meaningless.”⁵⁹

Structuralism bequeathed the concept of culture construction to postmodern art theory. By examining art based on the signification system of Saussure it was determined that the art object and its content contained no meaning outside of the collective understanding of the signs and symbols of a given culture.⁶⁰ Analyzing

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁷ Saussure’s classifying terms, quoted in Appignanesi and Garratt, 59.

⁵⁸ Appignanesi and Garratt, 59.

⁵⁹ Ibid. The Structuralist approach was also applied to cultural anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss in the 1950s. Levi-Strauss’s theory of Structural Anthropology is an analysis of culture based on sign systems which views all cultures as functioning according to a system of binary opposites. The idea was based on Saussure’s “binary model” which suggests that human comprehension operates in terms of differentiating opposites. See Appignanesi and Garratt, 64. Art historian Rosalind Krauss also applied Saussure’s binary opposites in her theory of art analysis. For further information on Krauss’ application of the “binary model” see R. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” *October* 8 (Spring, 1979).

⁶⁰ Appignanesi and Garratt., 59-60.

art solely on the basis of an underlying structure presents some degree of difficulty. Because art has traditionally functioned as a means of visual communication, through which the meaning of the represented concepts and images was conveyed to an audience; therefore, the application of the Structuralist approach to art seems inadequate.

Structuralist theory has been widely criticized. Richard Appignanesi opines that Structuralist theory is more closely aligned with modernism than with postmodernism due to its “rigorous abstract intellectuality” its universally applicable principles, which fail to account for changes that occur through time.⁶¹ He explains the problem with the non-historical nature of Structuralism as follows:

Structuralism is non-historical, or more accurately a-historical. Its analysis is valid (in principle) no matter what is historically present.⁶² This is consistent with its discarding of historical origins and motivations [...].⁶³

Appignanesi also critiques Structuralism on the following points: the first point involves the issue of artistic motivation, specifically the negation of subconscious impulses informing creative activity.⁶⁴ According to Appignanesi, Structuralism eliminates the factor of experience; instead it relies exclusively “on the rules of reasoning to arrive at a general picture of the world.”⁶⁵ The second point of deals with a critical examination of the Structural interpretation of the origins of meaning;

⁶¹ Ibid., 71.

⁶² This flaw also occurs in regard to postmodern anti-avant-garde positions.

⁶³ Appignanesi and Garratt, 71.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 70.

he states:

It [Structuralism] claims that ‘meaning’ is a product of signification, a process maintained by timeless and universal structures forming a stable and self-contained system based on binary oppositions. The elements of the system, or signifiers, carry meaning only in relation to each other; their relationship to the signified-whether concepts or things or actions-is arbitrary, based purely on convention.⁶⁶

The questions about the validity of a Structuralist theory in art, raised by such critical inquiry, prompted the development of a Post-Structuralist art theory.

According to Appignanesi, the “Postmodern attitude” in art theory began to assert itself as a result of “the overlap of structuralism and the ‘post’-structuralist second thoughts of Roland Barthes (1915-80).”⁶⁷ Barthes continued the investigation of sign systems begun by Saussure and the discipline of Semiotics. Barthes believed that semiotics could be applied to the analysis of metaphor and its uses in the visual arts.⁶⁸ Barthes’ position states that:

semiological analysis collapses back into language – a forerunner of Baudrillard’s more radical notion of art totally penetrating reality; of the border between art and reality vanishing as the two collapse into universal simulacrum. A collapse into total semblance.⁶⁹

Barthes maintained that any aspect of culture could be “decoded” using a semiotic approach.⁷⁰ However, Barthes most influential contribution to postmodern theory was his assertion of “the death of author.”⁷¹ According to Barthes, the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁸ Based on Roman Jakobson’s classification system of “metaphoric types,” which he applied to structural anthropology. Appignanesi and Garratt, 73.

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation or Simulacrum, in which he asserts that reality and our image of reality have become indistinguishable. Appignanesi and Garratt, 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁷¹ Ibid.

author or artist no longer determines or controls the interpretation and meaning of the information contained in a work of art or literature. The viewers or “readers create their own meanings, regardless of the author’s [or artist’s] intentions. The texts they use to do so are thus ever-shifting, unstable and open to question.”⁷² By placing the responsibility of interpretation back in the hands of the viewer, Barthes’ “death of the author” undermined the entire concept of the artist in the modern world-view. The idea of the artist as a forward thinking, autonomous individual whose creations prompted the progression of society, was all but destroyed.

Post-Structuralism

During the late 1960s and 1970s, art criticism came to be redefined. Influenced by the developments of Structuralism and contemporary French literary theory⁷³, young scholars and critics began turning away from the Formalist approach to art interpretation. Focussing their analysis and criticism on issues beyond the formal characteristics of the art object, this new generation of art scholars and theorists began to examine the contexts (be they cultural, social, political and/or economic) under which the work of art was created. These art theorists shifted their critical attention to the circumstances that shaped the making and exhibition of a given

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Most notably the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard, Michael Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minnneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 134.

artwork.⁷⁴ Irving Sandler describes the methods of art analysis and criticism employed by the young art scholars and theorists in the 1970s as being based upon representation. Sandler maintains that, “above all, they [young art scholars and critics] insisted that what counted most in art was what it represented.”⁷⁵ “Representation,” he explains,

was defined as the complex of images and texts through which society represents itself—images and texts that have become so ingrained as to be accepted without question. The work of art was treated as a kind of ‘text’ leading to a discourse on representation.⁷⁶

Like Structuralism, Post-Structural theory originated as a branch of literary criticism. Defining themselves in relation to Structuralist theory, the Post-Structuralists, particularly Jacques Lacan, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and later, Roland Barthes, “elaborated on or reacted against the Structuralist redefinition of human experience as a decipherable construct of language.”⁷⁷ Post-Structuralism reconstructs and articulates the process of meaning by way of an open system which examines not only the presumed meanings imbedded in individual words, but (following Saussure) the meaning of the relationship of words to one another. According to Post-Structural theory there can be no concrete truth or meaning because such concepts are functions of and constructed by linguistic discourse and are therefore subject to variations and interpretation.⁷⁸

In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, author Terry Eagleton explains that Post-

⁷⁴ Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 333.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 134.

⁷⁷ J. Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 18.

⁷⁸ Eagleton, 144.

Structuralism called into question “the classical notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, all of which could be exposed as resting on a naively representational theory of language.”⁷⁹ Eagleton states that the Post-Structuralists proposed the following conundrum:

If meaning, the signified, was a passing product of words or signifiers, always shifting and unstable, part-present and part-absent, how could there be any determinate truth or meaning at all? If reality was constructed by our discourse rather than reflected by it, how could we ever know reality itself, rather than merely knowing our own discourse?⁸⁰

In other words, from the Post-Structuralist point of view, all meaning is relative to the structure of one’s language or the language of one’s own discourse.

In keeping with the overall agenda of postmodern theory, the Post-Structuralists denounced modernism and sought to repudiate its Formalist aesthetic. Irving Sandler maintains that the theorists of Post-Structuralism employed a deconstructive method to “dismantle and demystify modernism, its canon, and every one of its values—originality, uniqueness, authenticity, autonomy, completeness, transcendence, and aesthetic quality.”⁸¹

The application of Post-Structuralism to art theory and criticism can be attributed, most notably, to Rosalind Krauss. Krauss, along with her colleague Michael Fried,⁸² were largely responsible for the academic acceptance of Clement Greenberg’s critical approach to modern art. However, by the early 1970s, Krauss

⁷⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 143-144

⁸¹ *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 343.

had become critical of Greenberg's Formalist theory.⁸³ Recognizing Greenberg's limited scope, Krauss moved toward what she described as a "larger modernism."⁸⁴ Influenced by the work of Saussure, Foucault, Baudrillard, Derrida and Barthes, Krauss came to fully embrace a postmodern interpretation of Western culture and its artistic production.⁸⁵ Krauss went on to question some of the central issues regarding modernist criticism. For example, she addressed the omissions in critical writing; specifically the refusal to write or even talk about content while still insisting that "content and feeling [...] are central to modernist critics."⁸⁶

According to Harrison and Wood,

Krauss was increasingly disturbed by the apparent inability of Greenbergian Modernism to address what was palpably the most trenchant and interesting art of the day.⁸⁷ Accordingly, she began to adumbrate the idea of a larger modernist self-critical sensibility which the entrenched Greenbergian paradigm had, through its very rigidity, begun to violate.⁸⁸

Krauss recognized that art and art issues involving content tended to be avoided by modernist critics. Modern criticism relies solely on the analysis of the formal elements of a piece for its interpretation. Obviously, the intentions and passions of the artist, as well as, the emotion evoked during the viewing of the piece are present in the work, but they are simply not discussed. Furthermore, the idea that a work of

⁸² Fried is a critic of contemporary art and an art historian. He and Krauss were both students of Clement Greenberg at Harvard University. Taken from the editors introduction to Rosalind Krauss' essay "A View of Modernism" (1972), in Harrison and Wood, 953-56. Originally published in *Artforum*, September 1972.

⁸³ Krauss in Harrison and Wood, 954.

⁸⁴ Krauss quoted in the editor's introduction to "the Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths" (1986), excerpted in Harrison and Wood, 1060.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Krauss in Harrison and Wood, 955.

⁸⁷ As previously noted, Greenberg, himself, refused to acknowledge any contemporary art that demanded an interpretation outside of the schematic of his formalist analysis. See Chapter 2.

⁸⁸ Harrison and Wood, 954.

art may contain content other than the formal qualities is omitted in modern critical analysis. According to Krauss, modern art criticism “demanded that one not talk about anything in a work of art that one could not point to.”⁸⁹

Krauss also took issue with the linear historical model applied to art works and art movements; stating:

Profoundly historicist, Greenberg’s method conceives the field of art as at once timeless and in constant flux. That is to say that certain things like art itself, or painting or sculpture or the masterpiece, are universal, transhistorical forms. But in the same breath it is to assert that the life of these forms is dependent upon constant renewal, not unlike that of a living organism.⁹⁰

Krauss termed this view “progressive”⁹¹ meaning that the modernists saw art as continually moving and only able to move forward. She describes the modernist view of art history “from Manet to the Impressionists to Cézanne and then to Picasso”, as a secession of rooms in which each new pictorial achievement took place. Once a formal problem was solved, one could advance into the next room, but the door to the previous room inevitably shuts and locks behind you. Therefore, one can only move ahead to discover and accomplish the next artistic innovation.⁹² Krauss explains that, “The only thing about that unstable position that was clearly determined beforehand was its point of entrance.”⁹³ Krauss goes on to warn of the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 955.

⁹⁰ *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1.

⁹¹ Harrison and Wood, 955.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

dangers of using a historical narrative to gauge the present; suggesting that this leads to the construction of the present based on the past.⁹⁴

Krauss critiques modernism on the basis of its claim of self-criticality by pointing out its refusal to view history as being subject to one's own cultural perspective. "[M]odernist criticism has stopped being suspicious of what it sees as self-evident, its critical intelligence having ceased to be wary of what it has taken as given."⁹⁵ Krauss acknowledges that the modern view of history is only one of many possible perspectives, while modernists take their perspective to be universal truths or fact. She also questioned whether or not "the art of Modernism is being well served by writing that promotes the myths⁹⁶ through which it can be constantly misread."⁹⁷ From this premise, Krauss developed a Post-Structural theory for art.

Krauss' Post-Structural approach stemmed from the "rejection of history"⁹⁸ and the system of signification proposed by Structuralism. She maintains that Post-Structuralism "submits the vehicles of [cultural] production to the test of their own histories."⁹⁹ In other words, where Structuralism was concerned with the ways in which cultural products, including works of art, signify, Post-Structuralism goes one step further and examines how cultural concepts and signs stand up against the understanding of such signs through history. Krauss deduced that "the autonomous or unified nature of concepts like 'author,' 'oeuvre,' or 'work' tends to dissolve

⁹⁴ Ibid., 956. This point also brings up the issue of the construction of the past by the discipline of history and whether or not the historical interpretation of events is entirely accurate.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Here Krauss is referring to the "myth of originality." Krauss, 151-170.

⁹⁷ Krauss, 5.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

against the background of actual, material history.”¹⁰⁰ These concepts rely upon a specifically Western definition of the artist, which originated with the Renaissance. Krauss maintains that once removed from the Western interpretation and placed against broader historical and cross-cultural contexts, the meanings of these concepts change or vanish.

Krauss asserts that,

Poststructuralism, in problematizing all those transhistorical categories out of which most of the work of modernist production is thought, brought certain aspects of that art into focus, and led to considerations of authorship.¹⁰¹

The issue of authorship directly relates to Barthes “death of the author” and the idea of art as information in postmodern theory. More importantly, the questioning of the existence of an author in an age where nothing is without cultural associations, became the corner stone of postmodern theory, born out of Krauss’ idea of the “myth of originality.”¹⁰² For Krauss and the Post-Structuralists, the concepts of “originality” and “author” are questionable factors in the creative process. While the modernists believed these concepts were integral to the creation of art, in the Post-Structural view they were incidental at best and a total falsehood at worst.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰² Krauss, 151-170.

Postmodernism as a Continuation of the Modern

The emancipation of art from metanarratives¹⁰⁴ became the final piece of the postmodern theoretical critique of modernism. Jean François Lyotard defined “the postmodern condition as skepticism toward all metanarratives. Metanarratives are supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimize various projects, political or scientific.”¹⁰⁵ Lyotard addressed the “problem” of modernism by examining its evocation of metanarratives. According to Lyotard, modern theory was based on, what he termed, the “Enlightenment Narrative.”¹⁰⁶ This narrative presents “the hero” as one who works for the greater ethical good in order to achieve the end goal of “universal peace.”¹⁰⁷ Lyotard maintains that these types of “grand narratives” make a claim to history and that such claims are presupposed as objective. He explains:

if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth.¹⁰⁸

Lyotard’s position essentially attacks the modernist claim to universal truths which, in his view, have served to legitimize modern theory and its institutions. The foundation upon which modernism rests has been dismantled due to the questions

¹⁰³ Harrison and Wood, 1060.

¹⁰⁴ Also referred to as grand narratives or “self-legitimizing myths”.

Appignanesi and Garratt, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 103. Here it should be noted that Lyotard is speaking generally, and his remarks are not limited to art.

¹⁰⁶ Lyotard in Harrison and Wood, 999. From J. F. Lyotard, introduction to *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), reprinted in Harrison and Wood, 998-1000.

raised by the critique of grand narratives. The postmodern then is defined by its aversion to metanarratives. As postmodernism continued to develop and be put into practice during the 1980s, it became more skeptical and less idealistic and ultimately made a departure from one of the original inspirations of postmodern theory, namely Marx.¹⁰⁹ However, Lyotard's postmodernism retains "the intellectual prospect of a new form of social existence," thus presenting postmodern theory as more of a critical reinterpretation of modernism than a radical break from it.¹¹⁰

Similarly, Ihab Habib Hassan views postmodernism as a revision of modernism. In an analysis of postmodern literature, he observes that, in renouncing the aesthetic of the modern, the postmodern was seeking to assert its own aesthetic and create new avenues for artistic expression, which is precisely how modernism came into being. Hassan also suggests a certain correspondence between the modern and the postmodern; stating,

Whether we tend to revalue Modernism in terms of Postmodernism or to reverse that procedure, we will end by doing something of both since relation, analogies, enable our thought. Modernism does not suddenly cease so that Postmodernism may begin: they now *coexist*.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 999.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1000.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 998.

¹¹¹ *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, 40.

Art historian and critic, Robert Rosenblum, once stated that “clearly the 1960s represent an overt break with the Modernist tradition.”¹¹² However, Lyotard argued that “the postmodern and the modern are continually bound in a dialectical relationship, so that the postmodern supersedes the modern only in order to itself become the modern.”¹¹³ In other words, postmodernism, like all movements in the history of modern art, seeks to replace the ideas and styles of the art it immediately succeeds. This suggests that postmodernism is a progression from the modern and that the impetus to break from the preceding style of art actually serves to connect the postmodern to the modern, rather than separate the two periods. Addressing the connection between modernism and postmodernism, Richard Appignanesi contends that the “Modern is Postmodern.”¹¹⁴ In an attempt to explain the co-dependence of these two periods in the history of art, Appignanesi proposes that “The modern is always historically at war with what comes immediately before it. In this sense, modern is always post-*something*. The modern ends up being at war with itself and must inevitably become post-modern.”¹¹⁵

In the essay, “What Is Postmodernism?” (1983),¹¹⁶ Jean François Lyotard illuminates this progression as follows:

[Postmodernism] is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday..., must be suspected. What space does Cézanne

¹¹² R. Rosenblum, “Post-Modernism,” taken from a critical paper given at the Tate Gallery Symposia. Printed in *New Art: An International Survey*, Andreas Papadakis, et al. al., (New York: Rizzoli International Publication, INC., 1991), 54.

¹¹³ Harrison and Wood, 1008.

¹¹⁴ Appignanesi and Garratt, 19.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Originally published as “Answering the Question: What is Poatmodernism?” Translated for the French by Régis Durand in I. and S. Hassan, eds., *Innovation/Renovation*, (Madison Wisconsin, 1983). Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, 1008-1015.

challenge? The Impressionists'. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cézanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.¹¹⁷

So according to Lyotard, postmodernism reflects the regeneration of the modern, rather than its demise. If this is, in fact, the case then postmodernism represents a new version of modernity, connected to the art of the previous era by its reaction against it. Lyotard maintains that unlike modernism, postmodernism does not claim access to any universal truths and its theories do not function to legitimate any one idea or institution,¹¹⁸ therefore the art historical progression remains intact. The problem with this historically based view of postmodernism is that it undermines the postmodern denial of a "unilinear history."¹¹⁹ As Richard Appignanesi explains, "Postmodernism cannot follow in sequence after modernism, because this would be an admission of historical progress and a relapse into grand narrative mythology."¹²⁰ The question as to whether postmodern theory is intrinsically linked to modernism or is wholly separate from it remains unresolved.

What is clear is that postmodern theory came out of a reaction against the theories and styles of modernism, which had dominated twentieth century art. Postmodernists reassessed the premises of modern art theory – with the benefit of hindsight – with the goal of liberating art and artists from the confines of the

¹¹⁷ Lyotard in Harrison and Wood, 1014.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1000.

¹¹⁹ Appignanesi and Garratt, 114.

modern aesthetic, thus allowing art to move in new directions and to include non-traditional and experimental media. However, the postmodernists failed to consider the possibility that Pluralism might be an art trend and not an aesthetic doctrine. Furthermore, it was inconceivable that postmodern art could become subject to the narrowness of a single or dominant aesthetic. But, what if the multiplicity of styles that characterized the early postmodern period were to give way to a dominant style or set of aesthetic or conceptual art principles? What if the process of critical re-evaluation was applied to postmodern theory? Finally, if contemporary artists were prompted to react against the styles and tenets of postmodernism, would such a reaction resemble avant-garde activity?

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 5

A Postmodern Avant-garde?

In viewing the postmodern as a continuation of the modern, postmodernism can be regarded as functioning in an avant-garde manner because it follows the avant-garde tradition of acting in opposition to the prevailing style and/or the accepted artistic and cultural standards. Certainly, postmodern art and its artists display avant-garde tendencies, such as, reacting against the dominant aesthetic, proposing new practices, methods and media, and pushing the boundaries of subject, content and presentation. However, to be truly avant-garde is to have a specific artistic agenda, which postmodernism does not claim. Postmodern art is not a unified style with a traceable thread of aesthetic developments or common set of artistic practices or ideological concerns; rather it is composed of several extremely diverse styles and practices emerging or occurring concurrently.¹

While it is easy to identify postmodern artists who intended to shock or upset the status quo—Barbara Kruger, Andres Serrano and Joseph Beuys, for example—and to assert that such artists recall avant-garde activity, it is more important to look at how the developments of postmodern art and theory generated the conditions needed for avant-garde activity to arise and created a climate in which a new avant-garde revolt might occur.

¹ It should be noted that most of the postmodern art movements, including Feminist art, Conceptual art, Earth art, Video art and Performance art, have little in common aesthetically and/or philosophically with each other. These styles are grouped together under the postmodern heading because they do not reflect the

In examining the potential for a postmodern avant-garde, it must be made clear that the proposal does not, and cannot, call for the *next* avant-garde, but only investigates the possibility of new or other avant-gardes. The idea of the *next* avant-garde implies a resurgence of avant-garde activity and art as it occurred during the modern era and as defined by the theories of modernism. Because cultural and artistic standards have changed with the advent of postmodern theory, the themes and issues that informed the artists of the modern avant-garde art movements are, in most cases, no longer relevant for postmodern artists or applicable to contemporary art. So, the question becomes what would constitute contemporary avant-garde activity and how or why would it emerge?

The conditions necessary for avant-garde activity to manifest in the modern era should be reestablished before a determination can be made as to whether such conditions are present in the contemporary art world. It has been shown that the fundamental ideas governing avant-garde activity are the desire for change and the need to create and present an artistic alternative to the styles or aesthetic tradition that is most pervasive in the mainstream art world. Therefore, the presence of a dominant style of art or set of aesthetic standards must be perceived before an avant-garde reaction will occur. Without a critical authority or artistic status quo, there is nothing for the avant-garde artist to challenge or refuse to conform to. The accepted styles and aesthetic standards of the mainstream art world and majority culture are typically viewed by artists with avant-garde

modern aesthetic trends or because the artistic activity that defines these styles and movements post-date

inclinations or tendencies as stifling to creativity and as stagnating the development (or progress) of art and culture.²

Avant-garde activity tends to germinate when a contemporary style of art has become passive, meaning that the present style is no longer viewed as innovative or has ceased to be shocking or different, even when a style was recently considered progressive or its subject or content is generally taboo. Once a style or movement becomes acceptable to and absorbed by the majority or mass culture, the climate is ripe for an avant-garde to emerge. The avant-garde artist acts as the rule-breaker, promoting alternative (and, ideally, shocking) forms of expression which are specifically counter to the art and aesthetics of the mainstream art world. The difficulty with indicating such a climate within the postmodern art world is that the pluralism that characterizes the development of postmodern art would suggest that the emergence of a single, dominant style or current is unlikely. However, while the plural nature of postmodern art may remain intact, in terms of visual or stylistic diversity, it can still be argued that at the conceptual level, postmodern art has narrowed significantly and that a common standard has been established in the artistic approach toward subject and content.

the modern era.

² The culture to which this concept applies is a “high” or elite culture that the mass-culture should either be elevated to or excluded from. While this perception of culture (and the relationship of art to culture) has its roots in modernism, it should be noted that the tendency for avant-garde art and activity to distinguish itself from the majority culture continues into the postmodern era.

Some of the Developments of Postmodern Art

Prior to any further consideration of the potential for a contemporary artistic avant-garde, some of the developments of postmodern art should be discussed in order to set the stage for the possible presence of a dominant style or trend in contemporary art, which is a necessary precedent for an avant-garde reaction. Since the late 1960s with the advent of the Feminist Art movement, contemporary artists have increasingly explored the issue and presentation of identity (both personal and cultural) as both subject and content for their work. The feminist artists, Judy Chicago, Karen Finley, Sherri Levine, Ana Mendieta, Miriam Schapiro, and Cindy Sherman³ to name a few, called for a reevaluation of art and art history based on the proposition that art historical and contemporary art critical practices had institutionalized gender bias and sexism. Edward Lucie-Smith explains that the Feminist Art movement promoted feminist issues and women artists by “encourag[ing] the creation of a kind of art which would speak about female thoughts and concerns.”⁴ The women who embraced the feminist approach to art making and art criticism proposed a re-interpretation of art and art history from a non-gendered perspective, balancing the male-centric view of the history of art and artists by including the contributions of women artists throughout history. The Feminist Art movement also helped to refocus attention on gender inequity and the struggles of female artists (and other minority artists), working in a white male-dominated art world.

Concurrent to the rise of Feminist Art (continuing into the present), artists from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds⁵ and other disenfranchised or minority groups, including gay and lesbian artists, began exploring their own social and cultural identities and addressing issues of cultural difference through a variety of artistic media.⁶ While the feminist artists tended to focus explicitly on women's issues as a shared experience, the artists addressing racial and sexual identity were inclined to depict their personal experience as minority individuals within Western culture, along with the more general issues specific to their culture, ethnicity or group.⁷ Discussing the reclamation of cultural identities in postmodern art, Andreas Huyssen states:

There is [...] an alternative search for tradition and history going on today which manifests itself in the concern with cultural formations not dominated by logocentric and technocratic thought, in the decentering of traditional notions of identity, in the search for women's history, in the rejection of centralisms, mainstreams, and melting pots of all kinds, and in the great value put on difference and otherness.⁸

The work of these "identity focused" artists is stylistically varied and, even among those working with the same movement or group, each artist approaches his or her content in an individual and subjective manner. However from a philosophical viewpoint, the motivations of these artists are closely connected,

³ For examples of work by these and other feminist artists see: Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 460-472.

⁴ Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 12.

⁵ Such as, African-American, Native-American, Chicano/Chicana and Latino/Latina, and Asian-American.

⁶ Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 11-12.

⁷ For further reading on artists working with these issues and/or illustrations of artworks see Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 434-459 and 472-480. Also see Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, 9-14.

⁸ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 172.

and collectively they provided the basis for the postmodern theoretical critique on the grounds of difference.⁹

Perhaps one of the earliest and most influential developments of postmodern art was another type of issue oriented art, in which the social and/or political agendas of the artist or group served as the subject of the piece or performance. Modern and postmodern artists alike have used their work to address their political and/or social views or concerns. In addition, the intended use of artistic subject and content to bring attention to or criticize political or social issues is part of the tradition of the international avant-garde art from the first half of the twentieth century. What differs in the work of the postmodern issue-oriented artists is that the social and political critique takes on a stance of protest and the artists and artwork become politically engaged and socially active. In the early postmodern era, social and political activism was incorporated by some facets of Feminist Art, most prominently in the work of the Guerrilla Girls,¹⁰ but its precedent truly lies in the work of Joseph Beuys during the early 1970s.

In the 1960s, Joseph Beuys, a German Conceptual and Performance artist, was an active member in the Fluxus movement. Fluxus, an international artist's group that began in Germany, promoted audience response to a variety of mixed media activities or events. Fluxus artworks and art activities often combined elements of painting, sculpture, poetry, experimental music and theater, and Happenings into

⁹ For clarification of this concept refer back to Chapter 4.

¹⁰ A group of feminist artists whose ongoing art project involved gathering statistics and information regarding the prevalence of sexism (particularly in the art world) and presented their findings publicly in the form of posters and flyers. Sandler, 361.

one artwork or performance piece.¹¹ The primary goal of Fluxus was to disrupt the status quo and bourgeois complacency of art and society. The social goals of the Fluxus artists often dominated the aesthetics issues. This would become an enduring characteristic in Joseph Beuys's work.¹² By the mid-1970s, Beuys had integrated his political aims and his art; in fact, his organized political activities became his artworks.¹³ For example, in 1973 Beuys organized his piece *Save The Woods*, in which he and a group of students swept a forest floor with brooms made of natural fibers in protest of deforestation and the depletion of Germany's natural resources.¹⁴ Beuys believed that art could be a "politically productive force"¹⁵ and, in the spirit of many of the modern avant-garde artists and schools, he set out to reform art and politics with the hope of redeeming society. Linda Weintraub explains that Beuys's political activity and the organizations he founded,

provided the forms of his sculptures [and] [w]orld problems provided their themes. Thus Beuys integrated into art such grave and imposing themes as: the domination of advanced nations over Third World countries; nuclear energy and its alternatives; [...] urban decay; [...] the exploitation of workers; repression, violence, terrorism, and human rights abuses.¹⁶

Edward Lucie-Smith points out another important aspect of Beuys's contribution to the postmodern art world, commenting that Beuys was one of the first artists to utilize museums and gallery as political forums. He states, "It was

¹¹ Richter, 11.

¹² This tendency to subdue or negate the formal elements and aesthetic concerns within the artwork in favor of the presentation of a socially or politically critical message continues to be prevalent in contemporary issue oriented and activist art.

¹³ Some of Beuys projects included: the foundation of the German Student Party (DSP), 1967, the Organization of Direct Democracy Through Referendum, 1971, and the foundation of the Action Community of Independent Germans for the German Bundestag, (AUD), 1976. Weintraub, 179.

¹⁴ For a photographic image of this event, see Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, 179.

¹⁵ Beuys quoted in Weintraub, 179.

Beuys who was chiefly responsible for the discovery that the museum could serve as an effective political platform.”¹⁷ This “discovery” was highly influential for the minority artists and subsequent “activist”¹⁸ artists and art groups. Overall, Beuys’s coupling of political activity and protest with performance art would make a dramatic impact on the further development of issue-oriented and politically and socially active art in the postmodern period.

A Dominant Current in Postmodern Art: Activism

In the contemporary era,¹⁹ the themes addressed in this type of issue oriented or activist art (commonly referred to as “Political Art”),²⁰ tend to focus on issues of national, international, or global concern. These socially and politically active artists use their work as a forum in which to illuminate such issues as rape, abuse, human rights, tyranny, political injustice, and environmental issues. The introduction of overt issued-led content renewed the alliance between the artistic and the political, with both societal and personal politics being presented within an art context. According to Lucie-Smith in his book *ARTODAY*, the onslaught of

¹⁶ *Art on the Edge and Over*, 179.

¹⁷ *ARTODAY*, 11.

¹⁸ This term will be used to describe artists who utilize the arena of art as a means to present and promote a political or social agenda, including those artists whose content is so overtly issue-led that the work becomes more an object of propaganda than of art.

¹⁹ Throughout this paper, this term is used to refer to the period dating from the 1990s to the present.

²⁰ The term “Political Art” is problematic in that any work of art can be political in subject or content and there is a longstanding tradition of expressing and/or criticizing politics and political positions and policies in the history of art. Some examples include: Francisco Goya’s *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, the art of early twentieth century Soviet Avant-Garde, the post-Revolutionary Mexican artists and muralists, the

issue-oriented art that emerged during the early postmodern era not only created an interest in the artistic presentation of diverse cultural and political perspectives, but also helped to dismantle the “hierarchical” structure of the modern art world.²¹ Works by minority and politically active artists also supported the pluralist nature of early postmodern art and theory. However, Lucie-Smith points out that, as a result of the pluralism which was characteristic of the early postmodern art world, contemporary art “has passed from the private to the public sphere, and become an aspect of official culture.”²² The assumption here is that once art becomes part of the “official” or mainstream culture, art not only becomes subject to the tastes of the mass populace, but also risks becoming nothing more than a reflection of the society in which it is produced. This observation by Lucie-Smith also carries an additional and important implication which suggests that as a result of postmodern art becoming part of the public sphere, subsequent artistic developments that reflect the issues plaguing contemporary culture²³ have become increasingly prominent in contemporary art and its institutions.

The later decades of the twentieth century produced a vast amount of art with overtly political subject matter, including artworks in which commentary on

WPA art projects in the United States during the 1930s, and of course, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, 1937. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the terms “issues oriented” and “activist” will be used in its place.

²¹ *ARTODAY*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Primarily this is a reference to the cultural issues affecting Westernized nations, but due to the broad spectrum of postmodern art that specifically addresses problems affecting non-industrialized and Third World countries, such as famine, civil war and the international sex trade, the term will not be limited to Western culture.

current events and/or social critique composes the entire content of the piece.²⁴

Donald Kuspit and Robert Rosenblum offer strong criticism of “Political” and issue-oriented postmodern art; their views will be examined later in this chapter.

The increase in “Political” or activist art reflects a shift in the focus of postmodern theory, which, in its earlier developments, was interested in the examination of art as a system of language or communication and was concerned with art’s relation to and function in popular culture. As the era progressed, postmodern theory became primarily concerned with cultural theory and issues of cultural relevance. It is highly likely that this focal shift in postmodern art theory occurred because so many contemporary artists were addressing political and societal issues affecting specific nations or ethnic and cultural groups.²⁵ Susie Gablik explains that in the perception of many of the artists of her generation (those who witnessed the transition between the ideals of the modern and the postmodern eras),

Modernism, which had such good beginnings, was losing its bite. Overturning conventions had become routine. The avant-garde reduced to dulled values and stereotyped effects [...] In the problematic cultural ambiance in which [Gablik] was living, modernism had suffered a certain moral lapse. Its spiritual authority had been lost to the tyranny of economic self-seeking.²⁶

²⁴ The work of the following artists provide strong examples of this practice: Mel Chin, Judy Baca, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, James Luna, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Carolee Schneemann, David Wojnarowicz and Derek Jarman. For further information and illustrations see Weintraub, 45-50 (Chin), 97-102 (Luna), 109-116 (Gonzalez-Torres), 165-170 (Schneemann). See Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 246-249 (Wojnarowicz and Jarman). Examples of past and current works by Baca and Ukeles are available online at the following URLs: <http://www.judybaca.com> and <http://www.sparcmurals.org/jb.html> (Baca) and <http://www.felmangallery.com> (Ukeles).

²⁵ This trend occurs even in works by artists who have had little or no personal experience with the issues addressed in the content of their art and those who do not belong to the culture or group represented by or as the subject.

²⁶ S. Gablik, “The Unmaking of Modernism (Art for art’s sake is over. Make way for the new activist aesthetic)” *New Planet* (November-December, 1990), 33.

Confronted by the fact that the social goals of the modern avant-garde had failed to effect any significant or lasting change, postmodern artists took up the cause of social reformation. But rather than proposing new paths to spiritual enlightenment or creating universally understandable forms of artistic expression (the approach taken by numerous avant-garde artists and movements of the modern era), the postmodernists presented the problems but left the solutions open for the viewer's contemplation.

Andreas Huyssen explains that postmodernism is an "expression of the contemporary crisis of culture rather than the promised transcendence toward cultural rejuvenation."²⁷ Like Gablik, Huyssen recognizes the disenchantment experienced by postmodern artists in light of the dissolution of modernism and its avant-gardes. Huyssen suggests that much of the postmodernist inquiry into the "failure" of modern avant-garde activity (in terms of effecting social change), and the subsequent exploration into new ways of creating socially responsible art, was motivated by both a sense of nostalgia toward the ideals of the modern avant-garde movements and a search for tradition.²⁸ He explains that "postmodernism itself can [...] be described as a search for a viable modern tradition [...] outside of the canon of classical modernism."²⁹ In other words, the postmodern inclination towards identity-based and politically and socially active art are symptomatic of greater need to reconnect with traditions and histories which were seemingly omitted in modern art and culture. Huyssen believes that

²⁷ *After the Great Divide*, 169-170.

postmodernism developed out of a “cultural and political identity crisis” which began to appear around the decade of the 1970s.³⁰ In his view, Westernized art and culture of the postmodern era are similarly

confronted with a multi-faceted and diverse search for the past (often for an alternative past) which, in many of its more radical manifestations, questions the fundamental orientation of Western societies toward future growth and toward unlimited progress. This questioning of history and tradition, as it informs for instance the feminist interest in women’s history and the ecological search for alternatives in our relationship with nature, [...] reflect [...] the [postmodern] disposition toward history and tradition.³¹

Perhaps it was this perceived lack of cultural and political identity that created a cultural climate in which art became the chosen vehicle to explore these issues. In any case, from the 1970s forward, the postmodern art world saw a continual rotation of artists who were prompted to express their political and cultural views to the mass public through bold and aggressive visual presentations and performances.

The art of the postmodern era is characterized by a “politically correct” and culturally sensitive relationship toward society and an expanded audience whose multiple perspectives are brought to bear upon both the creative process and the viewing experience. Where modern artists promoted the destruction of the standing aesthetic standards and boundaries (by creating new art styles and exploring unconventional processes), and produced art objects which were usually experienced and only fully understood by an elite and enlightened few;

²⁸Ibid., 162.

²⁹ Ibid., 169.

³⁰ Ibid., 171.

³¹ Ibid., 171-172.

postmodern artists have sought to reconstruct a set of artistic standards which evoke multiple aesthetic traditions and reflect the contemporary and historic iconography of a whole, yet recognizably diverse, society.³² The subsequent developments of issue-oriented and activist art are a reflection of those issues central to contemporary Western culture and which are either socially unifying or politically divisive. For example, the issue of cultural identity continues to be an important subject in recent contemporary art, but the artists who currently address it tend to be less subjective than their predecessors were and instead direct their artistic efforts toward the depiction of communal cultural experiences and traditions. Such is the case with Zhang Huan and Juan Sanchez, both of whose work incorporates cultural references as a means of critiquing social politics in response to their own cultural and environmental experiences. Zhang Huan evokes Zen Buddhist rituals and Eastern practices to examine the tears in the spiritual fabric of contemporary society in China and America,³³ while Sanchez's mixed-media collages employ images, ephemera and folk art traditions of New York's Puerto Rican culture (including his own Puerto Rican heritage).³⁴

As issues surrounding individual and cultural identities became more integrated into the contemporary social vocabulary, many artists inclined toward presenting socially and/or politically charged content began exploring more global and humanitarian causes as source material for their art. Examples of this

³² Bell, "Modernism and Capitalism" (1978), in Harrison and Wood, 998.

³³ M. Borysevicz, "Zhang Huan at Deitch Projects," review. *Art in America*, No. 10, (October 2000), 169-170. See page 169 for an illustration of Huan's work.

approach can be seen in the work of Tim Thyzel, whose pieces from the mid-to-late 1990s focus on issues relating to the urban environment and the individual's relationship to it, dependence upon it, and responsibility for it,³⁵ or Rob de Mar's, sculptural pieces like *Stone Wall and Dirt Road*, 2000³⁶ in which the artist employs the miniature, diorama-like treatment of his landscape which has come to characterize his work, in an eloquent statement regarding the human relationship to nature. In a review of de Mar's work (including *Stone Wall and Dirt Road*) at P.S. 122 gallery in New York, *Art in America* critic Janet Koplos describes his sculptures as provoking "a certain questioning of our grasp of the reality of our place in nature." She goes on to say that "they suggest knowing parodies of our self-contented obliviousness to the environmental costs of modern lifestyles and measure the romanticizing fostered by distance from the messy truth of nature."³⁷

Within the contemporary art world a handful of contemporary issue-oriented artists (de Mar and Thyzel among them) chose not to assume an aggressive political tone in addressing their concerns. However, in many instances, contemporary art becomes the message board by which such concerns are addressed and often the work of art digresses into propaganda, functioning as little more than a proverbial soap box for the artist to spout his or her politics or

³⁴ J. Goodman, "Juan Sanchez at P.S. 1," review. *Art in America*, No.11, (November 2000), 171-172. See page 172 for an illustration of Sanchez's work.

³⁵ J. Hill, "Tim Thyzel at Cynthia Broan," review. *Art in America*, No. 10, (October 2000), 171-172. See page 172 for an illustration of Thyzel's work.

³⁶ Rob de Mar, *Stone Wall and Dirt Road*, 2000. Mixed mediums, 24 x 82 x 10 in. For an illustration of this piece see *Art in America*, No. 11 (November 2000), 168.

³⁷ J. Koplos, "Rob de Mar at P.S. 122," review. *Art in America*, No. 11 (November 2000), 168.

activist agenda.³⁸ A prime example of this tendency can be seen in the installation pieces by the artist Muntadas, who devotes much of his work to the cause of exposing the increasingly exploitative role of the media and the press and its effects on contemporary culture. His pieces utilize video and digital media installations to launch an antagonistic attack upon television and the news media. Art critic Michael Rush observes that Muntadas's installations serve as "platforms to launch his own political agenda, which includes exposing the hypocrisies that can move quickly from corporate boardrooms to media outlets."³⁹

Since the decline of the pluralistic art styles of the late 1970s and 1980s, it has become increasingly difficult to find exhibitions of postmodern art in which the artists represented do not make at least a marginal claim to some socially or politically based message, critique, or agenda.⁴⁰ Donald Kuspit believes that the main problem with this propagandist element that has emerged out of much of the content-laden, issue-oriented and activist art of the contemporary era, is that the art and the message become ineffectual and the intended impact is lost. He explains that the postmodern theoretical tendency to rely on language has removed any sense of authentic experience and ultimately desensitizes the viewer

³⁸ For examples of overtly activist content and subject see works by the following artists: David Wojnarowicz (Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 246-47), Barbara Kruger, (Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 521) Felix Gonzalez-Torres, (Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, 109-116), Jenny Holzer (Papadakis, et al., *New Art*, 169, 171-175) and the collaborative efforts of the art group Gran Fury (Papadakis, et al., *New Art*, 167).

³⁹ M. Rush, "Muntadas at Kent," review. *Art in America*, No. 11 (November 2000), 169.

⁴⁰ Coincidentally, all of the above mentioned issue-oriented artists were reviewed in *Art in America* from October and November 2000. It should also be noted that issue-oriented art and exhibitions comprised close to half of the reviews in both the issues cited.

rather than educates them.⁴¹ In Kuspit's view "the postmodern artist [...] has no meaning of his or her own"⁴² — no authentic experiential meaning to communicate."⁴³ Furthermore, he goes on to state that "the postmodern artist is no longer able to count on language to generate experiential meaning, to cover for his or her 'inexperience' — to disguise the fact that he or she has nothing to say that is experientially relevant."⁴⁴ In other words, the postmodern artists with activist agendas use "politically correct" language and familiar media formats⁴⁵ to communicate an issue or message but cannot relay the importance of the meaning or connect it with experiences readily available to the viewer.

Robert Rosenblum offers a different view regarding the effectiveness of "Political" or activist art, stating,

I have never thought that any art, certainly not any art of the last ten or twenty years that has had a political position has been in any way politically effective. Basically, the audience is much too narrow. You can't have politically effective art because only the art world sees it. Even if, within that world, it is at first shocking or makes people twinge with embarrassment at their values or lack of them, you soon get immune to that.⁴⁶

Whether activist art becomes more effective when the artist attempts to convey a sense of experiential meaning through an artistic dialogue as opposed to simply addressing and presenting social issues in an art context, is debatable. However, in recent years, many postmodern artists (perhaps the majority) have transformed

⁴¹ "Sincere Cynicism," 65,

⁴² This line of thought is concurrent with the postmodern theoretical premise that art has no intrinsic meaning and is a byproduct of cultural information.

⁴³ "Sincere Cynicism," 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For example, billboards, LED signs, television and computer monitors, video and the Internet.

⁴⁶ "In Search of the New," in *New Art*, 67.

the work of art into a vehicle for the communication of social and political messages.

Out of the precedent set by early postmodern artists and the issues that informed their artistic content and creative processes, issue-oriented and activist art has become a dominant trend in contemporary art. The artistic climate created by some of the major developments of postmodern art has generated many of the conditions that typically prompt avant-garde activity, the presence of a dominant artistic aesthetic, style or trend being the first criteria for an avant-gardist reaction. However, there are other factors to consider prior to announcing possibility of a new avant-garde undercurrent emerging in the contemporary art world.

Updating Avant-garde Ideals for a Postmodern Culture

The primary obstacle encountered when raising the question of a postmodern avant-garde is that postmodern theory denies the potential of the existence of an avant-garde in postmodern art. This theoretical pronouncement is based on the declaration of the end of modernism and the subsequent “death” of the avant-garde. Many of the postmodernist art historians and critics including, Jean François Lyotard, Rosalind Krauss and Robert Rosenblum, approached modernism and avant-gardism as mutually exclusive theories. Therefore, the theoretical attack on modernism necessarily required the dissolution of the modern manifestations of avant-garde artistic activity. However, it has been

shown that although avant-garde ideology was integral to many of the developments of modern art and many of the concepts governing these two theories are interrelated, they are not the same and should not be automatically combined under a single dogma. The theories of modernism are meant to define the aesthetic standards for the art of a certain historical period, whereas avant-gardism is an ideological or philosophical stance taken by some artists.

Another problem with the so-called “death” of the avant-garde with the advent of postmodernism is that modernist avant-garde art continued to exert itself into the 1980s (well after the establishment of the postmodern era and the development of postmodern theory). In examining the overlapping of avant-garde activity with the beginning of the postmodern period, Donald Kuspit proposes that the avant-garde art of the 1980s cannot be viewed as entirely modern because it reflects the shift toward the ideas of postmodernism.⁴⁷ Kuspit maintains that,

[T]he ‘80s avant-garde art was less a means critical opposition to the social façade than part of it. It tended to betray the deeper level of experiencing [which characterizes avant-garde art for Kuspit] rather than evoke it [...] In the ‘80s the avant-garde became another “ism”— an orthodoxy and a dogma.⁴⁸

This view may explain how the postmodern critics were able to justify the claim that the reign of the modernist aesthetic (and with it modern avant-garde art) had come to an end even in the midst of the Neo-Geo, Neo-Expressionist and Post-

⁴⁷ Specifically the reflection of the capitalist consumer culture as seen in Pop art and Neo-geo, and the return to the content, figuration and the traditions of art history seen in Neo-Expressionist art.

⁴⁸ “Sincere Cynicism,” 62.

Pop⁴⁹ movements, but it does not account for the error of relegating avant-garde artistic activity to the modern era.

In addition to the failure to distinguish between the theories of modern art and the theory of the avant-garde, several of the theoretical assumptions made by postmodernist scholars and critics are difficult to substantiate. For example, the evidence of a dominant art current occurring in the postmodern art world suggests that postmodern art critics were not unsuccessful in predicting the developments of the art styles and trends.⁵⁰ Upon further examination, postmodern theory reveals another contradiction regarding the postmodern denial of a potential avant-garde, in that postmodern art theory specifically advocates that anything is stylistically and conceptually viable within the realm of contemporary art, therefore the possibility of a postmodern avant-garde cannot theoretically be ruled out. Finally, postmodern art theory offers no concrete reason that would preclude avant-garde activity from developing and thriving within the framework of a postmodern culture. In addressing the postmodernist aversion to avant-gardism and the denial of the potential for avant-garde art in the postmodern era, Andreas Huyssen offers the following rebuttal:

[T]he tradition of avantgardism [sic], if stripped of its universalizing and normative claims, leaves us with a precious heritage of artistic and literary materials, practices, and strategies which still inform many of today's most interesting writers and artists. Preserving elements of the avantgardist

⁴⁹ The Post-Pop style will be examined briefly in Chapter 6.

⁵⁰ Because of the pluralist nature of early postmodern art it was assumed that a dominant style or trend could not emerge. It should be noted, however, that art theory rarely coincides with the actual practice and development of the art itself. Instead, theory and criticism tend to illuminate a style or movement with the aid of hindsight or propose a new style or aesthetic to complement a idea or philosophy about art.

tradition is not at all incompatible with the recuperation and reconstitution of history and of story which we have witnessed in the 1970s.⁵¹

In an attempt to make a connection between postmodern art and avant-gardist activity, Charles Jencks examines some of the fundamental ideas of the modern avant-gardes and those of postmodernism. In his essay, "Post-Avant-Garde"(1991), Jencks suggests that the views held by each group concerning the role that art plays in the development of culture are not entirely dissimilar. He explains,

All of the avant-gardes of the past believed that humanity was going somewhere, and it was their joy and duty to discover the new and see that people arrived there on time; the post-avant-garde believes that humanity is going in several different directions at once, some of them more valid than others, and it is their duty to be guides and critics.⁵²

Here, Jencks points out that although the approach toward humanity differs, the basic idea that the art and artist function in an educational capacity and the goal to bring culture to a new level of understanding remains intact. He goes on to propose that were a new avant-garde to emerge, it would necessarily be different from those that came before it (in the modern era), due to the new postmodern perspective on the relationship between art, society, and humanity as a whole.⁵³ So, what would constitute a postmodern avant-garde art movement and how might avant-garde activity resonate in a postmodern culture?

Before engaging in any discussion of avant-garde activity within the postmodern art world, a new (or at least updated) set of artistic characteristics that

⁵¹ *After the Great Divide*, 173-174.

⁵² Jencks uses the term "post-avant-garde" to reference postmodern art and artists. C. Jencks, "The Post-Avant-Garde," in *New Art* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 111.

encompass the central themes of both the theories of avant-gardism and of Postmodernism should be proposed. The defining characteristics of a new avant-garde for a postmodern culture should include both those qualities that are essential to avant-garde ideology and elements of the postmodern sensibility regarding the relationship of art to culture. A postmodern avant-garde must continue to present aesthetic alternatives to the prevailing styles and tradition in contemporary art, either through experimentation and innovation or by revisiting previous styles, practices, and concepts and presenting them in new ways. However, Postmodern avant-garde art should not be viewed as a catalyst for cultural change; in fact, all traces of the utopian ideals, which informed modern avant-garde thinking, should be eliminated.⁵⁴ Similarly, the art of a new avant-garde cannot serve as a platform for (or be subjugated to) any social or political agenda because it would fail to distinguish itself from the dominant, activist styles. However, a certain degree of social critique would reflect a tendency common to both avant-gardism and postmodernism.

In keeping with the postmodern concept that art functions within culture (as opposed to outside of culture), postmodern avant-garde art would continue to be a commentary on culture. However, the culture or society reflected would not be that of the mainstream, rather (in true avant-garde fashion) the art of a postmodern

⁵³ Jencks in Papadakis, et al., 111.

⁵⁴ This type of ideology should be avoided for three main reasons: first because modernism's failure to realize its utopian ideals was part of the disillusionment that led deconstruction of modernist theory and second, because this stance contradicts the postmodern understanding of art's function within culture. Finally, invoking a philosophical view tied to so many of the modern avant-garde art movements increases the risk of repeating a previous avant-garde incarnation.

avant-garde would most likely reflect a counter-culture or fringe group that deviates or stands apart from the mainstream or popular culture. This way the postmodern emphasis on diversity could be maintained while still placing avant-garde art and artists in social groups that remain distinct from the opposed mainstream culture and dominant aesthetic. Finally, a postmodern avant-garde should constantly question all accepted societal and historical standards and challenge any and all aesthetic norms and conceptual or stylistic boundaries.

Now that a possible outline for the indicative qualities of a postmodern avant-garde has been established, one last question remains: has a reactionary development in contemporary art (one that represents the antithesis of activist art) emerged, and if so, does that reaction and the resulting artwork express both the ideas of postmodernism and avant-gardism?

Chapter 6

Low Brow Art

The issue-oriented and activist art movements that developed out of early postmodern pluralism have come to constitute a dominant trend within contemporary art. However, the affinity for content-heavy artwork, which emphasizes the statement or message expressed within the piece rather than the visual and stylistic components of it, does not envelop every artistic manifestation to emerge from the early contemporary period. A handful of styles evolved from the aesthetics of Pop art (and its precursor, Surrealism) and the late modern avant-garde schools. Some styles marked a clear return to abstraction and an objective handling of the subject in both painting and sculpture,¹ but others, including New Image Painting and Post-Pop, extracted elements from Graffiti and Graphic art and combined them with reinterpretations of Expressionistic and Surrealist vocabularies.² Each approach presents an alternative to the issue-oriented contemporary art permeating the mainstream. Collectively, these styles reflect a tendency toward the continuation of formalism and figuration.³ Artworks

¹ Most notably in Neo-Abstraction, which was more of a collective label for contemporary abstract artists than a cohesive style.

² For further information on New Image Art, see Sandler, 194-213. Post-Pop will be briefly discussed in the next section of this chapter.

³ The artist most frequently credited with instigating the return to figuration in contemporary painting is Philip Guston. Having risen to prominence working in the Abstract Expressionist style, the reinstatement of figurative imagery in his work in 1970 alienated him for the acclaim of the mainstream art world, however, his break with abstraction served as a catalyst in the development of New Image Art. It is also relevant to mention that Guston's figurative style quotes the aesthetic and narrative format of comic strips and cartoons, particularly those dating from the 1930s, such as Krazy Kat. It should also be noted that although Guston was a prominent and successful member of the New York School, he was originally from

executed in this vein tend to subdue content (partially in reaction to the growing predominance of issue-laden content), in some cases the content is suppressed to such an extent that only general or vague pop cultural associations can be inferred. Among the styles of postmodern art which avoid overt content and promote aesthetically driven art, the Post-Pop school is the one most closely aligned with the avant-gardist tradition, following an art historical lineage from Duchamp forward to Pop and Graffiti. Interestingly, the aesthetic of Post-Pop art also reflects a reciprocal influence between the artists of the Post-Pop school and a small group of artists working in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, who created a new style of art dubbed “Low Brow.”

Post-Pop

The style that has come to be called Post-Pop combines aesthetic characteristics from both Pop art and Graffiti art with a Surrealist treatment of appropriated cartoon imagery. The artists who would develop the Post-Pop style were initially referred to as Cartoonists due to their affiliation with the Graffiti movement. Emerging concurrently within the East Village art scene, the cartoon aesthetic was ignited by the freestyle technique of Graffiti and the hot palette offered by the medium of spray paint. Although many of the works were executed in the streets and subways, the small group of cartoon artists — Keith Haring, Kenny Scarf, and Peter Saul — were distinguished from the Graffiti

California and much of his imagery reflects his early experience of the cultural environment in Los Angeles

artists (at least within the East Village art community) because they did not participate in “tagging” or “bombing” per se.⁴ Furthermore, these artists had all benefited from an art education, which informed the arrangement of their figurative compositions and lent a formal quality to the pieces that was not generally present in early works of Graffiti art. The most successful young artists to come out of the New York Graffiti movement were those who brought artistic training to bear on their work, as was the case with Haring, Scharf and Basquiat.⁵

The Cartoonists created their own unique pictorial language by combining the calligraphic gesture of Graffiti with a Pop art and cartoon vocabulary. While Haring rendered his simple, heavily outlined figures in an illustrative style reminiscent of commercial comics and cartoons, the art of both Kenny Scharf and Peter Saul depict reinterpreted presentations of cartoon imagery and popular animation characters from the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. Through their colorful, energetic, and whimsical portrayal of fantastic environments populated by the familiar creatures and characters from television cartoons and animated films (including many of those made famous by Hanna Barbera and Disney), works by these artists reveal an intricate relationship between popular culture, entertainment, and contemporary art. Of the two, Peter Saul remains more faithful to the Pop sensibility. His compositions usually involve a humorous presentation of iconic cartoon characters and evoke the irony commonly

during the 1930s and 1940s. Sandler, 196-198.

⁴ Lucie-Smith, *ARTODAY*, 308.

⁵ Although Basquiat had not received any formal art education, he possessed a strong command of art history and often drew upon it within his own work. Sandler, 475-76.

associated with the original Pop style. For example, in one of his better known pieces, Saul depicts multiple Donald Ducks viewed from several angles meant to suggest the figure at various stages of movement (much like the still images of animation cells or cartoon “flip books”), juxtaposed with short flights of bright yellow stairs. Written in block lettering at the bottom left hand corner of the canvas is the title of the piece, *Donald Duck Descending a Staircase*, confirming Saul’s intention to playfully quote Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912.⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith describes the characteristics typical of Saul’s work as satirizing “Disney cartoons (treated as the basis for a visual language ‘everyone’ will understand), in its narrative thrust, and finally in its use of hot, glowing colour.”⁷

Kenny Scharf rose to prominence along with Haring, and to a lesser extent Saul, in the early 1980s as one of the New York Graffiti artists, although he was only briefly associated with the movement. Originally from California, Scharf migrated to New York City in 1978, to attend the School of Visual Arts.⁸ He quickly immersed himself within the art student community and became an active participant in the Punk Rock and New Wave music scene of the East Village, where he, like his fellow students, was given the opportunity to interact with the Street and Graffiti artists. Scharf was attracted to the public art concept

⁶ For an illustration of Saul’s *Donald Duck Descending a Staircase*, 1979 see Varnadoe and Gopnik, 383.

⁷ *ARTODAY*, 337.

⁸ Scharf met Haring at the School of Visual Arts. The two later became roommates and, as result of Haring’s encouragement, Scharf participated in the New York/New Wave Show. In fact, it was Haring who introduced Scharf’s work to gallery owner Tony Shafrazi; the dealer subsequently launched Scharf’s career

demonstrated by the graffitiists' and became adept at handling spray paint as a medium through his acquaintance with the movement. In comparing Kenny Scharf's early works on canvas to works by Graffiti artists, Edward Lucie-Smith has observed that Scharf's "bulging, writhing forms have a great deal in common with the fanciful distortions which the graffitiists' impose on lettering."⁹

However, the artist maintains that he "always felt very separate from the Graffiti artists,"¹⁰ largely because he did not utilize words or text as part of his artistic expression, nor did he participate in the tagging and bombing of public spaces. Stylistically his early compositions were more closely aligned with the aesthetic of the underground cartoons and comics of the period,¹¹ than with the graffiti murals. While admittedly impressed by the Graffiti artists, from the beginning Scharf's works reflected a variety of other influences, such as psychedelic art, Surrealism (particularly works by Magritte and Dalí), Hieronymous Bosch, and the early works of Robert Williams, a pioneer of the Low Brow style.¹²

Although Scharf, like Haring, is commonly associated with Graffiti art, he is more accurately categorized as a Cartoonist. Scharf draws much of the inspiration for his pieces from the animated world of children's cartoons, such as

and continues to represent him. "Kenny Scharf: Riding the New Wave." Interview with Robert Williams in *Juxtapoz* no. 37, March/April 2002, 53.

⁹ *ARTODAY*, 305.

¹⁰ Scharf quoted in "Kenny Scharf: Riding the New Wave." Interview with Robert Williams in *Juxtapoz* no. 37, March/April 2002, 53.

¹¹ Scharf cites the ongoing influence of the following cartoonists: R. Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, Basil Wolverton and "Big Daddy" Ed Roth (the artist who created "Rat Fink"). "Kenny Scharf: Riding the New Wave," 54, 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54, 72, 74.

The Jetsons and *The Flintstones*.¹³ Scharf himself recalls that very early on he was creating large canvases populated with “images of Hanna Barbera with insect bodies and snakes and things.”¹⁴ Scharf’s mature style is generally described as invoking the lush visual imagery and “hot” color palette of the classic celluloid cartoon aesthetic.¹⁵ Perhaps one the most salient examples of Scharf’s style is a large work on canvas (approximately 10 x 17 feet) entitled *When the Worlds Collide*, 1984 [fig. 12]. Described by art critic Gerald Marzorati as a fusion of “the Saturday- morning innocence, the phone-doodle psychedelia, the magpie delirium, the electric chromic dazzle...”,¹⁶ this piece demonstrates Scharf’s whimsical style and his characteristic *horror vacui* treatment of the surface, filling every inch of the pictorial space with the surreal elements of an imagined landscape environment, inhabited by swirling, floating psychedelic forms and fantastic amoebic creatures.

Scharf believes that art and fun can and should co-exist. His work is intended as visual entertainment and nothing more. In both his choice of subject and content, Scharf tends to avoid even the most subtle commentary on any issues relating to art and/or contemporary culture. This differs greatly from the subject matter and content being presented in the issue-oriented art that was gaining momentum during the same period when the Graffitists’ and Cartoonists’ were gaining recognition. Of the three prominent Cartoonists—Saul, Scharf, and

¹³ Sandler, 472.

¹⁴ “Kenny Scharf: Riding the New Wave,” 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶ G. Marzorati, “Kenny Scharf’s Fun-House Big Bang.” *ARTnews*, September 1985, 73-81.

Haring—only Haring addressed contemporary issues in his work. This fact may account for the classification of Saul and Scharf as “Post-Pop” artists, a term that more accurately describes the objective, non-analytic approach to their appropriated subjects and the kitsch quality of their imagery. In keeping with the ideology of Pop and the late avant-garde movements, Scharf explains his philosophy, as well as the general intention of Post-Pop art, as the belief that,

[A]rt should be part of everyday life and everyone’s life and not just something separate devoted to a gallery or museum wall. I wish more people would get excited about all art’s potential to bring us out of the mundane, boring world that we all just accept and don’t reach beyond.¹⁷

The concept that art should be accessible and available to everyone reiterates the motivation behind the original Pop art movement. But, the more important content of this quote lies in Scharf’s brief description of the Post-Pop artists’ understanding of art’s function as a vehicle by which the artist and the viewer can be moved out of or above the mundane reality of the everyday.¹⁸ This idea is very reminiscent of the belief widely held among the participants in the early modern avant-garde movements, that art can move society forward or elevate humanity to a higher state of consciousness and spirituality, and may suggest the continuing presence of avant-gardist tendencies within a postmodern art movement. Scharf’s summary of the Post-Pop philosophy also reflects an attitude shared by the previously mentioned Robert Williams, an artist whose style not only influenced

¹⁷ Scharf quoted in “Kenny Scharf: Riding the New Wave,” 72.

¹⁸ It should be noted that this concept has its origins in 19th century Romanticism.

the development of Scharf's aesthetic, but would become the foundation for a new school of artists who adopted the term "low brow" as their title.

Robert Williams: Low Brow Pioneer

Low Brow art emerged in the late 1970s as a reaction to the intellectually based art of Conceptualism and the politically based art of Feminism and Activism. Like the Graffiti and Cartoon artists, the painters and draftsmen who would create the Low Brow style were fueled by the anti-authority message of the Punk Rock movement and assumed a general resistance to the mainstream culture and its art aesthetic. The style developed out of the fusion of a variety of influences including Dada, Surrealism, Tiki art,¹⁹ and the illustrations of Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, and Ed Roth.

Discussing the formation of the Low Brow school, Billy Shire, the proprietor of the La Luz de Jesus gallery in Los Angeles²⁰ and an early supporter of Low Brow art, recalls that the founding members of the Low Brow style (Robert Williams among them), came out of a larger group of "young artists involved with the Punk Rock culture of the 1970s, who were [creating] illustrations and cartoons."²¹ Shire explains that the impetus behind the development of Low Brow came from a general sense of dissatisfaction with the Minimal and

¹⁹ Tiki is a style of tribal art created by the native cultures of Polynesia, Hawaii and the Pacific Islands.

²⁰ Opened in 1986, La Luz de Jesus was the first gallery to show Low Brow art. Shire wanted to challenge the mainstream gallery system and provide a venue for Low Brow and Post-Pop artists (who were, at that time, excluded from the mainstream gallery establishment). Interview with Billy Shire, owner, La Luz de Jesus Gallery, February 2, 2002.

²¹ Interview with Billy Shire, owner La Luz de Jesus, February 2, 2002.

Conceptual art movements, which as he describes, were viewed by the Punk Rock and Low Brow artists as “vapid and hollow.”²² The original Low Brow artists, several of whom were trained in the fine arts or came from an art educated background, were particularly distressed by the absence of figuration and the overall lack of painting and drawing in Minimal and Conceptual art. In addition, the mainstream art dealers, who were supporting and promoting these styles of contemporary art, were not interested in showcasing works executed in traditional media and styles, therefore artists working in this vein were relegated to the underground scene.

One such sequestered artist was a young underground cartoonist named Robert Williams. Largely self-taught, Robert Williams came to California in 1963, seeking training as an illustrator. After briefly attending Los Angeles City College, Williams left school in 1964 and went to work with the cartoonist and illustrator Ed “Big Daddy” Roth.²³ Although he worked as an illustrator for much of the latter half of the 1960s, Williams maintains that he “always painted.”²⁴ His early works on canvas are admittedly Surrealist (he cites Surrealism, Dada, and Cubism as early influences)²⁵ however, Roth’s “psychotic”²⁶ images of monster-like creatures in “souped up” cars made a strong impression on him and eventually began to inform his own visual imagery. Williams’s relationship with

²² Ibid.

²³ Roth gained notoriety among the Hot Rod and Biker culture of the 1960s and 1970s as the creator of “Rat Fink,” a grotesque rodent who races Hot Rod cars. For examples of Roth’s imagery see the following URLs: <http://www.edroth.com> and/or <http://www.ratfink.org>.

²⁴ Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

²⁵ Ibid.

Roth and his reintroduction²⁷ to the world of underground comics would have a profound affect on the further development of his style.

Williams discovered early on that his technical skills and pictorial style were generally frowned upon by the mainstream art world. In fact, the more he honed his technical ability (evolving into a highly accomplished draftsman), the more apparent it became that these skills were not being appreciated by the art establishment of the early 1970s, when Minimalism was at its height. Excluded from the mainstream art community, Williams sought out aesthetically like-minded artists (like Roth) and eventually became involved with a small group of trained artists who had launched an underground, “adult,” comic book called *Zap*. Contributors to *Zap* comics included, among others, Robert Crumb, creator of “Fritz the Cat,” and S. Clay Wilson, who Williams credits with the return of the “horror vacua” technique in graphic drawing.²⁸ Inspired by the work of his colleagues at *Zap*, Williams combined a comic book aesthetic with his previous influences from the traditions of art history (specifically the techniques of the Renaissance masters and the work of Dalí and the Surrealists),²⁹ to create his mature, signature Low Brow style.

According to curator Walter Hopps, the work of Robert Williams brings together “Two realms of popular culture poised on the line between high and low

²⁶ Robert Williams’s description of Ed Roth’s aesthetic. Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

²⁷ Williams was a fan of the EC comics as a youth and was later impressed by its offshoot, *Mad Magazine*. Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

²⁸ Robert Williams, “A Return to Too Many Jujubees,” *Juxtapoz* no. 30, January/February 2001, 4.

²⁹ Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

art [...]: cartoon imagery and the abstract plastic forms of custom car culture.”³⁰

Billy Shire has described Williams’s style as a mixture of images from pop culture (particularly from the decades of the 1950s, and ‘60s), reinterpreted into new narratives.³¹ Williams’s paintings are characterized by an all-over treatment of the pictorial space created through crowded compositions packed with imagery, and multiple views within a single scene. Additional or complementary scenes within an image are often displayed in boxes or windows that share a similar function as the conventions of split views and thought bubbles employed in comic book illustration. For example, in the piece titled *The Notion That Lurks Between Two Adjacent Thoughts* 1998 [fig. 13], an abstract pattern forms the background behind two red squares angled across the top of the canvas that contain the narrative imagery. Read from left to right, the first square depicts a garnished grilled cheese sandwich on a plate. The second square depicts a male figure pulling the sandwich apart, exposing a web of cheese stretching between the two pieces of bread. Extending out from the square at the top right of the canvas, is a blue sunburst shape that dominates the front of the picture plane. Within this window, the open sandwich becomes the figure’s head and the content reveals his subconscious fantasy. Here, the sticky web has been transformed into seminal fluid, which has entangled a bound and gagged nude woman between the two pieces of bread, implying that the hunger is actually one of lust and sex. Ultimately, it is the woman, not the sandwich, which the man wants to devour.

³⁰Walter Hopps on Robert Williams, excerpts from R. Williams, *Malicious Resplendence*, 1998. Reprinted

Williams explains that his imagery is intentionally provocative and acknowledges that his “comic aesthetic is distasteful in [mainstream] contemporary art.”³² Walter Hopps observes that while

many contemporary critics [have] shied away from the seeming vulgarity of much of his representation and the aggressiveness of his narrative thrust, his brilliant and provocative use of spoofing and vulgar humor is rare in the visual arts. His free wheeling mix of the low imagery of comic book art and the complex visualizations of the classic Surrealist dreamscape constitutes a remarkable fusion.³³

Williams epitomizes this “fusion” of Surrealist influence and the comic book aesthetic in a 1999 piece entitled, *The Day The Big Kahuna Stole Surf City*³⁴ [fig 14]. In this painting, Williams portrays the abduction of a female State of California by a lascivious Tiki God idol, who has whisked this prime piece of real estate off into space. When asked to comment on the 1950s symbolism and the nostalgic quality of much of his imagery, Williams explains his choices as follows:

What I profess to practice is taking imagery that has been neglected for four or five decades and picking up where it left off. In the same way, I’m going back to representation [...] as a way of telling stories. The [narrative] process never really died, it just sidestepped itself in comic books, movie storyboards and stuff like that. When you’re dealing with a cartoon or comic book, you’re dealing with that old pictorial and symbolic language that was sidestepped [during the modern era] by the fine arts.³⁵

in *Juxtapoz* vol.5, no.1 spring, 1998, 64.

³¹ Shire paraphrased. Interview with Billy Shire, February 2, 2002.

³² Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

³³ Walter Hopps on Robert Williams, excerpts from R. Williams, *Malicious Resplendence*, 1998. Reprinted in *Juxtapoz* vol.5, no.1 spring, 1998, 64, 84.

³⁴ Museum catalog title: *The Surf Tiki’s Overture To The Abduction Of The Golden State Geo-Madonna*. Colloquial title: *Thoroughly Stocked On Pacific Fruitcake*.

³⁵ “Best Intentions: New Work by Robert Williams.” Interview with Carlo McCormick, *Juxtapoz* no. 30 January/February 2001, 67.

In addition to resurrecting the pictorial conventions of the art of previous periods, the nostalgic elements in Williams's paintings also serve to evoke a bygone era when women's fashion and cosmetics were the personification of femininity and gender roles were more clearly defined. Williams commonly depicts curvaceous, often seductive female nudes as objects of sexual desire or fantasy for the male figures or characters in his work. This choice of imagery, which prevails throughout the Low Brow style, is decidedly non-feminist³⁶ and politically incorrect. Reacting to the influx of politics in contemporary art and the non-offensive or culturally sensitive trends dictating artistic content from the 1970s onward, Robert Williams admittedly intends to upset the status quo of the high art elite by reuniting the high and the low and affronting the "politically correct thought police."³⁷ Art critic Carlo McCormick notes that as a result, Williams has frequently been in the position of "defending his work to its detractors – those legions of political correctness and cultural higher ground for whom this painter is the epitome of bad art."³⁸ Walter Hopps similarly acknowledges that many critics and viewers dismiss Williams's work due its vulgarity and lack of comfortable subjects. Viewing such easy dismissal as a

³⁶ The term non-feminist should not be confused with anti-feminism. Low Brow artists on the whole do not necessarily support gender inequity or disparage equal rights for women (or any minority group), rather their objectification of the female form is purely aesthetic and meant to celebrate women and female sexuality.

³⁷ Carlo McCormick quoted in "Best Intentions: New Work by Robert Williams." Interview with Carlo McCormick, *Juxtapoz* no. 30 January/February 2001, 61.

³⁸ From McCormick's introduction to "Best Intentions: New Work by Robert Williams." Interview with Carlo McCormick, *Juxtapoz* no. 30 January/February 2001, 59.

mistake, Hopps offers the following interpretation of Williams's choice of subject matter, explaining that,

In an age of dominating political correctness, Williams' frequent reliance on overtly outré subject matter can hinder understanding. His work chronicles a near encyclopedic treatment of societal taboos—from scatology to sadomasochism—often tinged with rending violence. In addition, Williams almost gleefully confronts the most deep-seated fears of adolescence and adulthood, the terrors of psychological disorientation and deterioration, and the threat of both physical and intellectual domination by forces both explicable and supernatural.”³⁹

Williams has observed that unlike your typical middle-class, art-educated audience (those, who as he puts it, “fall victim to political correctness”), his audience comes from

a rather insensitive, brutal, underground, and hot rod crowd that wants to concentrate more on the emotional reaction of the work itself than on caring sensitively what effect it's going to have on a large group of people or what it's relationship to mankind is.⁴⁰

Williams's understanding of his audience and his relationship to it has had a lasting impact on the promotion of the Low Brow style as the artistic representation of the aesthetic of a specific and unique underground counter-culture. Williams's participation in the Hot Rod and Low Brow sub-cultures led to the realization that, much like the modern avant-garde artists, he and his colleagues have created a niche for their work to be enjoyed and consumed by informed viewers whose tastes and ideas are reflected in Low Brow imagery.⁴¹ In the early 1980s, Williams recognized that Low Brow art needed a forum, like the

³⁹Walter Hopps on Robert Williams, excerpts from R. Williams, *Malicious Resplendence*, 1998. Reprinted in *Juxtapoz* vol.5, no.1 spring, 1998, 84.

⁴⁰ Robert Williams quoted in “Best Intentions: New Work by Robert Williams.” Interview with Carlo McCormick, *Juxtapoz* no. 30 January/February 2001, 60-61.

Surrealist *Minotaure*, in which Low Brow artists could present their work, publicize upcoming exhibitions, and advertise Low Brow venues, such as Billy Shire's La Luz de Jesus gallery. Williams went on to found Juxtapoz, a magazine dedicated to showcasing the work of established and up and coming Low Brow artists.⁴² Subsequently, a new generation of young artists was exposed to the lexicon of cartoon imagery and learned the specific vocabulary of the Low Brow style. Walter Hopps comments on Williams's contribution to both the Low Brow art community and to contemporary art on the whole, stating that Williams's artworks embrace the "imagist tradition of the fine arts and his paintings, however wild, hilarious, and vulgar, have become part of the admirable art of our time."⁴³

The Low Brow Style

The Low Brow style is, above all, a reflection of an underground, urban, sub-culture. Underground comics, Pulp imagery from the 1940s and '50s, Punk Rock and "alternative" music, Tattoo art, and the Hot Rod or "Kustom" car culture, all inform the iconography of Low Brow art and the slick, graphic treatment of its images and compositions. While each artist lends his or her own individual subject matter and a variety of graphic techniques to the style, there exists a common aesthetic among their work. The Low Brow aesthetic is

⁴¹Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

⁴² Williams has served as Honorary Chairman at Juxtapoz since 1993. M. McIntosh, ed., *Taboo: The Art of Tiki* (Melbourne: Outre Gallery Press, 1999), 96.

⁴³Walter Hopps on Robert Williams in *Juxtapoz* vol.5, no.1 spring, 1998, 64.

representational, pictorial, and figurative. The imagery tends to have an illustrative quality, and although commercial graphic techniques, including silkscreen and serigraph printing are commonly employed, the practitioners of Low Brow advocate the use of traditional fine art media, such as oil and acrylic paint on canvas or panel. The forms and figures are rendered through simple, economic line work, derivative of cartoons, comics and Tattoo art, but which also finds its precedent in the graphic aesthetic of Pop and Post-Pop art. The style can be characterized as one that contains its own symbolic language, intended for an initiated audience. The images and iconography of Low Brow art lend themselves to the presentation of provocative and taboo subjects and themes. The content tends toward the vulgar and the imagery is often erotic or sexually charged (depictions of voluptuous women and pin-up style nudes are a favorite subject). The intention is to reintroduce all of the elements summarily removed from contemporary high art by way of the Conceptual and activist art movements: traditional media and techniques, formal conventions, and pictorial narrative, not to mention political satire, humor, sex, vice, and decadence.

Narrative Art

Several members of the Low Brow school choose to work in a pictorial and narrative manner that alludes to the traditions of Surrealism and Post-Pop and reflects Robert Williams's continuing influence. The qualities indicative of the Low Brow narrative style—all-over treatment of the pictorial space, unorthodox

juxtapositions, allegorical content, and humor and irony—are perhaps best represented in the work of Bay Area artist Winston Smith. The art of Winston Smith has been described as following the tradition of collage and montage established by the Dadaists and Surrealists.⁴⁴ Often compared to Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, Smith has explained that like his predecessors, his process is random, chaotic, and spontaneous and his montage compositions are created and assembled entirely by hand.⁴⁵ Smith's collage imagery and “allegorical compositions” are meant to be a reflection of modern culture, while intentionally satirizing and frequently criticizing the American capitalist consumer society. He appropriates and re-contextualizes pre-existing images from various popular culture sources, “re-arranging new compositions that surprise or inspire or repulse.”⁴⁶

Winston Smith describes himself as an “essentially self-taught” artist, who discovered an outlet for his creativity within the Punk Rock movement during the late 1970s. He maintains that Punk Rock was a catalyst in his artistic development, stating that, “The phenomenon of the Punk movement was my salvation. Without it, my form of artwork would have had no avenue of expression.”⁴⁷ Smith had difficulty finding work as an illustrator during the 1970s and into the mid-1980s, because collage was not a typical medium in

⁴⁴ Robert Willaims, Frank Kozik and S.Clay Wilson have all made reference to Smith's debt to the work of Duchamp, Ernst and Schwitters. However, Smith's colleagues note that while he continues in the same vein as Dada and Surrealism, he has taken the medium in a new direction. W. Smith, *Art Crime: The Montage Art of Winston Smith*. San Francisco: Last gasp, 1998, (Back cover).

⁴⁵ W. Smith, *Art Crime: The Montage Art of Winston Smith*. San Francisco: Last gasp, 1998, 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

commercial design, which had focussed on graphic drawing, painting and photography.⁴⁸ In addition, Smith was also discouraged by the mainstream high art establishment, because his style, as well as his choice of medium, was generally not considered a viable form of fine art.⁴⁹ Commenting on the exclusion of his work and the work of his fellow Low Brow artists from the mainstream art market, Smith asserts, “In regards [sic] to the ‘Art World’ (Galleries, Museums, Exhibitions, etc.), it seems that the worst thing one can be is an artist.”⁵⁰ So, Winston Smith took it upon himself to embark on a series of collaborations with Punk Rock bands in and around the San Francisco bay area, designing flyers, posters, and ultimately album covers.⁵¹ Through his affiliation with the west coast Punk movement, Smith became familiar with the other early Low Brow artists and was himself soon recognized as a unique talent among his peers. Eventually his work became, at least marginally, accepted within the mainstream art world, due in part to the aesthetic connection between Smith’s pieces and the pioneering works in the collage and montage mediums by early modern avant-garde artists [fig. 15].⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ Smith notes that at the time he started, collage pieces could only be executed by hand (a practice he still proudly follows). Today, however, collage and appropriation art are common place in both advertising and the fine arts, and the artworks are usually digitally created and altered. Smith states (rather begrudgingly and in a true avant-garde spirit), “now that contemporary collage art is almost always done with computers, it’s easy for anyone to whip up a ready-made mish-mash of retro images. Collage, once the domain of malcontent artists who were protesting the 1914 war, has now finally gone mainstream.” *Art Crime*, 46.

⁵⁰ *Art Crime*, 46. This statement also seems to allude to the absence of traditional media and conventional art objects among the more celebrated works of postmodern and mainstream contemporary art.

⁵¹ Winston Smith has designed Album covers for Dead Kennedy’s, Jello Biafra, D.O.A, and Green Day, among others.

⁵² Winston Smith, *Everyone’s A Critic*, 1997. Collage, (dimensions not specified). ©Winston Smith, 1998.

In true avant-garde fashion, Winston Smith's compositions are intended to provoke a strong reaction, whether positive or negative, created by the combination and juxtaposition of his borrowed imagery. Smith's 1982 piece entitled *Child's Play* [fig. 16] provides a characteristic example of Smith's unusual, often jarring combinations of imagery and content. In this work, Smith plays with the expectations of the viewer by presenting a familiar scene of children frolicking in an idyllic country landscape. The imagery is appropriated from an advertisement or perhaps a book jacket circa 1950, which not only dates the image and evokes certain preconceived notions about the subject in the mind of the viewer, but also lends a formulaic element to the reading of the image. The text at the top of the image, which reads "To guard the peace of these sun-swept hills," serves to further enforce both the idealism and confidence associated with the post-war era and the disturbing effect of Smith's redesigned propaganda-like artwork. The children, who would naturally be picking daisies, are in fact, picking up guns that are scattered around the landscape, while the rolling hills just beyond their immediate environment are littered with nuclear warheads. The provocative and disorienting qualities of Smith's montages are as much a product of the artist's non-conformist, rebellious attitude as they are the result of the formal arrangement. Smith explains, "I feel that they [his artworks] work best when they ring a bell in the heart and mind of the beholder. If someone really is

shocked or disapproves of some of my compositions then at least I know I've struck a nerve.”⁵³

Not only does Winston Smith pay homage to the aesthetic concerns and anti-establishment ideology inherent to the early modern avant-garde art movements (particularly Dada), but his imagery and social philosophy also reflect the influence of postmodern thought. Among the Low Brow artists, Smith's content and subject matter are the most overtly opinionated and politicized.⁵⁴ Like many of the early postmodern artists, Smith questions the so-called necessities of consumer culture and the relevance of the information absorbed by much of contemporary society.⁵⁵ He is extremely disillusioned with the media and propaganda driven by and made widely available in our information based culture and economy. Smith believes that “It's time for us to get back to creating our own culture.”⁵⁶

Much of the text Smith incorporates in his collages and montages is reminiscent of the declarative statements put forth in the works of many of the Conceptual artists.⁵⁷ While some of Smith's text based content is decidedly humorous, much is frighteningly poignant. An example of Smith's wit can be illustrated by one small work that depicts the quintessential 1950s family standing over the breakfast table. Dad has junior riding piggyback, while mom looks on;

⁵³ *Art Crime*, 27.

⁵⁴ It should be noted that Winston Smith's politics are highly representative of Punk Rock ideology. For clarification on the politics and socialist agendas of early Punk, see Chapter 3, footnote # 70.

⁵⁵ *Art Crime*, 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ The works of Lawrence Weiner, Sol Le Witt, Jenny Holtzer and Barbara Kruger, for example.

the child is reaching for a human brain that is resting on the table. The surrounding text reads “Where were you when they were passing out the brains?” On the other hand, Smith also uses text to voice strong commentary, as seen in his work *Corporate Lords* 1979.⁵⁸ In this piece, Smith has reworked an illustration (presumably an old advertisement) of two men looking out of their high-rise office window at a view of New York City. Smith altered the original image by clouding the skyline with B-52 bombers dropping munitions on the city. The caption below the image reads, “It is an irony of modern society that sometimes the only way to protect your freedom of speech is to keep your mouth shut.” The combination of Winston Smith’s Dada and Surrealist tendencies with his penchant for calling attention to socially relevant issues within his works of art intimates that Smith might possess the qualities of a postmodern avant-garde artist.

Smith frequently employs another technique that has its roots in both postmodern art and the art of the late modern period: the appropriation of imagery from pre-existing works of art. Smith has incorporated and transformed works by Rembrandt, Holbein, Michelangelo and Vermeer. In addressing his use of appropriated imagery from the realm of high art, or as he describes, those “icons of western art that have long enjoyed a sacred peace undisturbed for centuries,”⁵⁹ Smith states, “A recurrent theme in my work is the abuse of the great masterpieces western civilization.”⁶⁰ Among the works of great art historical

⁵⁸ For illustrations of these works see W. Smith, *Art Crime: The Montage Art of Winston Smith*. Page 26 and 93. ©Winston Smith, 1998

⁵⁹ *Art Crime*, 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

significance that Smith has “abused,” the most instantly recognizable are Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream* 1910, Jan van Eyck’s *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* 1434, and Diego Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* 1656, to which Smith has altered two of the original figures and added a variety of new figures, animals and objects to the composition [fig. 17].⁶¹ Smith explains his use of appropriated imagery and his process, as follows:

I create my compositions by destroying pre-existing compositions. I remove the elements from their original context and recompose them into a new and different format that introduces alternative ideas of a more sincere and, sometimes more sinister nature.⁶²

The definition of sinister aptly characterizes Smith’s artistic style, which he describes as “a cross between Hieronymous Bosch and Norman Rockwell...*In Hell*.”⁶³ However, a sinister or dark quality is present in the majority of Low Brow imagery. The precedent for this fascination with ominous imagery can be found in both the tradition of Surrealism and in the dark and macabre imagery often used in comic books to lend atmosphere to the stories of underground anti-heroes. The comic book aesthetic is cited by several of the Low Brow artists as an early influence on their stylistic development, particularly those who work in a narrative format. Another possible explanation for the prevalence of this type of imagery may be a result of the experience of the Punk Rock sub-culture from which Smith and his colleagues hail. Punk promoted an anarchistic ideology that

⁶¹ Winston Smith, *Only An Animal Could Understand*, 1992. Collage, (dimensions not specified).

©Winston Smith, 1998.

⁶² *Art Crime*, 24.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

supported deviation from the norms of mainstream society and often created an aggressive, harsh environment for its participants. Most likely, the use of dark and edgy imagery and content by Low Brow artists is the result of a combination of all three aesthetic influences (Surrealism, comic books, and Punk), as well as a reflection of each artist's individual interests and tastes.

Graphic Art

In contrast to the dense imagery and sequential presentation of the content seen in the narrative style of Williams and Smith, some Low Brow artists choose to adhere to a highly graphic presentation, in the tradition of Pop art and Graffiti art. This approach is typically characterized by singular, frontal images composed of one or two figures and/or objects, rendered with minimal detail. The style is representative of the aesthetic of Lichtenstein, Warhol and Haring, but also makes reference to the psychedelic and underground poster art that began to surface in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, many of the Low Brow artists have made their living (while at the same time engaging in the self-promotion of their works) by designing posters and cover art for Punk and Rock & Roll bands.⁶⁴

Chris "Coop" Cooper is one of the Low Brow artists who gained initial recognition through poster art, he has since become known for his slick, graphic

⁶⁴ The most notable among the Low Brow poster artists are Winston Smith, Frank Kozik, who has designed posters for everyone from Iggy Pop, Lydia Lunch and the B-52's to the Dwarves, Nirvana and Nine Inch Nails [Kozik is not discussed in this paper. For examples of his work see *Man's Ruin: The Posters & Art of Frank Kozik*, San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1995]; and Coop, who has designed posters for numerous bands including, Sound Garden, White Zombie, Green Day, Rocket from the Crypt, as well as his notorious poster for The Church of Satan in San Francisco.

print style and his racy images of buxom women and “Devil Girls” [figs. 18-20].⁶⁵ Influenced by Punk Rock music, “Kustom” car culture and above all, the work of Robert Williams,⁶⁶ Coop creates images of hedonism, debauchery and vice, executed in his highly individualized graphic Pop cartoon style. There exists a subversive context implicit in Coop’s work by which the artist intends to upset and undermine conventional norms and morality. Although his imagery and subject matter have touched on a variety of themes, including politics, pop culture religion (more specifically religious hypocrisy), the body of his work is composed of sexually provocative, voluptuous, nudes who are generally depicted as both muse and man’s ruin.

Several of Coop’s works make reference to Tiki art and the 1950s American lounge culture that adopted a kitsch version of the Polynesian and Pacific Island aesthetic. In the piece titled *Still Life With Tiki* 1999 [fig. 21], Coop seems to be alluding to the false quality which resulted from the American appropriation of Tiki iconography. In the foreground Coop presents an exotic nude female posed on all fours atop a leopard print carpet in front of a large Tiki God totem. The female figure is strategically placed so that her buttocks and bent leg frame the phallus of the icon. At first glance the image appears to be little more than erotic and campy, but the purple backdrop above the island beauty’s head is falling

⁶⁵ 18) Coop, *Pearls Before Swine* 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 365 in. ©Coop, 1994.

19) Coop, *The Hard Stuff* (sketch), dated between 1980-2002. Graphite on paper. ©Coop, 2002.

20) Coop, *Untitled* (Devil Girl) (sketch), dated between 1980-2002. Graphite on paper. ©Coop, 2002.

⁶⁶ C. McCormick, introduction to “COOP,” interview with Boyd Rice. *Seconds* no. 39, n. d., 81.

down, exposing the lighting and hardware required to create the scene's illusion of authenticity and addressing the construction of contrived realities.

In an article titled "Coop: Straight to Hell," author C.R. Stecyk III observes that "Coop's economic line work and intuitive understanding of narrative devices propel his plays on immorality and homages to American Camp."⁶⁷ However, Coop's deadpan humor and tongue and cheek references to Pulp media, the 1950s American lounge culture and "leisure class" entertainment are often lost on many viewers. But it is his overtly erotic imagery and sexually charged (if not perverse) themes which provoke the most controversy and criticism. Many female members of the viewing audience, feminists in particular, are among the most vocal of his detractors, insisting that his imagery is offensive and degrading towards women. However, these viewers fail to recognize that Coop's female portraits and nudes are intended to glorify and celebrate women and their sexuality not to oppress or exploit it.⁶⁸

Another common criticism of Coop's work is the highly illustrative, cartoon manner in which he renders his imagery. Given the degree of his artistic ability and skill as a draftsman, Coop is frequently asked why he does not abandon the "low" art media of print and graphic design in favor of painting? In response, the artist explains that, although he does produce paintings in acrylic on canvas, he utilizes the print and poster mediums as a means of keeping his works available and affordable for his Low Brow audience. He is also quick to note that his silk

⁶⁷ C.R. Stecyk III, "Coop: Straight to Hell," *Juxtapoz* vol. 3, no. 3, summer 1997, 39.

screen, serigraph and lithograph prints are always printed in limited editions and he hand-signs each piece. Finally, in addressing his opinion on the issue of fine art versus illustration and whether he finds such categories relevant to his own work, Coop states, “I see commercial art and so-called fine art as the same thing. Toulouse-Lautrec was a poster artist wasn’t he? I don’t see it as compromising myself, I see it all as art.”⁶⁹ This is a sentiment held by many of Coop’s peers and has been influential in the progression of the Low Brow style and the artistic developments of a new generation of Low Brow artists, who have refused to be categorized and insist that their work be recognized as art.

Low Brow as a Postmodern Avant-garde

Robert Williams maintains that a postmodern avant-garde already exists; it is represented by the various modes of creative expression occurring within the fringe groups and sub-cultures of contemporary society, including, of course, Low Brow art.⁷⁰ However, it can be argued that any form of art created with the intention of deviating from the current styles and aesthetic standards of the majority culture qualifies as avant-garde. In order for an authentic manifestation of avant-garde activity to present itself within a postmodern cultural framework, criteria of a more specific nature must be met. For instance, does the art reflect elements of both avant-garde and postmodern ideologies? Do the artists maintain

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.

a stance of opposition against a perceived dominant culture and view their art as means to engage in confrontation with the mainstream? And finally, do the works of art consistently challenge the pre-established artistic standards set forth by art historical traditions and contemporary aesthetics?

In the previous chapter it was established that Activism and issue-oriented art currently dominate the stylistic and conceptual trends in contemporary art. It has also been established that Low Brow art developed in reaction to, and in many cases as the antithesis of, contemporary activist art (with the exception of Winston Smith, whose artistic content often addresses issues of political or social importance) and that the Low Brow style exists in opposition to the aesthetics and ideals of mainstream society. But these factors alone do not justify the claim the Low Brow functions as a postmodern avant-garde school.⁷¹ In order to present a reasonable argument for Low Brow art as a potential representative of a postmodern avant-garde, it must be shown that Low Brow art possesses some of the intrinsic qualities of both avant-garde art and postmodern thought.

For example, Low Brow art is intentionally shocking, which is an essential characteristic of avant-garde art. Following the avant-garde tradition, the Low Brow style is indicative of a revolt against the art and aesthetics of the mainstream culture and promotes alternative and adverse forms of artistic expression. However, the Low Brow school should not be viewed a continuation of the stylistic or philosophic ideals of the modern avant-garde movements. Low Brow

⁶⁹ Coop quoted in Stecyk, "Coop: Straight to Hell," 42.

art is not the product of a socialist or utopian optimism; in fact, if there were an underlying social ideology in Low Brow art it would most likely be some form of nihilism. Furthermore, Low Brow art is not intended to function as a catalyst for cultural change. Instead Low Brow art is a reflection of both modern and contemporary culture and the cultural information that has informed the artist and creative process, which is more closely aligned with the concepts of postmodernism than those of the modern avant-gardes.

Like the postmodernists, Low brow artists confront the expectations and assumptions of an information-based society, and utilize the art object as a vehicle through which imagery, ideas and information are communicated. Low Brow shares the postmodernist concern for individualism and diversity, but rather than reflecting the mainstream culture, Low Brow art reflects the diversity of the culture through the microcosm of a fringe-group, which in turn reflects the success and failure of the mainstream society. Low Brow art dissents from the majority of postmodern art in that it is not a platform for airing explicit political or social agendas; however, several Low Brow artists introduce social commentary and criticism into their content, but they expose their views through the conventions of allegory, irony, humor and satire. Similarly, both postmodern and Low Brow artists look back on Western culture and the art historical traditions, incorporating previous styles and practices and reinterpreting and re-presenting them in new ways. But Low Brow also utilizes the aesthetic and

⁷⁰ Interview with Robert Williams, February 4, 2002.

techniques of the “low” arts (a tradition of modern art) and draws on the pop culture imagery of past eras, rather than focusing on contemporary media (a common practice among postmodern artists).

Low Brow art represents several aspects of the theoretical concepts and associated artistic practices of both avant-gardism and postmodernism, but can the blending of these two ideologies within the Low Brow style create the possibility of a new, postmodern avant-garde? Moreover, can postmodern theory allow for the presence of contemporary avant-garde activity? An examination of the postmodern declaration of the so-called “death of the avant-garde,” has revealed that in the attempt to dismantle the tenets of modernism, a common error occurred: avant-garde theory and the developments of modern art were treated as synonymous with modernist (Formalist) theory and its rigid aesthetic standards.⁷² However, when avant-gardism is understood as a concept distinct from modernism, it becomes clear that postmodern theory calls for an end to the artistic styles and practices of the modern avant-garde movements which culminated in the development of Formalist theory, not the actual end of all avant-garde art artistic activity. Therefore, there is no precedent that denies the possibility of an artistic avant-garde occurring in the postmodern era.

⁷¹ As defined in the last section of Chapter 5, “Updating Avant-garde Ideals for a Postmodern Culture.”

⁷² For clarification on postmodernism and the so-called end of the avant-garde, refer back to Chapter 5.

Finally, given its unique combination of avant-garde and postmodern characteristics, the Low Brow style seems to encompass all the necessary components of a postmodern avant-garde art movement.

Figure 12. Kenny Scharf, *When the Worlds Collide*, 1984. Oil, acrylic and enamel paint on canvas, 10'2" x 17'5 1/4". Whitney Museum of American Art.

Figure 13. Robert Williams, *The Notion Lurks Between Two Adjacent Thoughts*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 inches.

Courtesy Robert Williams, 2002.

©Robert Williams, 1998.

Figure 14. Robert Williams, *The Day The Big Kahuna Stole Surf City*, 1999.
Oil on canvas, 24x 30 inches.
Courtesy of Robert Williams, 2002.
©Robert Williams, 1999.

To guard the peace
of these sun-swept hills

Figure 16. Winston Smith, *Childs Play*, 1982. Collage (dimensions not specified).

Courtesy of Winston Smith, 2003. Winston Smith @ www.winstonsmith.com.
©Winston Smith, 1998.

Figure 17. Winston Smith, *Only An Animal Could Understand*, 1992. Collage (dimensions not specified).
Courtesy of Winston Smith, 2003. Winston Smith @ www.winstonsmith.com.
©Winston Smith, 1998.

Figure 18. Coop, *Pearls Before Swine*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 365 inches. Courtesy of Coop, 2003.

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Figure 19. Coop, *The Hard Stuff* (sketch), dated between 1980-2002. Graphite on paper.

Courtesy of Coop, 2003.

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Figure 20. Coop, *Untitled* (Devil Girl) (sketch), dated between 1980-2002.
Graphite on paper. .

Courtesy of Coop, 2003.

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Figure 21. Coop, *Still Life With Tiki*, 1999. Serigraph print, 29½ x 21 inches.
Courtesy of Coop, 2003.

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Conclusion

The attempt to present the theoretical possibility of a postmodern avant-garde has required a thorough examination of the theories of avant-gardism, modernism and postmodernism. Research on these subjects has revealed two important distinctions: the first being that avant-gardism and modernism must be understood as separate theories despite their inter-relatedness in the developments of modern art. The second being that postmodern theory was intended to undermine modernism and its institutions—the avant-garde among them—not to put an end to avant-garde ideology as a school of thought which promotes questioning and challenging the status quo of the mainstream art world, and presenting alternative artistic styles, practices and aesthetic possibilities. In fact, postmodernism developed out of similar inclinations.

A critical re-evaluation of postmodern theory has shown that the assertion that an avant-garde movement could not arise in the postmodern period was based on premises that have either been misinterpreted or are no longer applicable. Because postmodernism developed in response to modernist art and theory, postmodernist artists, scholars and critics sought to dissolve the artistic limitations brought about, not by avant-garde art, but by the Formalist aesthetic and Clement Greenberg's rigorous promotion of it. The postmodernists advocated for an end to the stylistic narrowness generated by the art of the post-war era that came to be

characterized by completely abstract styles of painting and sculpture, such as Color Field, Hard Edge and Minimalism.

The motivation to broaden the accepted standards of artistic styles and practices prompted postmodern artists to usher in a decade of pluralism. This explosion of stylistic developments created a climate in which it became difficult to conceive of any one style or theory dominating the art of the postmodern era. From this climate arose the idea that postmodern Pluralism marked the end of the avant-garde (specifically, the avant-garde activity of the modern era), because it was thought that absence of a dominant aesthetic would remain constant, therefore an artistic avant-garde would have nothing to challenge. But Pluralism did not endure, instead it gave way to a more homogenous group of art movements, those expressing a shared concern for political, social and/or cultural issues. Activist art has been shown to demonstrate a dominant trend in contemporary postmodern art. It has also been determined that once the presence of a dominant style or trend is established, the possibility exists for the occurrence of an avant-garde reaction.

In light of the distinction made between the theory of the avant-garde and the avant-garde movements of the modern era (upon which the argument for the possibility of a postmodern avant-garde rests), it is important to update or redefine the concept “avant-garde” in terms of the postmodern view of art and culture. In order for a contemporary artistic avant-garde to function, it must represent at least some of the essential or defining qualities of both avant-garde ideology and

postmodern thought. Outlining the potential characteristics of a postmodern avant-garde has demonstrated that these two theories could come together within the work of a contemporary artist or artistic group. Through the presentation of the Low Brow style and school of artists, who reflect the characteristics of an avant-garde while working within the parameters of postmodernism, one can conclude that it is possible for an artistic avant-garde movement to develop in the postmodern era.

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Appendix

Subj: Richard Hamilton Date: 9/30/03 3:11:07 AM Pacific Daylight Time From: STU4168@tuebingen.de (Gerlinde Engelhardt) To: Jenarth@aol.com

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Gerlinde Engelhardt
 Kunsthalle Tübingen
 Philosophenweg 76
 72076 Tübingen
 Tel. 07071/9691-13
 Fax 07071/9691-33
 mailto: kunsthalle@tuebingen.de

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92.266.A-C
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boundary="----=_NextPart_001_01C3AAACE.77E2E810"
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Heinke Jenssen

Am Montag, 27.10.03, um 18:31 Uhr (Europe/Zurich) schrieb Jenarth@aol.com:

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 >
 > To: Bruno Bischofberger
 > or Representative for the Collection of Bruno Bischofberger
 >
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 >
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