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Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning

Deniz Tekiner

FROM THE 1940S UNTIL THE LATE 1960S, FORMALIST CRITICISM FUNCTIONED TO appropriate modernist art to the market interests and conventional sensibilities of the art world. By its judgments of taste, it certified the worthiness of art objects for markets, facilitating processes of the reception of artworks as commodities. It thus functioned symbiotically with art marketers. By its support of the market apparatus and its invalidation of social concerns as they are expressed through art, formalism upheld conservative agendas. Limiting its attentions to form alone, it obscured the relationships of art to social contexts and the socially critical implications of art.

Formalism dominated art criticism in the United States during the postwar period, a time in which the center of gravity of the Western art world shifted from Paris to New York, the U.S. experienced an economic boom, complacency characterized political life, and dissent was scarcely tolerated. The North American art critic Clement Greenberg was the leading prolocutor of formalism during this time. Many less prominent critics followed his lead. Greenberg's criticism, which was published mainly in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, and *Commentary*, carried on a European formalist tradition that was led in the early 20th century by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. Greenberg believed that the subjects of the visual arts should be their respective media. Painting should be about paint, and sculpture about the materials of sculpture. It follows that politics and narrative, as extraneous to the art media, debase the purity of visual art. Formalists evaluate art according to physical qualities such as color, size, shape, line, texture, and so on, and treat the ideational content of works as irrelevant. They view themselves as being mainly protectors and upholders of high aesthetic standards.

Many art critics now favor "contextual" approaches. As nicely summarized by art historian Howard Risatti (1988: 31), such approaches seek "to understand how art functions socially, economically, and politically in relation to status and power and the construction of worldviews." Contextual approaches may be more capable of evading the collusions with market forces and conservative interests that marked formalism during the period of its hegemony. As Risatti points out,

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“because object validation is not something contextualist art history primarily does, it presents a threat to this whole apparatus of culture as object worship and to the status and power that this apparatus supports” (*Ibid.*).

In *The Function of Criticism*, Terry Eagleton (1984) shows that contemporary literary criticism, though it is ensconced in academic domains, tends to be complicit with market forces and the ideologies that support them. He shows that contemporary literary theory, even while it is supposedly anti-authoritarian, is complicit with established structures of power by its epistemological nihilism, its social insulation, its intellectual abstraction from the affairs of everyday life, and its consequent impotence as an effectual form of social criticism. Eagleton’s critique of literary theory is comparable to the Frankfurt School’s critiques of scientism and positivism that charge that much of scientific inquiry is complicit with systems of domination. These critiques suggest that systems of ideas that attain prominence in intellectual or scientific worlds often tend not to unsettle, if they are not directly complicit with, established structures of power. The compliance of intellectuals with these structures is thus secured without direct coercion.

Formalist art criticism is also subject to this charge. By excluding considerations of idea content and social context, it obscured the substantive concerns that artists frequently sought to express in their works. Thus, while Piet Mondrian wrote extensively on art’s role in a dialectical revelation of harmonized oppositions, for example, by reading Clement Greenberg on Mondrian we could learn no more about this than that the artist “has theories” (Greenberg, 1986: 64). Greenberg’s disregard of the idea content of Mondrian’s art was typical of his approach. Even in cases in which artworks, according to the extensive writings of artists such as Mondrian (Holtzman and James, 1993) and Wassily Kandinsky (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982), were heavily invested with ideational or affective content, Greenberg evaluated such works only in terms of their formal properties. If he acknowledged the content at all, he gave it short shrift, dismissing it a priori as not pertinent to the value of art.

As modernist art became more abstract, its symbolic content became more obscure. Symbols were an integral part of Christian art from the medieval period through the Renaissance. Christian art, however, used a lexicon of traditional symbols that were widely understood. During the early 19th century, Romantic artists developed a new lexicon of natural symbols that would serve their aesthetic of the sublime. Their “symbolic landscape” spoke a universal language of natural forms that might be generally understood by any viewers capable of feeling nature’s grandeur and power. As more abstract lexicons were developed by French Symbolism, Mondrian, Kandinsky, and North American Abstract Expressionism, the intended meanings of artists became more opaque. Without knowledge of the explicatory literature by authors such as Georges-Albert Aurier, Paul Gauguin, Mondrian, Kandinsky, John Graham, and Barnett Newman, a viewer could not be expected to know that some modern artists sought to represent such things as Platonic forms,

the triumph of spirit over matter, the balanced relations of physical and ideal oppositions, or the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious. Consistent with Romantic traditions, much of modern art opposed and resisted processes of the rationalization and disenchantment of life (Rosenblum, 1975; Tekiner, 2000).¹ As with Romantic attitudes toward the sublime, many modern artists construed their transcendental subjects as signifiers of freedom, and their artworks as expressions of a liberated imagination.

The opaque symbolic lexicons of the modernist arts proved to render many works vulnerable to misleading interpretations by formalist critics who ignored the explicatory literature and the statements of artists. North American Abstract Expressionism was especially vulnerable, because few of its artists wrote at length about art. Among the group, the only prolific writer was Barnett Newman (1990: 108), who conceived of art as “a carrier of the awesome feelings...felt before the terror of the unknowable.” We have one book by artist John Graham (1971: 95), who in the late 1930s accurately anticipated the movement’s general purposes to “reestablish a lost contact with the unconscious...in order to bring to the conscious mind the throbbing events of the unconscious mind.” The meaning content of Abstract Expressionism as shown through artists’ writings and statements was eventually well exposed, but only after the movement had passed its prime. During the period of its reign as the foremost modernist movement, Greenberg and other formalists took full avail of Abstract Expressionism’s susceptibility to misunderstanding.²

Greenberg’s perspective as an art critic can be best understood by considering its development. Early in his career, he advocated formalism as a way of resisting kitsch, which he viewed as a product of mass culture, and which in turn was an effect of the industrial revolution. As he wrote in 1939 regarding the birth of kitsch, “newly urbanized masses set up pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised, ersatz culture, kitsch” (Greenberg, 1939: 10). He viewed formalism as a way of insuring high art against a loss of autonomy by militating against absorptions of high culture by mass culture. Greenberg’s defense of abstract painting is consistent with his formalist position. He argued that art could best ensure its integrity by its exclusion of representational content. Greenberg declared that the modern arts must preserve their autonomous status, “by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.” This would require each art to “narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure” (Greenberg, in Frascina, 1982: 5). The exclusion of extraneous content, according to Greenberg, was accomplished by North American Abstract Expressionist art, which Greenberg called “American-style painting.”³

Greenberg’s criticism thus provided an intellectual basis for the support of tendencies toward greater abstraction in modern art, tendencies that culminated after World War II in North American Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg’s for-

malist focus on aesthetics alone, however, demanded an abstraction of art from life. He demanded that art should exclude social or existential concerns that would supposedly compromise artistic autonomy as well as defile the aesthetic purity of visual art. Like the contemporary literary criticism that Eagleton discussed, his criticism thus has no substantive bearing on social concerns. His art criticism was neither antagonistic nor threatening to the dominant ideologies by which society reproduced itself. Its advocacy of a radicalized artistic autonomy and purity obviated any implications for social critique. Greenberg was a proponent only of art for art's sake.

As a contributor to the *Partisan Review*, a forum for the New York radical Left of the 1930s and early 1940s, Greenberg saw avant-garde culture as a mode of resistance against oppressive economic ideology as well as kitsch culture. Kitsch, or "popular, commercial art and literature" (Greenberg, 1939: 39), as he pointed out, tends to manipulate the consciousness of masses to market ideological ends. To protect against onslaughts of kitsch, Greenberg saw a revolutionary potential in the preservation of individualistic consciousness, which he thought would in turn preserve capacities for politically critical thought. He believed that individualistic consciousness could be preserved in spheres of avant-garde culture, and that the high graphic arts could protect themselves from the vulgarizing influences of mass culture only by becoming completely self-referential and abstract. Greenberg championed Abstract Expressionism for its achievement of individualistic consciousness as well as abstraction.

By the early 1950s, Greenberg recognized that much of avant-garde art had been assimilated by bourgeois culture. He responded by advocating an even more radical isolation of avant-garde culture from the rest of society. But this more definitively foreclosed any meaningful socially critical role for culture. He thus came to see avant-garde art as an enlightened enclave of critical culture set apart from the rest of social life, but powerless to change that life.⁴ As James Herbert (1984: 182) nicely summarizes Greenberg's intellectual development, "Thus the avant-garde, which Greenberg had entrusted in 1939 with the revolution needed to redeem society had by 1953 only the simple task of isolated self-preservation and protection of the traditional standards of art."

Prior to the war years, art critic Harold Rosenberg, who along with Greenberg was part of the *Partisan Review* circle, also viewed modernist culture as an enclave of individualism and of opposition to politically oppressive ideologies. After World War II, he came to see modernism as opposed to the leveling effects of mass culture and stultifying cultural traditions. "Individual culture," for Rosenberg, should withdraw from political and social concerns to protect its revolutionary consciousness from the mass culture that threatened it from without. The implications of Rosenberg's advocacy of the radical isolation of artistic activity were thus the same as Greenberg's in terms of an effective, socially critical role for art. Cultural activity was rendered impotent as a force for change. As Herbert (1984:

187) writes, “like Greenberg’s, Rosenberg’s version of art for art’s sake [became] not a device for revolutionary protection, but the justification for self-referential, autonomous artistic production, isolated from the world of politics.”

Greenberg’s formalism is a Francocentric endorsement of Cezanne and the Cubists, whom Greenberg considered to be the original sources of all good modernist art. He dismissed all modern art not traceable to their influences as inferior. He thus writes of Kandinsky’s “bad luck to have had to go through German modernism” (Greenberg, 1961: 111). As the art historian and critic Donald Kuspit (1979: 156) observes, “Van Gogh, Soutine, and everyone else Greenberg regards as expressionist—as having an excess of life content at the expense of the medium they are working in—are condemned by him for their lack of cubist grounding.” The subject of cubist art is, in the final analysis, nothing other than the composition itself. Expressionist art, in contrast, served emotion or feeling, a subject extraneous to an artwork and therefore an impurity, according to Greenberg. For his antipathy to feeling, Kuspit (1979: 166–167) charges that Greenberg carries on a:

positivist campaign against emotion that...seems to be an extension of Comte’s campaign against the religious and the metaphysical.... Art itself, Greenberg seems to suggest, like science, went through a religious phase and a metaphysical one and has now arrived at a positivist phase. It has at last become mature, an assertion of fact, and an acknowledgement that fact is physical.... Without the positivist spirit that they symbolize, both art and criticism would regress and become expressions of emotion. Art would once again attempt to make “magic” and would reinforce religious and metaphysical conceptions of reality.⁵

By ignoring intentionality and the emotional content of artworks, Kuspit observes, Greenberg also undermined latent or unconscious content—and thus the more subtle significance of works—and affirmed only literal meanings.

According to Kuspit, Greenberg’s devaluation of emotion reduces the aesthetic experience to a bodily sensibility equivalent to the sense of taste, exclusive of involvements of the intellectual or affective faculties. Greenberg expresses such a sensibility in his “rhetoric of cuisine,” frequently using epicurean metaphors that liken the aesthetic experience to savoring a fine meal. As Kuspit (1979: 43) notices, “like many gourmets, [Greenberg] thinks French cuisine offers the best taste sensations.” Greenberg thus reduces art appreciation to a gratification of a bodily sensibility, to the pleasing of one’s aesthetic palate, exclusive of intellectual, affective, spiritual, moral, or social relevance. His devaluation of affective and spiritual sensibilities goes hand-in-hand with his radically materialistic brand of formalism. Greenberg’s descriptive language, as a consequence, is in sharp contrast to the early 20th century formalist criticism of Roger Fry, who wrote of aesthetic experience as involving a “disembodied functioning of the spirit” and, in an essentialist tenor, described the life of the imagination as “correspond[ing] to

an existence more real and more important than any that we know in mortal life” (Fry in Frascina, 1982: 81, 91).

Through various modern art movements (including French Symbolism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism), the social and existential concerns of Romanticism were carried into 20th century modernist art. Cezanne and the Cubists, however, carried on the formal concerns of French neoclassicism. For Cezanne and the Cubists, the formal qualities of art alone were to manifest beauty, and art was not to be infected by emotional content. The aims of Cezanne and the Cubists were in sharp contrast to various modern movements that, like much of Romantic painting, sought through artistic expression to resist processes of rationalization and disenchantment and to invigorate imagination, emotion, and spirit. These movements progressed ever further toward abstraction, as naturalistic approaches came to be viewed as being less capable of resonance with the higher faculties of mind. They invested artworks with significance beyond the pale of what one could apprehend only through the formal qualities of works. Because the ideas they represented were expressed largely through cryptic symbols, the significance of such works could be fully understood according to the intentions of their producers only in light of the supplementary literature or knowledge of artist’s statements about their works.

Greenberg, however, by his disregard of content, evaluated all modern art according to ways that works allegedly built upon the contributions to modern art of Cezanne and the Cubists—the modernist heirs of classicist aesthetic values. He evaluated all works according to modern standards of classical taste, and according to the standards of aesthetic modernism and art for art’s sake, as efforts principally toward manifesting formal beauty. His contempt for emotional content parallels that of the late 18th and early 19th century advocates of French neoclassicism who, seeing themselves as upholders of the refinement of a new Augustan age of high art, viewed the Romantic’s flights of the imagination as vulgar. By his disregard of content, Greenberg was able to pretend that all modernist art, including that which was rooted in Romantic social and existential concerns, was a child of French aesthetic modernism. To support his case, Greenberg did not hesitate to take liberties with the facts of history, as where he remarked that the Abstract Expressionists “all started from French painting, got their fundamental sense of style from it, and still maintain some sort of continuity with it” (Greenberg in Frascina, 1982: 94). The Abstract Expressionists were surely influenced by the School of Paris with respect to their uses of color and form, but as a means toward expressing content, not as ends in themselves.

The Rebellion Against Formalism

A critical counteroffensive against formalism began in the 1950s. The art historian Herbert Read (1952) published the first major attack on formalism in an article titled “Farewell to Formalism” in *Art News*. Read points out in this piece that while there are many very different types of modern art with different objectives, criticism

of all modern art has been dominated by “a hazardous combination of subjective judgment and formal analysis” (*Ibid.*: 36). He observes that art historian Heinrich Wölfflin’s formalist principles of “scientific art criticism,” presented in Wölfflin’s *Classic Art* of 1898 and his *Principles of Art History* of 1915, had enormous effects on the modern art criticism of the first half of the 20th century. However, as Read (*Ibid.*) writes, “Wölfflin’s principles are based on, and applicable to, one kind of art only—the figurative art of the humanist tradition. They had no application to earlier traditions...and they have proved less applicable to various types of modern art.” With respect to analyzing some types of modern art, Wölfflin’s principles were adequate to analyses of formal structure, but could not account for the “artist’s sensibility,” or the “feeling expressed by the artist in executing design,” which could not be deduced by observing formal elements (*Ibid.*: 37). A critical appreciation of much of modern art, particularly that with “symbolist” and “transcendentalist” content, according to Read, requires an interpretive dimension of understanding that is beyond the epistemological range of a formalist analysis. Such work, in Read’s view, requires a symbolic interpretation.

Read observes that the dominance of formalist analysis is a 20th century phenomenon. In the 19th century, Ruskin, Baudelaire, and Pater were all symbolic critics who “insist[ed] that we should first *see* the work of art, and then *read* it.” “In fact,” Read proclaims, “all criticism that was ever worth anything, and that has survived its brief day of topical relevance, was symbolic in this sense, taking the work of art as a symbol to be interpreted, rather than an object to be dissected” (*Ibid.*: 38). Because the referents of symbolic art are often metaphysical and thus of a numinous nature, they can elude translation by mere words. Thus, to appropriately represent art, criticism should, ideally, be artistic. A beautiful literary interpretation supplements the visual experience of a work of art, facilitating a more complete aesthetic experience. Criticism, then, according to Read, may serve as the “midwife of painting.” The writings of Apollinaire and Breton exemplified such “true” criticism in the 20th century, in Read’s view.⁶ He points out, however, that criticism should not only be a poetic exercise. To avoid lapsing into solipsism, the critic should keep in mind that he or she is translating the work, and this requires that the critic’s interpretation should not be at variance with that of the artist. As Read (*Ibid.*) writes, “the critic should play fair, and not substitute his own symbols and metaphors for those intended by the artist.”

Read (*Ibid.*: 38–39) anticipated, prophetically, that formalism would wane as the symbolic content of art gained wider recognition:

We begin to appreciate after fifty years of phantasmagorical change the undoubted fact that different types of art demand different critical approaches.... [However,] it will still take some time for art criticism to discard its formalistic habits, and emerge in free and sympathetic collaboration with the symbolic forms of art that now prevail in all countries.

Symbolic criticism, according to Read, allows penetration of the “mystery” that much art expresses. The mysterious content in art is in his view an expression of the artist’s most deeply felt concerns. It arises from the “tragic situation of modern man” and expresses the artist’s “profoundest fears and hopes” (*Ibid.*: 39). Read urges that art criticism should facilitate rather than fetter or obscure such expression.

The New York Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman fought against formalistic misrepresentations of his work. In 1963, he refused to participate in a show entitled “The Formalists” as the show would be “a distortion of the meaning of my work” (Newman, 1990: 221). When *The New York Times* announced that a museum exhibition in which Newman participated represented “the new American formal painting,” Newman complained to the museum’s director that “I have become a cog in the formalist machine” (*Ibid.*: 186). In his catalog statement for the show, Newman charged that the art object becomes a fetish and an ornament if it is reduced to its formal properties. He wrote, “the fetish and the ornament, blind and mute, impress only those who cannot look at the terror of Self. The Self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture” (*Ibid.*: 187).

Newman was suspicious of contemporary art criticism in general. In 1950, he wrote a letter to *The New York Times* that charged that art critics were collaborating with dealers and museums to promote mediocre art, and condemned critics’ “deliberate attempts to ignore, malign, and distort the state of art in America” (*Ibid.*: 35). In 1968, he wrote that art criticism “is becoming neutral, dispassionate, scientific” (*Ibid.*: 131). In view of the purported leftist orientation of some art critics, he charged critics with “eagerness to cater to, rather than destroy, the bourgeoisie” (*Ibid.*: 131), and noticed that “objective, descriptive, analytical, formal criticism... does not hesitate to use every crude weapon to kill the *in vivo* quality of a work of art” (*Ibid.*: 131–132).

Non-formalist criticism began to flourish in the late 1960s, a time in which questions about the legitimacy of ideology and authority proliferated in counter-culture movements. As the art historian and critic Barbara Rose observed in 1968, William Rubin, Robert Rosenblum, and Leo Steinberg had already made significant contributions to the development of an alternative “synthetic criticism, which has no vested interest in ignoring subject matter or subject content” (Rose, 1968: 32). However, as Rose (*Ibid.*: 32) observed, conservative tendencies persisted:

In the meantime, however, criticism is dominated by an element of the disenchanting American left, led by Rosenberg and Greenberg, which has managed to reach a rapprochement with the society it once rejected. Traumatized by Stalinism, anesthetized by McCarthyism, and pacified by affluence, it has found a comfortable home in art criticism.

Echoing Read, in 1966 Rose observed that the relevance of formalist analysis had narrowed due to the variety of types of modern art that had emerged. She observed that the formalist perspective was most suited to discussions of Cub-

ism. However, so many other kinds of modern art, and Abstract Expressionist art in particular, rendered formalist terms of analysis less relevant. Formalism is appropriate to a discussion of Cubism because the latter “was a hermetic art for art’s sake [and] depended for its success or failure on a balanced structure created by the relationship of analogous parts.” However, the Abstract Expressionists, for example, “themselves claimed that theirs was above all an art of content.” Therefore, Rose avers, “today, if we wish to keep pace with the art being done, critics must be willing to discuss what is implicit in an artwork: that is, its content and intention.” Because so much of modern art does not seek to be hermetic, but is openly responsive to the historical situation, criticism should take into account the historical context in which art is created. Such criticism contributes to making artworks intelligible to the public and providing, as Rose writes, “such an interested public with the clues to experiencing and interpreting the messages of new work” (Rose, 1988: 215–219).

The calls by Reed and Rose for synthetic and contextual analyses, mindful of symbolic content and of the intentions of artists, were answered by Irving Sandler’s (1970) *The Triumph of American Painting*, a historical review and analysis of Abstract Expressionist art. Sandler inveighs against formalism at the outset of this book, calling for more art criticism that acknowledges the intentions of artists. Against spurious and widely disseminated assertions “that the artistic vanguard is motivated primarily by formalist considerations,” Sandler points out that the Abstract Expressionists’ “preoccupation was with investing forms with meanings that relate to the whole of human experience, and any critical approach that does not consider these meanings is misleading.” Sandler considers it essential to take account of artists’ statements with regard to their work, as this aids the critic’s efforts to make the work comprehensible to a public. Further, as Sandler (1970: 1–2) writes, “the remarks of an artist, when they correspond to visual ‘facts,’ can also be valuable in suggesting ways of experiencing his work and understanding how it came into being.” Sandler recognized that Abstract Expressionist art incarnated Romantic aims in new forms. Abstract Expressionist art, therefore, must be distinguished from the “classicistic or ‘geometric’ attitude,” which is moved to the production of art for its own sake (*Ibid.*: 30–31).

Against the growing strength of non-formalist and synthetic criticism, Greenberg took another stand for his position in a 1972 article titled “Necessity of Formalism.” Greenberg here reminds readers that modernism should be devoted above all to the preservation of high standards of artistic quality against the degenerative effects of mass culture. In response to a cultural “emergency,” modernism is charged with “continuity with the highest aesthetic standards of the past.... The modernist preoccupation with aesthetic value or quality...could not but lead to a much closer and larger concern with the nature of the medium in each art, and hence with technique” (Greenberg, 1972: 105–106).⁷ Thus, modernism’s “artisanal emphasis” reacted against Romanticism, which, according to Greenberg, contrib-

uted to a deterioration of aesthetic standards by subordinating form to content. He correctly attributes this emphasis to Manet, the Impressionists, Cezanne, and Matisse. But this emphasis cannot be correctly ascribed to many others (such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Abstract Expressionists), whose works were rich with content. Greenberg strains credulity by his implication that this emphasis is a general characteristic of modernist art. By disregarding or brushing aside vital distinctions, Greenberg subsumed as much art as he wished under his aestheticist interpretation of modernism.

Formalism and the Art Market

By its interpretation of all modernist art exclusively according to formal criteria, formalist criticism unwittingly functioned to appropriate art to the ideologies and purposes of the art market. Formalism defined artworks exclusively as material things having no significance other than their aesthetic appeal. It divested art of contents that may have been challenging or disturbing to conventional sensibilities. Artworks were thus prepared by formalist interpretations to be savored by fine art connoisseurs and to be bought and sold as precious objects. Greenberg declared that all great modern art, and Abstract Expressionism in particular, built upon the contributions to art of the School of Paris. Expressed at the time that the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York, this bestowed upon postwar North American modernism a cachet and pedigree that would not then have been conferred by Romantic traditions that are associated largely with German cultural history.

Many modernist artists sought through their works to communicate existential problems to audiences and to confront them with these problems. These artists conceived of the use value of their works largely in terms of capacities to express and communicate ideas. However, in the processes by which artworks were assimilated into the art world, and to the main principle by which the art market reproduced itself, or capital, works were transformed into exchange value and appropriated to market purposes. The original use value receded as the status of artworks as commodities ascended in the market. By conceptually abstracting artworks from their ideational qualities, formalism estranged the works from their original relations to the social and existential concerns of their producers. A critic functions in the art world to bestow meaning and significance on works of art in processes of reception. Through formalist criticism, which subjected all modern art to purely aesthetic standards of evaluation, artworks were relieved of ideational content and were brought into accord with the prevailing system of art commodity exchange and its ideology. Formalist criticism thus facilitated processes by which art objects were reified, or assumed their principal identities and statuses as objects in commodity relations, rather than as products of human relations. In this process, the social contexts of artworks were forgotten.

Formalist criticism, then, functioned to dissolve the tensions that artworks may have had with both the established art world and the larger social world. Whatever

critical content there was in modernist art was neutralized as artworks were redefined according to modern classical standards of evaluation, exclusively as aesthetic objects. Although many modernist artworks were, according to the often impassioned intentions of their producers, to represent ideas that clashed with established values, and artists sometimes envisioned roles for their works in processes of social or existential transformation, the formalist assimilation of artworks to the art market cancelled out any critical content the works may have had.

Howard Becker (1982) has shown that art worlds tend to operate according to functional exigencies that constrain innovation and insure the eventual assimilation of “maverick” art to the conventions of production and reception of “integrated professionals.” In the processes by which art was interpreted according to the terms of formalist analysis during the 1940s and 1950s, this occurred as a leveling process in which creative activity was assimilated to prevailing economic and ideological interests. To be successfully incorporated in an art world system in which formalist assumptions held sway, artworks were first stripped of substantive content and then conceptually re-ascribed with qualities essential to their consecration as works of art. This process of conceptual transformation facilitated the assimilation of art to the art world’s core system of values. From a functionalist standpoint, then, the formalist transformation of the intended use value of artworks, as a means to communicate ideas, into exchange value as commodities was essential. During the politically conservative period that was concurrent with the apogee of formalism’s influence and power in the United States, artworks were more effectively prepared for the market as beautiful things than they would have been as objectifications of challenging ideas.

Transformation of the Art World

Since the late 1960s, contextual perspectives have been well represented in art discourses. Although “dry, pointless formalist analyses,” as Rose characterized them (1968: 32), remained plentiful, synthetic and contextual approaches became no rarity. Any charge that they remained widely or systematically suppressed would be unfounded. As art forms that evinced various social or political concerns flourished since the late 1960s, art criticism became pluralistic. Synthetic and contextual approaches have since been well represented in the major publications that are oriented toward a general readership, such as *Artforum* and *Art in America*, and in academic publications. Ongoing formalist criticism is often better informed than it was in the past. When reviewers are bothered by content, they are more likely to contest the assertions of the content than to deny it. The content invested in artworks is now more difficult to ignore because it is so well exposed. For artists, the danger that the ideas they invest in their works will be whitewashed in processes of reception has thus diminished. Nevertheless, complaints of formalist biases persisted after the 1960s. Continued polemical discourses (Kuspit, 1981; McEvelley, 1982, 1991) show that formalist and contextual approaches, even if

they achieved more parity of status in the art world, coexisted in states of tension through the 1980s and into the 1990s.⁸

An infusion of countercultural sensibilities since the mid-1960s led to a significant transformation of the political structure of the art world. During the 1960s and early 1970s, widespread agitation in the United States for political and cultural reforms eventually conferred greater legitimacy on cultural expressions of political and social criticism. Through the 1960s, even before the eruption of counterculture movements in the United States, the formalist credo was vigorously challenged by Pop Art, in which political and social subjects were frequent (Stich, 1987). Yet contextual approaches only gained significant influence during the late 1960s. During the 1960s, the growth and invigoration of alternate styles of art and art criticism were concurrent with intensified counterculture activities in the society at large. Although popular enthusiasm for political and cultural reforms subsided after the Vietnam War, counterculture attitudes persisted and flourished in the art world. After the 1960s, many artists continued to invest beliefs in art culture as a sphere of activity in which liberating (if not revolutionary) forms of consciousness may be expressed, cultivated, and preserved, though these points of view were counterbalanced by an abundance of less idealistic views.

Today, as ever, an entrepreneurial spirit is a prime mover of the art world. This spirit, however, does not now significantly interfere with processes of exposure of maverick art forms to publics. The line between mainstream and maverick art has become fuzzier since the mid-20th century, as the art world developed habits of readily welcoming new styles and forms. This was the case even for art forms that resisted commodification, such as conceptual art and earth art, which won critical approval soon after they appeared. Quick assimilations of new or radical art forms into the art world mainstream might at times not be attributed so much to liberality as to an entrepreneurial zeal to capitalize on these forms as soon as possible. Whatever the motives at play, the art world's rapid acceptance of new forms facilitates exposure of these forms, along with whatever ideational content they embody, to audiences. Due to these accelerated processes, many producers of original art have been spared relegation to the margins while awaiting long processes of official acceptance. From the 1940s through the mid-1960s, an ideological sanitation process by which artworks were conceptually stripped of their original relations to the intentions of their producers facilitated processes of appropriation to market imperatives. As a spirit of liberality grew in the art world since the late 1960s, such spurious interpretations became less likely to occur. Critics and art historical researchers are now far more likely to be eager to find out what these intentions are and to relate them to their readers.

The present plurality of critical approaches and styles is a hallmark of the post-modernist art world. According to prevalent postmodernist attitudes, culture products can be subject to many valid interpretations. The relativism that this implies can be vexing to traditionalists who long for a return to a uniform standard of artistic

judgment, such as that which obtained when formalism reigned. A plurality of approaches, however, is a requisite condition for the liberation of culture from the dominion of any single standard of judgment. Within the perimeters of the art world, processes of pluralization facilitated freer expressions of the ideational contents of artworks since the 1960s. These processes evinced a diffusion of power in the art world, obviating the continued hegemony of any one ideology. Thus, a variety of art forms rich with content have flourished since the 1960s. This might be taken as evidence that artists are encouraged by knowing that substantive content will not be obscured in processes of reception.

NOTES

1. Artists, of course, did not use the Weberian sociological terms “rationalization” or “disenchantment,” but these are the conditions that they opposed. Art historian Robert Rosenblum (1975) does not use these terms in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, but much of his book shows the ways in which modern artists resisted such conditions.

2. The content of works of earlier European modernists such as Gauguin, Mondrian, and Kandinsky was not as vulnerable to misunderstanding because it was supplemented by the copious writings of these artists.

3. The term “abstract expressionist” was first used to describe Kandinsky’s art in the 1920s. The term was first used to describe contemporary North American painting by Robert Coates in the March 30, 1946, *New Yorker*. Greenberg disliked the connotations of “expressionist,” so he avoided the term.

4. Greenberg’s advocacy of an isolated social position for the artistic avant-garde is thus comparable to the “hibernation” of radical intellectual thought that was advocated by Theodor Adorno, the grimly pessimistic Frankfurt School sociologist.

5. Greenberg’s antipathy toward metaphysical content could just as well be attributed to latent Marxist tendencies of his early years. In any event, Greenberg’s aversions to feeling and emotion in art evince efforts to suppress emotional expression through art. Because the suppression of the life of the emotions, according to the critical tradition of thought from Schiller to Marcuse, is a social requisite of life subordinated to utilitarian or instrumental reason, Greenberg’s formalist ideology, by its censure of emotional expression, appears implicitly to support such domination.

6. The French Symbolist art criticism of Georges-Albert Aurier, whose writings were full of feeling and color, also exemplify such midwifery.

7. This article was first published in *New Literary History* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 1972: 171–175).

8. The situation might be compared to current political life in the U.S., where conservatives and liberals complain that the other side dominates the press, though both may be better represented than each side claims.

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