

## THE EMBOURGEOISEMENT OF AVANT-GARDE ART

*Reason becomes unreason—a benefit  
calamity.*

(Goethe)

Avant-garde art has reached a paradoxical situation: it has become accepted by the bourgeoisie. Though professedly anti-traditional from the beginning, it built up a tradition of its own; *an aesthetic and morality* of uncompromising permanent revolution. The containment of the avant-garde, which began during the 1950s and has been one of the most interesting social developments in art, broke the continuity of more than one and a half centuries of non-conformism and rebellion.

In any historical period, the relationship between art and society can be compared with the relationship between sound and the vibratory motion of air. Like the air in Boyle's "*pneumatical engine*" providing the physical conditions for the transmission of sound, society provides the framework within which the creation and the reception of art is possible. The physical phenomenon

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of wave-forms becomes sound when it is transformed into a psychological phenomenon by means of the receiving ear. Like sound, art is more directly related to psychological conditions than to its physical origins. It is not the social changes in objective reality which are reflected by art, but how these are registered, understood and associated by social groups. As an important part of the culture of a historically determined society, art corresponds with and expresses the prevailing tendencies of social consciousness. While its practical and representational functions are usually determined by, or at least directly related to society, art has an intrinsic logic and a development of its own.

The containment of avant-garde art was the result of a unique historical situation: the developments which took place within the internal structures of modern Western bourgeois society and that of avant-garde art reached their logical conclusions approximately at the same time. In social development the post-war *status quo* created a situation in which the bourgeois society of Western democracies gradually abandoned political labels, ideological considerations and an ethical approach in favour of compromise, technical considerations and a pragmatic view of fragments of reality. It should be mentioned that compromise and pragmatism have always been favoured by the entrenched bourgeoisie, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and passionate ideologies from about 1830 were preserved in defence of domestic morality. As regards the art of the avant-garde, it began to benefit from the new permissive and liberal morality by means of public patronage and social recognition which brought the century old antagonism between the official art of the Establishment and the avant-garde art of the 'free and radical' intelligentsia to a sudden end. Indeed, it was not tolerance but an unspeculative practical approach that was needed to accept what avant-garde art had to offer by this time: an environment of sensual excitement and pleasure.

From about the 1850s *l'art pour l'art* aesthetics became gradually dominant in avant-garde art, and in terms of theory from about the late 1910s avant-garde art began to negate its own existence. The *modernolatriy* of Italian Futurism, the functionalism of Russian Constructivism and the anti-art aesthetics and attitudes of international Dada were significant contributions to the

spectacular achievements of modern architecture and design (i.e. the Bauhaus, De Stijl, and their influence in Europe and America), and at the same time, they also helped to spread the ideas of practicality, modernity and the simple, unsophisticated, pure architectonic beauty of the new styles. The credibility of Fine Art ornamentation was soon demolished.

Under the new social conditions functional architecture, design and environmental decoration were given new dimensions. At the same time, rebellion and non-conformism as an attitude of artists and as the meaning of avant-garde art had lost its reality and substance; it became purposeless and absurd.

Eight years ago Leo Steinberg in America was still amazed to notice that "... the time lag between shock received and thanks returned gets progressively shorter. At the present rate of taste adaptation it takes about seven years for a young artist with a streak of wildness in him to turn from *enfant terrible* into elder statesman—not so much because he changes, but because the challenge he throws to the public is so quickly met." Indeed, today, irrespective of social classes the public wants to live with the living in art. Those who were brought up on avant-garde aesthetics can perhaps still project hints of Dada-like satire, but not so the artist-writers of the introduction of a recent "avant-garde" exhibition catalogue: "Just looking is the means of understanding that can fit without undue effort into your daily life. Here we show several different forms of coloured surface, each splendid for sharpening your visual awareness. This show was worked out by an expert, with you in mind... specially selected and blended together to please and entertain you."

By now, in all art forms, the artist's physical action is generally regarded to be the "message" of his art. The action is violent and often destructive. Avant-garde *pop* singers, some of them seriously considered to be representatives of modern art, are sometimes described as having a love affair with their guitars. There is a levelling of aims and requirements in the creation and, in the reception of art today; the roles of artist and beholder are blurred. The sophisticated interplay of empathy and detachment, a basic psychological condition in the aesthetic appreciation of art, is no longer required. On the contrary, it is the spontaneous active participation of the beholder that leads

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to an inarticulate and indefinable emotional experience. Hence the difference between the concept of art and the concept of reality is diminished.

As in primitive tribal ritual, the new "avant-garde" tries to liberate those irrational unconscious instinctive energies which are common to all men. The failure to comprehend the totality of the complex modern scientific world does not mean, however, the objective validity of an institutional revival of myth as an alternative to humanism and scientific thinking. The bourgeoisie today can recreate the world in the the McLuhanian "image of a global village"—but cannot provide the meaning for genuine magic.

Science fiction is no myth. Undoubtedly there are similarities, but only at a phenomenal level. Myth is the sublimation of man's genuine cultural and instrumental inability under primitive conditions to comprehend the totality of his environment; naïvity is its meaning, poetry its form. Myth begins with chaos and confusion and develops towards systematised religious dogma. On the other hand, chaos and confusion is the essential meaning of science fiction which is regarded as the modern myth: the nihilistic negation of an already fragmented mind is its beginning and its end.

In contrast with the naturalist origins of avant-garde art, objective reality is no longer intentionally utilised in art; it is a self-conscious art that tries to penetrate into the concept of reality. Since this process is taking place within the institution of art, art is losing its function as a revealer and is unintentionally becoming a concealer of reality.

### THE CONCEPT OF THE AVANT-GARDE

*It is almost always like that in an artist's life that success is one of the worst things.*

(Vincent van Gogh)

Avant-garde art is an historical concept. Its history, however, has not yet been written. Although avant-garde art as a concept and an attitude is one of the central problems of modern art, the

literature on this subject is very limited. Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the avant-garde* is perhaps the most comprehensive book on the subject to date.

This military term—according to Renato Poggioli—was first applied by Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant in *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes* of 1845 claiming that "...art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is... Along with the hymn to happiness, the dolorous and despairing ode... To lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society..." This early description of avant-garde aims and tendencies refers to all important characteristics: art as a quasi-scientific analysis of reality and social consciousness for the sake of progress and justice, the idea of commitment, the myth of modernity as an aesthetic category, and novelty as an aesthetic value in modern art. It seems that the term "*littérateurs d'avant-garde*" mentioned in Baudelaire's personal notebook, kept by the poet-critic between 1862 and 1864, had a left-wing, activist connotation and was associated with socio-political commitment.

In contrast with this militant political and social orientation of the early avant-garde, Renato Poggioli emphasizes a "secondary meaning with a tendency towards a 'cultural-artistic' interest. He believes that this new orientation can be traced back to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the revolution and suppression of the Paris Commune. At this time, he claims "...the two avant-gardes appeared to march allied or united... this alliance of political and artistic radicalism, this parallel of the two avant-gardes, survived in France down to the first of the modern literary magazines, significantly entitled *La Revue indépendante*... the last organ to gather fraternally, under the same banner, the rebels of politics and the rebels of art, the representatives of advanced opinion in the two spheres of social and artistic thought."

As a third stage of development in the history of the term, Renato Poggioli suggests that by the turn of the century "...what

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had up to then been a secondary, figurative meaning became instead the primary, in fact, the only meaning: the isolated image and the abbreviated term *avant-garde*, became, without qualification another synonym for the artistic *avantgarde*, while the political notion functioned almost solely as rhetoric and was no longer used exclusively by those faithful to the revolutionary and subversive ideal." The later "partial" reconciliation between the "two *avant-gardes*," in Renato Poggioli's view "...has more reality in appearance than in substance."

This almost classical trinity of historical development provides a convenient framework for the analysis of the art theories of the *avant-garde*. It is likely, however, that the history and the meaning of this term is more ambiguous when interpreted as an historically determined *concept of art* than when Renato Poggioli interprets the term *avant-garde* as an historically determined art movement. Unlike the art historical terminology connected with style and iconography, the term *avant-garde* makes little sense when related to the work of art. It becomes more meaningful, however, when used in connection with the existential and creative problems of the artist. In this respect, an historically unique relationship between artist and society appears to be important.

It is the concrete historical situation that provokes the artist, who is generally considered to be a free intellectual in bourgeois society, to find and develop a new attitude to art and life. At the same time, as a simultaneous social development, a new role is given to the artist and a new function to art in social existence. In this sense, the term *avant-garde* is to denote a *concept of art* shared by artist and society—even if occasionally in antagonistic terms—and it is based on the assumption that art as well as science are a means of understanding nature which will liberate man.

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Up to the end of the Baroque, the artist was an integral part of a social institution (ecclesiastic, secular, or both) and his function was to affirm states of social consciousness in terms of his respective medium. The attitude and social position of the

artist of the avant-garde spring from the bourgeois concept of the free intellectual, although the origin of the concept of the artist as a free intellectual, of course, goes back to the Humanism of the Renaissance. The genius of the sixteenth century High-Renaissance and Mannerism, although a free intellectual was still an integral part of the society from which he emerged, and the genius of the period of the Baroque was still able to attach himself to and to feel himself part of the social and cultural totality. It is as a bourgeois intellectual that the artist becomes aware of himself in relation to society—a necessary social condition for the avant-garde—, a phenomenon which really begins with the period of Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

The relationship between the intellectual and society in modern Capitalism is based on the bourgeois concept of freedom: the relationship between the individual and society, the ethical concepts of social and individual conduct were previously derived from religious dogma, now it became a pragmatic proposition, a matter of individual choice and responsibility. Hence freedom of choice became a necessary social condition. In the arts, the individual artist no longer identified himself with the whole; he was related to society through his right to be free even to the extent of negation. Personal responsibility and commitment to a quasi-scientific view of life and art became necessary psychological conditions. From the point of view of the creative act, it is the social and political right and the idea of individual commitment which justify the art of the avant-garde by giving universal validity to a personal expression. Antagonism was inherent in this social situation.

While antagonism towards the bourgeois Establishment had been its most essential and its only constant characteristic, avant-garde art emerged and developed with the main stream of bourgeois culture. From the end of the Baroque, avant-garde art was, on the whole, as much a part of general social and cultural changes as was the so-called official art. In comparison with that of official art, the relationship between bourgeois capitalist society and the avant-garde is more complex than is usually believed. During the heroic age of the bourgeoisie the avant-garde as an attitude and a concept of art was not only accepted, or tolerated,

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but, with education and science it was encouraged and developed as an important means, first of gaining, and later of retaining political and social advantages and power. Within the framework of bourgeois society, education and science have never lost their social functions. In the arts, contradictions inherent in the bourgeois concept of art revealed themselves at an early stage.

Littérature was the first to attack the dogmatic *Weltanschauung* of the past, symbolised by the trinity of Church, Monarchy and Aristocracy. The major attack was against the Church which was dogmatic in its thinking and which, in general way, also provided the ideological foundations of Monarchy and Aristocracy. The special role of literature may be explained by its bridging position between philosophy, science and art. It was also useful for partisan action (hardly suitable in other art forms), circulated through printing. Also, traditionally, the writer was the least attached to his patrons, having taken the risk of personal freedom for many centuries, and he was closest to actual teaching. It was due to the writers, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, that the social and cultural conditions for avant-garde attitude and concept of art were made possible, and they were responsible for working out the outlines of its theory.

There have always been some currents of irrationalism in avant-garde art. Regressive tendencies, quasi-romantic sentimentalism, nostalgic reappraisal of the unspoiled beauty of nature, primitivism, and the belief in the superiority of "the noble savage" to civilized man—fashionable since Jean Jacques Rousseau—were a kind of *internal opposition* to the mainstream tendencies of avant-garde art. They were, however, given more attention by contemporary critics and later historians than their aesthetic and historical importance would justify.

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Since the Renaissance many artists have considered painting as a part of the natural sciences, while literature was generally considered part of the social sciences. Scientific thinking, the weapon against all forms of dogmatism, was also the political and ideological foundation of bourgeois progress. The bourgeoisie

never changed its positive attitude to science and technical development on which the capitalist social and economic system is entirely dependent, but became less and less willing to accept and live with an art which was originally considered to be analogous with science.

Like science, avant-garde art followed an internal logic in its development. Its premise that art is a kind of science and that it should exist and develop like science was probably a false one from the aesthetic point of view, but historically it was an inevitable proposition and once accepted it had to run its course. Indeed (due to the science-like internal logic of avant-garde art) this was the only tendency in modern art which continued the essential aesthetic characteristics of the art of the past; it provided avant-garde art with a real social function and with true artistic problems. Like science, avant-garde art was committed to discovery. Discoveries were supposed to be made equally in nature and in society, and at the beginning—as in science—the human condition was not entirely divorced from its subject-matter.

The demand for more objectivity, however, soon led to dehumanisation, a necessary condition in scientific research but presently a great problem in art. Art has always been an expression of human problems. No matter whether it centered around an animistic concept of nature and man, or devoted itself to supernatural power; whether it conceived life in terms of human proportions and values, or conceived itself as a means of social and scientific progress, it always started and returned to man. In this sense even anti-humanism in art was an expression of the human condition. Dehumanisation as a conscious quasi-scientific programme of art, if taken to its logical conclusions, will not only result in an art of anti-humanistic contents but it is bound to result in the end of art. Naturalism, more engaged with the visible world than any other tendency in art, was the nearest in its methods and subject-matter to science. Friedrich Antal in his penetrating study of the origins of bourgeois art (*Reflections on Classicism and Romanticism*) has shown that since the crisis of the Renaissance, irrespective of the style of the period, it was through Naturalism that the scientifically orientated progressive bourgeois art manifested itself.

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François Magendie, the first physiologist to claim that the living organism was subject to the same laws and to the same methods of investigation as inorganic matter, contributed towards the trend to regard man in a more scientific, and at the same time, dehumanistic light. This theory had the indirect effect that man lost the privileged position which he enjoyed both in the biblical sense during the Middle Ages, and in the humanistic sense of the Renaissance image of a homo-centric world. In the middle of the nineteenth century Darwin's *Origin of Species* indirectly furthered the process of dehumanisation in art and literature.

At the same time, while the development of science was unquestionably fostered by the bourgeois establishment—except the few cases when it was indirectly connected with public morality—, any art which aimed at an uncompromising enquiry into reality became less tolerated. Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, perhaps the most characteristic philosopher of the period, recommended the description of the human condition by methods of the natural sciences. However, in art and literature he warned against the disillusioning effect of scientific methods, and approved only an idealistic-moralistic-didactic attitude. In a letter to J. J. Weiss he writes: "I am working on physiology in moral matters, nothing more. I have borrowed from philosophy and the social sciences methods that seemed to me convincing and I have applied them in the social sciences. I am treating sentiments and ideas as one does functions and organs. Better still, I believe that two kinds of facts have the same nature, are subject to the same necessities, and are but the obverse and the reverse of one and the same individual the universe. That is all." Approximately at the same time, Taine, in an essay on Balzac's *Etude de mœurs*, criticized the novelist's "*grandes idées vraies*" suggesting scepticism, constant verification and discrimination when applying methods of psychology, the discoveries of science and factual detail to art. He believed that Balzac, as an artist, was by nature and profession obliged to imagine and believe.

Balzac, like many writers and artists of his generation, tried to reconcile science with art. As a result, the humanist idea of the absolute universal human type was replaced by the realist view of socially determined exceptional characters. By the second half

of the nineteenth century the mediocre character came to the foreground in art and literature (e. g. Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*) and gradually, the representation of human characters gave way to a detailed description of social milieu. The Goncourt brothers claimed a more intimate connection with science than Flaubert ever did, and Zola developed the Realist concept of the *école du document* towards the Naturalistic concept of *roman expérimental*; an idea based on Claude Bernard's *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale* of 1865. In the visual arts the general development had a similar tendency from Manet's description of *la vie moderne* to Monet's momentary impressions of landscape fragments.

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Nineteenth century art can be seen in terms of the struggle between avant-garde naturalism and academic official art, which was taking place within the general stylistic development from Neo-Classicism to Post-Impressionism. Avant-garde naturalism claimed to negate the artistic tradition and was, on the whole, antagonistic to existing social conditions. At the same time, by following up a quasi-scientific investigation of nature it became the motor of stylistic change. Official art, consistently claiming the heritage of Antique and Renaissance classicism, but actually only trying to preserve the immediate past, made constant use of these innovations. With a time lag of approximately a decade, it incorporated most of the technical inventions of the avant-garde but adjusted them to the idealising demands and pseudo-modernity of the Establishment. Official academic art enjoyed the financial and moral support of the entrenched bourgeoisie by means of commissions, state-organised exhibitions and public honour. The avant-garde had the negative privileges of the minority group in a liberal society. In a sense, both were culturally in the same position, they reflected social conditions and mentality without society directly providing them with a really meaningful philosophy of life suitable for concrete artistic expression.

By the middle of the century official academic art was praised and avant-garde art was ridiculed by the public; but neither of

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them was genuinely accepted. The really popular tendency in art was *Kitsch*, which fulfilled a new social need for an art that was intended only to please without existentially involving the beholder, and provided wide sections of bourgeois society with a convenient lie. Lacking meaningful human values in life, society welcomed and propagated the convenient pipe-dreams of *Kitsch*. Petty in content and scale it was suitable for everyday consumption; it was equally good for public buildings and the private drawing rooms. The originals were purchased by the rich at the annual Salons or through a chain of dealers, and cheap prints made after the most popular pieces flooded the market for the poor. *Kitsch* was the only art of the period which involved unconditionally almost the whole of society.

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The social function of the official academic art was to celebrate the abstract concepts of liberty, fraternity and equality as interpreted by government officials. The social function of *Kitsch* was to please. The first was too institutional, was artificially created and had little connection with social consciousness. For this reason, those abstract ideals of democracy were not developed into a concrete meaningful imagery collectively shared by artist and society. The second was too loose and almost intentionally detached from the reality of human experiences. *Kitsch* was produced for an unknown impersonal public like consumer goods; its quality and meaning was determined by the fluctuation of taste and market. Neither official academic art nor *Kitsch* had a genuine basic subject-matter which could have provided them with autonomous artistic problems. Avant-garde art, on the other hand, had nature—though gradually stripped from human meanings—as subject-matter, science as an approach to life and art, and last but not least, the new social idea of individual commitment as a social relationship—even if sometimes in terms of negation—was equally protecting its artistic and personal integrity.

Socio-political Activism and ivory-tower Parnassism are only phenomenal characteristics of the avant-garde concept of art.

It is the idea of commitment as an aesthetic attitude affecting all aspects of the creative act, which is the cause and the basis of any avant-garde notion of art. At a psychological level, there was little difference between the socio-political and the aestheticist commitment. Aesthetically, documentary evidence and works of art hardly show a significant dichotomy in this respect. Under the impact of external social and internal artistic developments there was, however, a significant change in the interpretation that was spontaneously given to the socio-political and cultural situation of the post-1871 era. The story about Monet who early in 1872 visited Courbet, the old revolutionary facing trial for his part in the *Commune*, illustrates this point. Monet, the most uncompromising among the Impressionists, though indifferent to matters of politics, made it clear that he paid his gratitude to Courbet the great modern artist and had no concern with his political views and actions. This statement would have been more plausible from an ethical point of view in connection with a scientist, than with an artist whose creative work was supposed to involve the totality of personality.

It has already been suggested that the internal development of avant-garde art grew from the original bourgeois idea of art which drew an analogy between art and science. As in science it was the logic of the internal development of the avant-garde to narrow down systematically the subject-matter of artistic enquiry from an all-round panorama of social existence to the fragment of personal experience and self-contained form. It is ironical that the negation of a *critical* social commitment in the later stages of avant-garde art was also an indirect reflection of contemporary society. It was the hostile social surroundings which provided the social and intellectual environment of avant-garde art: the laboratory conditions for artists and art committed to experimentation.

In a social and economic system that despised traditional values in anything but morality and art, the commercial and scientific achievements of the individual became the new values. The submission to traditional values in art by a basically anti-traditional society made little sense to the avant-garde. Through anti-traditionalism and commitment to experiment, through individualism and continuous search for novelty, the avant-garde acted according to the bourgeois concept of life and social norms.

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The novelty of form as a meaning and value in art was the only social meaning, the manifest content of contemporary society suitable for artistic expression, irrespective of the hostility of the public. In this sense, modern art is as much the expression of bourgeois social consciousness as, for instance, Gothic art was of mediaeval Scholasticism.

### THE AVANT-GARDE IN SEARCH OF ART AND REALITY

*The plastic virtues, purity, unity and truth, keep nature vanquished under their feet... The workers are allowed to master the universe and the gardeners have less respect for nature than have the artists... one must be able to embrace at a glance the past, the present and the future.*

(Apollinaire)

*Life is movement... to try to check life in midflight and recapture it in the form of a work of art, a sculpture or a painting, seems to me a mockery of the intensity of life.*

(Tinguely)

Nineteenth century definitions of Naturalism were based on the complex relationship of three concepts: nature, science and personality. The meaning and the importance given to these concepts in successive definitions of Naturalism varied considerably. The most significant changes were made in the second half of the century; definitions of the art of Naturalism by Castagnary and Zola are probably the most revealing. In Castagnary's definition, nature as a subject-matter of art included social existence; Zola, on the other hand, thought of it as a series of reality fragments. Science, in Castagnary's definition, was the modern approach to the phenomena of nature and he connected it with the ideas of modern rationalism; Zola used this concept to adduce the objectivity of personal observation and description which he associated with an art free from *a priori* considerations. According to Castagnary, the personality factor is important because the artist 'is again in the centre of

his time with the mission of reflection... (that) determines the genuine utility, in consequence, the morality of art'; in Zola's interpretation it has the double function of the recording eye and the life-love-emotion generating heart. At the same time the disintegration of art forms, a process which began at the end of the Baroque, reached its climax. It is in respect of the fragmentation and disintegration of the idea of reality and art that Cubism was one of the most important landmarks in the history of the avant-garde notion of art.

Although, Cubism was a reaction against the art and theory of Naturalism tied to philosophical Positivism, it inherited the three basic concepts of the aesthetics of Naturalism. It was not the introduction of new concepts but the new definitions of the old ones which formed the basis of Cubist aesthetic theories and art. Nature was given a wider meaning than fragments of the world of visible phenomena; in the Cubist interpretation it meant the totality of cosmic existence. Science was no longer interpreted in terms of observation and description of manifest data, but at the means by which the artist can comprehend and master the dialectics of the universe. Once again in the history of European art the study of mathematics had been considered an imperative prerequisite of the creative act. The Cubist meanings of the image of personality in the definitions of art were contrary to its nineteenth century meanings connected with the artist's limited social commitments, sensual recording functions, and the emphasis on his emotional responses; Cubist theories stressed the intellect's role in the production of art, and they compared the creative power of the artist's personality with the divinity of gods.

Indeed, the original bourgeois concept of art which drew an analogy between science and art had survived the nineteenth century and remained the meaning and the motivation of the avant-garde idea of art. Though there is no substantial historical evidence for any direct relationship between early twentieth century science and art, the similarity of problems and methods, and the simultaneity of achievements are striking. The developmental stages of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics closely correspond in time with the developmental stages of Cubist art. At least in terms of its programme, avant-garde art had the same subject-matter and a method similar to science.

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They also shared, of course, the same social environment, though the external social responses towards science and art were considerably different.

From about the end of the 1880s, there were some genuine signs of reconciliation between the bourgeoisie and the avant-garde. The common desire for social unity was, however, thought of in different terms by the conservative right and the progressive left of the bourgeois Establishment. The building of the neo-Romano-Byzantine *Sacré-Cœur*, a memento of the suppression of the *Commune* symbolizing the new unity of Church and National Assembly as the pledge of social and economic development, and the erection of the simple steel structure of the *Eiffel Tower* at the Paris World's Fair of 1889, commemorating the centenary of the French Revolution symbolizing the complex unity of industrial society, reflect the extremes of contemporary social morality and its relationship with the arts.

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The *Eiffel Tower* is among the few man-made objects to have gained universal symbolical meaning in modern society. Described by the novelist Huysmans as a triumph of industrial civilization, '...a belfry without bells but fitted with a cannon to call the faithful to the Mass of High Finance, the brokers' vespers; a signal gun that booms a smoky summons to the cult of Capital', was given a wider and deeper human meaning by the poets and artists of the early twentieth century. In Apollinaire's and Cendrars's poetry and in Robert Delaunay's painting it was associated with Apollo's Python which, like the illustration of Gafurius's *Practica musice* of 1496, connects the earth with the heavenly spheres. It was also associated with the Scion of David and the Wood of the Cross. The juxtaposition of the *Eiffel Tower* and the motif of an obelisk was a recurring theme in Dufy's work. In contrast to the eclecticism of nineteenth century architecture, the *Eiffel Tower* affirmed the double aspects of architectural function: the unity of utilitarian and representative social purposes.

Cubism, the last great universal intellectual movement which

aimed at the unity of all arts under the umbrella of the Fine Arts, formulated and tried to express the absolute, objective, universal aspects of reality by abstracting fragments of the visible world and using them in an emblematic form. Hence the problem of aesthetic totality was in the centre of Cubist experiments. The internal logic of the development of Cubist art, with its emphasis on composition and structure, corresponded with an iconography in which individual and social themes were replaced by universal human problems. At the same time, particular art forms were once again directed towards a common goal. The idea and the design of the *Maison Cubiste* tried to unite all Cubist activities in the various art forms, and had a penetrating influence on interior design, architecture, typography and the modern theatre. Though more eclectic than purely Cubist in style, the *Ballet Russe* was one of the best examples of the Cubist idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* dominated by the Fine Arts.

The themes of Cubist iconography were, however, internally provided; most were borrowed from classical mythology. The original mythological motifs were saturated with ideas and images of modern life and scientific achievements, and were translated into the Cubist idiom. For example, the figure of Icarus was fused with the new image of the aeroplane, and the obelisk with the Eiffel Tower. Although the social tension between the bourgeoisie and the avant-garde was more relaxed than it had been around the middle of the nineteenth century, and the new dimensions of scientific achievements considerably shortened the time lag in avant-garde stylistic investigations and public acceptance, the raw material of Cubist imagery was not the product of social consciousness but of artistic experiments in the laboratory conditions of the *atelier*.

Ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence, Modern Paris and the new order of the City of Tomorrow were among the important themes of Cubist art and literature. Cubism—in contrast with the *modernolatry* of Futurism, the Italian version of the French movement—tried to build a bridge between past and future. It is in this respect that the Neo-Platonic humanism of the Renaissance and the science-orientated myth of modernity were fundamental aspects of many Cubist aesthetic theories. They were to provide the human element: a modern lyrical humanism and a new

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concept of beauty. The classicist aesthetics and the science-orientated approach of Cubist art helped to reconstitute the classical concept of the autonomy of the work of art.

However, the Fine Arts such as painting and sculpture have, by definition and tradition, no other than representative social functions. Like its predecessors for approximately the last hundred years, Cubism had not been provided by society with a social function; contrary to its hopes and ambitions it shared the fate of the earlier avant-garde. The logical possibilities of Analytical Cubism were exploited by the middle of 1912. Although technical inventions such as *trompe-l'œil*, *collage*, *papier collé* and *construction* gave new dimensions to Cubist experiments and were responsible for the development of Synthetic Cubism, the first crisis of the Cubist movement became apparent. About the autumn of 1912, attempts were made within the movement to deny the significance of the term "Cubism" and the common stylistic characteristics of the group. It is somewhat ironical that Apollinaire's Neo-Platonic deification of the artist's personality as omnipotent creator (June, 1908) was changed to Raynal's emphasis on the role of different artistic temperaments—so reminiscent of Zola's definition of art.

It has already been suggested that the central problem in the history of the avant-garde concept of art was the social role and the position of the artist in bourgeois society. The failure of the Cubist attempt to reconcile the sentimental-idealistic bourgeois and the quasi-scientific avant-garde aspirations contributed to the rise of anti-art tendencies.

The humanism of the Renaissance has been associated with the bourgeoisie since the Enlightenment. The Fine Arts, on the other hand, have been associated with humanist and classicist ideas. The visual vocabulary of sculpture and painting was largely dependant on the human figure, and occasionally ideas on human proportions influenced stylistic developments. It was one-sided but logical to assume that the negation of the validity of Fine Art in the twentieth century is a meaningful artistic and social protest. Also, it was expected that this new avant-garde attitude would lead towards new possibilities in artistic experiments.

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Dada, the fine art movement with an anti-art programme which emerged during the First World War, was the first to attack the aesthetic and social validity of the general concept of Fine Art. In the nineteenth century, Realism and Naturalism attacked the sentimental-idealistic concept of Fine Art as it was affirmed by official academic art and *Kitsch*. The artists of Realism and Naturalism wanted Fine Art to reflect modern life and to participate in social life. Dada aesthetic theories wanted to do away with art by turning the attention from the work of art to the artist's actions, and also by replacing the creative act with the selection and construction of fragments isolated from physical reality.

Indeed, the "ready-made" objects of the Dada revived what was probably the most ancient method of producing art: selection instead of creation. By selecting the already physically existing object and placing it in an entirely new environment, usually in an aesthetic context, it gained a new, aesthetic existence; it became a new kind of work of art. By ridiculing the concept of the autonomy of art, the artists of the Dada tried to blur the difference between the reality of the work of art and the reality of nature. This too, in a sense, was similar to the concept of nineteenth century Naturalism, though in a reverse process. In the nineteenth century attempts were made to create an art which was derived from and was penetrated by fragments of visible reality as observed through the personality of the artist. Hence it was art which was submitted to nature and equated with it. On the other hand, the 'naturalism' of the Dada and subsequent developments brought unadulterated physical fragments of reality into an artistic existence: an attempt was made to submit nature to art.

From the late 1910s, the interpenetration of real and pictorial space appears to be the characteristic tendency in avant-garde painting. Marcel Duchamp's *Tu'm* of 1918, now in the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, a painting on canvas from which a three-dimensional brush protrudes with its shadow depicted on the canvas, is one of the earliest examples of this new idea of reality and art. The same idea can be traced in the art

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of Surrealism—whether the images created are representational or abstract—and in all post-war styles such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop-Art, Op-Art and Kinetic structures.

The ambiguity of the real and the unreal within the framework of artistic creation has been typical of all art forms in avant-garde art in this period. In literature, there has been an attempt to get away from the printed word and abstract thought in favour of the more emotional involvement of the reader by the use of sound-effects, and also by provoking and utilising a chain of free associations in the reader. By 1916, Dada poetry made an attempt to abandon language and to create phonetic poems through an unconscious 'alchemy of the Word.' Avant-garde music has been using processed natural and artificial sound fragments such as squawks and squeals since the early 1910s. The Futurist Russolo introduced "unmusical sounds" into music, and in March 1913 he published *The Art of Noises* manifesto. During the next few years he worked on his *Intonarumori* (noiseorgans), elaborate machines to be used as musical instruments for the recording of noise. Satie in his "*ballet réaliste*," *Parade* of 1917, used sounds of a dynamo, a siren, a telegraph key, an airplane propeller and a typewriter, and contrasted this cacophonous music with unassuming melodies. In the avant-garde theatre there has been a tendency for many years to replace the importance of the playwright with that of the actor. An escape from words is reflected in the actors performing amongst the audience in an attempt to inflict a systematic violence on the spectator. As in literature, the visual arts and music, the new concept of the 'living theatre' is no longer satisfied by the physically passive aesthetic response of the audience.

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The Dada rebellion against the concept of fine art was an important influence on the development of modern functional architecture and design. The bourgeoisie was always in favour of those utilitarian art forms in which the new practical requirements, due to the lack of tradition, necessitated new ideas and forms.

The Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus and De Stijl soon produced an anti-ornamental and anti-Fine Art style of architecture and design which was scientific, functional and modern; the adequate aesthetic expression of an efficient industrial society and economic system. Although the ideas and the styles of these movements were produced and developed largely by artists with a Fine Art background, the emphasis was on architecture and design.

Once again in the history of European art, architecture and applied arts became the dominating art forms. Indeed, the functional and purist style of modern architecture and design had an important effect on the style of contemporary painting and sculpture. Techniques such as the standardization of shape and colour and the systematization of working procedures, and the increasing use of new synthetic materials show the extent to which design has contributed to the actual production of Fine Art works. It is somewhat ironical that the political parties (with the exception of Italian Fascism), which aimed at the streamlining of modern capitalism by curtailing the freedom and anarchy inherent in this socio-economic system, failed to recognise the latent possibilities of avant-garde architecture and design between the two World Wars.

#### REVOLUTION, REFORM AND 'RETHINKING.'

*But today we live in far different times  
We have no oppressors no violent crimes  
We are well on the way to achieving our goal  
There's bread in plenty and there's also coal  
And although we're at war anyone can see  
It can only end in victory*

(Peter Weiss)

The establishment of Western democracies in general and American cultural politics in particular, seem to have espoused the concept of avant-garde art because it was equally condemned by Communism and Fascism, and had a progressive modern libertarian connotation. Hence, in terms of ideology, the United States as "Defender of the Free World" also became "defender of intellectual and spiritual freedom."

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It has been pointed out that historically and culturally the concept of avant-garde art was created by intellectuals in support of progressive bourgeois aspirations. Although, the original meaning of the concept changed considerably, it retained a "leftist" connotation. During the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, the artists of the avant-garde were generally associated with socio-political events. Very soon, however, their activity and art were condemned by the new socialist state. In this respect there was little difference between Leninist, Stalinist and Trotskyist approaches. The avant-garde was also condemned by most of the fascist states. While the communists considered it to be a bourgeois concept of art, the fascists were convinced of its demoralizing effects. Since both Communism and Fascism considered art as a means of direct political propaganda, their main objection was against the socially negative decadent aspects of avant-garde attitudes and art.

Decadence was only a by-product of the quasi-scientific internal development of avant-garde art. Though it never gained dominating significance, avant-garde art remained an easy target for those who failed to see its historically complex meaning. One of the effects of the post-war political status quo was the gradual disappearance of institutionalised middle-class morality. In consequence, oversimplified views on avant-garde art have given way to a more pragmatic approach. This change of mentality was one of the greatest achievements and, at the same time, a tragedy of the intelligentsia in Western democracies.

In a world divided between Communism and modern libertarian Democracy (the 1950s has not yet shown signs of a fascist revival), the intelligentsia had an important role in the ideological reconstruction of democratic social and cultural institutions in the Western world. S. M. Lipset in his book, *Political Man* of 1960, was among the first to claim that post-war Western society with its modern democratic system 'is not only or even primarily a means through which different groups can attain their ends or seek the good society; it is the good society itself in operation.' He argued, that 'the fundamental problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state; and the democratic

left has recognized that an increase in over-all State power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions for economic problems.' In 1961, Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* pointed out that the ideology of socio-political conflict has now been replaced by a pragmatic approach and liberal reforms by Western intellectuals. Instead of pursuing ideals, the furthering of science and technique became their main concern. As early as 1956, E. H. Gombrich in an article "The Vogue of Abstract Art" (reprinted in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 1963). asked: "how long must we still accept such categories of nineteenth century political thought? How long are we to be subject to what may be called the 'polarization' of intellectual life into 'progressive' and 'reactionary,' 'left' and 'right'? These terms and sentiments, after all, are not God given... In all spheres of life the oversimplified view of history and human destiny has been recently giving way to a sober mood of empiricism. It ought to prove a blessing to art... I can see no way of discussing *theories* of art, of assessing their value, other than by submitting them to the test of experiment and such rational discussion as is possible, to establish whether the theories *work*."

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The change in the Establishment's attitude towards avant-garde art had an important effect on the purchasing policy of public collections, but it could hardly have been directly responsible for changing public attitudes. Nor is it likely that the public's recognition of avant-garde art has been the result of the emergence of a better educated public which is more capable of understanding artistic meaning and aesthetic merit than its nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors. It is more likely, however, that the sudden increase in the price of works of contemporary avant-garde art, mainly due to the demand created by public collections, established the reputation of avant-garde art in terms of financial worth. Hence the assessment of complex artistic achievements became simple and straightforward; expressible and comprehensible in figures. The spectacular post-

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war prices of nineteenth and early twentieth century avant-garde works of art, which the artists were hardly able to sell at the time of creation, have been used as an historical analogy after the war to prove that the purchase of contemporary avant-garde works means good investment.

The art-market, of course, is more complex than to be determined by offer and demand. Aesthetic standards concerning style and technique have been used in establishing the stature of avant-garde artists and works. In this respect the position of the professional art critic has changed considerably. Some of the norms and categories of evaluation were borrowed from the past, such as the refinement of handling and composition. In this respect a Braque or a Rauschenberg have been assessed on similar grounds as a Titian or a Rembrandt painting. However, some new norms and categories of evaluation have also been introduced. Probably the most important of these was concerned with novelty of form and technique; only used in the past in avant-garde circles.

Once it had been accepted by the Establishment, the novelty of form as a meaning and value in art became self-centred: it became the purpose rather than the result of anti-traditionalism and experimentation. The self-conscious search for novelty devoid of internal artistic problems created a situation in which new formal devices introduced into art to attract attention began to resemble gimmicks.

The basic internal problem of art has hardly changed since the Surrealism of the 1930s: the ambiguity of artistic and physical reality. The succession of post-war avant-garde trends, such as Abstract Expressionism, Post Painterly Abstraction, Hard Edge, Neo-Dada, Pop Art and Kinetic Art were mainly concerned with what Rauschenberg called the gap between art and life. Since the basic problem of art remained the same, differences of style and novelty of form have no longer been the outcome of genuine internal developments, but have been affected by external circumstances. Novelties, therefore, are more quantitative than qualitative; concerning size, execution, real movement and the psychological exploitation of shock.

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It is often claimed that the artistic centre of the world shifted from Paris to New York after the second World War. In fact, Paris as an art centre never really recovered its nineteenth and early twentieth century significance after the First World War. Picasso's and Matisse's move to the South of France by the end of the 1910s appears to have been symbolical in this connection. Neither in regard to resident artists, nor in respect of exhibitions and the art-market has New York been, since 1945, more significant than, for instance, London or Paris. Indeed, there is no reason why there should always be a single art centre in the world, but it cannot be denied that for the last twenty years some of the most important avant-garde trends in art came from America.

Economic, political and social reasons have been suggested to explain this new significant American contribution to Western art. Though external circumstances probably helped to widen the scope and to increase the influence of American art, they could not have been responsible for its emergence and for its characteristics. The suggestion that the origins of modern American art is due to the influence of European avant-garde artists resident in the United States during the Second World War appears to be important only in so far as it brought the ideas and works of the European avant-garde into personal contact with the youngest generation of American artists.

Many of the basic ideas of modern American art trends are, indeed, directly connected with the aspirations and achievements of the European avant-garde of the first half of the century. The peculiar American quality of the new avant-garde seems to have been derived from the conclusive exaggeration of ideas and technical devices which were previously invented and used in European avant-garde art in a potentially latent form. It is possible that the relative lack of artistic tradition and the somewhat self-conscious urge to join and eventually to lead Western artistic development were responsible for the American attitude.

Ever since Jackson Pollock introduced the technique of *action painting* by which the artist during the creative process is literally *in* the painting, the creative act has been taking place within the

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physical limits of the work of art. The enormous size of the works of art, filling the spectator's field of vision to provide a controlled and well-tempered environment, has gradually eliminated the aesthetic and psychological difference between artistic and physical reality. Hence, the relationship between art and nature is no longer a matter of dichotomy, harmony or ambiguity, but a matter of negation. The work of art that affirms an aesthetic of anti-art and asserts that its meaning *is* reality, does not only make aesthetic detachment and criticism impossible for the beholder, but prevents the possibility of reality-testing. By asserting that the content of the aesthetic experience is a reality experience, the avant-garde art of today, paradoxically, negates reality by substituting it with art.

Since the artist's creative act and the beholder's response are often taking place within the physical limits of the work of art and within the aesthetic realm of art, the work of art as a material object and as a concrete meaning expressed in terms of sensuous form loses its significance and, theoretically, art is gradually becoming a psychological condition. Indeed, it has already been claimed: 'Art should burst boundaries... Object art is over. We are moving away from the physical view of reality as that which exists to a kinetic conception of reality as that which seems to occur. This is a shift from being to becoming... Kinetic works do not contain time, they create time... a subject system dialectic capable of integrating us with the environment. We have reached the end of disinterestedness, impartiality, and contemplation... Involvement mitigates the inside-outside split and destroys the subject-object duality. Fusion brings us into a single spiritual body... The proper response to art is not criticism but art... Words no longer work... To become meaningful again, words, like art and life, have to be emptied out, transparent, void... Air art doesn't interpret reality, it is reality.'

POSTSCRIPT.

*War is sex for the Americans, and for  
a lot of people not just for Americans  
it's a substitute.*

(Tuli Kupferberg)

Socio-political protest as a subject-matter has been revived in all media of contemporary avant-garde art. The modern human condition has usually been described in terms of alienation; only sex and violence are left as means of liberation. These seem to form the basis of the subject-matter and form of many recent avant-garde works of art. Although the social and political content is often anti-Establishment, most of the works are considered according to their artistic merit and are usually favourably received by the Establishment. Of course, if art is reality in terms of aesthetic experience, than an art of protest is socio-politically meaningless in terms of social existence.