

*A public lecture by Dana Gordon given at the New York Studio School, 1999:*

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## **FAUX POPULI / FALSE ART**

### **POST-MODERNISM AND MASS CULTURAL SUICIDE**

...though the names of the members of David's and the preceding generation are known, their works are partly lost or buried in obscure museums and, for the most part, rightly forgotten. In the ingenious and frequently enthusiastic analyses of their pictures in the Salons of Diderot, one has the feeling, despite the vitality of his diction, that one is dealing with shadows. *For it was more the attitude of these artists, their relation to actuality or nature (which included something of sentiment), than the qualities of the productions that Diderot and the other critics were praising.*

Walter Friedlaender, David to Delacroix

Occasionally a high energy contention in a sub-culture reaches critical mass and bursts out into the mass culture as a most egregious example of a cultural trend. This occurrence is often portentous. It may mark the end of such a trend or it may mark that it has reached a much broader level of influence.

Certainly the big-time assertion by the front page of the most important American newspaper of the fashionable notion that mass culture, i.e., billboards, TV ads and programs, music videos, etc., is equal to or in fact is fine art is one of these occurrences. On the last day of 1996 with seemingly proto-millennial aspiration, the newspaper-of-record went to the unusual length of beginning a feature article by its chief art critic in a major spread on the front page. The article's main thrust was to claim that today the new Times Square is art.

Anyone who really values art has to find this event a violation. Where the piece appeared was the exceptional thing about it. The claim it made on art has a long and recently shameful history.

This battle over the very existence of fine art, or high art, or just art, is a major theater in our thirty-years culture war. The desire to snuff out fine art is one of the many peculiar, Quixotic self-abnegations typical of the anti-culture that has come to be known as post-modernism, the dominant culture of the past twenty years or so in academia and the art-and-culture world. These post-modernists endeavor to substitute for fine art what they call popular art, insisting that fine art, along with its authors and institutions, is and has been elitist, racist, sexist,

homophobic, ethnocentric, etc., etc.: generally guilty, by association at least, of all sins and contributory to all miseries of humankind and therefore illegitimate as art.

In the past in the evaluation of a work of art, the expressed or implied or inferred personal, social, or political views of an artist were considered at most very secondary to the aesthetic, technical, intellectual and emotional quality of his work. If, in the execution of these qualities, the views were carried into the work on the level available to the viewer's conscious perception, they might add to or they might take away from the more important qualities. While the emphasis on achievement in all these qualities combined, but not the views, ultimately would eliminate truly evil work from being considered great, it was acceptable to find that there were nasty people who made good art and good people who made bad art, depressed people who made joyous art, and happy people who made depressing art. Often little was known of the artist except the art. The quality of the art mattered, not the qualities of the artist. (The influence of an artist's social position and contacts on his or her chances for commercial and historical success remains another matter.)

The weight of great evil on great beauty does occur in exceptional cases about which there is steeply divided opinion. For example is Richard Wagner's music made unbearable and unacceptable not simply by his anti-Semitism but by the explicit implications of the program Wagner himself gave to his music, ideas which inspired his music and which the artist made inseparable from it? This programmatic music was meant to stir violent tribal passions in Germany and it did. Is Wagner's music Nazism *avant la lettre*? The prevailing opinion nowadays is to enjoy Wagner's music. And what of the extraordinary motion pictures made for Hitler by Leni Riefenstahl? By standards of film form these are great, but by intent, effect, and message they are propaganda, advertisements for Hitler and Nazism. So some art can be highly achieved aesthetically and also be evil. The problem would not come up if the work did not have great artistic power. Manet's wonderful painting, *Au Bar aux Folies Bergere*, was written about extensively by post-modernists because of its sociological interest, but it wouldn't have been written about at all if it were not so superior artistically that everyone must know it. But it was not the artistic, aesthetic power that made the German works evil, it was the use of this power by the artist to communicate, with the intent to enact, an evil agenda. Though salient and challenging, these cases do not change the general principle of evaluating art by its total quality. On the contrary, they require it.

The post-modernist endeavor has gone further than merely to question whether or not there is a distinction to be made, whether distinctions are to be made at all, between good and bad art or about anything on the basis of quality, as opposed to the basis of other qualifications such as ethnic origin, and if so on what or whose

authority? It asserts that there is no distinction to be made and makes this a moral, ethically based assertion — in other words, political or religious, based on beliefs not observations or knowledge.

One must deduce from this position that one is to judge an artwork's worth by its agreement with one's political agenda. An example from recent decades of the effect of this kind of evaluation is the choice by the collective artworld/academia promotional machine in the period of about 1975 to 1995 to promote art made by African-American women if it is mimetic and based on folk art and not to promote art made by African-American men if it is abstract and based in the fine arts tradition, no matter if Mr. A's painting is much more highly achieved than Ms. B's quilt. Here the aesthetic power itself does not even matter, only the artist's use of art to further a political agenda. By this standard art is good if it agrees with my politics, not if it transcends them. Thus post-modernism uses art the way the Nazis and the Communists did. If art is defined by political preference, then the work has to state one or it is not art; by extension, if it is not my preference, I don't consider it art.

Is there a standard of judgment that can proclaim excellence or mediocrity on much the same basis in any century (while nevertheless allowing for changes of style and circumstance), transcending local differences, as those who support the elite qualities of fine art and the superiority of the old masters as a matter of moral and essential importance would say? Or do the standards of judgment truly change with the change of styles and in the end don't matter anyway (a cynical stance inherited from post-war existentialist absurdism), as the post-modernists would say? Is art "wherever you find it", as the *Times'* writer asserts, or is art made by artists and not very often? Is popular art, whatever it may be, the equal of fine art?

The *Times* came down forcefully on the post-modernist non-distinction side, the side of popular art as opposed to side of fine art. It said that mass art is the art of our time. It seemed unaware that world popular culture, mass culture, such as it is now, is created by large corporations to boost profits and stock prices, whether the "cultural" product is a movie, a rock CD, a TV show, a music video, Times Square or sexy underwear ads. The new Times Square, and to a great extent the old, was created by real estate and advertising interests solely to maximize their holdings and profits.

It is true that fine art can be used toward such ends and could become popular without becoming popular art. Art in fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy, for example, was primarily religious in its subject matter and could be considered a form of advertisement for the Catholic Church, which often commissioned it. But it commissioned religious art, not religious advertising. The clerics who ordered the art, whether pope or monk, wanted the finest artists they could find and afford. And these artists, by nature and by reputation, subordinated the

religious program to the aesthetic demands of their work, thereby in the end creating greater power for the spiritual message desired by both artist and church.

But there is no fine art in Times Square, though there may be artful experiences offered on the street there. Indeed the streetscape is sometimes remarked on for its resemblance to a shallow, newish (in the long scheme of things) art called installation art that is in part based on the kind of real-life happenstance that occurs in Times Square and on any other street corner. But the attempt at reproduction of everyday reality has not in and of itself ever either produced the quality that raises a work to the level of art, even work of the most mimetic styles, or matched the depth of everyday life.

Fine architecture one might find in Times Square, if one looks hard enough. But the reason one must look hard is that the architecture has little presence, obscured as it is by the shouting of the display of mass art. (A Swedish friend once remarked to this writer, "Why is American television always shouting?")

Times Square consists of advertising billboards and electric signs and a stock market ticker tape, and lots of people, buildings and cars. There is no question that this encapsulates a basic quality of our culture, particularly New York's, but does this make it art? Is this all it takes to comprise art?

The billboards and signs were designed by graphic designers for the singular purpose of selling products. The ad exec and his art director did not say "let's find the best art we can and put it in Times Square." They said, "what image will best sell our client's product in Times Square?" Other motivations are attributed to the production of fine art, which account for it being called fine. But in the confused post-modern desire to be more popular and yet still high, to exploit the market but seem not to be doing so, the *Times* wanted its readership to believe that there is no distinction other than size and date between Times Square and a painting by Fra Angelico or Masaccio or Cezanne or Velasquez. (Conversely and ironically, another confused post-modern tenet is that you cannot really understand a Masaccio unless you lived during the time in which he painted.)

The masquerade of popular art as fine art is not a flowering of only our modern times. And sometimes the cultural effect of this masquerade, for example on the nature of the art produced or promoted, has been greater than at other times. In the past few decades it has gotten stronger than ever before, most likely because of the spread of mass culture by more efficient mass communications and by the world market. The dominance of the cultural discourse by the world market has produced a frenzied culture industry that attempts to imitate the fashion and information industries and therefore has to value the popular over the good — the popular is the good. In earlier decades, in midcentury, with mass culture well underway popular art was called kitsch. Kitsch is so much more ubiquitous and

insidious now, being spread aggressively from its corporate source like the seeds in industrial farming, that it surely requires a new, less affectionate-sounding name.

The current extravagant beguilement began in earnest with the advent of Pop Art. The art world's motive to believe the self-deception about the nature of art is economic. Academia's is purportedly theoretical and moral, but it serves political purposes and has been a most efficacious route to academic (and therefore economic) success. Furthermore popular art is easier to write about than is fine art, almost by definition, and Pop Art easier than abstract art. An academic lives or dies by words, by writing and talking. Popular art and Pop Art exist primarily if not exclusively on the level of verbal, narrative message delivered by picture. And finally popular art, really mass art, opens the heretofore musty life of the academic to the quick, successive excitements of the fashionable, trendy atmosphere that the advertising world creates for popular culture.

Pop Art started to be made in the mid 1950s and was a big commercial success by 1962, when it abruptly replaced Abstract Expressionism as the fashion object of the contemporary art market. This event marked, in fact, the shift of interest in the contemporary art market from art to fashion.

A leading example of Pop is famously Andy Warhol's painting of a Campbell's Soup can, one of an eventual multitude of images Warhol lifted whole from popular culture, making each more famous than famous, doubling its celebrity and his by bringing it into his art. Warhol copied the formal basis of a common product label, an advertisement. The only difference is that he and assistants painted it affectlessly on a canvas, for a gallery, and the company printed it on a million labels, for stores. This change of place provides a frisson of surprise for the art viewer, making him question what is art. (E.g., is the original Campbell Soup can label itself art? Is anything an artist does art?) This is all it does, other than reproduce the formal solution derived by an ad man somewhere. This question, Is it art?, is not uninteresting, but it is not enough content in itself to comprise a work of art — unless one reduces the definition of a work of art into something very impoverished (e.g., to "discourse", as it is put in the post-modern academy). As content in of a work of art. "What is art?" is perhaps necessary but not sufficient.

Unfortunately, the promotional machinery in the artworld found that this was enough to sell art and so it was art enough for them. The absence of any emotional depth, formal exploration, and exploration of technique — what was considered *sine qua non* for art before this — was ignored. The novelty of Warhol's action, more even than the action itself, became the attraction. From then on, any novelty could be put across as art, provided there was little or no art (in the old sense) in it to confuse the issue of what in fact makes art.

Warhol's one gambit went on to a great many extrapolations by others and by himself over the next thirty years. One clearly sees its effect in the *Times* piece on Times Square. One sees its effect in another major source of that piece: Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas*, a paean to popular culture that has held architects in thrall since the 1960s. The view from Venturi has it that a gas station is our culture's Greek temple.

In service of the ascendancy of Pop Art and popular culture, obvious minor but not insignificant elements of modernism have been puffed up as precursors of post-modernism and of mass art as popular culture. For example, Willem de Kooning — an artist as steeped in fine art as they come — used part of an image of Marilyn Monroe in a small part of one of his paintings. And for a few years (in a 60 year career) he allowed imprints of newspaper fragments to show in some of his paintings. Even these paintings are primarily devoid of anything but oil paint and de Kooning's own personal brushstrokes, which otherwise make up his oeuvre in total. Yet these minute appearances are used by some writers to place de Kooning, the very archetype of the authentic painter, in support of the trend of mass culture to replace fine art. Similarly the cubist Picasso and Braque are among the most refined fine artists of the twentieth century. Yet the appearance of bits of wallpaper and newspaper in their collages are now held up by post-modernists as evidence of the strong influence of mass culture on this art and on modernism in general even though Picasso and Braque and de Kooning were using a bit of popular culture in fine art, not the other way round.

Another page in this same Machiavellian chapter of art history, perhaps even more intellectually obscurantist, was written in the notoriously frenzied art market of the 1980s when so much of the financially successful and critically acclaimed art was based on what came to be called "appropriation." "Artists" re-presented as their own art other art or popular culture material, including verbal language alone, with very little change in the material, if any. The style had many guru theorists, most endemically the French writer, Jean Baudrillard, and the ur-appropriationist and patron saint of post-modernism, the effete Marcel Duchamp (of whom more later). French intellect is often invoked here, a common post-modern ploy used by academics of the Anglo-Saxon world to fluff up suspect argument, but it's all the same Warholic approach.

These art "movements" have had an unfortunate influence even on many of those artists who do not think they are simply appropriating, who think they are making real painting. Under the influence whether consciously or not of ubiquitously promoted and commercially successful art history like "appropriation art" they really are making only emblems of paintings. They produce highly refined artisanal decorations that refer to certain painting styles or formats rather than being them or rather than being something in themselves more than just the sum of their references. (Synergy — something being more

than the sum of its parts — isn't automatic.) These works, because they are so highly decorative and smart looking, are prized by dealers because they sell more readily than art that shows signs of the wear and tear of actual thinking. Unintentionally, perhaps, these works too have become Pop Art.

There is a branch, or really a root, of post-modernism, semiotics, which insists that an artwork cannot be more than the sum of its references, it is an emblem pure and simple. (The founders of semiotics aka structuralism, like Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Christian Metz might not insist on this, but certainly their acolytes who fill the universities do. The followers of the prophet are always more fanatical, dogmatic, and limited than the prophet.) Semiotics is the study of signs — not so much of their meaning as of their linguistic construction. Semiotics is engineering; in practice it cannot accept or even recognize the existence of mystery, spirit, or emotion. The broad cultural influence, one might say like a suffocating blanket, of semiotics in academia, where most artists now study, encourages artists to substitute the signs of art for art. It is certainly true that the level of signs is much more accessible in and constitutes much more of popular art and Pop Art than of fine art.

Semiotics was one of the many intellectual fashions which in recent decades flowed over the artworld and academia like waves over the beach. Many of these fashions were exclusively fashion and not intellectual at all. But even those that were, like semiotics, removed more from art than they left. Artists and writers lost their moorings and floated out to the Sargasso Sea with the academic tide.

A seminal discovery by Warhol and his apologists was that if the art is essentially empty, the viewer will fill his own mind with associations anyway. It is a natural activity of the mind to make associations, even when there aren't any that are justified by reality. So it was discovered that one could make art that seemed full and rich and had the "aura" of art, but the artist didn't have to strive to make it that way. The viewer would do it for him. And if there were writer and dealer hucksters around to help fill the viewer's mind with suggestion of the art's important tonic qualities, so much the better. In fact, they were made necessary — to fill the void of the art's emptiness. Perhaps it was an unconscious collusion: "I'll make art that's easy to write about"/"I'll write about your art if you make it easy for me."

The purveyors of Pop Art liked Pop Art and its progeny because art based on and limited to novelty required new novelty very quickly, as there was nothing else in it but the novelty to carry interest further. The art was so simple, there was only one single perception or idea "to get." (This of course is the basic principle of fashion and advertising.) And, they discovered, once the shock of novelty wore off the public, the public found that the art was familiar and placed only minor demands on them. They could look at a familiar image with even less content

than it had in the grocery store: there was no pressure to buy the soup, only a dulcet invitation to come to a museum to be entertained, and who minds that? The engagement wasn't really real — do I buy and eat this soup because I'm hungry? It was vicarious, as well as ersatz. It was "theoretical." Artists, too, found that this sort of art put less demand on them as compared to the old kind. The artist had only to provide the affectless frisson of novelty, nothing more complicated would sell nearly so well. And if he couldn't think of anything new, then the ersatz in the guise of theory would do.

One needn't argue that Times Square itself isn't entertaining or interesting as an urban, historical, or visual phenomenon. Even the soup can or its label is visually of some interest. And the Square is a much more grandiose visual display than any individual artist could afford to put on, even Andy Warhol at his most devil may care. But the Romans had circuses and they didn't consider them art. We have other similar entertainment, pro football (also sponsored, like Times Square, by major corporations as a vehicle for advertising) for example, but we don't mistake it for art, it is sport. Times Square is advertising. If advertising wasn't entertaining, nobody would look at it, but don't be fooled into thinking that it is art, as has been the *Times* chief art critic, whose insulting airheadism that "art is wherever you find it" is an extraordinary nadir either of cynical irresponsibility or of gullibility about distinction.

Real art is rare. It occasionally is achieved by an artist and occasionally is recognized by a critic. Art can be made only by the deliberate action of an individual human being, not by corporate bureaucracy. This individual action does not, of course, guarantee that the result is art, *pace* Warhol.

Decades of critical abdication in favor of popularity, fashion and sales have created the context for the feigning off as art criticism of the *Times'* inane paean to corporate culture. For example the art magazine *Artforum*, originally in the 1960s and 1970s a repository of usually serious attempts to write about generally serious art, has been devoting its pages for nearly twenty years to fashion (7th Avenue), television, movies, rock video, art critics praising the brilliance of art because it was made from the garbage (literally) of the mass culture, and *nostalgie de la boue* in general. It is yet another source of the many corrupted meanings the *Times'* piece emerges from and stands on.

Popular entertainment standing in for art, but maintaining the name and claims of art, in fact has its origins long before the present end of the present century. Roger Fry, the great English art critic of the early 20th century, saw that,

...it was in seventeenth century Italy that that alternative tradition of popular or commercial art was first set up in open rivalry to the old tradition of the profession, a tradition which appealed to other sanctions than those granted by the gross public in recognition for the gratification



of its untrained instincts. And since the expression of sentimental and melodramatic emotion provides a slope down which the imagination glides without effort, this new tradition has been, and always, one supposes, will be, by far the greatest impulse to the manufacture of so-called works of art at any particular period. But it suffers from the fact that it is not really a tradition at all, since it has no constant methods or principles, its only standard being its power of gaining immediate success.

The war between fine art and popular art can be found in many guises; politics itself, for instance, stands opposed to fine art and has much in common with popular art. Politics runs on slogans, simple statements or quickly grasped images ("sound bites") easily remembered, much like a soup can label. Politics strongly influenced American art in the 1930s, an influence that stayed but waned through the 1950s, and certainly has influenced art again in the past ten or fifteen years, although in the recent decade the art world has mistaken the detritus of corporate culture for an authentic popular art, a modicum of which still existed in the 1930s, perhaps even the 1950s.

In contradistinction, the great period of American art usually referred to as Abstract Expressionism, an art of aesthetic and emotional depth, arose at a time of reaction by some artists and critics against political and popular appeal in art, a time after fifteen years of great world-wide suffering in economic depression, totalitarian repression and total world war. One of the artistic leaders in this development was the Armenian-American painter Arshile Gorky. Of the advent of Gorky's highly influential personal abstract style after 1940, the critic Harold Rosenberg wrote (in 1962):

The bankruptcy of a rationale of progress in regard both to art and to social history had to be acknowledged and an appeal addressed to other powers of mind.

And in 1947 Rosenberg wrote of these artists with poignant relevance for our current discussion: "Estrangement from American objects here reaches the level of pathos."

Championed also by the great art critic Clement Greenberg, these artists included William Bazotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, among others. Authenticity — truth, especially truth in the art — was one of the most important and basic concerns of these artists and these writers

The denial of the contemporary validity or even the existence of authenticity in art is one of post-modernism's major tenets, and a major pillar in its support of pop and mass art as the real art. By authenticity the post-modern theorists mean the emotional reality and depth and personal originality of an artist's work — a

rare acceptance by them of the common definition of a term. The soup can, of course, became a major emblem of the theory that authenticity not only doesn't exist but doesn't matter. And this is not an issue limited to art — most recently, we read discussion in the *Times* and elsewhere about the meaninglessness of the original on the Internet, where all is reproduction. (But what of the changes made to the information at each computer stop?) It's a glib response to a serious challenge to integrity in human communication.

Perhaps the reaction against the authentic in art, inexplicable from a rational point of view, can be attributed to an Oedipal need to kill off the previous generation's claim to fame in order to give oneself something else to claim professionally. This is easier than accepting authenticity as valid and then having to be authentic, and achieve within this requirement. It's easier to change the rules of the game than to compete in a difficult game. And certainly within their own circumscribed universe of discourse, the semioticians are right: what could possibly be authentic about something that is only a bundle of references? Further, and again conversely, post-modernism has lurking beneath its surface the old-left red herring that fine art is not authentic, that art cannot possibly be authentic unless it comes from popular culture.

A source of this view, the meaninglessness of authenticity, and one of post-modernism's underpinnings is Walter Benjamin's essay of the mid 1930s, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", a text increasingly referred to with a biblical reverence and frequency in art academia since the late 1960s. But this confused essay begins with the patently false statement that "In principle a work of art has always been reproducible" and then ends with a Note saying "Precisely because authenticity is not reproducible...."

Without going into the reasons for the apotheosis of victimhood (another caryatid of the post-modernist temple) in the late 20th century, I believe it is not a coincidence that Benjamin, a Jew apparently trapped in France by the Nazis and Fascists and because of this a suicide in 1940, was proclaimed in the 1970s and 1980s as a major culture hero. Yet Benjamin's writing and life are filled with willful, pathological contrariness. For years in the 1920 and 1930s his longtime, devoted friend, the scholar Gershom Scholem, offered him an escape to Palestine from the onslaught in Europe, which they both clearly saw, of deadly anti-Semitic totalitarianism. Walter Benjamin, an artist at ambiguous and evasive writing, put himself in a position where he would have to evade the Nazis but ultimately fail to.

Any discussion, however brief, of the war against and for distinction in art would be seriously wanting without mention of the greatest *bête noire* of post-modernism, the critic Clement Greenberg, a champion of personal authenticity and intellectual responsibility in both artist and critic. The huge number of academic thesis and art rag pages devoted to the *de rigueur* ritual, Oedipal killing

of Greenberg over the past several decades has perhaps been exceeded only by those devoted to the apotheosis of Saint Duchamp. And how Oedipal it is: kill the threatening, authoritative, masculine father, Greenberg, and replace him with the less assertive, less demanding, more effeminate — even sexually ambiguous, therefore less clear or authoritative — Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp also brought with him from his background in the French aristocracy the old aristocratic principle that one shouldn't actually work, especially not with one's hands. (A little mental work or sport was OK.) The irony of how influential this has been in art and in academia is somehow lost on the confused, quasi-Marxist American academics, who reject a genuine man of the people in Greenberg.

Greenberg writing in 1969 on Duchamp and to the point here is worth quoting at length:

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

Duchamp apparently realized that his enterprise might look like a retreat from "difficult" to "easy" art, and his intention seems to have been to undercut this difference by "transcending" the difference between good and bad in general....

Twenty years later, in response to a friend's expression of despair about the condition of art and the artworld, Greenberg explained, with typically mordant succinctness, "We're still in the Age of Pop."

In a society dominated by corporate culture, Times Square is not an escape from the daily humdrum into the eternity of art, it is the quotidian. Nevertheless the 12/31/96 *Times* article made the insolent comparison, as opposed to the contrast, of Times Square to the Athenian acropolis. The Athenian acropolis truly was an expression of the culture of the populace, but it was not popular culture. It was art and it was popular but it was not popular art — it was high art and produced by the greatest artists of the time. Neither was it a real estate adventure nor an advertising venue. It was the embodiment and outgrowth of a culture's deepest spiritual needs, desires and achievements. If the contemporary Times Square is

this for our culture, as the *Times* chief art critic implies, we are in deep, deep trouble.

But one needn't accept the deep cynicism of post-modernism nor join in its mass cultural suicide. Yearly fashion changes and sterilizing art theory have indeed dominated the artworld for the last decades of the twentieth century. Yet we know, we can see in art itself, at least in the art of the past, that art provides something larger, more free, open and adventurous, something deeper and more personal, something for the entire imagination, for the whole being. It is not a corporate toy or an academic ploy. Painting is 35,000 years old, maybe older. It is intimate, it is deep, it has the most dense history of all human cultural endeavors (except maybe war). It is, in our era of over-mediated experience, the least mediated and most inclusive and exposed of expressions. In this way, at least, it is essential and because of this the authenticity and fineness of fine art will persist.

Ad Reinhardt, an Abstract-Expressionist painter who is favored by the post-modern theorists because of his late work and who would be horrified, I surmise, by this favor, had quite a bit to say about the issues raised in this essay. He was well known for his exacting diatribes on art as well as for his art, and so, in closing, several fitting excerpts are profered:

The one idea of art as "fine", "high", "noble", "liberal", "ideal" of the seventeenth century is to separate fine and intellectual art from manual art and craft. The one intention of the word "aesthetics" of the eighteenth century is to isolate the art experience from other things. The one declaration of all the main movements in art of the nineteenth century is of the "independence" of art. The one question, the one principle, the one crisis in art of the twentieth century centers in the uncompromising "purity" of art, and in the consciousness that art comes from art only, not from anything else.

Every revolution in art turns over art from art-as-also-something-else into art-as-only-itself.

The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art-as-art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art.

*Art-as-Art, 1962; The Next Revolution in Art, 1964*

Back in 1954 Clement Greenberg wrote that, "Ambitious, major painting and sculpture continue in our time, as they always did in the past, by breaking with fixed notions about what is possible in art and what is not." Post-modernists agree with this motivation for making art, though many would quarrel with the idea of being able to distinguish "major". With whatever subsequent shadings, the idea became a mantra of art, whether modern or post-modern.

However, in post-modern hands art has declined in quality precipitously. In part this is because those under post-modern influence do not understand or believe in the notion of quality, as this essay has discussed. But it also is because they — artists, collectors, curators, writers, academics, ideologues — do not understand precisely what Greenberg was saying here (not only here, of course). He said, "what is possible in art" not "what is possible as art".

Post-modernism has encouraged artists to accept that artists do not have to produce art, that anything they produce will be accepted as art. This has been in the name of exploration, a worthy value and an important part of art, but it also has been in the name of political attitude and obliteration of quality and distinction. The whole claim is even worse — including as it does that (in the service of "fairness") anything that anyone makes is art — and has added immeasurably to the leveled greyness of quality in our environment.

This has left present and future with the difficult and essential project of recovering art, with the conservation of art, as it were. This doesn't mean repeating earlier art — no more as an academic homage than as a direct appropriation. It means that what must be learned, or relearned, is what makes something art. Now the *idée fixe* in art is that anything can be art. Our break with this must be to show that not anything can be art, that art is special, rare, and one of humanity's greatest achievements. That it is great only because of the complex, constructive, affirmative human effort it takes. That it is an achievement, exemplary and worth striving for.

Only art is art. Not art is not art. One can learn the difference.

That it was on the noses and the foreheads of his portrait subjects, and not on their ears, that Rembrandt piled the juiciest paint of his last manner has very much to do with the aesthetic results he obtained.

Clement Greenberg, 1954