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THE DEMISE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

The prospect that the mental perspectives and the cultural focus of most of us here in this room have been conditioned, and to a great extent continue to be conditioned, by the ethos, the mystique and the achievements of modernist artistic culture can hardly be questioned. The very location and circumstance of this talk can be seen to confirm the centrality of the complex of ideas, attitudes and assumptions that we call "the avant-garde" - not only to our understanding and experience of visual culture, but also to our overall view of life and society.

At the same time, artistic culture is clearly not experiencing the degree of confidence that seems to be indicated by the apparently expansive nature of our cultural institutions. There is an evident massive contradiction between the implicit messages that we read in museums, art-schools, universities and other cultural structures and those that we read as they echo throughout the art community itself.

Artistic culture believes that it sees itself in terms of

historical precedent; its very self-view is understood to be conditioned by the flow, the current, in which it locates itself. Yet, today, it clearly stands before an uncomfortable future that is not necessarily predicated in its own past traditions. Indeed, current artistic activity now glances back into its own past with some trepidation - since the historical body of modernist tradition no longer appears quite the same, no longer seems to offer a secure and valid basis for creative activity. The historical reality of modernist culture slowly reveals itself as something a little different from what we thought it was.

Of course, various established modernist critics and commentators have been reading obsequies over the sickbed of avant-garde value for at least a decade. But they have almost invariably done so in a confused and contradictory manner, declaring the demise of the avant-garde in the light of "post-modernist" tendencies that, paradoxically, remain rooted - even claim justification and sanction - in the past heroic traditions of modernism.

There is a sense abroad that the avant-garde has somehow failed, eroded, become irrelevant, even old-fashioned. Yet, the very modernist culture that was for so long marginal to established culture, regarded as being tangential, eccentric, outrageous, or just plain deranged, is now sanctioned as the artistic objectification of our present collective social self-image. There is an awareness, only half articulated, in criticism and theoretical discourse concerning studio practice, that modernist imperatives no longer apply. Nevertheless, artistic production appears to remain locked to modernist precedent - if only to the



degree that stylistic supercession validates the very structures that it extends and builds upon.

It appears evident, then, that we are confronted by a major nexus of contradiction located at the very core of our current understanding of artistic culture - whether it be in terms of critical, curatorial or studio practice. This obviously is dependant to some extent upon confusions concerning the nature of what exactly we mean by the very terms and concepts that we are using. para [What do we mean by "avant-garde"? Is it a value, a mode of artistic behaviour, or a structure of collective cultural assumptions? Is it a coherent body of thought, a style, a world-view or an aesthetic tradition? Is the notion of "avant-garde value" synonymous with that of "modernism"? Is "modernism" an ongoing and still-evolving process stemming from a past cultural mutation? Or is it a historical cultural epoch susceptible to a termination?

There is also a deeper level of confusion; and that is the one operating between an understanding of modernism as an artistic system and an understanding of modernism as a way of looking at the world. This contradiction stems from the particular ways in which artistic culture of the recent past has been, and continues to be, mythologised. The canonization of not only individual exemplars, but also of their actions, gestures and paradigmatic products (one can think here of the obvious example of Duchamp) is, however, only one aspect of the complex mechanism in which, at a primary level, the artistic producers, and, at a secondary level, the cultural consumers, orientate and identify themselves.

It is characteristic of contemporary artistic culture that the paradigms of the heroic models of modernism are now largely transmitted through the channels of a widespread and public distribution network (one made up of specialist publications and art-history lectures) rather than through the more personal earlier exchanges that took place within the confines of a defined artistic community.

This, of course, is not merely a matter of a widening of some sort of informational base, a process of enhanced availability, a "democratization" of culture. It is more in the nature of a deformation - the institutionalization<sup>5</sup> of the historic models of modernist culture. Inevitably, this development has caused a subtle transformation of those paradigms and a concomitant deflection of the process whereby the individual contemporary artist concretizes his identity in the light of heroic exemplars.

This deflection cannot but also transform the individual artist's self-view, his understanding of the very nature of his activity, role and function. Historical sanctification, however, would tend to deny and obscure this modulation. A contradiction is thus set up between the mythical structure of the exemplary model and the actual structure of the contemporary reading. The contemporary artist finds himself being progressively distanced from a traditional base to which he still believes himself to be intimately connected.

Equally, the sanctification within society at large (as opposed to the earlier limited sanctification within a distinct and contestational artistic sub-culture) of the exemplar's products, of



the paradigmatic historical artworks of modernism, that has progressively taken place during the "museum explosion" of the last two decades also tends to implant and to reinforce a contradictory self-view on the part of the artist today.

Not only have paradigmatic "masterpieces" become de-socialized and de-historicized, so also have the social and cultural situations in which they were produced. The contemporary artist is obviously further distanced from his models by the transformation (and, of course, devaluation) of historical facts into legendary ones. In the neutral and sacralized space of the museum, the individual artwork is now thrust into a continuum where the only currency of exchange is style: the social context of the work (the whole social context, that is to say the complex of associative "meanings" carried by an artwork within social discourse, as well as the social conditions of its production) is now thrust into a continuum where the only currency of exchange is myth.

If artistic culture is de-historicized in this primary way, it is also de-historicized, as it were, in a secondary manner. Just as artefacts conditioned and formed by diverse social imperatives are de-socialized by juxtaposition in museum space (the reciprocation between, for example, a cubist painting and an Eskimo mask when both are neutered and subsumed to formal plastic value) so they can<sup>also</sup> be de-historicized by a sort of telescoping of time. The "recent acquisitions" room in which a newly-purchased seminal "masterpiece" and last year's fashionable confection create a tension between them that is resolved in the common denominator of time-less time, history-less history.

This de-historicization is not contained, not limited to its own objects, but informs the whole continuum of which the museum is, itself, representative - and, of course, it informs social individuals, not least the contemporary artist who interacts with the museum. He sees, or has the potential to see, his own work enshrined in that privileged, self-encapsulated space. This expectation is conditioned, however, by a series of contradictions between the individual artist's response to the legendary artistic tradition (between his sense of somehow "belonging" to a special aesthetico-social formation sanctioned by the myths of modernist art-history) and his necessary reaction to the conditions that actually pertain in the present cultural superstructure.

A full historical awareness would, in this context of course, totally fragment the homogeneity of the existing cultural edifice; and the natural resolution of this contradiction is to deny history in all domains but in the merely stylistic - in short, to admit only a pseudo-history, one internalized and restricted to the dynamics of formalist progression and mutation. Style recognises that artworks follow one another as do artistic "movements"; further, style insists categorically on the notion of development.

Contemporary art conceives itself to be teleologically-directed. Contemporary "progressivist" culture sees itself as just that - in the secondary sense of the word - it progresses, it advances, improves, supercedes. But this teleology, of course is understood in terms of an integrally closed and self-encapsulated dynamic. It seems that, within the cultural domain, history has been replaced



by mere sequence.

Thus, we note the development of a deepening mystification that blankets and distorts not only the contemporary artist's understanding of his relationship to the past traditions of modernism, but also the conception he has of his current role and function in society. In the light of an evident discontinuity, I therefore propose the thesis that the social and historical reality of the avant-garde <sup>in actuality</sup> was entirely different from the way that it is now seen both by art-history and by practicing artists themselves. Further, I propose to show that an essential erosion of relevance has taken place in the domain of artistic culture that is largely confined to the parameters of the art community itself - in terms, as I have already intimated, of the artist's understanding of his basic activity.

This understanding, this self-view, comprises a body of assumptions that claim a special status for the "creative" artist which are exteriorized in the concept of the avant-garde, and they are, of course, inherited from the heroic period of modernist artistic culture at the beginning of this present century. To sustain a special understanding of the artistic role, it is necessary to insist on an unbroken continuity of modernist tradition, on the permanence - as it were - of the avant-garde.

As we shall see, this gives rise to the most extraordinary contradictions. For instance, the present logic of the art-world, conditioned as it is by changed patterns of patronage and an escalating corporatization of culture, causes the contemporary artist to see himself in a less marginal and a less contestational

role than heretofore. Yet the mythology of modernism that sustains his self-view demands a more or less fixed view of that role, one totally informed by the imperatives of a socio-cultural refusal of established value.

Equally, the massification of culture engendered by the expanding "culture industry" (publications, movies, mass-appeal didactic exhibitions like the recent New York Picasso show and so on) concretizes an even more fixed, closed and a-historical public view of the creative role that is increasingly at variance with the present conditions of artistic production. An escalating schizophrenic situation is developing in which mutually contradictory concepts slide past one another.

All the evidence of the present dynamic of artistic culture would point to the fact that the homogeneity of the flow of modernist tradition (insisted upon by the artistic community and mass culture alike) is an illusion. It seems clear that a rupture of some sort, an epistemological break - to use Bachelard's term - has taken place in the recent past in such a manner as to throw the conventional notions of an evolving and expanding modernist tradition into disarray.

As an emphasis that this displacement concerning an understanding of the nature of artistic activity is not restricted to the confines of the art-community, we can note a distinct change of focus in the academic world's view of avant-garde value. That such an unambiguous shift should occur within the most culturally-institutionalized arena is an extremely clear indicator of our postulated rupture.



Not so very long ago (certainly as recently as the nineteen-sixties) the average university teacher of art-history was extremely ambiguous towards "the modern movement". He tended to avoid dealing altogether with twentieth-century art, declaring it to be - more rightly - the province of art-criticism. When inescapably confronted with the emergence of modernist aesthetic sensibility (and this judgement may be confirmed by a glance through the published scholarship of the period), course material usually acknowledged only a basic fragmentation, a watershed around the point of cubism.

Modernist artistic culture was at that time usually thought of as an appendage tacked on, almost at the last minute, to the end of post-impressionism in such a manner as to maintain the formal coherence of a posited central tradition running from Gauguin and Cézanne via cubism to abstraction. Lingering and evolved notions of "significant form" defined a hierarchy between a conceived mainstream and a conceived marginality. Even central european expressionism could not be easily be seen to fit the established pattern and was consequently downplayed. Dadaism was a clear aberration. Surrealism defined as "narrative" and "literary" - a manifestation of a pathological rather than of an artistic domain.

What Gene Swenson was to define as The Other Tradition was firmly relegated to a marginal position. Paralleling Daniel Bell's declaration of "the end of ideology", critical and curatorial opinion insisted on the "outmoded irrelevance" of non-formalist modernism.\* What were to be seminal texts on avant-garde sensibility

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\* This trend, of course, was echoed in academic literary scholarship. The Movement in England, and The New Criticism in the United States.



by Motherwell, Shattuck and others<sup>2</sup> remained academically tangential until quite recently: and Swenson's own influential pamphlet, with its eloquent plea that futurism and dadaism be taken seriously, was not published until 1966.<sup>3</sup> Even at that late date it was still necessary to make a special case in academic circles for what we now accept as avant-garde aesthetics.

The last decade, however, has seen an extraordinary (though largely unremarked) reorientation of art-historical focus. A veritable industry of scholarship has now sanctioned and centralized concerns that were either previously totally ignored or understood as being tangential to the mainstream in one way or another. One has only to speak of the enormous recent output of articles and monographs exploring various aspects of dadaism and futurism (especially in the domain of the proto-history of performance art and the experimental theater), of the Russian experience of cubo-futurism, semantic-formalism, LEF, Vkhutemas and Blue Blouse agit-prop, of the pervasiveness of Theosophy across a spectrum ranging from the sectarian mysticism of the Rosy Cross to the recognition of spiritualism as a fundamental base for the aesthetics of Munch, Hodler, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, Itten and others, as well as of such provincial phenomena as Canada's Group of Seven.

The recent irruption of material on the avant-garde into the staid learned journals, not to mention its penetration into the thesis

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- 2 \* Robert Motherwell, The Dada Painters and Poets, Wittenborn Schatz, New York, 1951  
Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, Vintage Books, New York, 1968
- 3 \*\* Gene Swenson, The Other Tradition, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1966



mill, indicates a sudden displacement of the boundaries that mark the limits of the territory considered legitimate in terms of academic concern. Another, less immediately apparent, refocusing of academic perspective in regard to the historical avant-garde has been a greater concern to isolate overall patterns, to replace a fragmented linear understanding of the material at hand with a holistic one. This tendency towards imposing a homogeneity is, of course, an indicator of a historicist view; and, as far as the development of modernism is concerned, academic scholarship has a tendency to replace the notion of a progressive dynamic of revolutionary supercession with that of a suffusing continuity mediated by stylistic evolution.

In this regard, one has only to think of the question of symbolism. Understood not so long ago as a quasi-mystical phenomenon that characterized certain aspects of the stylistic development of post-impressionism (that is to say, it was <sup>seen as being</sup> clearly located in the pre-modern culture of the nineteenth-century), symbolist value now tends to be regarded as informing the whole aesthetic sensibility from which not only early non-figurative painting but also the broad currents of futurist and technological utopianism have sprung.

In the light of this art-historical reorientation, it is evident that established thought is beginning to view the avant-garde as being no longer a part of the current social conformation, but as a closed historical epoch. Humanist academic scholarship has a propensity to declare legitimate material for analysis only those issues that are historically neutralized, that are safely closed off from the dynamic of the present.



Unquestionably, a shift has taken place in the way in which we understand the concept "modernism". If scholarship is now sanctioning the value-system of avant-garde culture, this suggests a process that goes well beyond a simple reinforcement of a wider general acceptance of modern art. It implies that there has been a transformation in the nature of the relationship between established culture and the modernist artistic community. The earlier rejection and incomprehension has modulated. The earlier public hostility abated.

It would be simplistic to place this mutation to the credit of public taste having become "converted", become more informed, educated to the subtleties of avant-garde aesthetics. Clearly there has also been a wider and deeper transformation, one located within the established cultural institutions of society - and this shift one would (correctly) assume is dependent on the even wider and deeper dynamic of economic mutation.

What about the artistic community itself then? We all know that there is a constant change taking place across the whole social and mental territory staked out by modernist artistic culture. There is nothing surprising about that. The very notion of modernity is predicated, as we have seen, on the imperative of constant mutation, on the cyclic rejection of prior value. Further, the ideological perspective of modernism insists on the self-persuasion that our own current refusal of precedent is as significant as any other refusal that has taken place before us. In the gaze of the legendary models of revolutionary artistic progression, we can be no less exigent and radical ourselves than were our predecessors in transcending, in thrusting beyond,



their achievements.

In this way, modernist culture has a clear apprehension of the idea of progressive sequence in the social as well as in the aesthetic dimension. But, of course, style is understood to modulate, even if it does so violently, within a homogenous<sup>e</sup> and ongoing tradition. The fundamental imperatives of stylistic "originality" also, evidently, define a view of the self that is cast in terms of personal originality. Similarly, this individual assertion, no matter how egoic, also is seen to take place within a homogenous<sup>e</sup> and ongoing tradition. If one fundamantal modernist assumption is the essential coherence of modulatory style, so then a corollary assumption is the coherence of the social relations within the art-community that supersumes the personal individuation of its members.

As long as modernist style, then, is a style (that is to say, in its own contradictory terms, a "revolutionary accretion"), it logically postulates the existence of a constant and self-consistent superstructure of social relations within the art community itself. In contrast to the continuity and coherence (perhaps here I should say: in contrast to the apparent continuity and coherence) of stylistic progression, the art-community has, in the recent past, clearly undergone a massive revision of its internal social relations together with a concomitant fundamental transformation of the nature of the individual artist's self-view. Further, this deflection has remained largely unacknowledged, due, it would seem, to a suffusing myth concerning the autonomy of artistic style and its supposed primacy over the social relations that are central to the very concept of cultural modernism.

Perhaps I can best clarify what I mean with a digression into an anecdote. Some thirty years ago, around nineteen-fifty, a brash twenty-year-old art student knocked unsolicited on the door of Picasso's studio in Antibes with a folder of not especially distinguished drawings under his arm. He has been bumming around the beaches and youth hostels of the Midi with his head full of romantic precedent and his whole life was conditioned by the belief that he was constipated with unrealized talent.

When the great artist, whom he had often seen in the street, opened up the door, the art student explained in fragmented schoolboy French that he would be grateful if he, Picasso, had a spare moment during which he might comment on his work. Such was the young man's self-confidence (or, perhaps, his arrogance) that he was not in the least surprised to be immediately asked in, sat down, and invited to open his portfolio.

His French was minimal, as I have remarked, but he knew enough to address Picasso as "Maître", and he naturally used the formal appellation "vous"; quite apart from the aura of fame, there was an age gap of more than fifty years between them. But the great man corrected him. "Non, non", he said, "il faut me tutoyer. Nous sommes les artistes ensemble!" - no, no, you must use the personal form of address, we are all artists together. Finally, after scrutinizing every drawing, Picasso led him to the door, patted him on the shoulder, and admonished him: "Continue, jeune homme !"

I tell this story not to record that I once met Picasso in somewhat unusual circumstances and actually received a studio crit<sup>icism</sup> from him. The point is, there once existed a world-wide fraternity



of creative artists for whom the accidents of fame and "genius" mattered perhaps less, in the long run, than a sense of solidarity in belonging to a collective enterprise, and that I am old enough and lucky enough to have been briefly and marginally part of that fraternity.

Some twenty years later, in telling this story to some students of my own at a Western Canadian university, I was made sharply aware that this fraternity and collective enterprise no longer existed. A couple of them were to visit New York, some two thousand miles away, for the first time, on a gallery and museum study trip. It appears that, with portfolios underarm, they subsequently knocked on the door of their artistic hero, Frank Stella - who, of course, did not personally answer the door, and declined firmly to see his uninvited visitors.

Stella is reputed to have become a millionaire through his painting, and Picasso was never short on significant financial resources. The latter could certainly insulate himself whenever he wished from the curious and the intrusive by deploying the defences of fame and reward. It is in no way a discredit to Stella to remark that the two artists lived in different worlds and were even motivated as artists by different imperatives.

Now, for that matter, was it a particular virtue that the most famous (or the most notorious, depending on your perspective) living artist instantly had time and concern for an immature and not particularly talented uninvited visitor. That memorised and rehearsed speech did the trick. A coded password delivered with an atrocious English accent. "Cher Maître ! Je suis un

jeune peintre anglais..."

Stella, simply, was not historically able to respond to such an approach. Something crucial had happened in between. The fundamental nature of the artist's self-view and his understanding of the artist's role and function had radically altered. It is clear, moreover, that this alteration was not a gradual transformation, an evolution, a mutation within a flux, but one more in the nature of an absolute and unprecedented rupture that has appeared across the whole broad fabric and flow of artistic culture.

This rupture which we have identified in terms of an abrupt re-focusing of scholarly art-historical parameters and an equally abrupt transformation in the nature and self-view of the artistic community does not, of course, comprise simply a series of discrete cultural deflections. An awareness of this phenomenon as a rupture (rather than as an evolution, a mutation, a transposition) makes it evident that these shifts are integrally related to a series of major developments that have taken place across the whole institutional support system of established culture.

These developments can be seen to be subsumed within one comprehensive cultural phenomenon: the consolidation together of disparate cultural institutions into a single edifice - what I have called elsewhere "the museo-critical complex" - the concretization of which reflects the present congealing corporatization of culture. This escalating tendency towards the integration of museums, art-schools, university art and humanities departments, funding bodies, arts councils, parallel gallery and access networks,



publication and distributions structures and the like, into one over-riding institutional conformation is, of course, a logical development in the domain of culture that parallels the presently consolidating process of the corporatization of capital.

Cast against the perspective of this phenomenon, the recent bureaucratization of culture, the eroding distinctions between "high" and "mass" culture, the almost complete absorption into the established cultural edifice of marginal structures, the diminution of scandalized reaction to attempts of stylistic, aesthetic and moral transgression, the institutional and market appropriation of marginal phenomena such as folk art, the appearance of hybrid and artificial forms of "indigenous" art and mutations in the patterns of patronage can all be seen to be interrelated events.

That this integration is unprecedented and finds no sanction whatsoever in the general ideology of culture up to the present is emphasised by the fact that the current tendency towards a monolithic consensus culture is in vivid contrast to the diversified and contestational perspectives of the modernist tradition. The present reality of the artist's actual condition is clearly at variance with the value-system of the avant-garde, yet the myths of that value-system survive.

The eroding notion of an oppositional collective that remains enshrined in those myths is obviously incompatible with what can only be described as a revived liberal-humanist cultural ideology currently pervading contemporary artistic consciousness. In clear contradistinction to the earlier ideal of the artist as rebel and hero, as the individual visionary voluntarist, the existing socio-cultural consensus maintains the ideal of the artist as the



embodiment of a series of absolute and abstract values central to the liberal-bourgeois (~~or, if you like, the Lord-Clark-of-Saltwood~~) understanding of the concept "civilization".

It must here be emphasised that this is not a question of the adoption (or even the co-optation) of a previously misunderstood, "difficult" or obscure body of modernist visionary insights into established culture. What we are observing is the modulation of avant-garde value itself into a distinct neo-Humanism in which it is now required to extend, rather than to oppose, the liberal-humanist tradition of objectifying in aesthetic form a postulated absolute and extra-historical "human condition". Not only the extent of this displacement, but also the current mystificatory depths of revealed art-criticism, becomes evident when we consider the fact that it is the residual mythology of the dadaist and futurist absolute refusal of humanism that is now required to inform and validate this emerging corporative cultural neo-Humanism.

However, before we can more fully explore the socio-cultural and politico-cultural implications of the aesthetic realignment stemming from the consolidation of the corporative stage of monopoly capitalism, it is necessary to have a clearer understanding of the fundamental avant-garde posture, since it has, to a great extent, been distorted by this very process of realignment.

Renato Poggioli has unquestionably developed the most penetrating extant analysis in his Theory of the Avant-Garde which was first published in 1962.\*<sup>4</sup> He begins by making a crucial distinction

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<sup>4</sup> This date is significant in the light of our earlier remarks on the lateness of a serious response to avant-garde culture on



between the notion of an artistic "school" and that of an artistic "movement". The school, he tells us, is the expression of an essentially classical and hierarchic view of <sup>socio-</sup>cultural relations while the movement embodies a romantic and individualistic understanding<sub>of them</sub>. I would like to quote him at moderate length, if you will bear with me; as I will attempt to show in a few minutes that his exact definitions and distinctions<sup>have</sup> has an extremely apposite bearing on the actual conditions that pertain across the whole field of visual culture today.

"The school", he writes, "presupposes a master and a method, the criterion of tradition and the principle of authority. It does not take account of history, only of time (in terms of the possibility and necessity of handing on to posterity a system to work by, a series of technical secrets endowed with a vitality apparently immune to any change or metamorphosis: ars longa vita brevis). The school, then, is pre-eminently static and classic, while the movement is essentially dynamic and romantic. Where the school presupposes disciples consecrated to a transcendent end, the followers of a movement always work in terms of an end immanent in the movement itself. The school is inconceivable outside of the

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the part of established academic culture. Poggioli's book was the first attempt to deal in depth with the subject. He, himself, notes, in the opening sentences of his text, that: "...few thinkers, historians or critics have deigned to study the subject...one of the most typical and important phenomenon of modern culture." If academic scholarship ignored modernism, and Poggioli found himself in a sort of intellectual limbo in 1962, it is worth mentioning that modernist artistic culture (despite the intensity of its activity at that time) was far from widely accepted in terms of either critical opinion or institutional commitment at that time. The present public accessability of modern art through museum structures and the like is not unrelated, as we shall see, to the present institutionalization of avant-garde value.



humanistic ideal, the idea of the school as thesaurus. The movement, instead, conceives of culture not as increment, but as creation - or, at least, as a center of activity and energy".<sup>5</sup>

Poggioli insists on the significance of the shift from a cultural validation of public order towards a cultural confirmation of visionary individualism. The "school" is ideologically dedicated to the reinforcement of an existing status-quo. The "movement" objectifies - in comparison to the idea of a hierarchical edifice - the principle of flux. He does not say as much, but it is implicit in his argument that the movement is more concerned with the experience of creative activity than it is with the concretizing<sup>5</sup> of abstract ideas in terms of cultural artefacts. The individual artist member of a movement has a tendency to be self-heroizing in contradistinction to the disciple of a school who heroizes a "master".

The movement, thus, is predicated towards questioning the status-quo. Poggioli remarks that the disciples of a school are "consecrated to a transcendent end" while the followers of a movement see their end immanent in the movement. I would like you to bear this distinction in mind when we return, in a moment, to the discussion of the present situation in the field of artistic practice.

Before then, it would be useful to briefly review the factors that Poggioli identifies and isolates as the specific characteristics

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<sup>5</sup> Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, page .



of a movement, and which he defines as contributing to what he calls the dialectic of movements. "A movement", he informs us, is, at the outset, "constituted primarily to obtain a positive result, for a concrete end."<sup>6</sup> He implies that the dynamic is a proselytizing one; its aim is for the general adoption of the movement's specific ideals and point of view. To the case in hand, it is, of course, "...the affirmation of the avant-garde spirit in all cultural fields."

He finds that there are two major and two modulatory postures that contribute to make up this "avant-garde" spirit: and it is evident that any one of them, or combinations of them, could apply equally to movements that manifest themselves culturally outside of the artistic field - in radical religious cults or in marginal political parties. To that extent, such non-artistic movements may be described as being "avant-garde". Artistic culture, after all, did not appropriate the term out of context from its earlier usage in radical politics.

As an aside, there is also another significant facet to this correspondence. It emphasizes, in contradistinction of course, to a central tenet of avant-garde ideology, that artistic culture is not a special, privileged and absolute domain of experience; but rather one that parallels other defined cultural structures and contributes on a basis of equal parity with them to the overall cultural superstructure.

First of all, there is what Poggioli refers to as the activist

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. This and the following quotations <sup>from Poggioli</sup> are selected from pages 25 - 31.

moment, in which a movement takes form and agitates for the sake of action itself on a spectrum ranging from the emotional fascination of sport and adventure to direct action of the type objectified in internally-justified political terrorism. The second characteristic that he isolates is the antagonistic moment, that one "...formed in part or in whole to agitate against something or someone. The something may be the academy, tradition; the someone may be a master whose teaching and example, whose prestige and authority, are considered wrong or harmful. More often than not, the someone is that collective individual called the public."

Activism and antagonism, he tells us, can be extended by two other attitudes that devolve from them and modulate them. "The taste for action for action's sake...can drive itself beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation...(to find) joy in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way." This is a kind of "transcendental antagonism": he calls it the nihilistic moment.

The fourth posture also constitutes an extension of the first two attitudes (that are themselves, of course, "rational in relation of means to ends") into the domain of absolute irrationality. This posture consists of pushing activism not only beyond the point where it is hostile and dangerous to others, but up to and beyond the point where it is destructive to the self, where it "it even welcomes and accepts...self ruin as an obscure and/or unknown sacrifice to the success of the future movement." Poggioli defines this aspect as the agonistic moment.

Activism, antagonism, nihilism, agonism. Four characteristics of radical movements in general. Four characteristics of the avent-



garde in particular. They are not, of course, regarded as disparate or fragmentary aspects; but as elements that interact to make up the dynamic whole of the particular movement in question. Poggioli insists that "...the first two moments, by themselves, constitute the logic of movements...by adding the other two we get what might be called the dialectic of movements."

I do not believe it necessary here to argue in support of Poggioli's analysis. It seems clear that a residual modernist ideology would condition today's artistic community to concur in general that these four postures are still characteristic of avant-garde value. The whole mythology of our artistic culture would insist as much; and we have, of course, formalized that mythology by elevating and canonizing individual artists of the past as paradigmatic of these very confrontational and anti-social postures.

Undeniably, the avant-garde consists of more than a collective view of aesthetics or common understanding of the nature and function of the artist's role - it is also a shared anarchistic standpoint, a group experience of alienation, a collective refusal of established society and its conventions, and a flight into an invented counter-society defined by its invented counter-conventions.

André Malraux, who is personally so characteristic of the co-optation of the erstwhile confrontational artist into established culture, has aptly described this process. Writing about the "revolt of the unique against society in the largest sense" and the concomitant solidarity within the "community of rebels and libertarians", he tells us that now "the artist defines himself by breaking away from that which precedes him, by means of a slow and purposeful self conquest. But each artist brings to the fraternal, isolated



clan his own conquests, and they separate him more and more from his own particular environment." <sup>7</sup>

Bohemianism, then, is unquestionably integral to the avant-garde posture. By bohemianism, I do not, of course, mean the beret-and-sandals, beer-swilling, roaring-boy cliché: that represents an essentially pre-avant-garde sensibility, which is today merely a socially-sanctioned eccentricity. This form of "bohemia" <sup>of course,</sup> survives in the remarkably tenacious ongoing traditions of academic classicism. Now and again, one actually comes across an authentic specimen; a representative of this archaic sensibility, tucked away in the odd art-school - screen<sup>ed</sup>, as it were, behind the more "conventional" exponents of modernism.

Bohemianism, in the context that we are discussing, is another matter ~~altogether~~ altogether. It is the terminal state of cultural terrorism so eloquently depicted by Arnold Hauser in his description of the escalating stages of bohemian revolt. Bohemia, Hauser tells us, "was originally no more than a demonstration against the bourgeois way of life." <sup>8</sup> Its protagonists, he explains, students and young artists, affected an originality and extravagance in a spirit of youthful exuberance. They undertook, he says, "...their excursions into the world of outlaws and outcasts just as one undertakes a journey into an exotic land." <sup>9</sup>

They were followed by the bohemia of militant naturalism, that of Champfleury, Courbet, Nadar and Henri Murger, who were, as Hauser

<sup>7</sup> Andre Malraux, Psychologie de l'art, Geneva, 1947-50 quoted Poggioli, op cit, page 31.

<sup>8</sup> ~~Arnold~~ Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art, Volume 4, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1962, page 179

<sup>9</sup> ~~Ibid~~ Ibid, page 180



expresses it, "an artistic proletariat...made up of people whose existence was absolutely insecure, people who stood outside the frontiers of bourgeois society, and whose struggle against the bourgeoisie was no high-spirited game, but a bitter necessity." <sup>10</sup> \*

Hauser's use of the term "proletariat" in this context is not gratuitous. The violent social changes that took place in the middle of the century (especially in France, where urbanization<sup>s</sup> and the industrial revolution were, just at that time, reaching the take-off point) authentically proletarianized<sup>s</sup> an already marginal student and fledgling-artist population for a period of time. One whole artistic generation came to maturity in a sort of patronage vacuum, sandwiched between the vanishing state patronage of the residual cultural structures of classicism and the not-quite-yet-emerged private patronage of the bourgeois art gallery and dealer market. The bohemia of those transformative years found itself in a necessary conjunction with the newly-urbanized peasantry and the lumpen-proletariat of the exploding industrial cities.

It is, however, the following stage that here concerns us; for it is in it that we locate the saints and the martyrs of the church of modernism: Nerval, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Tristan Corbière, Lautréamont, all first appeared with the generation of 1870. They were, as Hauser has it, "...a company of vagabonds and outlaws, a class in which demoralization, anarchy and misery dwell, a group

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<sup>Ibid.</sup>  
10. Hauser, ~~op. cit.~~, page 180 .

of desperadoes, who not only break with bourgeois society, but with the whole of European civilization."<sup>11</sup>

It is this absolute revolt, this cultural demolition act, that was necessary before the various forms of escape (those defined by the symbolist and decadent nostalgia for alternate, imaginary and <sup>exotic</sup> social forms) could finally coalesce into the modernist sensibility. Alfred Jarry was necessary before Apollinaire and Picasso, before Marinetti, Mayakovski, Tzara and Mondrian, could assert some sort of common purpose and eventually objectify a common aesthetic.

And they, of course, in order to protect the dynamic of their situation, were obliged to continue, even to institutionalize<sup>s</sup>, the ongoing demolition act. Each, in their own way, went far beyond merely opposing or negating bourgeois society and bourgeois value; they cancelled it out altogether - and, a radicalism of that degree demanded the construction of an alternate support system. The apparently unconnected life-styles of Tzara and Mondrian are not so unconnected after all. The hyper-bohemianism and "groupe-scul" reassurance of the terrorist cell is the obverse of the hyper-<sup>and spiritualized reassurance</sup> bohemianism/of the mystical cult.

Unquestionably, then the avant-garde is characterized by a hyper-bohemianism that refuses utterly established values, mores and custom. Further, what we are able to isolate as modernist style is inextricably interpenetrated with a separate and parallel social universe. The formalist critical perspective that understands the phenomena of modernism as being essentially limited

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<sup>11</sup> \* Ibid, page 181 .



to a sequential progression of artistic style is entirely unsatisfactory. It is incapable of critically penetrating a field of aesthetic experience that is absolutely modulated by an interiorized and complex body of social assumptions.

That is not to say, however, that the avant-garde constituted a closed and self-encapsulated universe. Massimo Bontempelli defines the avant-garde as "...an exclusively modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical viewpoint."\* It is, of course, just this historical dimension that distinguishes the conformation of the avant-garde from that one characteristic of sects, self-validating cults or other types of hermetic social universes. Sectarian structures, of necessity, claim an extra-historical privilege. Their "secret knowledge" is of the absolute, <sup>of</sup> the timeless, the eternal. A distinct self-awareness, a collective consciousness, is clearly necessary if a group is to "contemplate itself historically." Further, this self-awareness must be open, must be resilient to some degree to the effects of discourse with the dominant established notions of value. It cannot remain locked in behind a wall of faith and received dogma.

The whole span of cultural history up until the modernist period demonstrates unequivocally that artistic events take place within the context of the social dynamic of any given historical period. If the modernist refusal precluded the normal dialectical

\* Massimo Bontempelli, L'Avventura novecentista: Selva polemica (1926-1938), Florence 1938. Quoted Poggioli, op cit., page 14.

relationship of reflexion and reinforcement (which artistic culture clearly experienced during the period of classicism - and, less obviously so, during that of romanticism), what necessary social edifice was the avant-garde rooted in? In the light of the clear discontinuity between its value system and that of external society, the only reasonable reply to that question can be: "its own". The emergence of modernism as a coherent system capable of enduring almost a century was clearly the result of a great deal more than the simple concretization of a body of concepts and notions concerning the nature and form of artistic culture. It depended upon the emergence of a parallel, distinct, and internally self-consistent sub-culture.

This social formulation extended, of necessity, beyond a mere "life style", beyond the limited assumption of a common bohemian stance. It assumed the lineaments of a wider social collectivity. It is evident that not only shared assumptions and attitudes linked a disparate community across national and regional boundaries but also so did shared values and tastes - and, to a considerable degree, a shared economic perspective defined by a distinct mode of production.

I remember myself noting, during the late nineteen-fifties, a remarkable similarity in the overall appearance of artists' studios in different countries between which one would expect to see extreme divergencies (European and Arabic, for instance). This was not merely in terms of the obvious "professional" aspects, the tools-of-the-trade, as it were, but in regard to an extraordinary homogeneity of decor and furniture, and especially of such clear cultural indicators as clothes and books and gramophone records.



¶ [Just as bourgeois value, taste and style manifests itself in forms that over-ride national distinctions (even - perhaps especially - the metropolis-hinterland distinctions of colonialism), so, it seems, does also the value, taste and style of what might be described as the "modernist intellegensia". The social spaces demarcated by this sub-culture are (or rather, were) extraordinarily undifferentiated - the studios, bars and cafes across the world (with the specificity of the street obscured) remaining more or less completely interchangeable.

I hasten to note at this point, anticipating a theme that I shall touch upon later, that the middle to late nineteen-sixties saw a media diffusion of this previously-restricted modernist taste to a broader audience. The phenomenon of the massification of the counter-culture, and the subsequent bourgeoisification of the avant-garde and modernist aesthetic value, is one of the clearest indicators of the rupture that I have postulated.

In some ways, the emergence of the avant-garde was completely unprecedented. I believe that it would be true to say that all previous coherent artistic movements have dialectically reflected and reinforced the dominant social ethos. I emphasise the "all", since I can think of no distinct contestational movement within the whole of cultural-history except that of the avant-garde. Certainly, romanticism vehemently opposed the cultural ancien régime of academic classicism in the name of a sort of revolutionary individualism. But the whole Faustian-Manfredian posture was, in essence, the cultural confirmation of emerging bourgeois political power - and thus a reflexion and a reinforcement of a class-conditioned point of view. Whatever cultural contestation



that took place did so in terms of a socio-political modulation of the dominant social ethos. Only modernism proposed a condition of absolute rather than relative contestation.

The socio-political dimension of the cultural manifestations prior to the epoch of modernism is clear. In the magico-totemic universe of tribal culture there is, of course, no distinction between the social and the aesthetic domains: they are absolutely undifferentiated. Neither is there found any significant fragmentation in the priest-king configurations of urban antiquity. Feudalism of course, represents a homogenous world-view in which the aesthetic celebration of monarchial and religious value are hierarchically integrated. [It is only with the advent of the modern era (using the term in this instance in the broadest sense - beginning with the gothic and concretizing with the renaissance) that a distinct and differentiated notion of artistic culture begins to emerge. Despite our contemporary ideological insistence on the autonomy of artistic culture, "art-history", as an established body of understanding, emphasises the social and economic imperatives that condition cultural expression.

The very idea "art", as we presently understand it, is an invention of the renaissance. The emergence of the artist considered as a visionary individual, and of the artwork as a transcendental object, are unquestionably phenomena closely interrelated with the emergence of mercantile economic structures and the subsequent development of a class-divided society. Humanism (expressed in visual culture in the transition from a schematic to a narrative-realist representation) was, itself, a response and a confirmation of a mutation in society from a static and feudal world-view to a dynamic and competitive-mercantilist one.



9 [Figurative representation in art, psychologically introspective narrative in letters, the "scientific method" of observation and investigation, were all aspects of the overall recognition of the natural world. That phenomenon, in turn, was integrated absolutely with the developing mercantile-colonialist dynamic. You have to observe, tabulate, enumerate, codify and describe the world if you wish to exploit it.

From the emerging commercial formulations of the twelfth century (themselves accompanied by the proto-colonialism of the Crusades) we note an increasing atomisation between the social and the cultural arenas - specifically the concretization<sup>5</sup> of the visual arts as a field of distinct, autonomous and transcendent experience. The only other historical moment when "art" began to be thought of in this way was for a brief period during the Hellenistic age. The mediterranean first century A.D. saw the appearance of the notion of the artist as the mediator of transcendental value, saw the appearance, for a while, of collectors dealers, even art critics.

The closing stages of antique primary-imperialism was marked by a developing complex of social relations based on trade and commerce that were on the point of evolving into proto-capitalist forms. This process, of course, was arrested (and placed into abeyance<sup>antique</sup> for a millenium) because the system of production was conditioned by a slave economy. The development of the industrialized technology necessary to complement mercantile trade and to coalesce it into capitalism - a technically feasible possibility, remember Hero's steam engine - was precluded by that condition. It is unquestionable, therefore, that the existence of a class-society is itself a pre-condition for the very notion of "art" considered



as a differentiated and autonomous aesthetic function.

With an awareness in mind, then, that the socio-economic dynamic of artistic culture is rooted in the patterns of dominance central to class society, that the concomitant logic of visual culture is one that articulates and reinforces those very patterns of dominance, and that there also exists a parallel and ideologically-conditioned set of assumptions and beliefs (and the word ideological is here stressed - art is quintessentially a mystificatory process) which maintain that artistic vision and artistic products are essentially transcendental in nature, it becomes increasingly clear that the recent "history" of art is, in fact, a history of a deepening, even a schizophrenic, process of contradiction.

If art is thought to speak of absolute and transcendental value, the existing class relations to which it responds are not merely obscured, but also vindicated, indeed sacralized. But even a superficial overview of art-historical sequence will reveal one specific ongoing set of contradictions: the reinforcement in art of social values that are actually historically discontinuous with the mutating conditions of economy and production.

The gothic cathedrals were, on the face of it, erected as monuments to a static and timeless view of man's relationship with the divine. But they were also so done under the conditions of a developing set of urban proto-industrial economic relations that denied that very view. The monumentalization of an undifferentiated understanding of, and acquiescence to, divine authority and ecclesiastical prestige <sup>has</sup> tended to veil a secondary monumentalization, that of the specificity of a particular local, urban metropolitan-mercantilist reality of secular authority and



secular prestige.

- 0 The realism and the poetry of silence and arrested time that we experience when we contemplate the late medieval Flemish Duc du Berry manuscripts takes on an entirely different complexion when we understand that this poignant appeal to the absolute and permanent quality of feudal social relations was actually proposed in terms of a profoundly counter-feudal socio-economic base: that of the emergent northern<sup>n</sup> european weaving industry.

In a similar manner, the visual art of the renaissance, the baroque, the neo-classical and the romantic periods, can all be shown to have a propensity to celebrate values displaced historically by one stage in the escalating process of socio-economic progression. It seems that some sort of law can be formulated stating that artistic culture has a tendency to represent and to reinforce the values of the previous stage of socio-economic development. If there is any virtue to this analysis, we must realise that it demolishes one of our most cherished beliefs concerning artistic culture: that one which maintains the inherent progressivity of art. Rather than being prophetic in nature, art may now well have to be seen as being actually retardaire. The full significance of this reversal of what is almost an article-of-faith will become apparent when, in a few moments, we apply this insight to the question of modernist artistic culture.

We cannot, of course, take the time here to further detail the sequential art-historical distortions wherein artistic culture (in a condition of inherent "unequal development", if you like) is discontinuous with the sequence of economic history. For our



purposes, however, we can reinforce the argument by noting that the most significant characteristic of romanticism (which movement, of course, celebrated the subjectivized and individualistic self-view of developing bourgeois political power) was not to be found in an egalitarian or even in a "democratic" image, but was rather embedded in a nostalgic appeal to aristocratic, monarchical and feudal value. If I refer here to the architecture of the gothic revival, to the novels of Walter Scott and Chateaubriand, I believe the point would be well made.\*3

This displacement can, as I have already suggested, be observed to hold along the whole <sup>span</sup> sequence of art-historical sequence. It is only with the advent of the modern movement that it gives the appearance of no longer applying. It has merely been obscured, as we shall see. Nevertheless, this deflection is sharp enough to emphasize that avant-garde value is defined from a perspective that is distinct from ~~these~~ observed in previous art-historical epochs.

The two most immediately striking characteristics of modernist artistic culture that appear during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century are: the increasing dominance of formal aesthetic value over iconological content and the shift of focus in the now

3. \* One other clear example we might cite in a footnote, however, is the fact that the technico-economic reality of the baroque era could have been expressed in terms of the innovatory technology of shipping, that had been necessary to consolidate the American conquests. The typical baroque cultural image in painting, of course, was the mannerist extension into the cherubim, angels and puffy clouds of apotheosis-type ceiling murals. It was in fact the subsequent classic period (for instance, think of Claude) that, with all those Embarkments to Cythera and the like, <sup>that</sup> demonstrated a fascination in the complex rigging of the Hispano-Lusitanian shipping technology. The violence and the massacres of the American conquest, the dehumanized brutality of the conquistadors, became subsumed into the timeless and elegaic space of Arcadian nostalgia.



sublimated content from the specific to the generalized. The first aspect, of course, marks an escalating thrust into abstraction the second marks the abandonment of a content that had been concrete, and rooted in the discourse of social exchange, for one that was to become metaphoric, mystically-orientated, <sup>one</sup> with claims to a supposed discourse with absolute and transcendental (~~not to say, divine~~) value. The imperative towards abstraction that is already endemic to the opening phase of symbolist sensibility is absolutely integrated with the spiritualizing and cultic pretensions of symbolism.

In contradistinction to received art-critical opinion, the bizarre religiosity manifested, for instance, in its most extreme condition with the Society of the Rosy Cross, or the inverted pietism of Huysman's *Des Esseintes* and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, is actually the obverse of the theosophical perspectives central to the fountainhead of abstraction in painting. We cannot question the centrality of the tao-yoga traditions of mysticism to modernist artistic culture, but can merely query how such subtle and complex aesthetic intelligences as Mondrian and Kandinsky could have seriously considered as revealed spiritual truth the table-topping scam perpetuated by Mme. Blavatsky and the unbelievably credulous Colonel Alcott.

Without question, just as in the cases of the parallel and subsequent flights into a neo-rousseauesque primitivism (Gauguin to Matisse; Die Blaue Reiter to the Demoiselles; The Rite of Spring to the Postman Cheval; even the Nabi's Talisman to John Cage's pre-digested ~~and freeze-dried~~ taoism), the beginnings of modernist sensibility were already conditioned by an absolute withdrawal



from social and historical context.

In its opening phase, with the dandyesque sensibility of, first, Baudelaire, then Whistler and Wilde, claiming pretention to an aristocracy of creative artistic sensibility, we can see (in an obscured form) the operation of the law that we have proposed of the displacement of cultural focus to that of a superseded socio-economic mode. But, with the development of full-blown modernism, with avant-garde sensibility, we note a total, not a partial occlusion of both the cultural displacement and the socio-economic reality that displacement expressed.

Modernist culture begins<sup>now</sup> to propose an entirely encapsulated and historically-inert value system. It is possible to go further at this point, and to state that this occlusion was not simply a characteristic symptom of modernist aesthetic value - but that the very value-system that makes up the avant-garde is (or rather was) a singular aberration in terms of cultural manifestations, one defined by this very occlusion, defined by the abandonment of a historical understanding of social experience.

The one glaring paradox central to contemporary artistic culture can be identified without any great difficulty in the domain of the social assumptions of the artistic sub-culture. Barring totally romantic throwbacks, I doubt if any<sup>Serious</sup> practicing artist today sees himself in the contestational and anarchic posture that we have isolated. Nevertheless, despite the certainty of a total and vehement rejection of the bohemianist stance, it appears clear that the majority of today's practicing artists still retain intact and largely unquestioned the corollary belief in the visionary, spiritualizing and transcendental dimensions of the aesthetic



experience.

This more or less unacknowledged contradiction brings us to the central point of this present speculative discourse. It instantly raises the question of identifying the veiled dynamic in our society that permits (even demands) the rejection of the bohemianist social relations characteristic of the avant-garde, while, at the same time, requiring adherence to - at least nominally - the notion of art as a quasi-sacramental activity.

Having seen, then, that the post-modernist, post-avant-garde rupture is real, though only partial, and having isolated both the rupture and its now divorced and discontinuous facets of artistic style on the one hand and sub-cultural belief and behaviour on the other, we have some intimation of where to focus our inquiry. The pointers that we have unearthed indicate that this dynamic is social ~~rather than aesthetic~~ in its fundamental nature rather than aesthetic. ~~Equally, these pointers reveal that there are considerations central to our socio-political institutions that require a belief in artistic culture as a body, almost, of spiritual truth.~~ Equally, these pointers reveal that there are considerations central to our socio-political institutions that require a belief in artistic culture as a body, almost, of spiritual truth.

Before developing this line of thought, I would like to emphasise how extreme is this discrepancy - constituting, as it does, the essence of the schizophrenic experience presently colouring the whole domain of visual culture. Earlier, we noted Paggioli's distinction between the idea of the artistic "school" and that of the artistic "movement", and we saw how modernist artistic culture unquestionably defined itself as "movement". The contemporary artist quite reasonably rejects the romantic stance

of the bohemian, the posture of the rebel and hero; but he still understands his experience as expressing the process of creation itself, not as adding to or reinforcing an established and academic tradition. In short, while putting aside any romantic self-view, he will, quite inconsistently, believe that his artistic practice still operates within the fluid and dynamic terms of artistic "movement".

Let us briefly review the conditions ascribed by Poggioli to the aesthetics of a "school". It is <sup>he tells us,</sup> a contribution to the "humanist ideal", it depends upon "the criterion of tradition, the principle of authority...it does not take account of history, only of time... (it possesses) a vitality apparently immune to change or metamorphosis...(it is) incremental..." and so on. Do not these conditions clearly categorize the recent post-modernist aesthetic? Do we not now <sup>today</sup> understand artistic culture to be a contribution to a generalized "humanist" tradition rather than to the objectification of individualistic visionary insight? Do we not see the most recent contributions to that tradition in terms of the creative giants at the beginning of the century, attempting, each of us, to match their stature rather than to replace them? The "criterion of tradition, the principle of authority" !

Has not the imperative of refusal devolved to the imperative of a mere originality of style, the personal "trademark"? Has not the thrust towards "making new" long since abandoned the implied cancellation of the past, and replaced it with a programme of a personal contribution, a personal addition to an expanding and sanctified body of cultural property? Culture conceived as being incremental !



Do we not now approach art in absolute and totally a-historical terms, with a blanket aesthetic that subsumes together, for instance, a renaissance or impressionist painting, a cubist canvas, a Kwakiutl totemic mask, a Greek archaic Kouros and a modern Yugoslavian peasant primitive? It does not even disturb us to see such objects side by side in sanctified museum space. The school, "does not take account of history, only of time" !

The artist no longer heroizes himself (how old fashioned a Brenden Behan would look today !) but we heroize the paradigmatic masters of the avant-garde. We are all familiar <sup>by now</sup> with the new fashion in curatorial practice where a museum will show vast blown-up mural documentary photographs of the artist himself, that shifts <sup>media images</sup> the communication center of gravity, as it were, away from the <sup>artistic</sup> work proper into the domain of a mythologised and heroic presence.

No wonder our ~~practical~~ visual culture is presently experiencing such an acute crisis, such an intense moral discomfort. To believe, as a practicing artist, that one has seized the libertarian posture of revolutionary artistic "movement", to believe that one is celebrating to flux of subjective personal experience, to believe that one is objectifying the very process of the creative principle itself - while, in reality, <sup>one is actually</sup> contributing to a revised "school", <sup>one is</sup> confirming the academic consolidation of hierarchical value <sup>and</sup> reinforcing a world-view that that is static and classic !

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The artist now, <sup>however,</sup> <sup>while</sup> unconsciously underwrites the very values that the mythology of artistic commitment has declared to be inimical to the creative spirit.

¶ [To understand that there no longer remains any real confrontation



between the residual inheritance of the once contestational understanding of visual culture and the present "established" one, it is only necessary to consider the artistic support-system. The appearance of that vast new consolidated structure that I call the "museo-critical complex" implies considerably more than simple evidence that modernist art has become "acceptable", that public taste has "matured" to a stage of more subtle appreciation. It is a clear indicator that the avant-garde aesthetic has now become itself the symbolic language of the established institutions of society.

We may tend to take it for granted, but we are all of us here aware how recent is the general public acceptance of modernism in artistic culture. None of us have to look back very far in time to remind ourselves of the struggles to establish the acceptance, for instance, of abstraction in painting as a serious notion. This <sup>very</sup> lecture series, ~~itself~~, has been, at the same time, the fruit and the reinforcement of that acceptance.

It is not merely, then, the artists themselves, the producers, or the other members of the artistic community, who are experiencing this schizophrenic condition that we have isolated. To the degree that we react to artistic culture, so we are all trapped into a double standard. The institutions of culture, the universities, <sup>the</sup> art-schools, museums, the distribution and communication media, all declare one set of messages, while the net effect of the museo-critical complex is to confirm another and totally contradictory set of messages.

With an understanding that there exists a total discontinuity



at the present moment between what artistic culture understands itself to be doing and what it actually is doing, we can now return to a line of thought we digressed from a short while back. The basic cultural discontinuity that expresses itself in the rupture of the tradition of avant-garde value is, we have noted, located in the social and not in the aesthetic domain. And the dynamic that informs the parameters of social experience is, of course, that of politics. If we look back into the past for a moment (to the seventeenth century, for instance), I am sure that no-one here would question <sup>for one moment</sup> the basic assertion that classical painting, sculpture and architecture served, above all, a political role, celebrating divine-right and the power of monarchical absolutism.

If our present analysis leads us to inescapably conclude, as I contend that it must, that the modernist avant garde movement of <sup>the</sup> libertarian contestation of authority has modulated to a revised academic school of acquiescence, even to a celebration of hierarchical authority, then clearly artistic culture has once more fully joined the arena of political commitment which it appeared to abandon a century or so ago.

That such a violent reversal should echo throughout the whole cultural superstructure is, from this perspective, not especially surprising. The most significant political event that has taken place during the last twenty years (the period of the erosion of the avant-garde) has been a world-wide consolidation of capitalism into corporative forms. The massification of culture, the erosions of distinctions between "high" art and "mass" art, between the expressions of creative visionary subjectivism and those of an ethnic, folk or indigenous identity, the appropriation of bohemian counter-cultural codes and signals into the pervasive



edifice of fashion, are all aspects of a totalization<sup>s</sup> of culture that is not so much a reflection, but a contributory factor, to the socio-political totalization of society.

At this point, I would remind you of the notion of cultural displacement<sup>that</sup> we touched <sup>upon</sup> earlier, the tendency of artistic culture to be locked into the previous socio-economic era. It is possible to see that the mythology of the avant-garde reinforced certain ideological assumptions central to developing bourgeois capitalism. The whole myth of the artist as rebel and hero can be seen to confirm specific myths of the capitalist universe: competitive individualism, upward mobility, free-society, and so<sup>on</sup>. In short, the value-system of modernist art embodies the value-system of early competitive mercantile capitalism. Yet it is <sup>clearly</sup> discontinuous with competitive capitalism; ~~and~~ the historical span of avant-garde culture <sup>can be seen to</sup> chart the ~~historical period~~ historical period of the socio-economic transition to evolved monopoly capitalism. Further, it is notable that avant-garde value becomes a publically-accepted (co-optated, if you like) value-system at the<sup>very</sup> point in time when monopoly capitalism finally consolidates itself into its present corporative stage.

Without here raising any issues of political vices and virtues, it can be stated as unquestionable that the present dynamic of the capitalist world (and avant-garde as well as post-modernist artistic culture must obviously be understood as a phenomenon of the capitalist world) is one <sup>that is</sup> focused towards the integration and consolidation together of all sectors of the economy. It would be completely naive to imagine that the cultural sector, embodying as it does, important ideological functions, would remain immune to this development. Inevitably, the process of economic



corporatization, following its own logic towards monopoly, would ~~inevitably~~ also begin to demand a <sup>similar</sup> monopoly over culture.

It is possible now to observe that corporative capitalism has already co-optated the social and aesthetic universe of artistic culture in certain locations. The present situation in Canada would seem to provide the clearest example of the emergence of a state monopoly of culture with its pervasive and expanding complex of public bodies such as the Canada Council, the Council for the Humanities, the Art Bank, the C.B.C., the National Film Board, and A.N.N.P.A.C. (the national association of parallel galleries), which last represents the corporatization of the final stronghold of avant-garde aesthetics, the alternate distribution and media access network. I'm sure that each of us here can note from our own experience examples of a widespread developing consolidation and bureaucratization of cultural institutions. <sup>14</sup>

We do not have the opportunity here to enter into a detailed analysis of the processes by which monopolization becomes extended from the economic to the cultural field, nor to explore the various different ways in which this corporatization is currently manifesting itself. Suffice for our present purposes to briefly emphasise two operative factors which - being both absolutely central to the mechanisms of the economic sector and now both clearly visible in the cultural sector - illuminate the full appropriation of artistic culture into the dynamic of corporative culture.

The two specific and relevant processes currently taking place within the cultural arena are those of the changing patterns of patronage and the mutating distributive structure of cultural

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It is not surprising that a country which ~~only~~ owns a small proportion of its own economy should go to a great deal of effort, and spend a great deal of money, in asserting its cultural ~~independence~~ independence and identity. The Canadian economy ~~is~~, without question, a Branch Plant economy, in which the greater part of industry is owned abroad. The latest figures that I could discover is that 73% of the resource extraction industries and 61% of all manufacturing and service industries were foreign-owned. These are the official figures from Statistics Canada (Canadian International Investment Position, Ottawa.) However, these figures were published ten years ago in 1970, and the trend of foreign ownership in Canada is an augmenting one. ~~Just as~~ an informed guess, I would place the overall present-day figure of foreign ownership of the Canadian economy at about 85%. That is to say, we now own only 15% of our own country. For Australia, Ted Wheelwright gives an overall figure of the present moment of 41.4% foreign ownership ~~41.4%~~ (Australia and World Capitalism, Greg Gough, Ted Wheelwright and Ted Wiltshire, Penguin Books, 1980.) For this figure I condensed a table on page 125, adding up the six figures for the various areas of mining, manufacturing, service etc., and isolating a figure for the economy as a whole. It is unquestionable that the rate of new foreign investment in the Australian economy is extremely rapid at the moment, ~~and it will undoubtedly~~ and it will undoubtedly arrive at, or near, the Canadian figures very quickly indeed. I believe that we will see, in this country, an augmented ~~program~~ program in this country of cultural nationalism and the deepening consolidation of the Pseudo-Critical Complex.



production and consumption. The strict economic factors that these processes represent are, respectively, those of economic investment and those of the metropolis-hinterland nexus of development, underdevelopment and dependency.

- o The first process is more transparent in terms of the interrelationship between investment and culture. Over the last twenty years there has been a marked shift within the economy of the artistic community from a reliance on the patronage of the individual ~~patronage of the individual~~ private collector to a reliance on the patronage of state and corporative bodies. The interesting thing about the individual patron of art, the private collector, purchaser and cultural consumer, is the extreme complexity of his motives. He almost invariably has a genuine love of and understanding for modernist art - but he is never quite simply buying a spiritualized and transcendental object.

He is also purchasing some-sort of prestige, and, even more basically, some sort of entree into a desired social space <sup>together</sup> with its concomitant self-view. Of course, there is always the element of the special status conferred by the ownership of a sacralized cultural artefact. The owner of a Jackson Pollock painting is unquestionably demanding the recognition of social as well as of cultural superiority over the owner of, say, a Bernard Buffet painting, or, for that matter, at a more extreme level, over the owner of a Mexican velvet painting.

But these collectors are also doing something else. They are buying an image, a self image, and, to a varying degree, a personal share of a confirmed social reality embodied in that image. A



continuum that embraces Pollock, Bernard Buffet and popular kitsch decoration may well offend us aesthetically (it also sharply indicates the ideological nature of our notions of a clear distinction between the <sup>so-called</sup> "high" and ~~the~~ "vulgar" arts), but from the social point of view we would have no great difficulty in admitting a shared continuum of motivation - only distinctions of quality and degree within that continuum. The consumption and collection of cultural artefacts clearly belongs to ~~the same order~~ <sup>a whole structure</sup> of social experience: ~~as does tourism~~. We might remark here, in parenthesis, that tourism belongs also to that structure of social experience; and that the act of collecting art and the voyeuristic act of observing alien cultures (and, of course, also collecting on the momentary level) are clearly related. The individual collector, then, is not only confirming both in the world's gaze and in his own estimation, the virtues of his taste and sensibility (the brutally competitive entrepreneurial businessman can mollify any nagging moral twinges in his self-view as a patron of "the higher things in life"). But, at the more exalted level of patronage, he physically buys himself into the charmed circle of the artistic community. The history of the patronage of modern art, from the Fricks and the Guggenheims and the Schuchukins downwards, would seem to demonstrate that the act of basking in the appreciative glow of respect from those sacralized creatures, artists and poets, <sup>together with their</sup> mediators, curators and critics, <sup>does</sup> wonders after a hard day's work expropriating surplus value.

If the private bourgeois patron, from his inception round about the time of impressionism, shows himself to be originally part of the dynamic of avant-garde modernism, to be, as it were, a factor internal to the artistic community, to some degree a cultural "tourist", <sup>then</sup> there has also been an unmistakeable shift of purpose and intent in the domain of patronage as the basic economic structure



of the capitalist world has mutated over recent years.

Think for a moment that Nelson Rockefeller is an entirely different sort of collector from Hirschorn or Scull. He certainly has not been purchasing a slice of the socio-cultural "mana" or prestige of, say, an Andy Warhol or a Harold Rosenberg. An incident that took place a couple of years ago is instructive. In appealing to the Republican convention for nomination, Rockefeller spent over half of his public political submission in detailing his record as a patron of culture in general and of modern art in particular. At any time in the past, a similar speech would have detailed a candidate's "good works", his church attendance and pious charities. Not only, it becomes evident, has cultural patronage become a "good work" in the public mind, but further, corporate finance and industry (the banks and oil companies, in short) now lay claim to a parity with the state as embodiments and receptacles of "higher value".

It is not pure cultural interest, or even a concern with wise investment and tax-shelters that is behind the recent emergence of parallel corporative cultural institutions (the collections and foundations sponsored by banks and the resource extraction industries). There is surely an evident pattern appearing whose logic is to counterbalance, <sup>to</sup> influence, and eventually displace, the state cultural structures. This claim of cultural authority constitutes a significant step towards the claim and eventual consolidation of political authority.

The second nexus of contingency between post-modernist culture and capitalist political economy is <sup>the</sup> one that defines and determines



the distribution and structure of both cultural and economic disparity. The phenomenon of economic underdevelopment, whether it be understood in terms of the relationships between the advanced industrial economies of the first world and the retarded ones of the third world, or in terms of the relationships internal to the first world <sup>^</sup> between the metropolitan center and the hinterland periphery <sup>^</sup> are usually explained in terms of specific regional factors.

Underdevelopment at the periphery is largely understood in established economics in terms of historically-frozen political factors (Ulster's economic deprivation being seen to stem from the Battle of the Boyne, for instance), in terms of geographical factors such as physical inaccessability and problems of transportation, in terms of geological factors such as the lack of suitable natural resources (a patently untenable position in most cases, since the major characteristic of economic dependency is nearly always the high level of organic, mineral and fossil-fuel extraction) and, finally, in terms of local socio-ethnic factors, the "hillbilly" thesis that proposes the inherent and natural "conservatism" of peripheral society that obstinately refuses to be dragged upward from its rural and peasant stasis into the beneficial <sup>e ent</sup> progressivity of modern ~~techno-industrial and urban~~ techno-industrial and urban society.

An extremely important innovative economic approach has been developing over the last fifteen years or so which analyzes socio-economic experience in the technologically-advanced nations as being predicated on economic and industrial inequality. From this perspective it is proposed that the very logic of the present dynamic of corporative capitalism demands the escalating existence



of a metropolis-hinterland structure of economic domination and dependence.

Samir Amin, Gunder Frank and other radical economists \* have demonstrated in different ways that industrial and economic development takes place at a metropolitan center only in terms of a deliberate and planned underdevelopment (indeed, frequently a de-industrialization) in the dependant peripheral regions. Further, <sup>Frank has</sup> ~~they have~~ persuasively argued that this is not simply a recent evolution in the nature of economic relations, but a dynamic central to the development of capitalism itself, one easily identifiable as operating as early as the seventeenth century. This theory does not, it is immediately apparent, only question the various bourgeois economic analyses, but it also queries the classic Marxist formulations.

As I have intimated, this line of analysis has <sup>been</sup> so far restricted ~~itself~~ to the economic and the industrial fields. The coherence of the theory implies, <sup>however,</sup> the logical existence of a parallel network of cultural dominance and dependency, a parallel phenomenon of a consistent and deliberate de-culturization of regional and indigenous culture. One does not have to look very far to see <sup>clearly</sup> that this is, in fact, <sup>clearly</sup> happening at the wider level of mass culture.

We cannot question the escalating massification of "popular" culture. the dispersion of a broad, homogeneous value-system through the pervasive communications, entertainment and fashion media, ~~that which~~ <sup>to</sup> tends to dissipate and absorb local, regional, ethnic and indigenous cultural values into a central mode. From this perspective, the ubiquitous world-wide spread of a homogenized consumer-orientated

~~\* (Amin and Frank)~~  
15 Samir Amin, Accumulation on a World Scale, A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974 and Andre Gunder Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America, Monthly Review Press, New York 1967.



to

style intrinsic to chain-stores, <sup>to</sup>hotels, gas-stations, transport complexes, fast-food outlets and the like, can be seen to have implications well beyond any mere architectural rationale of standardization<sup>s</sup>. This "style" comprises, as do all styles, a structure of coded messages - in this case, ones designed to reinforce the values of the cultural center while the cultural periphery is being "dismantled",

It would be simplistic to see what has been called "coca-cola culture" simply as one fact<sup>e</sup> of imperialism - it is, rather, one facet of the totalization<sup>s</sup> of culture which is clearly demanded by the logical dynamics of the monopolization<sup>s</sup> of capital. Equally, the sanctified levels of "higher" culture also manifest themselves now largely as contributions to that totalization<sup>s</sup>.<sup>16</sup>

A significant aspect of this is the existence of complex patterns of cultural absorption; the incorporation of aboriginal, indigenous, ethnic and folk-art forms into "high" art by means of curatorial, market and critical mechanisms that co-optate these forms into the aesthetic universe of mainstream Euro-American artistic culture. The fashion for collecting various forms of native, indigenous and folk artefacts has contributed to more than a simple co-optation of their<sup>1</sup> values. In subsuming the specificity of peripheral indigenous<sup>1</sup> cultural value into the generality of central artistic culture (under the judgemental aesthetic of absolute stylistic formalism), a clear process of the de-development of peripheral culture is initiated.

The values inherent in these "collectibles", in indigenous and folk artefacts, are redefined as being aesthetic rather than social



while travelling

16 ~~L~~ During the Power Lecture Tour, I came across a remarkable illustration of this process. Arriving in Canberra at the airport, I was met by an extremely charming and thoughtful Arts Council Official, whose first thought was that, after the journey, I might like a drink. Placing me in the context, quite naturally, of an art-critic, he also thought I would like to have that drink in a new building of which both the ~~city~~ city and the country as a whole are proud. So he took me to the bar in the new Federal Law Court Building. Walking up the processional ramp, with its waterfall, towards the great edifice (constructed in the style currently designated "post-modernist" architecture), I remarked that it looked more like an art-gallery than a law courts. ~~My host~~ ~~My host remarked that~~ ~~the twin-building, still under construction beside it was, indeed, to~~ ~~be the new National Gallery. As we entered~~ ~~through the vast soaring glass facade, I was even more struck~~ ~~by its similarity to the new wing of the Washington National Gallery.~~ ~~The point is: The Australian State has decided to articulate the~~ ~~monumentalisation of its understanding of the nature and function of~~ ~~legal authority with the rhetoric of~~ ~~Later, as we left,~~ ~~I turned to look back once more at the building. I noticed, that, though~~ ~~only a small part of the National Gallery building was erected, several~~ ~~floor's height had been achieved, there was already a footbridge of~~ ~~some sort connecting the Law Courts and the National Gallery. So, it~~ ~~seems, the totalisation~~ ~~I am speaking of runs also that culture and~~ ~~art is conceived of as taking on the mantle of absolute and legal~~ ~~authority.~~

indeed,

to the point

to the degree

f culture



in nature. This neutralization of culture takes place across the whole spectrum of cultural dominance; and it is most clearly evident in the process of the de-historicization and <sup>the</sup> de-authentification that takes place when regional ~~specificity~~ specificity is ossified by being sanctified <sup>within</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>closed</sup> a museological context.

The monumentalization of "heritage", that takes place when buildings or artefacts are preserved outside of a contractual social context, provides only an illusion of regional identity in contrast to the packaged and high-rise reality of the imposed centralized culture. ~~As an aside, one might remark that these patterns are obviously also articulated both by and within the whole phenomena of tourism.~~

Unquestionably, then, we are moving into, not merely a massified society, but a totalized one. We have now only four years to go until 1984 - but we cannot, I fear, take much comfort even from Orwell's analysis. We are not facing, as his dystopian nightmare proposed, a phenomenon of totalitarian structures imposed from without, where dominance remains amenable to mediation and redemption by liberal-humanist cultural value. The present socio-cultural totalization is <sup>integral, but so far</sup> ~~relatively~~ <sup>only</sup> benign - that is to say, relatively benign to <sup>solaces</sup> ~~a~~ part of our society, that part which claims the ~~solaces~~ <sup>the solaces</sup> of artistic culture. It is not so benign, of course, to the deprived and the exploited who are ~~indifferent~~ <sup>artistic</sup> naturally also indifferent to ~~the alien~~ the alien culture of privilege.

There is, it would now seem clear, no longer much justification for claiming visual culture as the receptacle for the embodiment of a postulated transcendental "higher value" <sup>that is seen to exist</sup> ~~existing~~ beyond the contradictions of actual social experience. There would, indeed,



seem no longer any possibility of even demarcating artistic from social experience; ~~It~~ may well be that such a demarcation has been an illusion all along. But, if so, it has been an illusion that was central to a distinct and now-terminated socio-cultural epoch, that of the modernist avant-garde.

With the absorption of avant-garde value into the dominant aesthetic of our society, the avant-garde as a contestational and subjective-visionary socio-aesthetic has, quite simply, ceased to exist. The inheritors of that tradition, the present post-modernists, now inevitably articulate and objectify in visual form the values of established corporative capitalist society. Not a surprising or exceptional role for visual culture, as we have seen. The confirmation of established dominant socio-aesthetic value has been the role of art throughout its conscious history, with the <sup>single</sup> anomalous exception of the modernist era. The celebration of authority in art is, of course, no questionable posture in itself, in the context of aesthetics, or in that of artistic practice. It only becomes contradictory or problematical in terms of a <sup>concomitant</sup> retention of <sup>those</sup> residual myths that claim a non-existent socio-cultural contestation of authority.

This is not to imply, of course, that contemporary artistic practice is inevitably conditioned to acquiesce to a specific established understanding of the nature of social experience. I would suggest that only an understanding of visual culture <sup>completely</sup> dominated by formalist aesthetic imperatives is so restricted. The conclusion that we must inescapably draw is that the whole broad spectrum of artistic practice and experience has now (with the erosion of visionary subjectivism) become infused and informed with a political



dimension.

In politics, of course, we are not obliged to acquiesce to the dominant established view of human and social relations. Neither, of course, would a politically-aware artistic culture be limited to enshrining the principles of established authority. If artistic practice is to be meaningful beyond its present de-socialized aesthetic formalism,<sup>is</sup> to be meaningful in terms of the concept of artistic progressivity, it must take up the challenge of rendering itself once more socially and politically meaningful. It must reintegrate artistic and social progressivity into a contractual engagement. There are many indications that this is, in fact, already happening on a wide scale. The analysis of this evolving process, however, is a whole different subject of discussion. I leave you here with signs and markers pointing in that direction.

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The Power Lectures for 1980 were delivered in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Hobart, Launceston, Newcastle, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth during September, October and November 1980. A condensed version was delivered in New Zealand at Palmerston North, New Plymouth, Rotorua, Hamilton and Wellington in January 1981.