

Speculations

Æsthetics in the 21st Century

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Aesthetics in the 21st Century

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Not Objects so Much As Images

A Response to Graham Harman's "Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde"

Bettina Funcke

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Editors' Note: This response was delivered at the *Art, Information, and Philosophical Objects* event held at Columbia University on 8 March, 2013.

I WANT TO START BY MAKING SOME comments on what you have written in your essay on Clement Greenberg and Marcel Duchamp, Graham. I was especially interested because I have also written about these two figures in my book *Pop or Populus: Art between High and Low*.¹ I want to say first of all that your paper is dense and complex, but ultimately open-ended and speculative. And this is what makes it exciting.

As I see it, you are taking Greenberg's criticism as a model that might once again be interesting or relevant, not because of his strict emphasis on formalism, but because he is known to us as the art critic who decreed what was right and what was wrong, and who therefore tried to predict what was to come next in art, or what *should* or *should not* be the next step. His judgments were moralistic, e.g. calling Wassily Kandinsky a dangerous influence for young artists, or describing Duchamp as a dead end. So, essentially you are looking to this viewpoint as a kind of inspiration, and then posing the question yourself

¹ Bettina Funcke, *Pop or Populus: Art between High and Low* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009); see in particular chapters 1 and 2.

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of what might come next and how we might get to this next step in the evolution of art and its criticism.

You write, "Over the past decade, there has been a growing sense that Greenberg is becoming readable once again, while Duchamp's legacy was perhaps on the verge of becoming overexploited."² And this is maybe because Greenberg was writing from what he saw as a point of exhaustion; in his view Duchamp was entirely played out and we needed to find a new direction. He was seeing land art, conceptual art, and minimal art as basically bankrupt derivatives of Duchamp. That may not be something that we agree with now, but it may be that, forty years later, we can finally sort of come to the same conclusions as Greenberg: OK, you were not right about the art of the 1970s, but *now* we have caught up with you, because now everything feels exhausted to us, too. And we recognise, of course, that this feeling of exhaustion, that things have been overexploited, is perennial.

I still would not necessarily agree that the period since the 1960s is a neo-Dada period, i.e., Duchampian, because I think that view, which was Greenberg's, leaves out the influence of Andy Warhol, whom he could not really deal with, and who shifted the terrain again. But then again Warhol, like Duchamp, is another strain of art whose legacy may be over-exploited, as you put it.

So, I cannot give an answer to the question of what is coming next, but I want to contribute to the discussion by coming from a slightly different angle, which is to fill in another side of Duchamp's work which, I think, has really come to influence the art of the last few decades, more so than the readymade in fact. This is his play with information and documentation, with the very reception of his own work, through printed and editioned representations. It is an interference into art history. This is something that basically falls outside of Greenberg's investigation, and is not really addressed by the 6-point critique that you mention. Just to recap those points:

² Graham Harman, "Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde" in this volume.

Duchamp rejects quality or taste; is primarily interested in shock value; uses transgressive material; privileges the concept; overestimates his own radicality; and is an academic artist who takes his medium for granted.

The thing is, these points of critique seem to make sense only as long as we focus on the readymades and other objects as *objects per se*, ignoring their context, their discourse, their perverse histories, and everything that Duchamp worked so hard to put into place, a practice which is now much more common because of his work. As an example, let's take a look at the most famous (and as such the most exhausted) readymade: the *Fountain*.

Few people saw the original *Fountain* in 1917. Like almost all the readymades, the original had gone missing, its dimensions never even recorded. Never exhibited, and lost or destroyed almost immediately, the *Fountain* was actually created through Duchamp's media manipulations rather than through the creation-myth of his hand selecting it in the showroom, the status-conferring (and, for Greenberg, would-be shocking) gesture to which the readymades are often reduced. A week after the Society of Independent Artists refused to exhibit the work, Duchamp transported the urinal to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery, where Stieglitz photographed it under theatrical lighting in front of an expressionist painting. This is the only remaining visual trace of the original *Fountain*. This photograph has been reproduced in countless publications, and also served as the model for the edition of *Fountain* produced in 1964 by Arturo Schwarz, in collaboration with Duchamp. A critical commentary on the work, which, apart from the photographic reproduction, is all that allows for its inscription into what we might call the archive, appeared a month later without attribution in the second and final issue of *The Blind Man*, a journal published not coincidentally by Duchamp. So the object disappears, but its semi-fictional documentation and narrative produced a guarantee, a shortcut to history through photography and writing.

With the original lost, the questions of what is a copy, what is an editioned object, and wherein the authorisation of ex-



original



ecuting a work lies, are raised for the first time and remain complex and ambiguous. For example, the *Fountain's* entry in the catalogue raisonné, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, lists and depicts next to the original three additional urinals

that embody later versions of the work.³ Next to the original is one Sidney Janis selected in 1950 in Paris at the request of the artist; then there is one from 1963, selected by Ulf Linde for Duchamp's retrospective at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and, last, there is the 1964 edition of eight replicas produced under the artist's supervision from the photo by Stieglitz.

In *Fountain's* elegant model, the artwork does not occupy a single position in space and time; rather, it is a palimpsest of gestures, presentations, and positions, as Seth Price suggests in his essay *Dispersion*. He writes:

Duchamp distributed the notion of the *Fountain* in such a way that it became one of art's primal scenes; it transubstantiated from a provocative objet d'art into, as Broodthaers defined his *Musée des Aigles*: "a situation, a system defined by objects, by inscriptions, by various activities..."⁴

In short: it turned art into discourse. Duchamp made sure to photograph the original, to publicise it, to archive it, and then to totally twist the trail. Had anyone previously done such work with copies and editions within the realm of high art?

Once art defines itself as an activity primarily manifested in the larger domain of distribution, it encounters new and illuminating problems, as in the case of Duchamp's editions of his readymades created with Arturo Schwarz. Things declared to be readymades were, mere decades later, no longer industrially produced, or had become untraceable. The objects in question thus had to be reconstructed by hand and at great expense from sketches or photographs. The 1964 edition of *Fountain* was reproduced by a Milanese ceramicist with the aid of Stieglitz's photograph of the original. After Duchamp had authorised the designs for the copies, the "genuine copies of the readymades" were now—nearly forty years after they had been selected from among ordinary objects—seemingly

³ Marcel Duchamp, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, rev. and exp. pbk. ed., vol. 1, ed. Arturo Schwarz (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000), 648–50.

⁴ Seth Price, *Dispersion* (Self-published, 2002), <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf> (accessed March 18, 2013).

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conventional sculptures, handcrafted to imitate mass-produced articles. As Martha Buskirk has noted:

For the readymades, Duchamp had developed new ways of establishing authorship that would operate in tandem with their testing of the boundaries of the work of art. If Duchamp's initial gesture of choosing the readymade referred to mass production, the later forms of reproduction through which the readymades cycled secured their status as art.⁵

From 1930 to 1940, Duchamp spent his creative energy mainly on the reconstruction of miniature replicas of earlier works. Most of the pieces from that period took the form of multiples: *La boîte-en-valise* (an edition of 300, completed in 1941) included miniature replicas of the readymades, reproductions of the works in glass or celluloid, collotype prints of the paintings, drawings, and commercial prints (some black-and-white, others hand-coloured), as well as photographs of the readymades, of the optical apparatus, and of Duchamp's studio, all manipulated in various ways. In order to reproduce some of them, he had to visit his collectors and take notes. The notes in Duchamp's 1934 *Green Box*, in an edition of 300, were thought to be the only extant notes about *The Large Glass*. Duchamp, however, had more. In 1966, thirty-two years after publishing *The Green Box*, he produced *The White Box* or *A l'infinifif* in an edition of 150, which contained additional notes. These were translated and typographically transferred into English by Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk, a so-called typotranslation published as a book in 1967, also under the authorisation of Duchamp.

I want to stop and point out that all these examples do not invalidate Greenberg's critiques. Obviously Greenberg would have seen all of this as a confirmation of his doubts about the direction in which Duchamp was taking art. But this is how Duchamp allowed the work to enter a larger conversation and to circulate through cultural realms way beyond the exhibi-

⁵ Martha Buskirk, "Thoroughly Modern Marcel" in *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 200.

tion hall or gallery. Greenberg underestimated the power of this; he may have been right about the eventual waning of the readymade as a model, but there were a lot more powerful tools in Duchamp's toolbox: the way he made manuals for his own work, the status of the copy and the editioned object, the tweaked reproduction of one's work, the way art can turn into discourse, his thoughts on the fourth dimension and other quasi-mathematical and quasi-scientific aspects, and so on. In comparison, if you look at a painting by Jackson Pollock, you can admire the work, you can take something away in terms of attitude, experience, or freedom, but there are not so many concrete strategies to take away and use in your own work.

It is not in fact so much about objects now, but about images and their particular kinds of materiality; and now that we are in the realm of the digital, the image can migrate and transform much more rapidly and with all sorts of new forms. This is today's over-exploited legacy of Duchamp, not the readymades as shocking new sculptural form. It is Duchamp's work of documentation, information, altered photographs, forgeries, identities, narrativising, and transferrals.

I want to switch gears now. Graham, the last sentence of your essay is "What outmoded provincial might emerge as the Cézanne of the coming era?"⁶ You are referring to Cézanne going back to pick up perspectival space and trying to synthesise it with contemporary strategies, and you are pointing to this as a possibly interesting new approach, or a direction for artists today, who retrieve passed-over elements and basically run them through a contemporary filter. With regard to this, there is a case study I would like to share.

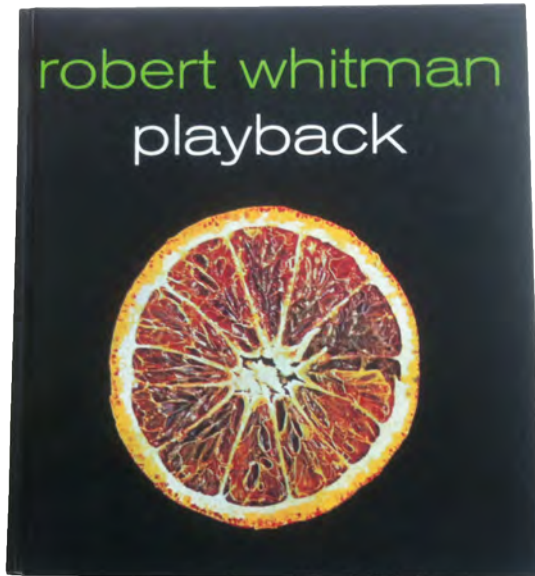
I want to go back to the 1970s and look at certain pieces by Robert Whitman. Whitman is not exactly overlooked, but certainly not as well-known as he should be. He is mainly known for his performances from the 1960s and '70s, and his *Cinema Pieces* from as early as 1963, in which installations of everyday objects, like a shower, sink, or window, became screens

⁶ Harman, "Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde," in this volume.

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onto which he projected films showing these objects in use. He also worked over many years with Bell Labs engineer Billy Klüver and the Experiments in Art and Technology group, which brought him into contact, crucially, with the Xerox machine. A Xerox machine is interesting as a transitional technology. Unlike a camera, it is not based on a chemical development process; it does not really refer to the world of photography. It is electronic, it is electrostatic, and it sweeps across whatever you place on its flatbed, and puts it together in one image. So we are just one step away from the scanner, which is what is interesting here.

The contemporary artist collaboration Guyton/Walker, consisting of Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker, uses a scanner as one of their main tools, and a whole component of their work comes out of something Whitman did in 1974 when he had a fellowship at Xerox. The photocopier was not a common artist's tool at the time; you had to have this kind of access. What Whitman started doing was Xeroxing sliced fruit, and fish, and other food.



Bettina Funcke – *Not Objects so Much As Images*

To return to the present, Guyton and Walker both saw the 2003 Whitman exhibition at Dia Art Foundation, where Guyton was working. In the exhibition, there is a 1976 poster announcing an earlier Whitman show at Dia that includes a sliced lime and a sliced orange placed on the flatbed of the Xerox and turned into a flat graphic element. These Xeroxed fruit slices then became the cover for Dia's book, *Robert Whitman: Playback*.⁷ And this turned directly into a series of works in which Guyton/Walker started putting sliced fruit, particularly limes, through their scanner. What is different now is that the scanner brings the fruit not simply to the page, but into digital space, where you can do all kinds of things to a file. You turn the lime orange, you blow it up, and you pervert it. It is open to manipulations and applications in various formats, and to printing on different kinds of objects and surfaces.



⁷ *Robert Whitman: Playback*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Bettina Funcke, Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003).



Bettina Funcke – *Not Objects so Much As Images*

You can see here the naked file as information first of all, a Photoshop document. The image was then printed by inkjet in various compositions onto different surfaces and objects: a paint can, canvas, sheetrock, the ubiquitous building material, itself part of an installation, and most recently, as depicted, laminated onto a table.

These artists are not the new Cézannes, by the way! But I am interested in taking up your idea, Graham, of past elements gaining a new relevance when they are brought to contemporary strategies that create a strange synthesis.

I want to close with the image of this table because it brings to mind another question. I wonder how, in thinking about the strangeness of how the scanner takes in the world of objects, and how these images are output through printing technologies in so many adaptable ways in order to cover the world of objects, we might possibly approach an understanding of your notion of “the third table” through the work of art.

This is a concept you wrote about in a notebook for dOCUMENTA (13)’s *100 Notes - 100 Thoughts* publication series, which I edited.⁸ I don’t want to presume to discuss this notion in too much detail but I will summarise briefly: the first table is the one that scientists would call the “real” table, which is a collection of materials, described in terms of the laws of physics. The second table is the table that humanists would find more real, and this is a table as we know it in everyday life, a familiar object inscribed in social use and customs and so on. You however say that neither of these tables is the real table, that there is a third table, which lies between the two, and which may belong to the culture of the arts. It is a table that is to some degree unknowable, it is a philosophical/artistic table, and I will leave it at that.

In closing, I am hoping that in future discussions we can go a bit further into how an object-oriented philosophy might somehow change how we think about art, what art is, where its place is, and where it may be going.

⁸ Graham Harman, *The Third Table*, dOCUMENTA (13) 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts Series (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013).

Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde

Graham Harman

American University in Cairo

IN CLEMENT GREENBERG AND MARCEL Duchamp we have two of the pivotal figures in the twentieth century arts. Yet they seem to stand in complete opposition, so that the reputation of Duchamp rises as that of Greenberg falls, and vice versa. Greenberg is viewed as the champion of formalism, of artworks sealed off from their socio-political surroundings and even from the private intentions of the artist. Greenberg held that Duchamp was simply “not a good artist,” and that his devotees (including the highly regarded Joseph Beuys) were “also not especially good artists.”¹ From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, Greenberg’s critical views marched step-by-step with the progressive advance of the artistic avant-garde, in the eclipse of Paris by New York, and the triumph of Jackson Pollock and the so-called “post-painterly abstraction” of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. Since that time, Greenberg and his preferred styles have fallen into disfavour, while in the words of one observer “the reputation and work of Marcel Duchamp ... [have] surpassed those

¹ Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 221.

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of Picasso in the eyes of art historians, artists, and Duchamp's admirers alike."²

Over the past decade, there has been a growing sense that Greenberg is becoming readable once again, while Duchamp's legacy was perhaps on the verge of becoming overexploited. My hope is that by re-examining Greenberg's complaints about Duchamp, by weighing the strengths and weaknesses of those complaints, we might gain a fresh sense of what avenues might still be open to art criticism and perhaps to the arts themselves.

1. Greenberg's Critique of Duchamp

From the dawn of his career in 1939 through May 1968, Clement Greenberg published a total of 333 essays, articles, and reviews. As far as I can determine, all of this written output contains just two references to Marcel Duchamp. In January 1943 there is a passing reference to some pieces by Duchamp in Peggy Guggenheim's new gallery, which Greenberg felt were unsuccessfully displayed.³ Almost a quarter century later, in April 1967, Greenberg tells us that minimalism commits itself to the third dimension because this is where art intersects with non-art, and he credits Duchamp and the Dadaists with this discovery.⁴ Just two references in twenty-eight years; that is all.

But beginning with Greenberg's May 1968 lecture in Sydney, published the following year, Duchamp becomes a more central opponent. Though the references become only slightly more numerous, they become more vehemently negative, as well as more central to Greenberg's defence of his own aesthetic views. The tables had turned. Greenberg was now an intellectual exile rather than a king, while Duchamp had been

² Gavin Parkinson, *The Duchamp Book* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 6.

³ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 141.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 253.

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retroactively anointed as the heroic forerunner of more recent artistic trends. Let us look briefly at each of these references, so as to prepare for a more general discussion.

In the Sydney lecture of May '68, Duchamp is criticised twice for attempting to transcend the untranscendable difference in quality between good art and bad art. The first instance condemns not just Duchamp, but a large portion of the art of 1968:

Things that purport to be art do not function, do not exist, as art until they are experienced through taste. Until then they exist only as empirical phenomena, as aesthetically arbitrary objects or facts. These, precisely, are what a lot of contemporary art gets taken for, and what any artists want their works to be taken for—in the hope, periodically renewed since Marcel Duchamp first acted on it fifty-odd years ago, that by dint of evading the reach of taste while yet remaining in the context of art, certain kinds of contrivances will achieve unique existence and value. So far this hope has proved illusory.⁵

Later in the Sydney lecture, Greenberg expands on this notion.⁶ No one in the arts, he says, had ever questioned the difference between high-quality and low-quality art until the emergence of the “popular” avant-garde, by which he means Dada and Duchamp. The inherent difficulty of high artistic taste and production was replaced by the difficulty of accepting an ostensibly non-artistic phenomenon as an artwork. Greenberg offers a sarcastic list of real or imagined pseudo-artworks produced by the Duchampian pop avant-garde:

The idea of the difficult is evoked by a row of boxes, by a mere rod, by a pile of litter, by projects for Cyclopean landscape architecture, by the plan for a trench dug in a straight line for hundreds of miles, by a half-open door, by the cross-section of a mountain, by stating imaginary relations between real points in real places, by a blank wall, and so forth.⁷

⁵ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 293.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 301-03.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

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Greenberg concludes: “In this context the Milky Way might be offered as a work of art too. The trouble with the Milky Way, however, is that, as *art*, it is banal.”⁸ In the 1968 Sydney lecture, then, Duchamp is presented as someone who evades questions of aesthetic quality and replaces them with the claim that any arbitrarily designated object can be an artwork. This interpretation of Duchamp is not surprising and not inaccurate.

In Greenberg’s 1971 essay “Counter-Avant-Garde,”⁹ the critique of Duchamp becomes harsher and more intricate. In Western art, Greenberg says, there had always been a small number of innovators who also led the way in terms of aesthetic quality. Beginning in the 1860s, there was increasing distance between advanced art and official taste. Advanced art began to challenge that taste to such a degree as to cause a certain amount of shock—important new art actually became *scandalous* with Manet, the impressionists, Cézanne, the Fauves, and cubism. In each case the scandal wore off after some time, though the underlying aesthetic challenge of the avant-garde remained. But the challenge and the scandal came to be mistaken for one another. With the Italian futurists, “innovation and advancedness began to look more and more like ... categorical means to artistic significance apart from aesthetic quality.”¹⁰ With Duchamp, this avant-gardeness was replaced by a full blown *avant-gardeism*. As Greenberg sees it,

in a few short years after 1912, [Duchamp] laid down the precedents for everything that advanced-advanced art has done in the fifty-odd years since ... [He] locked advanced-advanced art into what has amounted to hardly more than elaborations, variations on, and recapitulations of his original ideas.¹¹

⁸ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 303.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Counter-Avant-Garde,” *Art International* (1971), 15, 16-19. Reprinted in *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, ed. Joseph Masheck (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 122-23.

¹⁰ Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

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These are strong words, given the near-total absence of Duchamp from Greenberg's writings until the latter was almost sixty years old. And what was the core of Duchamp's vision, now credited by Greenberg with setting the agenda for advanced-advanced art as of 1971? That agenda is that

the shocking, the scandalizing, the mystifying and confounding, became embraced as ends in themselves and no longer regretted as initial side effects of artistic newness that would wear off with familiarity. Now these side effects were to be built in. The first bewildered reaction to innovative art was to be the sole and appropriate one.¹²

More than this, the shock and scandal in question were no longer aesthetic as it was with great avant-garde art, but came solely from the extra-aesthetic realm: "Duchamp's first readymades, his bicycle wheel, his bottle rack, and later on his urinal, were not at all new in configuration; they startled when first seen only because they were presented in a fine-art context, which is a purely cultural and social, not an aesthetic or artistic context."¹³ The point became not to violate the aesthetic standards of the recent avant-garde in order to create progress in taste, but to violate social decorum.

There are a few other points to consider. Duchamp always took pride in an art that appealed to the mind rather than the eye, against what he dismissively called "retinal art."¹⁴ But for Greenberg, this excess of *thinking* is precisely the death of art. In other words, avant-gardism of Duchamp's type involves too much conscious choice. The artist performs a series of easy cognitive stunts that fail to outrun their conception; the artist is no longer surprised by what the artwork discovers: "Conscious volition, deliberateness, plays a principal part in avant-gardist art: that is, resorting to ingenuity instead of inspiration, contrivance instead of creation, 'fancy' instead of "imagination"; in effect, to the known rather than the

¹² Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ Parkinson, *The Duchamp Book*, 6.

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unknown.”¹⁵ The new becomes a consciously available set of external gestures rather than the object of unremitting struggle. As a result, “the exceptional enterprise of artistic innovation, by being converted into an affair of standardised categories, of a set of ‘looks,’ is put within reach of uninspired calculation.”¹⁶ Yet aesthetics ought to be a matter of surprise rather than of shock, of difficult grappling with something slightly beyond our grasp rather than the transparent mastery of a clever subversive concept. As Greenberg later put it, mathematical demonstrations become boring when repeated, and so too do the “demonstrations” of Duchamp as to the arbitrariness of what counts as an art object. By contrast, “that’s not the way it is with more substantial art, good and bad: that kind of art you have to experience over and over again in order to keep on *knowing* it.”¹⁷

A related notion is that avant-gardism thinks it can overturn the entire history of art with a single transgressive gesture, whereas for Greenberg art advances by mastering the best art of the past and adapting it in some relevant way:

Maybe the most constant topic of avant-gardist rhetoric is the claim made with each new phase of avant-garde, or seeming avant-garde, art that the past is now being finally closed out and a radical mutation in the nature of art is taking place after which art will no longer behave as it has heretofore.¹⁸

Attempts to shock and overturn art from the outside have replaced challenges to taste from within the established tradition. But for Greenberg, surprise must always occur inside a given context: “new and surprising ways of satisfying in art have always been connected closely with immediately previous ways ... There have been no great vaults ‘forward,’ no innovations out of the blue, no ruptures of continuity in the

¹⁵ Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

high art of the past—nor have any such been witnessed in our day.”¹⁹ As he would claim five years later in his Bennington Seminars, “Duchamp had hardly grasped what real cubism was about”²⁰—namely, the flattening-out of the picture plane as opposed to the deepening illusion of pictorial depth since the Italian Renaissance. For Greenberg this is evident from the rather traditional perspectival elements in Duchamp’s own quasi-cubist painting efforts, before he gave up painting and turned to the bicycle wheel and other readymades. Instead, Greenberg holds, Duchamp mistakenly believed that the force of cubism lay in its difficulty and shock value.

This leads us to the final and perhaps most important aspect of Greenberg’s anti-Duchampian views. Though it might seem surprising at first, Greenberg is adamant in treating both Duchamp and surrealism as forms of “academic art.” There are two kinds of academic artist, Greenberg holds. The first is able to recognise the new avant-garde trends of the present day but follows them in a watered-down, nonthreatening form. Greenberg offers the example of Paul-Albert Besnard, whose vulgarised if imaginative variant of impressionism in the 1880s “outsold Sisley and Pissarro, to their grief, and became better known too, in the short term.”²¹ The second kind, far more common, “is one who is puzzled [by the new trends], and who therefore orients his art to expectations formed by an earlier phase of art.”²² Duchamp was a half-hearted early devotee of Cézanne and the Fauves, but was simply unable to grasp the new aesthetic standards generated by cubism, and misinterpreted cubism as nothing more than a shock and a scandal to previous standards rather than as a style with inherent aesthetic merit. For this reason, Greenberg holds, Duchamp can be taken seriously as an interesting cultural

¹⁹ Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

²¹ Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87.

²² Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 15.

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figure, but not as an artist per se.²³ Dada, surrealism, pop art, and minimalism mark a gradual relaxing of aesthetic standards, with everything boiling down to how severely one can shock the previous expectations of what counts as art.

But we have not yet heard Greenberg's most powerful definition of academic art, from another important Sydney lecture given in 1979:

Academicization isn't a matter of academies—there were academies long before academicization and before the nineteenth century. Academicism consists in *the tendency to take the medium of an art too much for granted*. It results in blurring: words become imprecise, color gets muffled, the physical sources of sound become too much dissembled.²⁴

Up through the 1920s and even 1930s, academic art tended to be blatantly academic, defended by official academies and conventional taste while disdained by a relatively small modernist elite. But Greenberg holds that with surrealism, the heir of Dada, we see a form of academic art that is cannily disguised as cutting-edge modernism.

As early as his pioneering essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in 1939, Greenberg wrote that "Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse, and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in,"²⁵ but added in a dismissive footnote that "the chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium."²⁶ For all the shock value of Dalí's flaming giraffes and skinny-legged towering elephants, his art is focused on shocking literary content, and in Greenberg's view we have reached a stage in the history of visual art in which literary content is just a non-artistic distraction. In this respect, surrealism and Dada are simply two sides of the same academic coin. Surrealism

²³ Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 153-54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28, my emphasis.

²⁵ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments*, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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takes its medium too much for granted by replacing drawing room portraits with wild fantasies of hallucinogenic entities. Meanwhile, Dada takes its medium too much for granted by giving up on the project of transforming it from within, and challenges it only with shocking gestures from the outside.

There are other details to Greenberg's critique of Duchamp, other scathing and witty remarks, but already we have encountered the core principles of this critique, of which there are perhaps six:

1. Duchamp rejects quality as an aesthetic standard.
2. He treats the shock value of advanced art not as an unfortunate side effect that wears off over time, but as the central purpose of art.
3. He shocks established standards not by internal aesthetic means, but by transgressing everyday social decorum: displaying urinals, breasts, or the spread-out naked body of a murdered woman in a fine art context that will be predictably horrified by such gestures.
4. He privileges thinking in art, turning artworks into transparent concepts to an excessive degree.
5. He overestimates the radical break his work makes with the past.
6. Though he thinks himself to be the pinnacle of artist advancement, Duchamp is actually an academic artist who takes the medium of art too much for granted, despairs of being able to innovate from within, and is thus led into a sort of juvenile sabotage through shocking affronts to the fine arts gallery context.

This six-point list is perhaps more interesting if we reverse it into Greenberg's own positive aesthetic program:

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1. Art is always a matter of high and low aesthetic quality.
2. Shock value is merely a temporary symptom of advanced art, never its central purpose.
3. Important art is characterised by aesthetic challenge rather than extra-aesthetic shock.
4. Art is a matter of taste rather than of thinking, and taste must always struggle to refine and improve itself in contact with the art object.
5. Important art builds on the past rather than breaking radically with it.
6. Art should not be academic, meaning that it should not take its medium for granted. This final principle entails that art reflects a constant struggle to reinvent its form.

Stated differently, art avoids academicism when its content manages to *reflect* or *embody* the possibilities of its medium, rather than presenting content as an isolated figure whose ground or medium can be taken for granted. This is why Greenberg increasingly celebrated painting that announced the flatness of canvas, why cubism was for him the greatest school of art in the twentieth century, and why he experienced such rapture over synthetic cubist collage as a way of negotiating the dangers of cubism's possible two-dimensional deadlock.²⁷ The content of cubism, for Greenberg, reflected and mastered the highest possibilities of its medium at that point in history. In other words, despite his concern with the flatness of the canvas, there is a sense in which Greenberg is primarily interested in *depth*: in making the invisible deep conditions of any medium somehow visible in the content of the art.

²⁷ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 61-66.

2. Non-Relational Philosophy

This links Greenberg closely with two key figures in the twentieth century humanities. One is the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, famous for his statements that “the medium is the message” and that “the content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.”²⁸ In other words, we waste our time when we argue about the good or bad content of television shows, since the real work is done by the invisible changes in the structure of consciousness brought about by television regardless of what high- or low-quality content it might possess. If we translate Greenberg into McLuhanian terms, then “the content of any painting has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.” All political activism in art, all literary anecdote and inspirational messaging, fades before the purely formal consideration of how the medium itself is made to shine forth in the content.

But perhaps an even more important link is with Martin Heidegger, the heavyweight champion of twentieth century philosophy, in my view still unmatched by any figure of equal stature since. Is not Heidegger’s entire philosophical breakthrough a premonition of what McLuhan and Greenberg formulated much later? The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl asked us to suspend judgment about any hidden reasons in nature for things to happen as they do, and to focus instead on the patient description of phenomena in consciousness, in all their subtlety. Heidegger’s great breakthrough came when he first noted that usually we *do not* encounter entities as present in consciousness. This is already an artificial special case that occurs most often in the *breakdown* of entities. As long as your heart and lungs are healthy and working effectively, as long as the highway is not buckled by earthquakes, as long as the hammer and screwdriver are working in your hands rather

²⁸ The longer quotation comes from the famous 1969 *Playboy* interview in Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (London: Routledge, 1997), 222-60.

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than shattering into tiny pieces, they tend not to be noticed. While phenomena in the mind are *present* or *present-at-hand*, entities themselves are *ready-to-hand* for Heidegger, remaining invisible as they work towards various purposes.

Even this standard way of reading Heidegger turns out to be too superficial. He is not just giving us a difference between conscious perception and theory on the one hand and unconscious practical action on the other. Notice that even praxis reduces things to figures, since my use of a chair or hammer reduces it, oversimplifies it by interacting with only a small number of its vast range of qualities. The lesson from Heidegger is not that conscious awareness is the site of figure and unconscious praxis is the site of ground. Instead, the hidden ground is the thing itself, which is reduced, caricatured, or distorted by *any* relation we might have with it, whether theoretical or practical. And moreover, this is not just a special fact about human beings, but is typical even of inanimate relations. But for the moment there is no need to defend an unorthodox reading of Heidegger, since even the most orthodox reading already makes the point we need: what is visibly present in the world appears only against a hidden background from which it draws nourishment. In this sense, Heidegger's critique of presence in the history of philosophy can be viewed as another critique of "academic art": art that consists in the tendency to take its medium too much for granted, in Greenberg's powerful definition. In similar fashion, "academic philosophy" for Heidegger would be the kind that treats being as something that can be exhausted in some form of *presence*.

Yet there is a funny thing about this celebration of the deep background medium in Heidegger, McLuhan, and Greenberg. In all three cases, the depth turns out to be utterly sterile, incapable of generating anything new. Let us start with the clearest case, that of McLuhan. For McLuhan, the dominant medium in any situation is so deeply buried that there is no way to address it in direct cognitive terms. But not only can we not look at the medium directly—since any attempt to explain the effects of television or the internet will always

fall short of the awesome depths of these media—the medium itself cannot even change without some impetus from the outside. As far as I am aware, McLuhan only allows for two ways that media can change. There is reversal through overheating, or retrieval through the work of artists. Reversal occurs when, for example, the speed and convenience of cars reverses into the slowness and inconvenience of traffic jams. Notice that this is not because cars themselves have changed, but only because their apparently superficial features (such as their shiny metallic bulk) became unmanageable due to the vast quantitative increase in the number of cars. What causes one medium to flip into another is not the deep aspect of a medium, but its more secondary and frivolous features.

As for retrieval, this happens for McLuhan when some current cliché or obsolete medium is given new life and made credible again. When vinyl LP records go from obsolete technology outstripped by compact discs to the newly revered medium of connoisseurs who despise the cold and sterile sound of CDs, we have a case of retrieval. But primarily, McLuhan thinks this is the work of *artists*. It is artists who transform banal visible figures by situating them in some sort of enlivening background medium that breathes new life into them. The crucial point for us here is as follows. For McLuhan, background media are more important than any of their content. Yet precisely because these media are so deep, so inaccessible to conscious contact, they are incapable of transformation. Such transformation can occur only at the most superficial layer of media—whether it be their peripheral features in the case of overheating and reversal, or the level of dead surface content in the case of the artist who retrieves some past medium as the content of a new one.

In Heidegger's philosophy the same point also holds, whatever the appearances to the contrary. There are admittedly some passages in Heidegger, especially in the later writings, when he treats humans as if we could only passively await the sending of new epochs of being. But in fact, the implicit problem faced by Heidegger is that since his objects withdraw so deeply from one another, they are unable to make

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contact precisely *because* they are deep. If they make contact, it is only through their most superficial outer layer. If I am injured by a hammer or virus, it is not because they assault the very core of my personality, but only because they exploit minor features of my being: such as a sensitive thumb or a few accidental cuts in the skin. Heidegger's depth is so deep that everything must happen on the surface, though he does not realise this as clearly as McLuhan does.

Even Greenberg admits that the content of painting is not unimportant. At times he calls it the site of inspiration: Picasso's painting is not just about a relation between the image and the flat picture surface of the canvas, but also about a guitar or horse or face of a woman. Yet this remains merely a placeholder in Greenberg's writing; he concedes the point without developing further what the role of sheer *content* might be in art. His primary concern remains the way that the content of the medium reflects the very structure of the medium: famously, in his case, the flatness of the picture plane. And though Greenberg freely admitted that this was a transient historical constraint not binding for all eras, he wrote so little about non-contemporary art that we can only speculate as to the principles he would have used to distinguish good from bad Renaissance perspectival art, or good from bad twenty-first century installation art.

3. Art and Relations

It is well known that Greenberg was an opinionated man, capable of swift and harsh judgments; for this reason it can be tempting to dismiss him as cranky and arrogant, his views not worth taking seriously. But this would be a mistake. Greenberg's dismissal of artists we might happen to like is based on his adoption of certain underlying aesthetic principles, and it is better to reflect on and possibly challenge those principles than to condemn Greenberg for being their messenger.

There was no more vehement defender of modernism than Greenberg, who viewed the modern not as a break with the past, but as an attempt to maintain the *quality* of the past by

preventing its degeneration into a series of mechanically repeated academic gestures. His definition of the academic, we have seen, is “art that takes its medium too much for granted,” and we have linked this claim with certain insights in the media theory of McLuhan and the philosophy of Heidegger.²⁹ If academic art is the kind that takes its medium too much for granted, we can understand why Greenberg objected to Dalí and other surrealists as academic. There seems to be no innovation as to medium in the case of surrealist painting. Indeed, Greenberg thinks the surrealists deliberately retained the realist and perspectival conventions of academic painting in order to keep everyone’s focus on the startling *content* of their works. Though it may seem difficult to call Dalí an “academic artist” with a straight face, the charge is understandable if we accept Greenberg’s definition of the academic.

But with Duchamp, it seems almost impossible to use this designation. We have seen that Greenberg actually makes six separate critiques of Duchamp, with academicism being only one of them. The others were Duchamp’s apparent rejection of quality as a standard, his overestimation of the value of shock in art, his tendency to shock not through aesthetic means but through breaches of social expectation, his overreliance on transparent concepts rather than the uncertainty of aesthetic struggle and surprise, and finally his excessive claims of breaking radically with the past. But let us focus on the “academicism” charge. Dalí can easily (if controversially) be treated as an academic artist simply on the basis of Greenberg’s definition of the term: academic art as insufficiently aware of its medium. In Duchamp’s case a more oblique argument is needed, given that Duchamp is widely considered as the shining example of someone who challenges our expectations of what an artistic medium should be.

Greenberg’s point seems to be that Duchamp was so deeply academic in outlook (to judge from his insufficiently brilliant early efforts at fauvism and cubism) that he became frustrated by his limitations and misinterpreted cubism as primarily a

²⁹ Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 28.

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brazen shock to societal expectations. He then tried to outdo even the cubists in this respect by exhibiting the most banal objects as if they were artworks: a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, a urinal. In other words, the sole choice for Duchamp is one between academic art and provocative gestures, and Duchamp wrongly thought he was following Picasso and all other modernists in pursuing a dazzling career of provocative gestures. This explains Greenberg's other complaints about Duchamp as well. For once art is conceived merely as a shocking gesture, then quality as a standard of measurement no longer matters. New and provocative concepts of what might count as an artwork replace patient aesthetic struggle within a set of plausible ground rules. And finally, by putting ever more ironic quotation marks around the artistic enterprise than anyone before him, Duchamp might easily think of himself as making the most radical break with the history of art.

Surrealism and Dada will forever be linked in the history of art, and the two movements do share some overlapping membership, the use of humorous or incongruous titles for their works, and the deployment of irreverent public personalities. But from a Greenbergian standpoint, they actually work in contrary directions, like two scientists performing experiments with opposite controls. Dalí adopts the already banal conventions of three-dimensional illusionistic oil painting, all the better to let the strangeness of the content shine through. Duchamp works in reverse, choosing the most utterly banal content, all the better to shock our expectations about what might count as an artistic medium. If the two artists had not performed these respective controls, the result would have been massive confusion. Imagine that Dalí had painted his classics *The Ghost of Vermeer of Delft Which Can Also Be Used as a Table* or *Gala and "The Angelus" of Millet Preceding the Imminent Arrival of the Conic Anamorphoses*, not in what Greenberg calls academic illusionistic style, but broken up into planes in the manner of high analytic cubism.

Such a chaos of innovation would surprise the viewer from too many directions at once. It is hardly accidental that Picasso and Braque chose such simple subject matter for their

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cubist masterpieces—*Violin and Candlestick*, *Fruitedish and Glass*, *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*—since these banal themes enable our undivided attention to innovations in technique. Likewise, Duchamp’s readymades would have tangled things too badly if he had chosen to display not simple and recognisable everyday objects, but more complicated, esoteric, or ambiguous things. In any case, we can conclude from this that neither Dalí nor Duchamp can plausibly be treated as an academic artist. Dalí does not “take his medium for granted,” but *deliberately suspends* innovation of medium in order to open up innovation of subject matter. Meanwhile Duchamp, at least in his readymade pieces, neither takes his medium for granted nor suspends innovation of it, but innovates his media to such a degree that Greenberg can view them only as shocks to fine art decorum, as in his followers’ use of

a row of boxes ... a mere rod ... a pile of litter ... projects for Cyclopean landscape architecture ... the plan for a trench dug in a straight line for hundreds of miles ... a half-open door ... the cross-section of a mountain ... stating imaginary relations between real points in real places ... a blank wall, and so forth.³⁰

Such strategies can reach the point of academic banality as much as any other, and perhaps the arts in 2014 have long since reached that point. But there is no reason to assume that no distinctions of quality are possible within the medium-stretching genres of recent art, that such art really flouts gradations in quality in any sweeping sense, or that it exists solely to provide shocks to social decorum. We should also consider Greenberg’s uneven track record as a predictor of greatness. For while he deserves much credit for his early defence of Jackson Pollock, it is by no means clear that history will join him in preferring Gottlieb, Morris, Noland, and Olitski to surrealism, Duchamp, Warhol, and Beuys. In fact, the opposite now seems more likely.

A Greenberg foe might say that he simply uses the term

³⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 302.

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“academic” for anything that he happens not to like. But this would not be quite fair; Greenberg’s critical vocabulary is more versatile than that. For instance, another famous target of Greenberg’s harshness is Wassily Kandinsky. A month after the Russian artist’s December 1944 death in liberated Paris, Greenberg offered a dismissal of Kandinsky’s career that was cold and brazen, but also rather fascinating. It would be difficult to describe a late-blooming innovator like Kandinsky as an “academic artist,” and Greenberg does not try to do so. Instead, he classifies Kandinsky as a “provincial” artist. His obituary review opens as follows:

There are two sorts of provincialism in art. The exponent of one is the artist, academic or otherwise, who works in an outmoded style or in a vein disregarded by the metropolitan center—Paris, Rome, or Athens. The other sort of provincialism is that of the artist—generally from an outlying country—who in all earnest and admiration devotes himself to the style being currently developed in the metropolitan center, yet fails in one way or another really to understand what it is about ... The Russian, Wassily Kandinsky, [was a provincial of this latter sort].³¹

For Greenberg, the provincial Kandinsky was no naïve simpleton, but a quick-witted observer of advanced art:

Like many a newcomer to a situation, seeing it from the outside and thus more completely, Kandinsky was very quick to perceive one of the most basic implications of the revolution cubism had effected in Western painting. Pictorial art was at last able to free itself completely from the object—the eidetic image—and take for its sole positive matter the sensuous facts of its own medium, reducing itself to a question ... of non-figurative shapes and colors. Painting would become like music, an art contained in its own form and thus capable of infinitely more variety than before.³²

³¹ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, vol. 2, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-4.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

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But in this way, Kandinsky repeats Duchamp's supposed error of thinking he can make a clean break with the history of art. Greenberg makes other objections that seem even more decisive for his verdict on Kandinsky, who in his view "for a relatively short time was a great painter," namely in his earlier period.³³ Greenberg's biggest complaint is that Kandinsky was too focused on the *abstraction* of cubism while missing a more important aspect of that style. As he puts it in the same obituary review:

[Kandinsky] rejected what to my mind is a prior and perhaps even more essential achievement of avant-garde art than its deliverance of painting from representation: its recapture of the literal realization of the physical limitations and conditions of the medium and of the positive advantages to be gained from the exploitation of these very limitations.³⁴

Although it might seem as if Kandinsky is fully aware of the flatness of the picture surface, "he came to conceive of the picture ... as an aggregate of discrete shapes; the color, size, and spacing of these he related so insensitively to the space surrounding them ... that this [space] remained inactive and meaningless; the sense of a continuous surface was lost, and the space became pocked with 'holes.'"³⁵ Aside from this purely technical shortcoming, Greenberg sees one clear sign of relapse by Kandinsky into academic art: for, "having begun by accepting the absolute flatness of the picture surface, Kandinsky would go on to allude to illusionistic depth by a use of color, line, and perspective that were plastically irrelevant ... Academic reminiscences crept into [Kandinsky's paintings] at almost every point other than that of what they 'represented.'"³⁶

In another accusation of insensitivity to medium, Greenberg

³³ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose*, 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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complains that “the consistency of [Kandinsky’s] paint surface and the geometrical exactness of his line seem more appropriate to stone or metal than to the porous fabric of canvas.”³⁷ Finally, his supposed failure to master what the avant-garde was really all about led Kandinsky to become an insecure and eclectic stylist. As Greenberg puts it, “the stylistic and thematic ingredients of Kandinsky’s later work are as diverse as the colors of Joseph’s coat: peasant, ancient, and Oriental art, much Klee, some Picasso, surrealist protoplasma, maps, blueprints, musical notation, etc., etc.”³⁸ Greenberg concludes with a few concessions and a single crowning damnation:

[Kandinsky] was and will remain a large and revolutionary phenomenon—he must be taken into account always; yet he stays apart from the mainstream and in the last analysis remains a provincial. The example of his work is dangerous to younger painters.³⁹

But Greenberg’s description of the dangers of Kandinsky seems to hinge too much on a single debatable point. He cautions that Kandinsky’s exact line would be more appropriate for stone or metal than canvas, yet he immediately concedes that the same is true of Mondrian, whom Greenberg regards as a truly great artist despite that stony-metallic exact line. He also tries to warn us that “academic reminiscences” creep into Kandinsky, which should mean that Kandinsky has a lingering tendency to take his medium for granted. But even if this turned out to be sweepingly true for the whole of Kandinsky’s work, it would not follow that it *must* be true for any art that adopts the abstractions of cubism while downplaying its relation to the flatness of the medium. Revolutions are often fuelled when heirs adopt only one portion of their forerunners’ legacies while refusing the others. As Greenberg himself repeatedly admits, there is not just one way to make great art, and what succeeds in one era will fail in others—precisely because the

³⁷ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

same techniques are fresh at one moment and banal in the next. He even makes the surprising admission that Duchamp was right to be “wild” early on as a way of escaping the “cubist vise,” which suggests Greenberg’s firm awareness that even the greatest styles can become suffocating prisons.

Just like the Renaissance-era growth of perspectival illusionist painting, the reverse movement towards painting that exploits the *limitations* of the flat canvas can reach a point of decadent banality. Were Duchamp, surrealism, and Kandinsky truly *relapses* from cubism in the way that Greenberg claims? Or were they not instead more like probes seeking a new planet, quite apart from the question of whether they succeeded in finding it? Nonetheless, it is dangerous to call Greenberg “old-fashioned,” as many of his opponents do. His keen intelligence deserves more than that, as does his literary brilliance. For his critical work and his spiritual guidance of the shift in avant-garde art from Paris to New York, Greenberg is no doubt one of the half-dozen or so most important intellectual figures the United States has produced. Moreover, *everyone* becomes old-fashioned someday, and those who dance on Greenberg’s tomb will eventually be danced upon in turn, viewed as outdated in their own right.

What will it look like when this happens? Let us assume for the sake of argument that surrealism produces no further avant-garde revolution, since its basic principles have been thoroughly explored. The same holds for abstraction, a known quantity for just as long, even if its lifespan was longer. Duchamp’s wager of continually questioning what counts as art may have a few years of life left in it, and hence we are still prepared to be impressed by “a row of boxes ... a mere rod ... a pile of litter ... projects for Cyclopean landscape architecture ... the plan for a trench dug in a straight line for hundreds of miles ... a half-open door ... the cross-section of a mountain ... stating imaginary relations between real points in real places ... a blank wall, and so forth.”⁴⁰ But this too will eventually become old and tired, if it is not already so,

⁴⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 302.

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and something different will need to awaken to surprise us.

What will this new thing be? We have already considered the “academicism” of Duchamp and surrealism, and the “provincialism” of Kandinsky, and have stipulated a future in which all are spent forces along with Greenberg’s School of Flatness. What else is left? It could be many things, but we have only encountered one other possibility in the course of our discussions: the *first* kind of provincialism, different from Kandinsky’s second kind. To refresh our memories, Kandinsky’s sort of provincialism was said to be “that of the artist—generally from an outlying country—who in all earnest and admiration devotes himself to the style being currently developed in the metropolitan center, yet fails in one way or another really to understand what it is about.”⁴¹ The other kind of provincialism, which we have not yet discussed, is that of “the artist, academic or otherwise, who works in an outmoded style or in a vein disregarded by the metropolitan center.”⁴²

At first it might sound as if this sort of artist cannot be a candidate for cutting-edge status, since the word “outmoded” suggests otherwise. But Greenberg already gives us an example of one such “outmoded” artist working in a vein disregarded by the metropolitan centre, and indeed one of the greatest artists: Paul Cézanne, whom he considers in a beautiful 1951 essay entitled “Cézanne and the Unity of Modern Painting.”⁴³ The opening claim of that essay is that the apparent eclecticism of avant-garde art in 1951 is merely an appearance. Great figures do not exhaustively accomplish what they aim to achieve, and always leave behind a tangle of loose threads for their successors to tie together. Greenberg views the late nineteenth century, and Cézanne in particular, as the origin of these threads. Even as great a movement as cubism was able to benefit speedily from the untied threads of Cézanne:

⁴¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance*, 3-4.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, vol. 3, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 82-91.

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Picasso's and Braque's Cubism, and Léger's, completed what Cézanne had begun, by their successes divesting his means of whatever had remained problematical about them and finding them their most appropriate ends. These means they took from Cézanne practically ready-made, and were able to adapt them to their purposes after only a relatively few trial exercises.⁴⁴

But the truly interesting topic of Greenberg's essay on Cézanne is the opposite topic: not Cézanne as the far-seeing grandfather of later trends, but as the struggling admirer of the classical painters before him. It is the story of the artist who does not simply extrapolate from the threads of his immediate forerunners, but who attempts to bring back something important that recent revolutions had prematurely left behind. So it was with Cézanne and the Impressionists. As Greenberg unforgettably puts it:

[Cézanne] was making the first—and last—pondered effort to save the intrinsic principle of the Western tradition of painting: its concern with an ample and literal rendition of the illusion of the third dimension. He had noted the Impressionists' inadvertent silting up of pictorial depth. And it is because he tried so hard to re-excavate that depth without abandoning Impressionist color, and because his attempt, while vain, was so profoundly conceived, that it became the turning point it did ... Like Manet and with almost as little appetite for the role of revolutionary, he changed the course of art out of the very effort to return it by new paths to its old ways.⁴⁵

The danger faced by all modernisers is the danger of robotic extrapolation. They assume that the previous revolution performed innovation X, and therefore the next revolution must perform double-X or triple-X: since the Enlightenment advanced by denouncing superstition and defending reason, the next phase of history requires a campaign of utter persecution against all “irrational” people, and so forth. Extrapolation

⁴⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Affirmations and Refusals*, 90.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.