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The Avant-Garde Industry

Daryl Chin

Although the concept of “the avant-garde” has been in constant evocation in the discourse of the contemporary arts, the actual practice of an avant-garde has been in disarray for at least the past two decades. The construct of any argument which considers “the avant-garde” has been couched in terms of an essential fallacy. Without the establishment of tradition, there can be no deviation, no exception, no rebellion to the norm. At this point, debate regarding the decline and the ultimate decadence of artistic practice would be deliterious: either the situation is acknowledged and accepted, or not. Commentators in many divergent fields have provided eloquent testimony to the declension of ambition in “the avant-garde”; among recent examples, I can recommend P. Adams Sitney’s essay “Point of View: Rear-Garde” in *American Film* (July-August 1985) and Fred Camper’s essay “Two American Cinemas” in *Spiral*, Number 4 (July 1985), Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan’s essay “The Fine Art of Gentrification” in *October*, Number 31 (Winter 1984-85) and Robert Hughes’s essay “Careerism and Hype Amidst the Image Haze” in the *Time* newsweekly issue of June 17, 1985, and Charles Newman’s book *The Post-Modern Aura* (Northwestern University Press, 1985). The range of opinion, of subject, and of address does not obscure the fact that there emerges the definition of a generalized consensus acknowledged as the malaise of contemporary art.

In the September and the October, 1984, issues of *Art in America*, the sculptor Donald Judd presented a polemic on the state of contemporary aesthetics. Deploring the market mentality which has elevated the young painters who have gone under the rubric of “neo-Expressionism” and “Trans-Avant-Garde” (painters such as Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, Anselm Kiefer), Judd goes on to describe the state of discourse

which has degenerated into consumer guides. He noted: "The quality of new art has been declining for 15 years. There are some probable reasons for this, but none which finally explain the fundamental fact of why. There have been almost no first-rate artists in this time. Neither do similar reasons explain why there were so many in the late '40s and early '50s and the late '50s and early '60s. Despite all that's wrong in this society it's the responsibility of new artists to occur. The explanation that the times and the society are bad is pointless. Probably they have always been and the issue is whether too bad or a little better. The reason for doing nothing is always wrong. There is also the responsibility of the older artists to uphold a high quality." The specifics of the quality of a society have been addressed by many social commentators, including the anthropologist A. L. Kroeber and the philosopher Benedetto Croce. There are many factors which contribute to the conditions of a particular society, including economic determinants, political ideologies, and environmental considerations. Nevertheless, the determination for aesthetic continuity depends on ideological precepts which often are obscure. That is to say: the perception of excellence and of originality is contingent upon factors aside from intrinsic merit. In the history of the arts, there are innumerable examples of artists underrated and/or overlooked, whose work corresponds to standards which only develop in the future. Stendhal was quoted as saying that his novels (written in the middle of the nineteenth century, and unsuccessful during that period) would find adequate appreciation a century later. Standards can and do change, which is why one part of the literary establishment currently engages in the investigation of "the canon," the definition of the standards which denote "quality" in literature.

One of the most prominent venues for "the avant-garde" in terms of performance at present is to be found in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Next Wave" series. This past season, the series was held from October to December, 1984; at its conclusion, there were a number of reports and essays written about the situation of marketing "the avant-garde." The entire series was written about in terms of the success with sales: for example, Meredith Monk and Ping Chong's *The Games* was judged unsuccessful because the capacity audience never was reached (audience attendance was only 70 percent of capacity); the revival of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* did not fulfill expectations, never reaching more than 98 percent capacity (the piece ran for three weeks, with an option to extend if the run was sold out entirely). In terms of the choice of artists, the Brooklyn Academy of Music presents the proposals from artists to an advisory board, which includes marketing experts from major advertising firms. The criteria, then, stress accessibility as opposed to aesthetics. The point of the "Next Wave" series is the marketing of "the avant-garde." For this reason, the emphasis has been on artists with "credentials" which can be exploited: that is the secret behind the "collaborations" which are stressed by the series. Through a touring program, the "Next Wave" series ensures that this image of the marketable avant-garde becomes enshrined in the national consciousness. The tautological

contradiction of this ideology never is examined. The explicit cooptation which ensures the degeneration of any aesthetic principle continues apace, as the Public Broadcast System (PBS) delineates (and delimits) "the avant-garde" through the new series ALIVE FROM OFF-CENTER.

What has become apparent is the lack of self-critical awareness which has overtaken the arts in their many manifestations. The acceptance which has been generated for "the avant-garde" through the ideological collapse between distinctions in terms of generic nomenclature has devastated the critical faculties. In the most spectacular instances, as in the case of much recent criticism on the cinema, the operative judgment relates to the phenomenon of "the hit": critics praise a movie when the advertising advances indicate the possibility of box-office success. Few people want to risk praising a movie which will not prove a success. This should not be seen as a conspiracy; rather, this is the ultimate regulation of criticism to a commodity status, admitting the function of criticism to a species of advertising. For this reason, many of the younger critics now employed regularly have begun careers as public relations agents or as gossip columnists. The period when movie criticism was aligned to historical issues or to aesthetic judgments has passed.

During the critical debates on quality and objectivity which animated art circles two decades ago, the admission of partisanship and of the impossibility of true objectivity paralyzed much inquiry. However, the result was not an openness in terms of critical debate, once subjectivity was acknowledged; rather, the result was a covert partisanship without the possibility of challenge. Thus: an art critic can define a "movement" in the visual arts in terms of a group of artists who include his wife and many of her close friends; another art critic can write of serious developments in contemporary art, citing the work of a woman he admits to being his neighbor. The critics do not explore the other manifestations of these developments of which they write; rather, they accept the limited arena of social discourse as defining the pictorial limits in the visual arts. There is no way to present debate in critical terms, because the options are closed.

On the other hand, the lack of cohesion in terms of critical discourse has caused an infantilization of opinion. As an exemplar of the crisis, the Summer 1985 issue of *Arts* magazine presented two critiques of the Whitney Biennial. Dan Cameron opened his review with the statement "I think the 1985 Biennial is far and away the most exciting, most interesting, and most accurate portrayal of the current movement in art history that we have seen in years, and are likely to see before (knock on wood) 1987." Jeff Perrone opened his review with the statement "The 1985 Whitney Biennial (the least controversial in our ten years of media scanning) confirmed the feeling that Art is no longer the antenna of culture, but its butt end." The equivocation which denies the assertion of authority also has brought about an impotence of ideology. Writing about this condition in his essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," Craig Owens notes:

The ways that criticism, the cultural establishment, capitalist speculation, philosophical loss of coherence, and “the avant-garde” support an increasingly disingenuous aesthetic practice is the condition of the contemporary arts.

“Decentered, allegorical, schizophrenic . . .—however we choose to diagnose its symptoms, postmodernism is usually treated, by its protagonists and antagonists alike, as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions. . . . Pluralism, however, reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction to difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability (what Jean Baudrillard calls ‘implosion’). What is at stake, then, is not only the hegemony of Western culture, but also (our sense of) our identity as a culture.” The demise of authority in the cultural establishment should have been laudatory; instead, the result has been the insistence on self-referential regard which is even more ethnocentric than ever.

At this time, one of the problems has been the definition of “the avant-garde.” In terms of Western culture, what is “the avant-garde?” How has “the avant-garde” operated? What does “the avant-garde” signify? During the period of the most active formulation of “the avant-garde,” that is, the 1960s and the 1970s, there was an acceptance of the perpetual existence of “the avant-garde.” One such statement, which can be considered paradigmatic, can be found in Marilyn Singer’s introduction to *A History of The American Avant-Garde Cinema* (1976): “For each age, for each place, for each time, there has always been an avant-garde.” Although there were many compelling reasons for this myth, the argument does not substantiate the urgency of the situation of “the avant-garde” in contemporary culture. In order to perceive that situation, there must be an acknowledgement of the conditions for “the avant-garde.” Meyer Schapiro’s essay “Abstract Art” (1957-60) and Leo Steinberg’s essay “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public” (1962) are two of the most important considerations regarding the condition of “the avant-garde.” Conceptually, “the avant-garde” cannot exist without “tradition.” “The avant-garde” (as a specific social construct in the history of culture) arose during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the political doctrines of equality and freedom, the rise of secularization, and the scientific researches of physics and chemistry had changed the ideological precepts of educated people. What is important in the consideration of “the avant-garde” is the extent to which a challenge to authority is established.

"In discussing the place of painting and sculpture in the culture of our time, I shall refer only to those kinds which, whether abstract or not, have a fresh inventive character, that art which is called 'modern' not simply because it is of our century, but because it is the work of artists who take seriously the challenge of new possibilities and wish to introduce into their work perceptions, ideas and experiences which have come about only in our time." (Meyer Schapiro, 1957)

"Yes, but one thing has not changed: the relation of any new art—while it is new—to its own moment; or, to put it the other way around: every moment during the past hundred years has had an outrageous art of its own, so that every generation, from Courbet down, has had a crack at the discomfort to be had from modern art. And in this sense it is quite wrong to say that the bewilderment people feel over a new style is of no great account since it doesn't last long. Indeed it does last; it has been with us for a century. And the thrill of pain caused by modern art is like an addiction—so much of a necessity to us, that societies like Soviet Russia, without any outrageous modern art of their own, seem to us to be only half alive. They do not suffer that perpetual anxiety, or periodic frustration, or unease, which is our normal condition, and which I call 'The Plight of the Public.' " (Leo Steinberg, 1962)

Through the capitulation of the arts to a market mentality, "the avant-garde" has instituted the specifics of a social structure. Through the success of the collapse of genres which accompanies pop art and other art movements of the past two decades, the arts have yielded to an image of show business success. The history of show business in this society has been one of recapitulation of the class structure, without the attendant ideology of behavior. The conditions of privilege, of favoritism, and of partiality have been mirrored, without the mask of manners. Social mobility is circumscribed, dependent upon approval from the hierarchy. In such a situation, the condition which goes under the label "careerism" runs rampant. In such a situation, the arts cease to develop, because the primary modus operandi becomes one of recapitulation, retrogression, and repetition.

Although the conditions no longer qualify for a consideration of "the avant-garde" in the arts, there is the increased insistence on publicity, advertising, and promotion in the arts. The terms of that discourse have been occasioned by contradictory impulses, always implemented in terms of opposition. For this reason, there is the presumption of a self-critical vocabulary, but one which is subsumed within strictly defined class limits. In addition, the machinery of publicity has advanced to the cooptation of criticism. Thus, prior to the release of a movie, or the opening of an art exhibition, or the first performances of a dance concert, there will be articles which profile the creators in glowing terms. Recently, the phenomenon has taken a

turn towards the fantastic, as in the cases of the profiles on David Lynch which appeared in magazines as diverse as *American Film* and the *Atlantic Monthly* before the release of *Dune* in the winter of 1984, the profiles on Jennifer Bartlett which appeared in magazines as diverse as *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, just before her solo exhibition in March, 1985, at The Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City (and Paula Cooper was profiled at the same time in *Vogue*), or (most spectacularly) the voluminous tributes to Pina Bausch which appeared in such magazines as *Dance Magazine*, *Ballet News*, *Vanity Fair* prior to her first American tour in the summer of 1984. The *New York Times* recently has been the vehicle for much (unintended) satire: glowing tributes are written well in advance of an opening, appearing just before the first public screenings or exhibitions or performances, only for the work to receive devastatingly negative reviews. One such example occurred with the movie *Alamo Bay*. Prior to the opening, there had been an interview in the Sunday Arts and Leisure section with the screenwriter, Alice Arlen; after the opening, there was an article in the Sunday Magazine section about the director, Louis Malle. Both interview and article were highly laudatory. Unfortunately, during the middle of the week, upon the movie's opening, Vincent Canby, the first-string critic for the *New York Times*, delivered a stinging denunciation of the movie. In this, the newspapers are following the lead of the news weeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, where the critical pages are increasingly subordinated to publicity profiles and advance "insights" and cover stories. To be blunt: advance hype has taken the place of criticism. This has been the case in every field. There are many reasons for this, but one must suffice at this time: the modernist aesthetic, which exemplified high seriousness for at least three decades, was an aesthetic noted for the self-critical functioning of the artists. Attempting to usurp the methodology of empirical knowledge, the modernist aesthetic affirmed the necessities of discourse. For this reason, the primacy of intentionality became established in critical discourse about the arts. By the mid-1960s, many artists had engaged or were engaged in critical activities. Critics were only too eager to embellish artistic intentionality as commentary. These exegeses on intentionality began to replace analytic considerations; from there, the development of critical writing to a subset of advertising copy was not far behind.

Any perspective on the contemporary arts indicates the collapse of coherence. This would be wonderful, if a true anarchism and a genuine freedom were achieved. Instead, a spurious pluralism accentuates the rigidities of class distinctions and caste barriers. Instead of promoting the dictates of intellectual freedom, the arts now provide the dimensions for enforced social stratification. Perhaps this always has been the case; perhaps the systems of patronage for the arts must accentuate the implementation of inequity; perhaps the egalitarian aims of past decades were delusionary. This is a possibility.

The arts always have been an exemplar of symbolic logic. The functioning of the aesthetic does not result in discursive knowledge or factual informa-

If Modernism represented a challenge to tradition, postmodernism represents the response to that challenge, not in reasserting the dictates of tradition, but in acknowledging contingency, equivalence and interchangeability.

tion or logical reasoning; rather, the aesthetic promotes speculative sensibility. Not surprisingly, the arts have seized upon the most extensive model of ideological symbolism in contemporary culture, the mass media; at the moment when this model has bankrupted its own systematics, the other arts have buttressed their evolution through an appropriation of mass media methodology. The functioning of "the avant-garde" now evolves under an unquestioned bad faith.

In short: there is no "avant-garde," as the term is utilized as a brand name to signify novelty in aesthetic terminology. How can an avant-garde be defined when the determinants of that appellation involve the instantaneous acclaim, the economic mobility, and the sociological access which can be seen in the careers of most current artists (cf. Molissa Fenley, Tim Miller, Karole Armitage, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Elizabeth LeCompte, Eric Bogosian, Anne Bogart, Laurie Anderson, Glenn Branca, Jill Kroesen, Jim Jarmusch, Beth and Scott B., Bette Gordon, David Leavitt, Kathy Acker, Jay McInerney)? If there is an avant-garde, there must be a perpetual attack, a continual reinvigoration, a permanent revolution. Instead, there has been the creation of the avant-garde in terms of an establishment. Animating the concept of "the avant-garde" is the theory of succession: the aggressive supplanting of one aesthetic by another, exposing either the bankruptcy or the senility of the supplanted aesthetic. If these terms seem harsh, that is intentional, for "the avant-garde" is founded on the oppositional, the adversarial, the antagonistic. However, there can be little mobility when the adversary becomes the establishment, a cooptation which denies confrontation.

The institutionalization of "the avant-garde" began with the dependence on education. This has not been unprecedented: thus, Martha Graham developed a formidable "school," as did Merce Cunningham, and colleges such as Bennington and Sarah Lawrence and Connecticut College have been noted for their dance programs. On a technical level, in such arts as dance, this idea of arts education is commendable. However, in the visual arts, many students of painting and sculpture, having been taught to be creative in a post-conceptual context, do not know the rudiments of drawing. With the decline in the economy, the educational system is overproductive, creating a surplus of "creative" talent in a society which must

renegotiate the responsibilities of leisure time. In such a situation, the arts are identified solely as a luxury; therefore, the most obvious alliance is with fashionability, that is, luxury with market value. During the 1960s, the economic system, in apparent expansion, could accommodate variations in market value as well as increases in personnel. In the 1980s, however, the market specifications are finite. Fulfillment cannot expand indefinitely, creating the scramble for the few spaces and the limited resources which remain.

In education, the effects have been visible for many years: only a few tenured positions are available, causing underemployment and an itinerant population. The few with tenured positions certainly are not about to cede these successes to younger faculty, with the result that the system of higher education in this country is virtually stagnant. The arts have entered a situation which approximates the education system, which can stand as the model for intellectual culture in the United States: a model of self-perpetuation, of stagnation, and of severe limitations on expansion or continuity.

What this means in the most basic sense is that artists have established themselves as institutionalized entities; as with all institutions, there is an insistence on sovereignty and on domination. During the 1960s, these same artists expected (and, because of the fluidity of the economic structure and the social context, got) accommodation from an older generation. Since the 1980s cannot accommodate such dualism with the same ease and the same access, these same artists have fought to define specific demarcations to access and to continuity, that is, the limits are defined in terms of self-interest. The education system which developed has been of great benefit, because these older artists have a supply of sycophants, epigones, stooges. The idea of an alternative is coopted from inception. One of the first "alternative spaces" was Artists Space, which was founded on the system of nepotism which has become prevalent in "the avant-garde," that is, early exhibitions were organized on the principle that older, more "established" artists would select promising younger artists. During the 1970s, there was the tacit acceptance of a system of hierarchy, resulting in a system dependent upon (for want of better terms) cronyism and nepotism. During the 1980s, the acceptance of this social stratification has resulted in the collapse of "the avant-garde." The contradictions inherent in the ascension of "the avant-garde" have resulted in depletion, corruption, and decay: there is no new energy, because the energy simply is recycled. Entropic exhaustion is the current state of affairs.

The bad faith which has been the result of the functioning of the current system has caused many delusionary tactics. Contemporary painters provide images as if the entire enterprise of image-making had never been questioned and criticized (by such "movements" as Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, and Process Art). Contemporary filmmakers make movies as if the particular processes of illusionism had never been questioned and

criticized (by such filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, Marguerite Duras, or the late Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr). Contemporary choreographers create movement phrases as if the entire enterprise of dance had never been questioned and criticized (by such a "group" as The Judson Dance Theatre).

During the 1960s, the American arts were in the ascendance, and the consideration of "the avant-garde" was occasioned by an unquestioned confidence. With the continual skepticism provoked by the secular consciousness of modernism, the American confidence was attributed to the prerogatives of cultural imperialism and ideological domination. Once provoked, this questioning undermined the sense of commitment inherent in the cultural arena. "The avant-garde" questioned "the establishment," but collapsed when the questioning was turned upon itself. By the 1980s, the American arts have been in abeyance, acknowledged as an economic force but uncertain as to artistic merit or philosophical meaning.

One of the most problematic, because one of the most important, artists in recent history has been Andy Warhol. His example has been the cause of much of the confusions and the conundrums of the current art scene. Artists such as Robert Longo and Jean-Michel Basquiat, filmmakers such as Eric Mitchell and Amos Poe, performance artists such as Ann Magnuson and Eric Bogosian have cited Warhol as a role model. Warhol reversed the systematic so prevalent in the art world during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the period of the dominance of the Abstract Expressionists and the rise of the ironic reversals through Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and utilized the social structure which had developed from that systematic. Warhol, coming from a background in commercial advertising, campaigned for serious attention in the art world. Through clever manipulation, he succeeded. Whether this was calculated or unconscious is irrelevant: Warhol's career represents the application of advertising techniques to the environs of "high seriousness." Once accepted, critical discourse could not retreat into innocence: the success of that application represented a capitulation to commercial values. For more than a decade, one of the significant activities which still bears the name of Andy Warhol has been the continual publication of the gossip journal *Interview*. As has been noted, Warhol has worked himself into a position where any sell-out, any degeneration of aesthetics, any amorality or ignorance, can only enhance his position. Regarding Warhol's OXIDATION series of paintings, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh wrote in 1982: "His OXIDATION PAINTINGS at Documenta were among the rare pleasurable exceptions to the generally somber and pompous offerings of the exhibition. From a distance they appeared to be a new version of Art Informel; their glistening metallic surfaces, their emphatic splashes and spots, their undercover preciousness seemed to share the worst aspects of Yves Klein. . . . When, however, the authorship and production procedures of the works were revealed—Warhol or an assistant urinated onto canvases prepared with a copper emulsion, causing highly gestural green splotches of oxidation to form on the reddish ground—it became clear that their mysterious quality was not only the result of their

sheer physical beauty nor even their truth to materials.” Regarding the same series of paintings, the Australian art critic Paul Taylor wrote in 1985: “In all his best art, Warhol celebrates meaning on many levels. Given the composition of the piss paintings, allusions to alchemy are unavoidable when discussing them. . . . What better contemporary demonstration is there of an elevated individual transforming base materials into gold?” The implications of these statements are worth considering: in a supposedly democratic society, one man has achieved such preeminence that every gesture becomes of instantaneous value. There is no irony in the critical adulation, that is, there is no statement of the obvious, which is, Warhol is pissing on the art world. The negation, the contempt, the nihilism of that gesture are not admitted in recent critical discourse. This inadmissible evidence is symptomatic of the impotence of critical commentary.

Through the success of the collapse of genres which accompanies pop art and other art movements of the past two decades, the arts have yielded to an image of show business success.

The drive towards the merger of all cultural activities to the realm of commerce has accelerated in the past decade. Artists talk in terms of “stardom” and “popularity,” terms which had been in the vocabulary of show business, but now are uttered in terms of aesthetic discourse. Show business thrives on misinformation, “myths,” and mistaken assumptions. For example: in Hollywood, there is the accepted idea that the motion picture industry is one of the biggest and most productive industries in national history. This is false: the motion picture industry is not even in the top twenty, let alone third. Nevertheless, the ideological power of Hollywood must not be underestimated. The Hollywood ideology was one of the causes of the shift in national consciousness, a change which was defined through the caesura of World War II. Writing about this period in his autobiographical *Albums of Early Life* (1980), Stanley Kauffmann wrote: “I took the work seriously during the actual hours, minutes, seconds that I was doing it: my ego was involved. But I didn’t see—even remotely—that I was in the middle of something portentous. The war was the immediate cause of the skyrocketing sales, but I was in the middle of an immense cultural shift—the gradual canonization of pop art—and I had no clue. I was in a moderately significant job right in the middle, I was contributing to the shift, and I had no clue.” The deification of pop art to the status of aesthetic signification has occasioned the detritus of critical discourse. In addition, the cooptation by the standards of the popular arts, standards defined in terms of commerce and marketability, has destroyed the concept of aesthetics as a philosophical subset. The cultural dominance of the

United States was created by the acknowledgement of this country as a world power, a position consolidated by the outcome of World War II. The prevalence of pop art standards around the world is well established: rock music and music videos have even reached the People's Republic of China. At the moment when the popular arts have clear dominion, at the time when the commercial interests should claim domination, the mass media industries are in a state of devastation and decline. As an example of the fact that the motion picture industry is not an economically important feature in the gross national product, there is the fact that all the major motion picture studios are not sovereign: the motion picture studios are all subsidiaries of multi-national corporations. If the motion picture industry, indeed, had been as important as many industry executives believe, the studios should be owning the corporations, rather than vice versa.

Warhol's rise to prominence coincided with the most stringent implementation of "the avant-garde" in contemporary culture. By the middle of the 1960s, the arts were engaged in an explicitly didactic investigation of the aesthetic traditions and the philosophical implications of Western culture. As Susan Sontag wrote of this situation in 1963: "A new mode of didacticism has conquered the arts, is indeed the 'modern' element in art. Its central dogma is the idea that art must evolve. Its result is the work whose main intention is to advance the history of the genre, to break ground in matters of technique. The paramilitary imagery of *avant-garde* and *arrière-garde* perfectly expresses the new didacticism. Art is the army by which human sensibility advances implacably into the future, with the aid of ever newer and more formidable techniques. This mainly negative relation of individual talent to tradition, which gives rise to the rapid and built-in obsolescence of each new item of technique, and each new use of materials, has vanquished the conception of art as giving familiar pleasure, and produced a body of work which is principally didactic and admonitory." During the 1960s, this trajectory of the path of artistic endeavor stipulated a highly sophisticated critical and self-critical vehicle. The polemical nature of their aesthetic enterprises conditioned the careers of many artists during that decade, consolidating the impression of art as a critical venture which would animate the way art was redefined, as in such careers as those of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, Michael Snow and the late Hollis Frampton, LaMonte Young and Steve Reich, Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton.

"Implicit in the work . . . is an attack of this very elemental premise of traditional Western dance: the projection of a star supported by a hierarchal imperialist organization (e.g., the kings and queens of the ballet, the tragic heroes and heroines of the modern dance). While I'm at it, I should mention a few other correlative notions that are also under attack. These are, of course, the trappings of any hierarchal system: the pomp and splendor and glamour and spectacle and virtuosic accomplishments required by aristocratic expectations." (Jill Johnston, 1968)

“The consistent compulsive logic of a Rainer group concert can be as perversely fascinating as the look of her beat-up performers, some of whom are former Cunningham dancers. . . . Now I see that her compulsion is more strictly ideological; she and her colleagues have become the sans-culottes of the Cunningham revolution, clomping through the back wall of the theatre into—everyday living?” (Arlene Croce, 1969)

“A questioning was initiated by Merce Cunningham and radicalized through the work of Rainer, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, and others working and performing in New York in the mid-1960s. Their common aim was the establishment of a radically new economy of movement. This required a systematic critique of rhetoric, conventions, the esthetic hierarchies imposed by traditional or classical dance forms. That rhetoric was, in fact, reversed, destroyed, in what came to be known as the dance of ‘ordinary language’ and of ‘task performance.’” (Annette Michelson, 1974)

What has become clear is that aesthetic endeavor, initially developing under a system indifferent to, if not in active opposition to, the valuations of late capitalism, had to be brought into accord with the ideological presumptions of the economic structure. The accomplishment of this evolution has destroyed the illusion of ideological freedom which was central to the enterprises of modernism occurring during the 1960s. For this reason, the retrogressive thrust of the contemporary arts is symptomatic of a capitulation to the positioning of “the avant-garde” within firmly entrenched economic boundaries. Writing about this development in 1982, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh noted: “It is furthermore not surprising that the impact of the work of the artists of the ‘60s and ‘70s on a contemporary understanding of art production and reception had hardly occurred before the need to revitalize the art market brought about a reinstitution of obsolete production procedures in the guise of a new avant-garde of painting. Simultaneously, however, a different range of esthetic positions has been developed by this new generation of artists which continues and expands one of the essential features of Modernism—its impulse to criticize itself from within, to question its institutionalization, its reception, and its audience.” The problem with contemporary art practice, in many different fields ranging from painting and sculpture to the performing arts of dance and music, is that the impulse of self-criticism has been deformed into a situation of self-justification. The self-critical impulse, which attempted to examine the ideological underpinnings of artistic practice, gradually usurped critical inquiry, until many artists have assumed, by the 1980s, that criticism is a function of advertising. In addition, the questioning of authority which defines an aspect of modernist discourse now occurs from within the centers of authority, thus sanctifying specific forms of questioning, that is, any questioning which derives from sources beyond the boundaries of authority is disregarded, thereby ensuring that only certain questions are

asked, in only certain contexts, by only certain quarters considered worth attention by authority.

The relation of aesthetic to ideology always has been uneasy. For this reason, many artists have attempted to locate their work within the confines of specific causes, not always with success. During the past decade, there were a number of art projects which attempted to address social issues through a variety of means, such as neighborhood cooperation, collective creation, and political sloganeering, in terms of organizations and events such as Colab, Fashion Moda, and Artists Call Against U. S. Intervention. The relation of art to specific ideological aims remains highly unstable, with the different emphases of art and politics not always addressed adequately. Nevertheless, this has been a problem which has plagued thoughtful artists in this century.

Right now, in order to create a coherent argument, a few generalizations are in order. For one, a working definition of "postmodernism"; for another, the relation of "postmodernism" to "the avant-garde"; for another, "the avant-garde" and the place of the culture industry within the matrix of late capitalist production. Obviously, all these remarks must be brief and cannot be considered definitive.

By the mid-1960s, many artists had engaged or were engaged in critical activities. Critics were only too eager to embellish artistic intentionality as commentary.

Modernism can be defined in terms of essentialism or criticism addressed to tradition. Thus, Cubism represented an investigation into the pictorial limits of perspective, Impressionism defined a reevaluation into the utilization of shade and hue, Expressionism represented a hyperextension into the potentials of color and shape. If Modernism represented a challenge to tradition, postmodernism represents the response to that challenge, not in reasserting the dictates of tradition, but in acknowledging contingency, equivalence, and interchangeability. For this reason, the forms of postmodernism tend to be eclectic, with the potentiality of reversal or exchange. However, this eclecticism should be a continuance of the analytic precepts of Modernism as a defining characteristic of postmodernism. "The avant-garde," as a cultural entity which represents an alternative to traditional culture, was allied to, in many ways, was equivalent to Modernism's alternative thrust. Postmodernism is the continuation of Modernism once the possibility of alternative meanings become one of the premises of

discourse.

One of the problems with late capitalism is the fact that increasing mechanization has redefined labor. A great deal of productivity can be contained in the industrial process without the necessity of manual labor. As the supply of resources depletes, the surplus capital of late capitalism must find outlets for investment potential. Within the last few years, there has been an acceleration in the application of this surplus capital to the speculation of art objects. In addition, the divergence of artistic practices became ideologically identified with related practices with already defined industrial procedures, that is, the mass media. As art in its many manifestations became a practice amenable to capitalist speculation, the arts had to be brought to an identification with industrial practices. The equivalence of meaning inherent in postmodernism has become a ploy to justify the diminution of meaning. In order to ensure the status of uniqueness that would justify economic valuation, the arts have had to rely on the cooperation of critical evaluation. The ways that criticism, the cultural establishment, capitalist speculation, philosophical loss of coherence, and “the avant-garde” support an increasingly disingenuous aesthetic practice is the condition of the contemporary arts.

As postmodernism posed a challenge to authoritative judgment, there has been an attendant confusion which has been unresolved. As an example, there has been a crisis in terms of critical attitudes towards the movies. That is: many commentators from other disciplines, such as philosophy, literature, or art history, remain unaware of the modernist tradition within the cinema, a tradition which includes the work of the early Soviet cinema (Eisenstein, Vertov, Dovzhenko, et al.) the German and French avant-garde cinema (Richter, Eggeling, Ruttman, Kirsanoff, Man Ray, Duchamp, et al.), and the work of Carl Dreyer, Robert Bresson, Jean Vigo, Yasujiro Ozu, and Roberto Rossellini, among others. One of the features of the modernist tradition in the cinema is an awareness of form such that illusionism is pushed to the limits of perceptibility. In the work of Jean-Luc Godard, who might be considered the culmination of modernism in one respect and the initiator of postmodernism in another, pastiche, allusion and the incorporation of multiple texts are ways to hypothesize alternative points of view as well as to break and to question the unitary illusionism. Now, in a movie such as Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown*, which is often cited by literary and philosophical critics as a “postmodern” movie, the allusions to past movies in the genre do not break into the seamless autonomy of the singular story being shown. For this reason, because the illusionism is never questioned within the structure of the movie itself, *Chinatown* cannot be a postmodern movie, because the premises of the movie are, in fact, pre-modernist.

In a broader sense, this has happened in all the arts. The spectacle has been in spotting the ways in which those involved in the arts, attempting to claim the mantle of seriousness which had been the mainstay of modernism, have consecrated claims for the recent work out of all proportion to the

The lack of cohesion in terms of critical discourse has caused an infantilization of opinion.

actual aesthetic practice. However, the lack of a cohesive critical vocabulary has caused an indifference to the specificity of work.

For instance, the work of Trisha Brown and David Gordon was defined through the alternative practice of The Judson Dance Theatre. The alternative practice was predicated not just on the temporality of dance and the possibility of alternative movement (the usage of pedestrian movement and the usage of real time) but on a reconsideration of space in terms of movement. For that reason, much of the work of Trisha Brown and David Gordon was conceived in terms of non-theatrical spaces: lofts, gymnasiums, gallery spaces. Now, their work has been developed in proscenium spaces, and the movement which is on exhibit has been distinctively unnaturalized, that is, “dancerly.” This stylistic change in their work, which has occurred within the past five years, has been treated as an instance of “style,” on the assumption that the primary focus, the intent, the philosophical meaning of the work remain the same. My contention is that this is not true: the stylistic changes signify changes in meaning, and these changes qualify, if not outright contradict, the essentially analytic thrust of their previous work.

The work of Twyla Tharp has maintained a constancy in terms of a postmodern impetus. Works such as *The Bix Pieces*, *The Raggedy Dances*, and *Baker's Dozen* utilized allusions to modes of popular dancing without defining the choreography in terms of specific dance idioms; merged into an eclectic, allover, idiosyncratic style, Tharp's choreography analyzed the dimensionality of American popular dance idioms through hybridization and juxtaposition. Her work never recreated old dance steps: thus, in *Nine Sinatra Songs*, her choreography never reconstructed the tangos or the waltzes or the other popular dances which would have accompanied the actual Sinatra songs from the 1950s and the 1960s, but, instead, defined movement possibilities, of which popular dancing was but one option among many. The reliance on popular music has led to the belief that her work is a reconstructed pastiche of past forms, which is not so. This has led to the problematic project of *Singin' In The Rain*, wherein Tharp was hired, not to create an analytic reassessment of the past work, but to reconstruct a literal remake in another medium.

When Richard Foreman began his theatre work, the stylistic elements included the dissociation of text from action through the usage of tape-recorded voices for dialogue, the demarcation of the performance space through strings stretched across the performance space, and the directed glare of lights and the incessant ringing of bells at the audience. These

What has become clear is that aesthetic endeavor, initially developing under a system indifferent to, if not in active opposition to, the valuations of late capitalism, had to be brought into accord with the ideological presumptions of the economic structure.

elements codified, in stylistic terms, a set of themes, which ranged from the dissociation of mind and body, the equivalence of spatial relationships, and the mechanized inhumanity of the contemporary environment. Whether or not these themes are or are not philosophically valid is not at issue. What is at issue is that, over the years, all these elements have been either modified or dropped altogether. When this happened, there were no comments on the fact that the meanings of the work, once absolutely present in the formal presentation of the work, were similarly modified. As his style changed, the thematic nexus of Foreman's work went from concrete embodiment to literal encapsulation, with a corresponding loss of formal integrity. Perhaps the greatest change occurred in the spring of 1974, with the dual productions of *Vertical Mobility (Sophia = (Wisdom): Part 4)* and *PAIN(T)*. When the formal elements were changed, this was not just a stylistic change, this indicated a different relation to thematic material as well: without the formal dissociation to exemplify the dissociation between mind and body, one was confronted with works which located the values of the mind in the male characters, and the values of the body in the female characters. In addition, the continual usage of female nudity, with only occasional compensation of male nudity, asserted a particular denial of female intellect. In all the writing about Foreman that has ensued over the years, there has been no mention of the meaning of these changes, nor has there been a critique of the actual meaning of the works. Another observation which has not been made is that the stylistic changes which appeared in 1974 brought Foreman's work closer to the construction of traditional literary theatre as practiced in our culture.

Yet these stylistic changes were the occasion for the development of these artists into avatars of the cultural establishment, even if these changes have meant either a modification or an outright negation or refutation of their past body of work. Without an acceptance of these changes, these artists would not have the possibility of cultural address: they would have had to accept the continuance of marginalization, which is the status of "the avant-garde." So an endless conundrum has been set up, wherein the cooptation of alternatives renders the alternatives defenseless to deal with the corresponding depletion of meaning.

At present, "the avant-garde" struggles with the self-knowledge of its own

depletion, or "the avant-garde" continues through the self-appointed appellation which is defined without irony or self-criticism, rendering that portion of "the avant-garde" pre-modernist in intent, and, thus, not an avant-garde at all. Nevertheless, "the avant-garde" has become an important feature in the cultural industry, with increasing stakes in terms of capitalist speculation. When a "performance artist" such as Whoopi Goldberg is signed to star in Steven Spielberg's movie version of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, when a theatrical monologist such as Spalding Gray can be called a "performance artist," when a "performance artist" such as Julia Heyward can be hired to direct the music video of a rock group like Red Robin singing "Eve of Destruction," then the term "performance artist" has been increasingly void of meaning. The same might be said of "the avant-garde" in general, which, as it decreases in meaning, increases in monetary valuation.

At the end of Stanley Donen's *Bedazzled*, Peter Cook, as the Devil, is foiled in his attempt to return to heaven; angered by this fact, Cook curses the world by declaring that, in the future, the entire world will be overrun by fast food franchises and by transistor radios blaring rock and roll, by an increasing industrialized and mechanized existence which will cover every inch of the globe. What was a joke in 1968 has become the reality of 1985, as proven by the franchising of McDonald's through Europe and Asia, the marketing of Coca-Cola throughout the world, including the People's Republic of China, and the popularity of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* throughout Europe and Asia. Although obviously a project of considerable social merit, the "Live Aid" concert on Saturday, July 13, 1985, was an incredible display of the power of the commercial entertainment industry. The fact that the satellite hook-up for live transmission encompassed over 100 countries world-wide, the biggest hook-up in history, was particularly impressive because the means have been at the media's disposal for over a decade, but political and ideological disputes have never been resolved to implement the technology. Nevertheless, the conglomerations of an impressive array of rock and roll musicians, certainly the most commercial of all forms of entertainers, were able to mobilize factions which could not be moved by politics or by history. The entire enterprise of culture, for better or worse, is being remade in accordance with terms commensurate with the practices of late capitalism.

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