

Western Art, a Critical Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper is a critical inquiry into Western Art. It starts with the assimilation of European Modernism in American Art and then deals with the stylistic effects of Cubism, Synchronism, and Abstract Expressionism. The paper ends with a critique of articulated art.

Keywords: Assimilation, Cubism, Synchronism, Abstract Expressionism, Articulated Art, Pop Art

Introduction

Great art cannot be measured. Artists believe that creative art is tied to the life of the senses. Social progress, they thought, would issue from sensual liberation, without which there could be no aesthetic appreciation. The images are spontaneous, complete transpositions in the visual and tactile field. In the form of relationships of shape and line and color they symbolize the harmonies of living matters, restlessly yearning, aspiring, struggling to reach beyond itself to the cosmic order concurrent with those yearnings. The sense of the hidden forces in the subconscious, painters who sought to externalize these hidden forces in their romantic art. Similarly the return to nature, the human versus the mechanical, artists found their introduction to art must be through the medium of oriental art. The notion of space was based on an understanding of spatial tensions and balances to express the impact of such forces acting against one another, in space to be a restless world of movement and flux. A few careless lines, a few seeming daubs of color so that the whole constitutes a living thing.

Assimilation of European Modernism

The moment at which American art attempted to assimilate European modernism coincided with the moment that the American nation was confronted with assimilating 13 Million new immigrants. The threat posed by this invasion of foreigners was often expressed in contempt for foreign art. This position forced the artist to Americanize European art, just as the immigrant was Americanized. Consequently, the new painting and sculpture proved an admirable target for the various kinds of insecurities and aggression thus released. This provided insecure and unoriginal artists with a formula that many chose to imitate in a vain search for a fashionable mode. Its other intentions were often frustrated as well. The artists wished to select all the created beauty of their time, the diversity and lack of focus or common denominators characteristic of 20th

century art. Some artists immersed themselves in the art of the present, through them modern art became a permanent of the culture of the West, which became converted to modernism. This was about 1919 which was devoted to contemporary art. At that time the universities did not alter curriculum to embrace contemporary art, because the large museums predictably continued to scorn modernism for the lack of aesthetic message, just the message of form without permanent value.

Cubism

Artists found themselves in a series of retreats to more conservative and defensible positions in a cultural vacuum that was not encouraging to their art; they were surrounded by a spirit of chauvinistic isolation that encompassed art. The result was a jazz age, and the problem of immigration, together with the morality of art. But although the artists had lost hold on the art market, academicism as a manner was not dead. They argued against the excess of an unconstrained modernism, counseling instead a compromise between the old masters and the moderns. In the desire to compromise, to strike a balance between the old and the new, led painters to concoct an eclectic synthesis that would combine the best of all possible styles, but originality never follows from this attitude of assimilation and refinement for they become innovators. But Cubism is not sharp lines and acute angles and surface effects superimposing directional lines and fragmented shapes a top of essentially realistic compositions. Some artists tried to imitate the shallow space of Cubism that looked like unassimilated modernism. It was not possible to move from the idyllic Romanticism to the logic of Cubism. To cover the diversity of styles they invented a term to cover that of styles, and periods reviewed called Post-Impressionism, and is also misunderstood. Thus the real issues at stake of Cubism the preservation of the integrity of the picture plane, the analysis of both the structure of objects and the means by which objects are perceived. The modernist attitude did so on an emotional intuitive basis. This produced successful synthetic cubist abstractions, but by 1920 artists renounced abstraction, and devoted themselves to create Dada objects and made experiments with spray-gun paintings and rayo-graphs, photographic impressions made on sensitized plates, exhibiting the flatness and geometric simplification of synthetic Cubism choosing solid forms insisting that if line is apparent, it is a drawing.

Synchronism

Synchronism was among the most advanced painting styles that emerged out of Post-Impressionism early in the 20th century. Synchronism represented the apogee of Western art, the culmination of its entire historical development from the Renaissance through Cubism. Synchronism prefigured the today's new abstraction to create multiple focuses

of artistic activity. Obviously, if the public chose to take modern art as a scandal, the answer was to give them more scandals. Unconventional behavior, liberation, and even dissipation were condoned, chess playing and transvestitism took their place as artistic activities. If there were not sufficient scandals to suit the public, then other scandals can be arranged. A woman who dressed in rags, wore sardine cans on her head, and had objects suspended from her clothes on chains. These liberties no longer are looked upon as itches. To the critics who cried out that modern art was immoral and anarchistic.

Some artists claimed that the rights of the artist transcended morality and politics. In holding that anything goes, they may have discredited art, but they also created a climate of experimentation in which many artists felt liberated for the first time from the repressive aspects of Western culture. However, this urge to experiment, without the guidelines of a defined tradition, took artists to the periphery of artistic activity. In a sense this kind of experimental activity becomes more comprehensible when viewed in the context of the revolt against the convention limits of art. It was an important moment when the artist discovered that freedom tradition meant freedom from rules; and that if there were no tradition rules either. Some artists also repudiated this freedom to steer a safer course within known boundaries. Accordingly, some destroyed these offensive works. For every artist who turned his back on modernism, there were others determined to find new forms adequate to express the qualities of modern life to produce the tickling sensation of a new way of thinking and feeling adapting to the realities of the industrial society. The acceptance of the idea that culture could be contemporary and the breaking with old traditions did not preclude the founding of a new tradition was an important step. The Futurists and the Purist had already begun to use machine imagery as the basis for their art, and turned to mechanical and industrial forms as a way of stamping their work as contemporary. Others, however, continued to find the machines not a blessing but a threat. Duchamp had painted the *Bride*, a complex diagram of a female machine, and *The Large Glass*, a big, complex group of quasi human machines connected by means of quasi mechanical relationships.

Modernism

With modernism artists of the 20th century had attempted to end imitation, and a painter is supposed to paint as though he had never seen another painting. Many artists maintained strong attachments to the farms and villages. They wished to escape the art of their time, just as they wished to turn their backs on contemporary reality in order to preserve the atmosphere and life styles of times gone by. This served to arouse a consciousness of art where many people had never before seen an original work of art. On another level, the muralists' practice of creating for the large area of the wall rather than limited space helped to prepare artists to paint large scale picture.

However, many artists choose to escape reality through personal fantasy. Like the Surrealists such as Salvador Dali, they presented the inner world of the imagination in the precise, detailed realism of the photograph. Because they combined the factual with the fantastic, they were known as Magic Realists, in that it married a highly cultivated precise technique and slick polished surfaces with a preserve version of the everyday.

In the thirties of the 20th century artists continued to paint landscapes made up of many small, jagged elements locked together like the pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle. Despite the degree of abstraction, the artists claimed that the paintings have their origin in things seen. They draw until they feel that the allover configuration has reached a degree of complexity and completeness satisfactory to the impulse that initiated it, and increasing the visual impact through the use of stimulating color intervals. The artists were dominated by strict geometric abstraction based on the horizontals and verticals derived ultimately from de Stijl or Constructivist prototypes, after which abstract art in that period became a voice crying out in the wilderness. Abstract art in that period became a voice crying out in the wilderness. Abstract art also was spurned by the museums as hopelessly out of date the modern style of the 20th century. In the forties and fifties painters' rebel against the dryness and rigidity of geometric shapes, they needed a drama. The painter wants to be free to determine the actual space in his work was an important step in liberating his composition from the fixed structural armature of the cubist grid in order to open the limited shallow space of late Cubism into an infinite atmospheric continuum, releasing explosive energies in a manner of Abstract Expressionism which offered an alternative to middle-class conventions and popular taste as they were expressed in academic and commercial art. Poor art is for poor people. An art maturing in such circumstances should be marked by signs of anxiety, emotional stress, even despair. All required that art should serve a social purpose in the moment when abstract art was undergoing the general crisis that accompanied the decline of Cubism. In that time the only major international art movements to arise were Dada and its offspring Surrealism. Neither contributed to the continuing evolution of pictorial form which the pioneers of modernism had envisioned. Through the triumph of reason, Dada and Surrealism set out to destroy the concept of progress in art. Thus art had polarized into two camps; Cubist-derived abstraction, including the purist geometry of the non-objective styles de Stijl and Constructivism; and Surrealism. To synthesize Cubism and Surrealism in an entirely new style became the goal of artists.

Abstract Expressionism

Mondrian was convinced that abstract art was the form of expression appropriate to the 20th century. He underwent a profound stylistic change in contrast to some artists who were untouched by the American environment with its indomitable energy, swift

tempo flashing lights, and its strict grid of streets, with skyscrapers, shooting up words which became for Mondrian the essence of modern age. The power of abstract art to express feeling is forcefully demonstrated in Mondrian's last works. Mondrian became interested in the syncopated rhythm of jazz; not in the cool, poetic improvisations of Charlie Parker whose music would find sympathy among painters, but in the measured beat of boogie woogie. In his last masterpieces, *Brodway Boogi Woogie* of 1942-43 and *Victory Boogi Woogie* of 1943-44, which were regularly on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art during the forties, he replaced the static primary color, rectangles and black grids on a white surface, which had characterized his works since the twenties of the 20th century, with small, irregularly placed rectangles of red blue, and yellow which to a syncopated beat. A new energy and movement, and an optical flicker, give these works an active quality that is radical for Mondrian.

For painters in the late forties of the 20th century, abstract art was mere formalism, empty decoration which could not embody universal themes. Rejecting the narrow chauvinism of Regionalism, they set out to express the general, the universal, and the elemental. The younger painters valued content over subject matters, and as much as form, they also refused to illustrate the tragedies of moment, and turned to the enduring myths of the race as the source of emotions. They appropriated ancient myths, symbols, and signs as light versus darkness, good versus evil, celestial versus chthonian. Surrealism was part of that reaction against the dealing and inhibiting factors in Western culture, which may be traced from Jean-Jacques Rousseau through the self-conscious primitivism of late nineteenth-century art. Surrealism put an even higher store on the instinctual and the archaic than Cubism as German Expressionism had done. But it was the buried primitive in modern man that the Surrealists wished to construct. Inspired by the Freudian method of free association, they invented the technique of psychic automatism which allowed the artist to wonder spontaneously, much as his hands moves at random on the Ouija board and to meander in strange paths unchecked by the fetters of reason or logic.

Stylistic Effects

These effects were the means for achieving greater spontaneity, and the accidental splashes and drips of paint left by the path of a rapid brushstroke were cultivated. These organic free shapes were called biomorphic because of their similarity to biological forms. Certain aspects of Surrealism to which Americans are indebted remained distasteful to them. They disdained, the social life and sensational publicity sought after by the Surrealists. Since Cubist space, no matter how shallow insistent on the integrity of the surface plane, still permits in and out fluctuations in depth, one may interpret the drip paintings as the first significant change in pictorial space since Cubism. Thus the drip

paintings offered a new kind of optical pictorial, space as well as a new kind of all-over pictorial organization. In this they became the central point of departure for the abstractions of the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century.

It is important to know that a painter called Pollock worked on the floor, not on the wall. He did not pour or drip the paint on the canvas, because perhaps he was painting from all sides of the canvas. The random drips and spatters testify that he had adopted the surrealist attitude. Having rejected wall paintings, he eliminated color in the elegies. Of the major artists of his generation, De Kooning around the thirties of the former century was the only one to choose the human figure first male then female, he has devoted variations on the woman that quickly came to be identified of his characteristic image. De Kooning's pictorial dilemma is special. Contours are opened to allow flesh and environment to flow into one another, and anatomical forms themselves have been fragmented. To complicate the matters further the abstract Expressionists wished to maintain only the humanistic values of classical art, not its forms.

Abstract Expressionism was able to make virtues of the art as of speed of execution and vitality. But when the internal contradictions that marked Abstract Expressionism as a style could no longer be held together in a viable synthesis, the demands for an art tied more direct by to the moment and to the realities of the scene could no longer be denied. These contradictions derived mainly from the figurative and Cubist roots of Abstract Expressionism. The lack of clarity of apparent structure of action painting in its most painterly phase of the late fifties of the former century was taken by younger artists as a sign of a lack of pictorial or emotional conviction. In reaction, they discarded not only the painterly-ness, but also the emotional, autobiographical quality of Abstract Expressionism.

Young artists began to question whether or not the marks of struggle and anxiety, they wondered to what extent the spontaneous splashes and random drips had become mere mannerisms, stylistic effects and random drips had become mere mannerisms, stylistic effects that could be manufactured at will. Rejecting the expressionistic basis of Abstract Expressionism, the new generations also renounced the symbolic, and the metaphoric along with the mystical. They were skeptical regarding the possibility of communicating subjecting content through the means of an abstract art, which Abstract Expressionism held to be not only possible but necessary. Abstract Expressionism began to lose impetus as a style. Abstract Expressionism wedded the contradictory impulses of Cubism and Surrealism. In pop art, certain aspects of action painting continue to find expression by the emphasis on tactile surface quality and the close tie to the environment and urban life, as well as implicit romanticism. Both pop art and the new abstraction however remain faithful to the scale, impact, and directness of Abstract Expressionism.

Articulated Art

Both post painterly abstraction and pop art reacted against Abstract Expressionism in favor of articulated art. Pop art assimilated as artistic novelty and thus there was no need to search for the source of pop imagery in Dada. Pop art differs from earlier movements that sought to gain closer contact with the public. However Abstract Expressionism and pop art has been rejected by the most older generation. As pop art was born of the reaction of second generation artists they simplified square-on-square compositions also provided examples of non-allusive, conceptual paintings, emphasizing the expressive power of pure color, the new abstraction, was characterized by even, non-textured paint application, flat, non-illusionist space and suppression of value contrasts in favor of the interaction of adjacent colors although most of the second generation had chosen De Kooning as a model. Opposed to successive records of brushed gestures that crowded the canvas and threatened to swamp it with muddy over-painting, these painters chose to leave areas of the canvas free to breathe. They allowed marks, stains, and blots to stand, discarding what was not suitable rather than reviving the same canvas, permitting islands of brilliant color to float on an open area of unpainted canvas. Abstract Expressionists did not exist because they chose to draw in paint. Because the successive veils of paint sink into the raw canvas and become identified with it, foreground and background is one. These pictures, which appear to materialize like natural phenomena emerging from a must, seem to defy a reconstruction of the method by which they were created. No self-conscious shapes or hard contours inhibit their mysterious flow, the superimposed veils, stained directly into each other, do not harden into the parallel planes of Cubist composition. Areas of raw canvas are left unpainted, causing the eye to focus more intensely on the interaction of the juxtaposed colors. Successive sprayings cause color to melt into one another, producing brilliance as sunlight, and an atmosphere as fluid and buoyant as sky and clouds in a moving atmospheric effect.