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Words from Chris:

While they have always been an area of amateur interest, the visual arts have never been the subject of close personal scrutiny by me. I have mostly been interested in whether I think a piece of art is good, whether it communicates something to me as an individual; I have never thought too intently about the social or political motivations behind the production of art. This all changed when we began to look at the visual art of the Sixties in Profs. Reed and Schneiderman's class concerning the American Avant-Garde. I learned that my position was woefully behind the times, that serious aesthetic criticism had been based on politics for decades by the time of Andy Warhol and Frank Stella. For this paper, we were asked to judge whether two artistic movements, Pop and Minimalism, were the "true" artistic Avant-Garde of the Sixties and to compare both to the political Avant-Gardes of the time. I found that these artistic and political movements were, in fact, very closely related and that the rhetoric of political analysis could be applied with great effect to aesthetic evaluation.

Minimalism, Pop, and the True Avant-Garde

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American Avant-Garde

Prof. Christopher Reed

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Minimalism, Pop, and the True Avant-Garde

In the twentieth century, the avant-garde took on a great ambiguity due to the rapid proliferation of movements, both social and artistic, that outrightly challenged the institutions of Western culture. Many groups *seemed* avant-garde and made claims to being on the cutting edge of society and aesthetics, but only a handful qualified as such by the parameters delineated by critics such as Matei Calinescu in his Five Faces of Modernity and Peter Bürger in his “The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde.” In the Sixties in America, the question of the true avant-garde reduced to an either-or option between Minimalism and Pop Art. Both plainly broke with artistic tradition and thus both appeared to be on the vanguard of aesthetics, but Minimalism’s emphasis on established modes of fascist communication disqualified it as avant-garde. In contrast, Pop’s reversal of the psychosexual power hierarchies of patriarchal society through its revealing of homoerotic subtext in the imagery of Western culture established it as the true avant-garde.

Both Pop and Minimalism exhibited a “rejection of...past [aesthetic values]” identified by Calinescu as a defining trait of the avant-garde (117). In Pop, this rejection manifested as a mechanized repetition of images appropriated from mass culture (i.e. images taken from newspapers, magazines, police brochures, etc. and not produced by the artist, as in Warhol’s screen prints). This appropriation altered the artist’s position from creator to arranger or interpreter and thereby subverted the traditional concept of art as a “portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding,” (Bürger 238) or in other words an

expression of “[individual] emotions regarded as ends in themselves,” as Roger Fry notes in his “An Essay in Aesthetics” (29). The visual content of Pop screen prints was only determined by the artist in his selection of the image to be reproduced and by his arrangement of copies of this “prefabricated” image. Pop thus rejected the concept of the artist as one whose emotions are communicated via the medium of image and positioned him instead as a commentator on images already in existence before his engaging with them. This redefinition of the artist’s role implied an aesthetic of social criticism rather than one of emotional expression in that it left little room for representation of individual feeling while making social critique eminently convenient. Indeed, critical interpretation of Warhol’s screen prints tends to read these pieces as representations of coded homosexuality (Meyer128), devices by which Warhol co-opted popular images and, via repetition and overlap, made obvious the concealed homoerotic possibilities latent in these images and, by extension, in the popular culture from which they were taken. His revealing of homoerotic elements buried within society positioned Warhol as a commentator-artist focused on the society that surrounded him rather than as an expresser-artist focused on his own emotions, and thereby divorced him from traditional concepts of the artist.

Minimalism also rejected the aesthetic of emotional expression by the artist as well as the techniques of artistic tradition; as Donald Judd noted in an interview with Bruce Glaser, conventional artistic “effects tend to carry with them all the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that’s all down the drain” (114). In place of this European tradition, the Minimalists posited the idea of the art object as (simply) object, free of connotations and associations such as emotional

expression or political criticism. As Frank Stella claimed, “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object,” as opposed to a symbolic representation of a “higher” order of abstract meaning beyond the object’s physical reality (Glaser 117). Thus, both Minimalism and Pop shifted the focus of art from the artist’s emotions to an embodiment of intellectual concepts (the “objecthood” of art in the former, social critique in the latter), thereby rejecting the emotional-visual aesthetic popularly and critically accepted in their time.

While both Pop and Minimalism included the most obvious element of avant-gardism, a rejection of established aesthetic values, only Pop embodied the most important, the suggestion of a new “praxis of life” (Bürger 239), or mode of existence different from the patriarchal semi-fascism of established Western culture. In Warhol’s screen prints, this new mode of existence was tied to homosexuality and its implications of feminization of the male. Warhol conveyed this new praxis by homosexualizing images from popular culture, thus undermining the patriarchal associations of authority and force made by society with these images. An example of this approach is his *Double Elvis*, in which he overlaps two copies of a frame from the Western film *Flaming Star* so as to suggest homosexual contact between the two Presley figures. Notable first is the double-entendre of the film’s title, which suggests both the romantic figure of the loner cowboy of popular culture and, in opposition, the homosexualizing of the famous actor and musician, or “star.” Also significant is the original image’s visual content, “in which several phallic surrogates (gun, knife, holster, shadow) mark Presley’s body” (Meyer 150). Here Presley can be taken as a paragon of patriarchal masculinity in that, as cowboy with gun trained on the viewer, he represents a popular ideal of masculinity

wielding phallic force. Warhol undermines the patriarchal resonance of the image by overlapping two copies of it in such a way that, as Richard Meyer in his book Outlaw

Representation notes:

activates the erotic possibility of man-on-man contact. The pressure points of *Double Elvis*, its moments of maximum charge and ambiguity, are those places at which the two bodies overlap or touch... What at first seems a precise duplication of Presley's image thus resolves into a relation between slightly but significantly differentiated male bodies, a relation in which several potentially erotic hierarchies are put into play: top and bottom, extension and recession, activity and passivity, dominance and submission. (150)

While the homoeroticism of *Double Elvis* maintains a patriarchal hierarchy of dominance versus submissiveness and places a male figure in the dominant psychosexual position, it also places a male figure in the submissive (feminine) position and thereby disarms the heterosexist meaning of the original image.

In contrast to Pop's feminization of the male, Minimalism propagated the standard psychosexual force dynamics of patriarchal culture. The Minimalist aesthetic centered on the presentation of the art object as object, as discussed above, but also on the art object as an instrument of force through which the artist confronts his viewers, that, in art critic Anna Chave's words, "intrude[s] aggressively on the viewers' sensibilities" (56). Frank Stella encapsulates his artistic ambition as a "striv[ing] to get the thing in the middle, and symmetrical...to get a kind of force" (Glaser 114). An illustration of the power Stella found resultant from unwavering symmetry is his *Die Fahne Hoch*, one of

his celebrated “black” or “pinstripe” paintings. In this piece, Stella uses strips of black paint of uniform thickness applied symmetrically to draw the viewer’s attention to the center of the canvas, where the lines of force generated by the right-angle intersections of the strips form a nexus. This concentration of power is, again in Chave’s words, “like a punch, ‘direct—right to your eye,’” and it clearly sets up a power hierarchy in which the audience is submissive and Stella is dominant (48, 56). *Die Fahne Hoch*, an example of the purest incarnation of Minimalist aesthetic, operates via traditional fascist means: an individual (the artist) employing force against a larger group (the audience).

The Sixties were a time of great political and artistic upheaval in America. In both spheres, groups that challenged traditional authority vied for position as the true avant-garde of their time, as the genuinely revolutionary viewpoint bound to effect deep changes within the structure of bourgeois society. The leading groups of this kind were the New Left and the Hippies in politics and the Minimalist and Pop schools in art. Hindsight reveals that Pop and the Hippies presented real alternatives to the patriarchal and fascist institutions of Western culture and that Minimalism and the New Left merely reinforced the elitist power structures already in place in this culture. Pop endeavored to homosexualize society, to bring the homoerotic elements already present in society to the fore, in effect feminizing the male and thereby defeating patriarchy. Similarly, the Hippies formed an inclusive counterculture that “implied rejection of the dominant culture and a decision to practice alternate lifestyles” (Schulman 17), lifestyles divorced from traditional modes of living (as was the homosexual mode of Pop). In contrast, Minimalism communicated via the traditional fascist means of Western culture by placing the artist in a position of authority over the audience. The New Left also

interacted with established power and the general public by asserting its authority through its “serious, even earnest demeanor” (Schulman 15). A comparison can even be drawn between Stella’s “pinstripe” paintings, a representation of “the quintessential Power Fabric” (Chave 48), and the suits the New Left wore as a badge of seriousness (Schulman 15). What becomes clear through an historical perspective is that, while Pop, Minimalism, the Hippies, and the New Left all challenged the incidentals of tradition (specific aesthetic views in art, specific use of power in politics), only Pop and the Hippies suggested a new life praxis, and were, therefore, the true avant-garde of the American Sixties.

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