

“Ask Them”

Clement Greenberg and the 20th Century

By
Vaughn Whitney Garland

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Dr. Josh Eckhardt

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It is my intention to illustrate how Greenberg's formalist theory, which developed as a critical framework, may now be characterized as a discipline; the theory evolved to become a self-critical exchange of dialogue on the issues that rise out of Greenberg's viewpoints on art and modernism in the 20th century. Due to Greenberg's influence on the visual arts during the 20th century, it is fundamental to understand how his views, ideas, and critiques were, and continue to be, used as either ammunition for critical backlash, mantras for sustained reverence, or the basis for egotistical gibberish. Arguably there is no one person who had so much pull with artists, critics, theorists, and historians alike in the 20th century. Major modernist movements, such as Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Hard Edge, Pop Art, Assemblage, and Minimalism, all function as either followers or reactionaries to Greenbergian formalism. Since we have moved into the 21st century, there continues to be a search for understanding concerning the full magnitude of Greenberg's theoretical reach. His views still permeate critical literature, articles, lectures, and university course syllabi. I find it safe to say that Greenberg's presence has not dwindled, but only has strengthened; therefore we need to ask if Greenberg's theories have become so important that they have become discipline.

Greenberg Formalism:

Clement Greenberg's seminal article called "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" published in 1939 in the *Partisan Review* is the basis of Greenberg Formalism. In this article Greenberg outlines the growing distinctions between the avant-garde, i.e. high art, and kitsch, i.e. middlebrow art. He also considers medium imitation and medium purity. It is in this

article that Greenberg establishes his concept of formalism, which he generally characterizes by four principles. Firstly, Greenberg promotes avant-garde art and artists, which he thinks have been and will be responsible for the advancement of culture. Avant-garde, the French military term for the forward guard, describes art and artists who work at the forefront of artistic innovation. Secondly, Greenberg believes that Modernism is defined by critical awareness and the re-consideration of mimesis. Thirdly, imitation, in its Modernist sense, will inevitably lead to medium specificity. Greenberg asserts that the need to and ability to imitate something depends on a true understanding of essential material. Fourthly, and finally, Greenberg argues in favor of abstraction, which he believes culminates with mid 20th century painting and sculpture.

In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg argues that the avant-garde artist/appreciator is the sole person who could define what art is, either through theoretical understanding or through economic support, an allusion to Marxist theory. Greenberg feels that in order to discover “Modern” art, one would first have to establish the differences between a high culture, high art, and that of the common interest. Greenberg considers this common, pliable art as Kitsch, which he defines as coming from the German word and meaning “popular, commercial art and literature” (Greenberg 1939).

Kitsch culture was anything with which the population could associate. It was rudimentary, easy, not expanding, and not at all critical of the times. Kitsch art was the art of the underprivileged, the common. High art, on the other hand was left to the wealthy and the powerful and was to be the focus of the greatest next steps in Modernism. Since the common man did not have the faculties to engage in critical

discourse, common may, the poor and uneducated, could not interact with or be responsible for pushing culture into the future, “There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful – and therefore the cultivated – and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor – and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch” (Greenberg 1939). While, for Greenberg, the common masses remained involved with and allured by commercial art like the covers from *Saturday Evening Posts* or songs from Tin Pan Alley, it was the avant-garde alone that could push civilization into the future: “the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not the ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence” (Greenberg 1939).

Greenberg promoted the avant-garde as a new idea that was inextricably connected to the idea of Modernism. In fact, Greenberg believed that Modernism was the first historical cultural period to display a critical self-awareness and thought that the role of the avant-garde was to expand on and comment about this critical self. “In seeking to go beyond Alexandrianism, a part of Western bourgeois society has prudently something unheard of heretofore: -- avant-garde culture. A superior consciousness of history -- more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society” (Greenberg 1939). For Greenberg it was these guardians of culture, the avant-garde, that he sought. The avant-garde were the elite of thought and the refined and important, they were to save us from popular misconceptions of what was good and bad. Yet, the avant-garde’s responsibility was to “remove” itself from the everyday misconception of aesthetics,

which popular culture had established, and focus on the next true “pure” art, the high art. Greenberg proclaimed that the future of the avant-garde is in jeopardy and therefore the future of our best efforts are in jeopardy since it is the avant-garde, the elite, who holds the power to advance culture. This article is a call of action to those who wish to stand up for the highest forms of art, and who might have the ability to do so, either economically or by ability. Greenberg’s fear is that no one, except himself, will take responsibility and that the “elite” groups were presently getting smaller and less able to participate with the advancement of culture. “The paradox is real. And now this elite is rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is threatened” (Greenberg 1939).

Furthermore, since Greenberg’s idea of the Modern is built solely out of critical self evaluation, the role of the Modernist avant-garde responsible for the re-consideration of imitation and mimesis. For, to have a critical awareness of the times, one must be able to critique the structure that compelled imitation. Ultimately, one must be able to imitate the imitation. “It is significant that Gides’s most ambitious book is a novel about the writing of a novel, and the Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegan Wake* seems to be...the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression” (Greenberg 1939). For Greenberg imitation was the root concern of the modernists, which is how his argument of medium purity, or medium specificity, began.

The Modernist definition of “imitation” becomes a driving force in Greenberg’s arguments over the years, while, at the same time, the argument about Greenberg’s notion of “Purity” becomes the most heated and most criticized. While both of these words are continually addressed over the course of his writing in various ways with multiple

definitions and many differing examples, it was imitation that Greenberg stood fast to the most:

The avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating – the fact itself – calls for neither approval nor disapproval. It is true that this culture contains within itself some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome... But there is one most important difference: The avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still. And this, precisely, is what justifies the avant-garde's methods and makes them necessary. The necessity lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order. To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like 'formalism,' 'purism,' and 'ivory tower' and so forth is either dull or dishonest. This is not to say, however, that it is to the social advantage of the avant-garde that it is what it is. Quite the opposite... The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs – our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop with a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumes itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remain attached by an umbilical cord of gold.”

To make clear, Greenberg is not saying that the avant-garde is comprised solely out of the elite economic class but may also welcome the less fortunate economic artists that make work in response to the concerns of the principles of the wealthy. In fact, as Greenberg alludes to in his article, the artist may be a representation of the elite only through the work produced for the elite for the advancement of culture. But, it is the gifted, and somewhat enlightened Modernists artist who will be able to form the next steps in the advancement of art through imitation-- using imitation to not talk about representation, which was the older concern of Alexanderism, but imitation through the medium, or imitation through the materials.

Medium specificity, in all its states of misconception and misappropriation, generally means the critical act of engaging with the material of choice. In many ways, Greenberg believed that the Cubists were the first to address the critical notions of

Modernism by addressing the “flatness of the picture plane.” For Greenberg, this meant that the Cubists were the first to concern themselves with the notions of medium specificity. The Cubists, Picasso and Braque, took the focus off representation, or mimesis, and isolated the use of imitation through forms, by destroying the pictorial illusion, in this case interjecting the flatness of the picture plane in the place of pictorial space. By removing representation and pictorial space, the image could be viewed through the medium, not the mimesis and without the reliance on nature. In a 1940 article, only one year after “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg takes on the notion of medium specificity directly. This article title, “Toward a New Laocoon,” is a reference to a 1766 book by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in which Lessing asked that the art forms of Painting and Poetry be looked at differently from one another and be considered each as a separate and specific medium. From Lessing, Greenberg develops his idea of medium specificity.

Greenberg’s idea of medium specificity calls on the notion of medium purity, on which many of Greenberg’s critics will focus. Greenberg’s hope was that the avant-garde would re-associate themselves with their specific medium and look away from the need to represent nature, which in some ways recalls Greenberg’s concept of popular culture and kitsch. If the avant-garde could rectify the medium they could save that medium, save art, and possibly save culture itself. In this notion, artists look at their own medium in order to address the concerns of the medium specifically, and, in turn, progress the medium. This is, for Greenberg, the introduction of medium purity-- keeping media separate and critical of themselves. Not only could the artist address the concerns of the “pictorial” composition (here I use the language of painting because of Greenberg’s

constant affirmation of the medium), they would also have to address not just the tools of the medium but the terms used to define, describe, and classify the medium. Like Lessing, who used the Hellenistic Greek sculpture Laocoon as the source of his work, (while commenting on how many of his predecessors looked at pictures and drawings of the sculpture to make criticism instead of looking at the sculpture itself), Greenberg calls for specificity of the tools and terms used by the medium's practitioners:

The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitation of the medium of the specific art... The arts have been turned back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. (Greenberg 1940)

For Greenberg one of the best ways to address this new concept is to champion abstraction. Greenberg emphasized abstract artwork of the mid 20th century, calling it totally "new." But what the Abstractionists artists did in terms of the flatness of the object was not completely new, for painters such as Picasso and Braque were long before dealing with the flatness of the image. In Greenberg's article "Toward a New Laocoon" he surmises the importance of "flatness" and what it did for the progression of a medium like painting saying:

But most important of all, the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas: where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon each other. Where the painter still tried to indicate real objects their shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere. A vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to re-assert its material flatness and crush them to silhouettes." It was artists like Brancusi, Picasso, Braque who led the way for medium specificity and for abstraction to grow into what Greenberg desired in high art: total medium specificity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, these artists began obstructing the canvas, the form, and the physical place unveiling critical considerations of the material. In the 1958 article “Sculpture in Our Time,” Greenberg suggests the sculptor Constantin Brancusi was at the forefront in challenging the notions of the medium saying: “Brancusi drove monolithic sculpture to an ultimate conclusion by reducing the image of the human form to geometrically simplified ovoid, tubular, or cubic masses. He not only exhausted the monolith by exaggerating it but, by one of those turns in which extremes meet, rendered it pictorial, graphic” (Greenberg 1958).

In that article, we see Greenberg’s logical flaw. Not a page before the reader is told, “Of course, ‘Purity’ is an unattainable ideal” (Greenberg 1958). For generations critics have scoffed at Greenberg for the many corrections and qualifications that Greenberg must make of his framework. Starting with the earlier pieces on the avant-garde and medium purity Greenberg tried over and over to go back and make clear what he had meant in earlier statements. This is the one huge problematic downfall of Greenberg, but interestingly enough, it keeps him reapplying his ideas whatever the current situation. I feel that this is the key to unlocking the Greenbergian Formalism discipline. Greenberg’s ideas shifted over time-- sometimes very slightly, sometimes violently. He was dismissive and defensive, but he consistently revised and reasserted his ideas. Even in regards to abstraction, he clarified his earlier comments years later in 1959 with “The Case for Abstract Art.” In this essay he tried to downplay that he had called for abstract art’s high presence by saying,

On point, however, I want to make glaringly clear. Abstract art is not a special kind of art: no hard-and-fast line separates it from representation art; it is only the latest phase in the development of Western art as a whole, and almost every “technical” devise of abstract painting is already to be found in the realistic

painting that preceded it. Nor is it a superior kind of art. I still know of nothing in abstract painting, aside perhaps from some of the near-abstract Cubists works that Picasso, Braque, and Leger executed between 1910 and 1914, which matches the highest achievement of the old masters. Abstract painting may be a purer, more quintessential form of pictorial art than the representational kind, but this does not of itself confer quality upon an abstract painting.

It is befuddling to consider the above statement knowing that on many occasions Greenberg did call for the “superiority” of painting, even using a historical critique about abstract painting in America and Europe. In fact in the article “Toward a New Laocoon” Greenberg identifies abstract art as superior art saying, “I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art. To argue from any other basis would require more space than is at my disposal” (Greenberg 1940).

The various flaws of Greenberg’s own statements have elicited critical backlash, criticism, and influence. These critical reactions include both theoretical retorts and practical responses to the possible applications of Greenbergian Formalism. One of the first influential writers elaborate upon Greenberg’s principles was Michael Fried, who wrote various articles including the formative “Art and Objecthood” in *ArtForum* in 1967. In this article, Fried suggests that Minimalism, which had taken Greenberg’s principles of medium specificity to its logical end, but did, in fact, actually steer away from Modernism. Fried believes that Minimalists art, which he calls “literalists art,” had been nothing more than an exercise in “aesthetic taste.” Fried believes that Minimalist art was not a produce of Modernism but a “new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art.” (Fried 124 1967). Even though Fried criticizes Minimalism heavily in his articles, the Minimalists themselves felt that they were the ultimate logical extension of Greenbergian Formalism, as they fundamentally explored medium

specificity. Greenberg and Fried both ultimately rejected Minimalism, because of what Greenberg calls “presence.” Fried comes by the notion of presence from Greenberg’s 1967 article titled “The Recentness of Sculpture.” In this article Greenberg stipulates that art had reached the boundary of non-art with the Minimalists and that all high art must at times be located on the edges of art and what might be considered non art. There the presence would determine how one would interact with a piece of art. For example, if one could not determine if the piece was an artwork or not, how would one benefit from that work? Fried did not consider Minimalism art and continued to call them “machinery,” as had Greenberg. What is surprising is that the Minimalist’s principles came out of the same conversation about medium specificity that Greenberg established and advanced. Greenberg failed to consider the close links between his own work with groups like the Minimalists or Pop and the advancements of aesthetic culture and theory. Further critical influence supporting Greenbergian formalism and medium specificity is the later century works of Noel Carroll who introduces medium specificity to Film, Video, and Photography-- three art genres left out of Greenberg’s vocabulary.

The critical antagonist of Greenberg was Harold Rosenberg, also a highly regarded New York Modernists art critic. While Greenberg called for a certain level of detachment, Rosenberg called for “action.” In his seminal work of 1952 titled “The American Action Painters” Rosenberg terms the phrase “action painters,” which is a well-know name of the Abstract Expressionist’s painters. In this work Rosenberg argues that what makes Abstract Expressionism (AE) different was the physical interaction with the picture, their “act” with the decision and not just the decision themselves. Like

Greenberg, the forerunner of this style was Jackson Pollock with his use of drips on the surface of the painting.

Published in the 1994 *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, Roxie Davis Mack wrote an article titled “Modernist Art Criticism: Hegemony and Decline,” which needs further exploration. In this article, Mack comments on the importance of Greenberg as a type of study unto himself, a one-person discipline. By reevaluating Greenberg’s relevance and the ways in which Greenberg changed critical art theory throughout the course of the 20th century, Mack suggests that Greenberg did develop a discipline of study and that that discipline, including the discussions which sprang from Greenberg’s critiques on Modernism, should be looked at once more.

While these development were going on in painting, Greenberg’s criticism was itself evolving, developing new self-consciousness about its own philosophical foundations which is particularly evident in his piece of 1965, ‘Modernist Painting.’ Further, his approach was being assimilated by a generation of younger critics, achieving widespread dissemination and with it something of the status of a critical paradigm. It attracted disciplines for a number of reasons. It filled a theoretical vacuum and provided something of a learnable critical method that could be applied across cases. Its promise of cool cognitively was alluring; by organizing the production of Modernists art into a developmental sequence, and offering an explanation of the principles behind that development, it was able to supply a certain kind of understanding more powerful than any other model on offer.

Here Mack seems to believe that as Greenberg’s influence grew, so did his ideas; this theoretical evolution created even more framework that could be responded to or reacted against. As Greenberg made changes and clarifications to earlier concepts (and even verbal assaults on critical peers) he was creating an expanding discipline, and one that may now be looked at historically and critically. This discipline may continue to expand beyond the fundamentals of Greenbergian formalism in many ways, as future critics will choose to use his ideas.

Even while Mack suggests that Greenberg's exemplar article is a later, more refined article, titled "Modernist Painting," which Greenberg wrote in 1960, it is easy to find many of the same principles from the first several articles reworked and reevaluated in the same way in later works. In fact it is this reworking that allowed Greenberg to be read anew and allowed his critics to become more fascinated or miffed by his importance. Yet, in all of Greenberg's statements, there is a sense of urgency to attach value and relevance to his ideas, even though Greenberg himself was constantly reevaluating his stance. Even for Greenberg, the Modern period was on a constant verge of being swallowed up by yet another monstrous force.

The Theory put forth in 'Modernist Painting' is surely familiar. Its ideas were not new with Greenberg; many of them had appeared in less developed form in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch (1939) and 'Toward a New Laocoon' (1940). Greenberg traces the birth of cultural Modernism to an historical situation whose nature and genesis he does not explain but which he locates somewhere around the last quarter of the eighteenth century. At that moment, he asserts, art was in danger of being assimilated to therapy on the one hand or entertainment on the other." (Mack 342 1994)

While Greenbergian Formalism remains a constant and consistent article of study for the critical arts, we may now start to ask if we can move it out of the individual historical model into an ever expanding discipline. Even today, artists, art/cultural historians, art/cultural theoreticians, and art/cultural critics continue to be both plagued by Greenberg and his arguments regarding formalism, while at the same time trying to justify his ideas. While there are many good things that have come from Greenberg's argument, there are many flaws. How does one deal with this dichotomy? This is the main question countless scholars, artists, students, and critics have had to deal with and there is not yet one answer. This is why Greenberg's writings will not go away and the reason why we should be able to say to each other that it is time we look at his

argument, his history, and his time even more. As he once wrote in his article “Modernists Painting,” in regards to people calling him a baron, Greenberg says, “I did hardly any talking up of American art from lecture platforms, in ‘sidewalk gabbles,’ in cafeterias, or at cocktail parties. That’s all too highly colored to be true. Nor have I ever been anything like a ‘baron’ among New York Abstract artists. Ask them.” (Greenberg 1960)

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