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## Going, Going, Gone

by Donald Kuspit



[Marcel Duchamp](#)

[Fountain](#)

[1964 version of a 1917 original](#)

The story of 20th-century art is the story of avant-garde art, and the problem with avant-garde art is that by self-definition it's rather short-lived. Renato Poggioli makes the point succinctly in his classic study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. After describing avant-garde antagonism and nihilism, he argues that it climaxes in "agonism," an attempt to make "suffering immortal and fecund," but that it ends in futility and suicide or, more politely, "spiritual defeatism."

Similarly, Peter Bürger, writing from an altogether different point of view in a book with the same title, argues that avant-garde art brings into question "the institution of art." According to him, the institution of art celebrates art as the sovereign creation of unique individuals, but avant-garde art is in fact a critical response to capitalist society, and thus not at all autonomous self-expression. Nonetheless, it is ironically institutionalized as hyper-individualistic, which undermines its socially critical import. Duchamp (and to a lesser extent Warhol) is Bürger's hero, for "Duchamp's provocation ... unmasks the art market where the signature is more important than the quality of the work."

But it was Duchamp who futilely railed against the fact that his readymades were quickly appropriated by the market, and came to be thought of as harbingers of a new taste for "vernacular" beauty, that is, the unexpected beauty of ordinary things. Whether or not he liked it, and however ironically, they were his self-expression -- emblems of his creativity. What he thought of as "anti-social" was quickly socialized.

Avant-garde art has always eschewed "staying power" in favor of the surprising moment, which makes one wonder what it leaves behind -- what it looks like after the the Sturm und Drang with which it announces itself has faded away.

By definition a shock is transient, and does more damage than good. Why should the avant-garde shock of the new be any different? What does it look like when it is old? Is it as much a ruin as the ruins it created, if different in kind?

Avant-garde art was originally an earthquake that destroyed an old city of art -- an old consciousness of art. Is the new city it built any better -- better able to survive a future earthquake? Just as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was profoundly disillusioning for true believers -- how could God perpetrate such destruction? Goethe asked -- so the avant-garde earthquake has become disillusioning for many former true believers in the self-perpetuating avant-garde revolution.

Years ago Octavio Paz wrote, "Today ... modern art is beginning to lose its powers of negation. For some years now its rejections have been ritual repetitions: rebellion has turned into





[Marcel Duchamp](#)

[Bicycle Wheel](#)

[1913, 3rd version replica from 1951](#)



[Andy Warhol](#)

[Onion Soup](#)

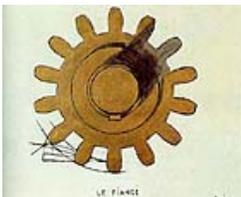
[1968](#)



[Andy Warhol](#)

[Marilyn](#)

[1967](#)



[Francis Picabia](#)

[Le Fiance](#)

[c. 1916-17](#)



[Rachel Whiteread's](#)

[Water Tower](#)

procedure, criticism into rhetoric, transgression into ceremony. Negation is no longer creative. I am not saying that we are living the end of art: we are living the end of the idea of modern art."

(One may recall that Duchamp modeled himself on Picabia, whom he described as "a negator," and that Picasso called his art "a sum of destructions," to mention only two famous celebrants of negation. Rachel Whiteread's apotheosis of negative space -- or is it that she only has one string on her artistic instrument, suggesting that negation has become a limitation rather than liberation? -- is another trendy example of negation, now clearly a cul de sac -- a really blind alley.)

Similarly, Edward Lucie-Smith thinks that "the visual arts are showing distinct signs of weariness, as if we were approaching the end of something." Citing Clement Greenberg's idea that artists have become obsessed with "the far-out as an end in itself," he argues that art is attempting to abolish itself.

According to the French dealer Jean-Louis Picard, the ironical beginning of the end of avant-garde art was Pop art, which, in the words of Peter Watson, seems to take us back to "the popular art of the 19th century ... perhaps reviving the wrong part of the 19th century, when artists earned enormous amounts of money in their lifetimes, but did not produce lasting work.

Could it be that Warhol, Schnabel and Beuys are the Bonheur, Meissonier and Landseer of our day?" What Marshall Berman wrote about the Russian revolution seems equally true of the avant-garde revolution: "A century later, we can see how the business of promoting revolution is open to the same abuses and temptations, manipulative frauds and wishful self-deceptions, as any other promotional line."

Clearly, the avant-garde has ended or is ending, for me in a kind of redundant swansong of conceptual art -- a whimper pretending to be the last big bang. I think we really are witnessing the unapocalyptic end of the avant-garde -- just in time for the millennium -- in Ann Hamilton's installation *myein* in the last (48th) Venice Biennale. Kathryn Hixson described the work in the following terms: "Like most of the art throughout the show, Hamilton tried too hard. Her complicated content-laden installation looked good in parts ... but it was heavy-handed, and in the end, trite."

Indeed, it was politically heavy-handed -- anti-American, just the opportunistically correct thing to score ideological Brownie points in Europe (and bite the American hand that feeds her). When art serves ideology, to the extent of being dominated by it, it is in serious decline.

Hamilton's decadent, pompous, facile avant-gardism suggests that the end has arrived in full entropic regalia. Certainly Hamilton's peculiarly wimpish conceptual art, with its clichéd criticism of America -- trendy leftism -- seems anti-climactic -- a real letdown -- after the big bang Manet's paintings caused and the even bigger bang of Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism. (Each new avant-garde shock was supposed to be bigger than the last one, but one can't help wondering whether it was an increasingly weak echo of it. This seems implicit in our speaking of "Pop Surrealism," "Neo-Expressionism," "Neo-Abstraction," "Neo-Dadaism," etc. These terms suggest a falling off of power and absence of originality, as well as a repackaging of used goods. They suggest that creativity has degenerated into cleverness -- that imagination has become stale.)

So what lies ahead for art? Are there any signs in the current decadence of new artistic -- even esthetic -- life? Ironically, yes. What I call the new Old Masterism or New Objectivism -- to name names, the artists I have in mind, among others, are Odd Nerdrum, Vincent Desiderio, James Valerio, Jenny Saville, Paula Rego, Brenda Zlamany, Julie Heffernan and Eric Fischl (in his recent portraits) -- is an alternative to labored and lame duck avant-gardism. The New Old Masterism is not another appropriation art -- there is no manipulative quotation of Old Master artists, nor any one model of Old Master art -- but rather an attempt to restore the beauty lost to avant-garde innovation (however much genuinely innovative avant-garde works ironically come to be regarded as beautiful, as the despairing Duchamp realized).

For all their differences, what the new Old Masters represent is perhaps best conveyed by the novelist, literary critic and philosopher William Gass, who writes: "I think it is one of the artist's obligations to create as perfectly as he or she can, not regardless of all other consequences,



[Julian Schnabel](#)  
[Voltaire](#)  
 1981



[Joseph Beuys](#)  
[Sledge](#)  
 1969



[Rosa Bonheur](#)  
[Race of the Horses](#)



[Edwin Henry Landseer](#)  
[Scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"](#)  
[Titania and Bottom](#)  
 1848-51



[Ann Hamilton](#)  
[Myein](#)



but in full awareness, nevertheless, that in pursuing other values -- in championing Israel or fighting for the rights of women, or defending the faith, or exposing capitalism, supporting your sexual preferences, or speaking for your race -- you may simply be putting on a saving scientific, religious, political mask to disguise your failure as an artist. Neither the world's truth nor a god's goodness will win you beauty's prize."

The attempt to create beauty as perfectly as possible has led these artists to emphasize craft -- not at the expense of vision, but as its instrument. Sol LeWitt once wrote that "When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art," but the New Old Masterism makes it clear that one can never learn one's craft too well, and the result of doing so is not slick but uncanny. For superior craft intensifies sight so that it becomes insight, which is what occurs in highly crafted Old Master art.

The New Old Masterism restores the idea of the work of art as a carefully considered and composed object rather than an improvised sketch, that is, as an integrated, organic whole rather than a partial expression. It is a reflection not a performance or enactment -- art, not para-art. Years ago Giorgio de Chirico said that the "loss of skill ... the incapacity to work well ... to create a true work of art" was responsible for "modern pseudo-art." The New Old Masterism is an attempt to return to the attitude or mentality of traditional art, not to any particular traditional style, which means a return to deliberate and hard artistic work -- in a particular medium, with a particular material, which must be fathomed and mastered.

The New Old Masterism is a quiet rebellion against the avant-garde assertions -- they are the ironical dregs of avant-garde agonism -- that "art only exists conceptually" (Joseph Kosuth) and that "art is really over with, having been transmuted into philosophy," as shown by the fact that "the objects [of art] approach zero as their theory approaches infinity" (Arthur Danto). To which the New Old Masterism responds: "the rule of theory always rises in proportion as creative power falls" (Max J. Friedländer).

The New Old Masterism involves a renewal of creative power, inspired by the creative power of the Old Masters -- a renewal that leaves theory in the dust, and reminds us that to define art only in conceptual or philosophical terms is to castrate it, or, to put this another way, with equally disastrous effect, to actually cut in half the baby that Solomon's wisdom never did divide. To split off the conceptual and philosophical in art from its material and craft is a pathological intellectualization of art at the expense of its potential for beauty -- a pseudo-austere puritanism (really a failure and inhibition of the imagination), eschewing the pleasure and delight it gives. (It is worth noting that the Dec. 4, 1998, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carried an article titled *Wearying of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty*, noting that "Tentatively, they seek renewed attention to esthetic criteria in criticism.")

I suggest that our fin de siècle is witnessing -- if one looks at the total picture of art making today, not simply at the current favorites -- a longing for beauty as well as the over-intellectualization and homogenization of avant-garde innovation, symptoms of its decline, that is, of the cliché newness has become. I think the New Old Master beauty has assimilated and accommodated the old avant-garde perversity -- which is what avant-gardism looks like in retrospect -- rather than dispensed with it or transcended it.

The regressive sense of destructive alienation, unresolved contradiction and brutal negation that informs avant-garde art, and is the ironical flip side of its "progressiveness" -- Michael Balint praised it for acknowledging "discordance" as inevitable in modern society and life in general (such discordance will not disappear with the disappearance of avant-garde art into the dead end of its own making) -- remains alive and well in the New Old Masterism. But it has become part of the larger picture of the object -- of an attempt to show that it is still possible to remain intact despite the experience of the negative forces in modernity -- to have ego strength despite the experience of the indifference and violence that threaten it. The whole -- if flawed -- figures of the New Old Masterism symbolize this new integrity.

The greatness of avant-garde art has to with its subjective implications -- it was a heroic visionary attempt to articulate the new sense and difficulties of being a subject and self that modernity brought with it -- the new suffering, as it were. The New Old Masterism does not deny avant-garde art's insights into the human condition as it is experienced in and defined by



[Vincent Desiderio](#)  
[The Progress of Self Love](#)  
 (left panel)  
 1990

modernity, but suggests that there is more to human existence than fragmentation and anxiety. It insists that one can get beyond the perverse effects of perverse modern life.

Francis Bacon (the philosopher not the artist) famously said that "there is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." Avant-garde perversity, epitomizing the modern experience of the enfeeblement and disintegration of the self, as Heinz Kohut said, survives in the aura of strangeness that haunts the New Old Master beauty that is in the making. I think a new humanism is in the artistic offing -- a gift to the next millennium, and a fond farewell to avant-garde art.

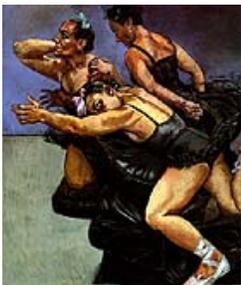
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[Julie Heffernan](#)  
[Accumulated Self-Portrait](#)  
 1999



[Odd Nerdrum](#)  
[Twins](#)  
 1992



[Paula Rego](#)  
[Dancing Ostriches from Walt Disney's](#)  
[Fantasia](#)  
 1995



[Jenny Saville](#)  
[Branded](#)  
[1992](#)



[James Valerio](#)  
[Translucent](#)  
[1996](#)



[Brenda Zlamany](#)  
[Snake #9](#)  
[1996](#)



[Joseph Kosuth](#)  
[Titled \(Art as Idea as Idea\) \[meaning\]](#)  
[1967](#)