

# Contemporary art

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



Contemporary Art From the beginning of the twentieth century to the mid-1900s, art is perceived to have undergone tremendous change. Through the tremendous changes that took place through Industrialization, the values of society were questioned in every field, not just art. In the field of art, though, this questioning took the form of who defines art. In 1917, Marcel Duchamp said, “ Art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist” (818). This view differed from the views of the past in which the intentions of the artist were considered to have been everything. In introducing the concept of ‘ ready-made’ art, Duchamp began to establish that an important element of art was the meaning that the viewer brought to it. “ All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists” (Duchamp, 1917: 819).

Greenberg (1939) illustrates how the avant-garde movement was an attempt to move away from what it was not in its search for purity and the absolute. In discussing how the avant-garde as modern art has explored art from the inside and provided the ruling class with the means by which they might explore the ideas of the new age, Greenberg introduces the necessity of a rear-guard action to this general repudiation of exterior reference. This rear-guard is kitsch: “ popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction,

comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc. etc”

(Greenberg, 1939: 9). Avant-garde art presents the cause, leaving it to the viewer to inject effect while kitsch presents the effect, making the art immediately accessible to the viewer without requiring any effort from the viewer at all – the art is already interpreted for him.

Greenberg (1960) explains this process as art investigating art from the inside. “ The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (Greenberg, 1960: 85). Because flatness was the one unique quality available to painting, that was what painters focused on as a means of exploring the absolute truth of painting. “ To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its effort to do this, and not so much – I repeat – to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract” (Greenberg, 1960: 88). However, this flatness was still able to achieve a great deal of communication.

This idea is brought forward in greater detail through Steinberg’s analysis of John Jones’ artwork in terms of avant-garde and through Andy Warhol’s reflections on art as regards pop art or ‘ kitsch’. “ Modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed. It is always born in anxiety. It seems to me a function of modern art to transmit this anxiety to the spectator, so that his encounter with the work is – at least while the work is new – a genuine existential predicament” (Steinberg, 1962: 225). On the other hand, Warhol continuously indicates the shallow nature of his form of

art. Describing one of his more famous creations, Warhol said, “ there was no profound reason for doing a death series, no victims of their time; there was no reason for doing it all, just a surface reason” (Berg, 1967: 3). Through this progression, it can be seen how both more generalized pop art and more intellectual abstract art sprang from the same underlying search for the meaning and purpose of art that has plagued artists for centuries.

#### Works Cited

- Berg, Gretchen. “ Andy: My True Story.” Los Angeles Free Press. March 17, 1967.
- Duchamp, Marcel. “ The Richard Mutt Case.” Blind Man. New York: Vol. 2, 1917.
- Greenberg, Clement. “ Avant-garde and Kitsch.” 1939.
- Greenberg, Clement. “ Modernist Painting.” 1960.
- Steinberg, Leo. “ Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public.” Harpers. Vol. 224, N. 1342, (March 1962): 31-39; reprinted in The New Art. Gregory Battcock (Ed.). New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1966.