Celebrating 175: Judd, Donald, 1965-1983

imagination. 7 This adversary culture shares with its father a concern with change and the relative. But the sense of the consciousness of the present time, of acting for one's self in history now shifts to a self-consciousness about the art itself, combined with the sense of the immanence and presentness of the art object. And the discontinuities and ruptures occurring in historic time are translated, and refocused, and now underlined, as an essential element of esthetic modernism present both within art objects and vis-a-vis other traditions, movements, and attitudes. Partly the result of the various kinds of discontinuities, it became the art of minority and not the majority, emphatically not a popular art.

Nineteenth-century movements of so-called "art for art's sake" were often really artistic expressions against the growing philistinism exemplified by the spread of middle-class values. Within this atmosphere, asserting the immanence of a work of art became a radical gesture. More and more the moment, the present, the imagination as the only valid source for artistic creation, the new and ever new and different were important in the 19th century.8

During the romantic movement artistic modernism was often synonymous with it. In turn the avant-garde was equated with romanticism and modernism. What is avant-garde will be modernist, but not all esthetic modernity is avant-garde, though in America the two are often equated.

Unfortunately, particularly today in the visual arts, modernism is often equated only and specifically with formalism, so that modernism is formalism and post-modernism is beyond formalism. But formalism is not one simply defined phenomenon reduced to one meaning. It is a part of modernism at different times, in the development of different arguments and positions, and it means different things at different times.

The term avant-garde, as is well known, comes out of a military vocabulary. About 1825 it was used in conjunction with romantic utopianism, though it had been used somewhat earlier in conjunction with left politics in general. Finally, by the 1870s, the label was applied to groups of advanced artists and writers. While it means work and ideas that are in advance of other work and ideas, it also suggests a position more radical and less flexible, more extreme and less tolerant than its progenitor, artistic modernism, at the same time being more in opposition to bourgeois culture, to the general public. It is elite in the art it promotes, yet it is paradoxically anti-elite at the same time: after all, the avant-garde came out of the time of modern democracy, and the tenets of bourgeois democracy made it possible. Much energy was shifted from the political arena and social forms to that of artistic forms with the accompanying belief that revolution in art would revolutionize life and society.9 We can see something of its effects as interpreted by Ortega y Gasset in 1925 in "The Dehumanization of Art" when he spoke of the avant-garde deforming and derealizing; in fact he found it dehumanizing through its practices. He went on to say that it was an art that was not only not popular, it was quite distinctly unpopular. It was this kind of abstraction, this moving away from identification with the real in the 19th century which was antibourgeois in its directions.

The 19th century: progress with invention and spectacle; 1825 and. the left political avant-garde and idealism; 1825, circa the discovery of the persistence of vision, and the development of the stroboscope, and, a bit before, the zoetrope, the Daguerreotype and Fox Talbot's registration

of the first photographic negative at Lacock Abbey-it was the beginning of "The Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to use that well worn Benjamin descriptor.

By the 1870s when the term avant-garde was finally applied to the radical segment of artistic modernism and its productions, the industrial revolution was long since underway and the split between bourgeois and artistic modernism long since accomplished. In 1877 Thomas Edison, inventor and entrepreneur, patented the phonograph, and fourteen years later he patented the kinetoscope, a viewing device which he thought of as merely an accompaniment to the phonograph. So in the last quarter of the 19th century at a time when the artistic avant-garde could begin to be identified, film entered the world, and was recognized publicly in 1895 and 1896 in screening organized by the Lumiere brothers, Edison and others; but it was certainly no part of any avant-garde.

What was it? It was a machine; another product of the industrial revolution; a small business for entrepreneurs. It was a product of bourgeois modernism which initially fascinated the working classes and finally seduced the middle classes. It was an entertainment and a business that borrowed from the popular forms of the 19th century and assimilated them. It took from the magic lantern in its various forms, including narrative, and from variety or vaudeville it took the tableau and the spectacle and comedy

[[image]]
Robert Ryman, Untitled, 1995, enamel on linen, 10¼ x 10¼".

[[image]]
Larry Poons, Mary Queen of Scots, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 135 x 90".

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