The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The Rise of Neo-Impressionism, 1900-1905

by Diane Crane


By the mid-nineteenth century artists in all fields gradually claimed an independence that was to be an essential condition of modern creation. The clarity and intransigence of their self-conscious break from tradition and the conventional institutions of support have no equivalents in the previous history of art and literature. More currently, the spirit of defiance and innovation that marked the modernist avant-garde is perceived as exhausted. Hastening to fill the gap is postmodernism. The art crutches with postmodernist rhetoric. Yet it is very difficult to make out the exact political and cultural context of so much work and so many gestures designed to suggest that some momentous change has overtaken us. So it behooves us to examine some of the historical and sociological reasons for the eclipse of modernism.

The two books under review, though different in method and style, propose to do just that.

Jerrold Seigel's "Bohemian Paris" examines the culture and politics of Paris of 1830 and 1940. Seigel, a historian, treats the avant-garde as a play coded within the larger play of Bohemia, and in so doing throws substantial light on why Bohemia was essential in carrying the revolution into a personal renewal and accomplishment. By contrast, Diana Crane's "The Transformation of the Avant-Garde," deals chiefly with the succession of avant-garde movements that flourished in New York between 1940 and 1965. Crane, a sociologist, focuses on the disintegration of the New York avant-garde from a close-knit community of competing groups into an image-making business that alternately stimulates and exhausts but does not threaten the middle class with its aesthetic provocations.

"Bohemian Paris" is a well-crafted piece of cultural history. Through a careful synthesis of archival material, biography, and political and literary analysis, Seigel has both recreated the whimsical and tragic figure of Bohemia, and brought into sharp focus the ambivalent relation of the modern artist to bourgeois life. Each chapter of the book is given over to the study of one or two bohemian figures.

With the exception of the painter Gustave Courbet and the composer Erik Satie, all the principals examined had a literary background. None were women. That Seigel had so little to say about bohemian women—who are marginalized to the role of gretiers, the working class lovers of artistic bohemians—is certainly the main oversight of the book. Beyond that, it stops short to a traditional philhellenic history of modernism that elides the musical voices of women remain muted.

Beginning with the work and life of Henry Murger (1822-1861), who popularized Bohemia with his successful musical stage play "Scenes of Bohemian Life," Seigel leads us into a cultural underworld that was home to ragpickers, artist in-toms, criminals and gypsies—Proustian thoughts that all gypsies came from Bo-hemia and that artists were becoming gypsys. Murger equates Bohemia with romantic rebellion, easygoing toler-ance, and opposition to the dominant culture. In his stories, Bohemia is portrayed as a world where sheer existence was a work of genius and imagination: a place where the dislocated bourgeois could satisfy their restlessness and artistic sensibilities.

But the real Bohemia, maintains Seigel, is not easily contained within this romantic definition, for it filled a complex social role. It functioned as a proving ground for unorthodox bourgeois who, wanting to show up tradition and status, associated Bohemia with all that was pathological and absurd in modern society. As technical and political revolution caused received structures and conventions to fall apart, Bohemia also became an accessible laboratory in which the tendencies emergent in modern society were tested.

In his opening chapters Seigel does a persuasive job describing the political life of the French capital. In Paris, the international center of a city and a powerful art center, Parisian artists were politically radical. The revolution of 1848 and the Commune of 1871 intensified these tenures, especially inside Bohemia where political radicalism was more pronounced. Moreover, for his part, was suspicious of radicals bred in an environment that was also the home of raw talent and the "ruined children of the bourgeoisie." He had little sympathy for the disintegrated mass of Bohemia, which he disdainfully associated with winnowers, pickpockets, and literati. While it is true, says Seigel, that Bohemia was a hideously-piggyback so-asment of political adventurers and radicals, their styles of life were nonethe-less crucial in shaping a political milieu which tolerated extremes of heresy.

In Bohemia, one could dramatize any number of political stances, and every political act was given a double significance, as public defiance and as grand personal gesture.

The chief beneficiaries of bohemian life were artists, who found in it a personal inspiration: not a way to live in society but a way to live with themselves, with their own feelings and sensibilities. This was the case, for example, with the Water-Drinkers—a relatively obscure group, who Seigel explores in some de tail. Henry Murger had himself been a member of the popular Water-Drinkers, a corps of aspiring writers, who entered into their own dislocated world. In their willingness to live at the margins of society, and in their determination to make art without any compromises, we see early signs of the emergent avant-garde. The Water-Drinkers disbanded after one year, but their ideas about art and their hatred of a conventional public was shared by the painter Gustave Courbet, whose bohemian personality and commitment to realism without idealization brought him to the forefront of the Parisian avant-garde by the mid 1850s. Courbet stunned the official Bonapartist salons and, anticipating the Impressionists, set up his own competing art gallery where he exhibited his work.

Bohemia offered artists the freedom to follow a vast variety of impulses. The irregular life of Bohemia also allowed for an experimental disorganization of sensations. Perhaps no other bohemians ex-hibited the same gift for the idiosyncratic Louisa Beruelle. Seigel spends a lengthy chapter, chiefly informed by the work of Walter Benjamin, examining how Buclaudure used his bohemianism and dandyism as ways of exploring the self-diffusion of modern life. His bouts of alcoholism, his drug taking and his flights into debauchery were all means of fragmenting perceptions, and the only defense against a society which had made money the goal of life.

Baudelaire's strategy of diffusing sensations was accompanied by his very opposite, concentration, which permitted him to remain within the limits of classical art and literature. But beginning with Verlaine and Rimbaud, both of whom Seigel covers in some detail, it became more difficult to maintain a separation between the inner life of the artist and the conventional forms of expression. A new dialectic was set in motion which was to produce one of the central ideas and myths of modernism: that by allowing the senses to be acted upon by external stimuli, artists could achieve, partly by result of unconscious processes and partly through the exercise of critical consciousness, the idioms and forms of new art.

By the first decade of the twentieth century a self-conscious avant-garde emerged ready to challenge the conventional limits of art. But because Seigel fails to make a clear distinction between the avant-garde and Bohemia, the reader is left wondering if the two are inter-changeable. Seigel seems to treat them as such. The separation of the two camps is no mine cavity but an important issue to get clear. Bohemia is a fusion of contra dictory cultural and political forces. The avant-garde is exclusive, more focused on its aesthetic experiments and declamations. The final section of the book, though having a number of insightful things to say about Parisian Cabarets and their co-optive influence on Bohemia, is perhaps the most derivative, for it draws heavily on the work of Roger Shattuck on the origins of the avant-garde. Nearly all the avant-gardists that Seigel discusses wanted to free the creative potentials of the everyday by dissolving the boundaries between art and life. Alfred Jarry's bizarre philosophy of pataphysics, where logic and the chains of physical determinations are made arbitrary, paralleled the whole aesthetic of pastiche and Surrealism. Marcel Duchamp's famous project of burning bicycle wheels, bar racks, and urinals into art objects signaled the begin nning of the modernist strategy of transforming any human product into art once it was removed from its normal context and associated with the artist's oeuvre and personality. Erik Satie championed the "poesie sonore". But Seigel's treatment of Seurat, perhaps the most original and profound of his experiments with the nerves of the everyday led him to mude de l'ameublement, or furniture music. All of three interven tions were designed to break down the hierarchies that constituted art to a sepa rate sphere outside everyday life.

What is especially surprising, however, is that Seigel pays so little attention to the cultural and political implications of the aesthetization of everyday life. While touching lightly on this issue, Seigel never really explores it. This point is worth examining, since it is clearly at the core of what we now call postmodernism. If modernist writers and artists re fused to be circumscribed by the "reality" of the everyday, neither could the every day remain normal in the old sense: everything had to be new and original, self-supporting and self-contained. The sounds, the technology, and the images of the ordinary items of daily life had to be privileged and given that absolute pre-emptory quality that one assigns to aesthetics. The irony is that the market, in its finite adaptability, used modernist techniques to further commodify and exploit the representations of daily life. Increasingly, aesthetic ideologies were understood and perceived. From here on it is an easy step to facsimile where any sensibility is abolished in an aestheticized inferno

As we get close to historically, Seigel's work fails to reveal its real potential. His discussion of the relations between Bohemianism and the specifically working class rebellion. The interest in non-canonic and similarly exploited into a logical struggle between the political and the moral universe rather than through the political, the psycho-history, the much that is compelling. One of the things I found in this book was that enclosed and very specific figures, some not in the Coordinator like Maurice Barrès, which mention a few of the important historians is a set of chapters that enable a review of the historical examination of po lities as distinct from thought history.

The arguments Diane Crane "The Transformation of the Avant-Garde" have been more skeptical of the avant garde than the initial book. She is aware of the mainstream of popular culture that reaches her conclusions of a working class art, and by examining forces which support that movement. Creasey makes a number of observations, charts, and it is well worth reading for its analysis into her analysis of how she maintain her New York art world for Abstract Expressionism, Figurative Painting, Painting, Pattern Painting, Blackwork. When does Crane's book read the right thing for rest at a muse um. Like most of the reviews, I applaud the rigour and vigour that are well observed. Admired by 25 students of the art history program. Cran's book is a crucial part of the narrative of the avant garde in the study of an aesthetic culture.
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ity is abolished in a single dimension of
aestheticized information.

As we get closer to the present his-
torically, Seigel's whole analysis begins
to reveal its veiled neo-Freudian biases.
His discussion of the ambivalence be-
tween Bohemia and the dominant culture
is especially burdened with Freudian
freight. Here, the "self-dramatization"
of bohemian life is seen as a form of ado-
lescent rebellion. The avant-garde's in-
terest in non-canonical innovation is
simply explained in terms of a psycho-
logical struggle between youthful rebels
and the moral universe of their parents,
rather than through the tropes of power
or politics. Despite the occasional leap into
psycho-history, there is in this book
much that is compelling and challenging.
One of the things I like best about Rohe-
nian Paritz is Seigel's ability to handle
the wealth of suggestive information
and bring to life a surprising array of bohem-
ian figures, some notable others are the
Guernica brothers, Jules Vallis, Maurice
Barnes, Emilie Goudeau, to mention a
few more. For any cultural historian this
is a sensibly structured strategy, one
that enables Seigel to discuss the avant-
garde through a practical, systematic,
and economical examination of people's
lives, rather than through high-falutin
abstractions.

The discussion of Crane's analyses in
The Transformation of the Avant-
Garde have become evident to many
critics: that the avant-garde, which tradi-
tionally has loved to challenge its tiny
audience and shock the bourgeoisie, has
increasingly been absorbed into the
stream of popular culture. Crane reaches
his conclusion by analyzing the
transition of seven major styles of avant-garde
art, and by examining the larger struc-
tural forces which have led to the em-
bourgeoisement of the artist.

Crane has an affair with classification,
charts, and statistical tables. Her
enthusiasm for hard-edged data spills
into her analysis of the seven styles that
the avant-garde has dominated the New
York art world for the past forty years:
Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism,
Figuative Painting, Pop Art, Photoreal-
ism, Pattern Painting, and Neo-Expres-
sionism. When discussing these styles,
the book reads like the transcript of a tape
for rent at a museum for a self-guided
tour. Like most museum tapes, the narra-
tive rigidly organizes the experiences
that we are about to see.

Added to 32 illustrations, we begin the
tour with the curvy Abstract Expres-
sionists' synthesis of Cubism and Sur-
realism (via Hans Hofmann), to the later
stages of Abstract Expressionism where
"the traces of the previous symbol system
are removed" in favor of a surface that is
"stripped of all secondary ideas." The
crowning achievement of this style were
the paintings of Jackson Pollock. Next,
we have the Minimalists, who "pushed
the boundary further by expunging all
kinds of ideas, emotions, and values from
the art work." What remained was the
pure phenomenology of perception, of
which Frank Stella explained, "what you
see is what you see." Following the
Minimalists we have the Figurative
painters who, as Alex Katz put it, is
"fond of the place of content."

The limits of Crane's approach are
obvious. Certainly there are enough fam-
iliar names as background atmosphere,
but the complexity of the art movement
is obscured. Each style is given a simple
interpretive frame and ambiguities are
purged in the interest of keeping the nar-
ative flowing smoothly. Still, the result is
far from negative—it reads well. There
is a semblance of coherence and contin-
uality, and one does, by the end of the book,
gain a cursory understanding of the
"seven major styles" that left their im-
print on the art scene of New York. What
is absent from Crane's text, however,
is the whole cultural temperament of the
New York avant-garde. Information about
the philosophy of art and art programs and
content analyses of artistic styles fail to
bring us closer to the power of ideas, the
pervasion of convictions, the grandeur of
artistic themes—and their complex rela-
tion to class, money, publicity and the
market.

In the years following World War II
American art made unprecedented incursions
into European intellectual life, and New
York was suddenly catapulted into the
center of the avant-garde world. Given the
new success of American cul-
tural exports and the growing public
interest in the arts, the number of galleries
and museums increased dramatically.

The number of Army National Guard
members increased fivefold, and World War II
era provided the setting for Abstract
Expressionism to flourish. But the
avant-garde was not immune to the
pressures of the Cold War, and the
charges of Communist influence were
commonplace. Nevertheless, the art world
remained a haven for artists, and the
avant-garde continued to thrive.

The post-war period saw a rise in
interest in art as a vehicle for social
change, and the role of the artist as a
leader of society was reinforced.

Commercialization of art also began in
this period, with galleries and museums
increasing in number and size. This led to
the rise of art fairs and auctions, which
became major venues for the sale of art.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a continuation
of these trends, with the rise of Conceptual
art and the emergence of artists like
Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift in
focus, with the rise of Postmodernism
and the exploration of new media and
technologies. This period also saw
the rise of the art market, with
increased demand for high-end
artworks.

Throughout these changes, the
role of the artist as a leader of society
remained constant, and the artist was
often seen as a symbol of cultural
change and progress.
of the art that has been." The postmodernist approach has critical implications: namely, that in a society saturated and dominated by mass media, popular culture and fashion are better able than the sacred pretensions of the avant-garde to provide the visual metaphors for the dilemmas of the everyday.

But some people argue, as Diana Craze does, that the cultural eclecticism promoted by postmodernism is itself the expression of a crisis of meaning, arising from the phenomenon of information being produced more rapidly than meaning systems can integrate and synthesize. What is missing from postmodernism is a genuine attempt to innovate and integrate. Lacking this potential, many postmodernist expressions are satisfied with either pure entertainment value, or sinister provocation. Thus, the paintings of Eric Fischl and Robert Longo are full of violence, explicit sexuality, and a sense of undefined catastrophe designed to amuse and provoke the public.

According to Craze, the only art style that is at the vanguard of innovation is Pattern painting, for reasons that are both sociological and aesthetic. Pattern painting is a movement that is primarily dominated by women, who have traditions based on the communicative systems of modern art. Because artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro attempt to reclaim female subjectivity, there is a psychological and political context to their art that is noticeably missing from other groups.

Craze's book is a "sociology of art" conceived in a fairly conventional mode, but it has a number of useful things to say about the contemporary arts and artists who are both pertinent and welcome, especially because they throw light on the reasons why the courage, audacity and innovation that were the original virtues of the avant-garde are now in decline. In some sense Seigel's "Bohemian Forces and Craze's Transformation of the Avant-Garde" speak to a similar issue. Craze blames the institutionalization of the artist within the university, as well as the spectacular growth of the art market and the infusion of massive funds into the art world by corporate and governmental institutions, for moving what had been a willfully exclusive modern art movement into the mainstream of popular culture. In a complementary way, Seigel recognizes that it is difficult for the avant-garde to survive without a subcultural enclave that shelters and encourages adversarial expression.

Bohemia has its powers, its frauds and its nihilists who overwhelmingly outnumbered the serious artists, but it did offer an alternative community which

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