

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AVANT GARDE*

One of the more commonplace and romantic definitions of the artist is that one which characterizes him as an adventurous explorer. He is described as one who crosses the frontiers of our common life and through his work he gives definition to those boundary situations of man's mind and spirit. In this role he is a maker of maps for the rest of the community, and these maps, in turn, celebrate the best and the worst, the most beautiful and most painful experiences that men have thought and felt. I have always liked this metaphor of the artist as mapmaker, but I am not so sure I can use it any more. You see, in recent years more and more artists have decided that cartography is a much too menial trade. They really want to be a combination of Christopher Columbus, Daniel Boone, and astronaut. What's more, they are rejecting their metaphoric role altogether. Many of them have decided that they are explorers. They think of their art not as something about life, but rather as an immediate social transaction which not only changes the world but also enhances their own humanity. And this new image that the artist has of himself has created many problems—problems for confused audiences, for befuddled critics and scholars, and even for artists themselves.

Indeed, the thorniest problem in the art world today is the growing tendency in all of the arts to break down or dissolve those distinctions that have heretofore existed between art and life. This condition has occurred before in the history of Western culture, but only for brief periods of time and always as a local and aberrant phenomenon. Today it is already widespread and it continues to grow—some would say like a giant cancer, while others would describe it as a glorious liberation movement. The fact is, this tendency toward dissolution has been in process for a long time now and its coming was probably inevitable. But our

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awareness of this does not make it any less of a dilemma for most of us. In this essay I should like to discuss some of the more significant aspects of the problem not only so as to understand it better, but also because I wish to point to certain critical strategies which, hopefully, will resolve it.

I. Art and Paradigmatic Experience

All art is based on some form of what Karl Mannheim referred to as "paradigmatic experience." He defined such experiences as those "basic experiences which carry more weight than others, and which are unforgettable in comparison with others that are merely passing sensations." A paradigm, then, is a compelling vision of reality which creates—as it does in language—a hierarchy of being and value which permits us to shape and judge experience in its terms. Insofar as we believe in paradigmatic experiences it is possible for us to say about an object, idea, or event, "this is true or false, good or bad, better or worse." Thomas Kuhn, in his influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, describes what happens in science in the same way. Scientific theories are, in fact, paradigms that are the most economic and complete models for synthesizing the known evidence about the physical world. In characterizing scientific advance, Kuhn describes those periods in which evidence begins to be assembled which the reigning paradigm cannot explain; that is, under the terms of the existing paradigm the new evidence appears anomalous and freakish. But it is the pressure of this anomalous evidence that characterizes scientific advance; calling not only for its acknowledgment, but demanding as well the invention of an entire new paradigm, or as Kuhn puts it, an explanation of what has by then become a "new world." When we deny the validity of paradigmatic experiences, or when the governing paradigms of a culture seem to have broken down, then nothing is revealed as having decisive importance. We are ruled by a kind of kaleidoscopic concept of life which, in giving equal significance to everything, attributes no radical significance to anything.

The most important shift in paradigms in the past several centuries, the shift which created what now we refer to as modernism, occurred in the second half of the 18th Century and the first part of the 19th Century when the Industrial Revolution combined with the political revolutions both in this country and on the continent to destroy the validity of those dominant paradigms that had governed Western art and thought since the middle ages, if not from the times of classical Greece. Today we can look back

and see that this process had actually been going on at a gradual rate since the 15th Century. But by the 19th Century our world was committed to the compelling vision of a democratic egalitarianism and we could no longer accept—at least in principle—a paradigm of social order based on a hierarchy of rank or class. Similarly, the industrial revolution had created the possibility of an economy of sufficiency which made it impossible for a paradigm based on an economy of scarcity to be maintained. This condition led to the emergence of new paradigms, the most important of those being the idea of unlimited economic growth through some form of industrial capitalism and the idea of progress as an alternative to judgment day. In the arts these major changes are reflected in the emergence of a marked pluralism of styles, a tendency to subordinate aesthetic style to more significant ethical and social concerns, the disappearance of genres, and the eventual devaluation of the art object. But most importantly, it created the idea of the avant garde.

II. The Nature and Development of the Avant Garde

We tend to forget what a recent idea this is. To the best of my knowledge, this Napoleonic military term was first used in reference to the arts by Saint Simon in 1825. It is an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, all of the literature of the avant garde—whether you choose Wordsworth or Shelley, Pater or Fry, Ionesco or Grotowski, Cage or Robbe Grillet—reveals that it is at heart conservative and in a sense even reactionary. Avant garde artists are “radical” only in the original sense of that word—they want to go back to the old roots. In using new techniques to return to these old truths they hope to be more real and direct, to be more truly communal and involving. Thus, more often than not, what appears in their work to be a shattering of tradition is actually a reaffirmation of it.

But the avant garde has also had a compelling need to repudiate the past, and particularly its own immediate past. Conceptually it is inextricably linked to the idea of progress and its origins can be traced to the emergence of the Romantic Movement. It is interesting to note that before Romanticism insofar as styles in art were categorized they were invariably described as “schools.” The notion of a school presupposes a master and a method, the criterion of tradition, and the principle of authority. Furthermore, the nature of a school is defined solely in aesthetic terms. Movements, on the other hand, are activist and future oriented. They

are "moving" toward the realization of something. Whatever goal a school might have, it is transcendent; its central commitment is to the mastery of what has already been achieved, believing that such mastery combined with inspiration will create a future that need not, nor cannot, be precisely defined. The followers of a movement always work in terms of an end which resides in the movement itself. Moreover, this end exists beyond the limits of art and is essentially ethical and social rather than aesthetic in nature. It is for this reason that movement conceives of culture not as increment but as creation.

As I said, the idea of movement is linked to the idea of progress. Progress which had heretofore been millenary and allegorical, had become by the beginning of the 19th Century a realizable expectation. After the French Revolution there was a decision to start a new calendar for human affairs. This was, in effect, saying that the metaphor of renewal was now seen as a reality so that, as George Steiner puts it, "the eternal tomorrow of utopian political vision became, as it were, Monday morning." And if it can be Monday morning, then the sooner we get started the better. The members of the avant garde were the early starters, the cutting edge, the first wave—you name it. If culture is something created constantly anew, and if art is conceived as revolution and movement, then there has to be an avant garde. We are just now coming to comprehend the full significance of this basic change in thinking about the arts and to assess its effects not only on what happened in the arts, but also on the artist's view of himself and the nature of his work.

There have been many studies of the avant garde published in recent years, but unquestionably the most challenging and imaginative of them is the late Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant Garde*. While I don't agree with some of Professor Poggioli's basic premises—and, therefore, some of his conclusions—no one has better described the nature of the avant garde better than he. To catalog these characteristics, even in the most summary way, is to outline the mainstream of the arts in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Poggioli's major thesis is that the particular tensions of our bourgeois, capitalistic, and technological society provide the *raison d'être* for all avant garde movements. Because in a democratic society the artist no longer has the Maecenas of an aristocratic culture to direct his work, he is forced to create not only the work but the audience for that work as well. Of necessity he becomes as much a "producer" for a market as he is a creator, and this puts the artist in a strange and antagonistic

relationship to his audience. A relationship which creates both his sense of alienation and isolation and his tendency to become self-serving, partisan, proselytizing, narcissistic, and even subversive. In such a situation, he cannot help but think of himself as superior—the true aristocrat of middle class culture—and yet he is also a kind of huckster who must be accepted by those “beneath” him if he is to be successful on his own terms. Furthermore, since he is committed to originality rather than renewal, the new and the novel are the hallmarks of his creativity. For the avant garde artist genuineness of vision means a new vision which avoids anything that has been done before; and genuineness of craftsmanship is the refusal to repeat old techniques. But this inevitably makes him almost completely dependent upon what is fashionable, even as he thinks of himself as the governor of fashion. Fashion’s task is to maintain a continual process of standardization, and it does so by creating constantly shifting new norms. Thus, the avant garde is condemned to conquer through the influence of fashion, the very popularity it disdains. But its victories are hollow, for fashion moves with inexorable force. The very success of an avant garde movement creates the opposition that will eventually put it out of fashion. This is why so many traditional critics argue that the whole history of avant garde art is finally reducible to an uninterrupted series of fads.

This is only a half truth, but it does point to another of the avant garde’s most significant characteristics. Namely, that it, like Progress, is futuristic. Poggioli, with tongue in cheek, wryly observes that “the art of the 20th Century seems to have one desire only, to get to the 21st Century as soon as possible.” Have you ever noticed that whenever teachers, scholars, and critics are talking or writing about any given period or work of art of the past 200 years they invariably refer to it as being in some way transitional? This is not just some tic of the academic imagination. One of the key ideas of modernism is that the present is valid only by virtue of its potentialities for the future. Carl Jung expressed it well when he wrote: “Today is a process of transition which separates itself from yesterday in order to go toward tomorrow.” Because the avant garde sensibility believes that all potentiality is capable of being actualized in the more or less immediate future, it must reject the past (although it unquestionably yearns for what it believes is the lost centrality of more primitive times) and embrace the vision of apocalypse. It is important to understand that the avant garde artist is not really opposing traditional forms of art; rather he is seeking a radically new experience. One in which

the ideal can be made immediate and tangible; one that permits him to believe that the gap between the possible and the real—which heretofore had been bridged by works of art—can be closed. Thus, in rejecting art as a derivative experience in favor of the myth of art as an immediate experience, the avant garde is constantly mixing up aesthetic and ethical categories. And because of this confusion there is always pressure to break down the differences between art and life, to confuse them, to see them as the same.

III. The Breaking Down of the Distinctions Between Art and Life

This process has really been going on for a good part of this century. It was the central intuition of Dadaism. It was implied in Duchamp's found objects. It was the dominant dramatic idea in Pirandello's theatre, which in turn had a profound influence on the Theatre of the Absurd. It was hinted at by the atonal composers and became manifest in aleatory music. It was even one of the deaestheticizing premises of action painting. John Cage is probably its most articulate prophet, and over twenty-five years ago he said: "For too long art obscured the difference between life and art. Now let life obscure the difference between art and life."

But these were still minority views. The dominant tendency in the arts since World War I—and especially in the fifteen to twenty years after World War II—was to shrink the world to a rebellious gesture. The governing spirit during this time was one of protest and retreat and the work of most artists had become violent graphs of the cornered man. From such movements as the Theatre of the Absurd or abstract expressionism in painting it is clear that man was defined by his estrangement and solitude and not by his participation in the life of his society. Then in the 1960s, when all art forms seemed to erupt into the spasms of a mad St. Vitus dance, things began to change. It was then that the idea that art was not about life but was a form of life itself came to be the predominant view of the avant garde. This happened, I think, because of a major shift in the artist's attitude toward technology. Technology came to be seen not as a dehumanizing enemy but as a great new resource that could be used in both material *and* spiritual ways so as to enhance the present and its possibilities. However, whenever we embrace anything—an attitude, an idea, even another person—we must remember that we are acted upon by the object of our embrace every bit as much as

we effect it. There is no such thing as embrace with impunity. Thus, when the artist came to embrace technology not only was his work affected; his whole sense of himself was changed.

Probably the first noticeable effect of the artist's embrace of technology is that it gives him a radically new sense of choice. This is the central theme of the reports of the Harvard Program on Technology and Society. We know that each one of us has opportunities for choice that were unthinkable a generation ago, and more important, we know that we had better keep on making them. We don't need to be locked into anything because the number of choices available to us is greater than ever before and the possibilities for continuing new choices are rapidly increasing. Now I happen to think that the possibility for choice is at the very heart of the creative process; but when you also believe that one need not be bound permanently by his choices because new choices are made available to us every day, then your attitude toward what you create invariably changes. And this accounts—at least in part—for the growing dominance of the spirit of improvisation and impermanence in all of the arts.

Today our artists are less and less concerned with creating lasting works of art. Because each day brings with it new choices, the artist comes to find joy in the creative process itself—indeed, involvement in the process of creating has tended to replace concern for the project or object that is made. This being the case, it shouldn't surprise us that in the past couple of years some artists have carried this to even further extremes. Why bother making anything at all—especially since the marketing systems in all of the arts are so unashamedly corrupt? Rather than write plays, some playwrights give interviews before and after a performance no one has ever seen to explain the meaning of what hasn't occurred. In the visual arts—at least in some quarters - there has been a noticeable shift away from the creation of tangible objects to calling attention to the attitudes by which art has or can be made. In each of these instances execution has disappeared completely; philosophic attitude has taken precedence over unique form.

But there is probably a more meaningful explanation for this bizarre situation of an art world without art. In the past material objects were valuable because in an economy of scarcity what one made was more enduring than those who made them. Objects were sacred not only because they were unique and irreplaceable, but because they represented an ideal of mankind which would endure beyond the life of any individual man. Under such condi-

tions man was as expendable as the materials were valuable. If the lives of a thousand more men had to be sacrificed in order to build a pyramid or a cathedral, so be it; such structures would last forever as eternal monuments to those ideals and aspirations by which men (or at least their monarchs) lived. But today we believe less and less in the permanence of matter, or, for that matter, in the stability of nature. After Hiroshima, how can we? Furthermore, in an economy of sufficiency, all materials are— theoretically, at least— expendable. Any object is replacable, and our industrial technology has made it possible for us to replicate anything from a rare antique to the latest model automobile. In a society with such an economy, and with such a prodigal attitude toward human artifacts, the only unique and replacable element is man. It is an awareness of this basic change that prompts the sociologist John McHale to write about the future of art as follows:

The future of art seems no longer to lie with the creation of enduring masterworks but with defining alternative cultural strategies, through a series of communicative gestures in multimedia forms. As art and non-art become interchangeable, and the master work may only be a reel of punched or magnetic tape, the artist defines art less through any intrinsic value of the art object than by furnishing new conceptualities of life style and orientation. Generally, as the new cultural continuum underlines the expendability of the material artifact, life is defined as art—as the only contrastingly permanent and continuously unique experience.

While I am horrified by such gobbledygook and jargon, I must admit that if one picked up any fairly recent issue of *The Drama Review* or *Artforum*, *Performance* or *New Sound*, he will find article after interview that will echo McHale's prognosis, even if they cannot match the lucidity of his style. But the fact is, that as the life of the individual comes to replace the object or the performance as the only unique and irreplaceable creation in the universe, then increasingly the artist comes to think of his own physical and psychic being as the material from which and the medium through which he will shape his most meaningful, if not his only creations.

The effects of this conviction are most clearly manifest in the idea of life itself as a performance. Critics such as Richard Poirier and Richard Gilman have been the leading spokesmen for this view, and Norman Mailer is the supreme embodiment of it. In the mid-fifties Mailer had reached a creative impasse and the novel

form was no longer working for him. As he turned his attention to the turbulent events going on in the world, he came to believe that the most interesting source of art was the interaction between himself and those events. He no longer thought of writing as a mimetic act but rather as a "kind of combative enterprise analogous to war." Form was not a pattern imposed on experience, it was an account of one's engagement and struggle with it. For Mailer there was no longer any separation between living and creating. The artist himself is the work of art. He said as much when he maintained that "the first art work in an artist is the shaping of his own personality." It is important to understand that Mailer's running for mayor in New York City was an aesthetic, not a political act. We see the same thrust in the more recent films of Godard, and Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* is indeed the last because art and life get so confused that the whole idea of making a film is lost. The Theatre of Fact is governed by the same impulse. Peter Weiss used the transcript of the Nazi Trials because what went on in the concentration camps was more horrible than the human imagination could comprehend and, therefore, no artistic form was capable of expressing them or their meaning. In the visual arts we find the same phenomenon. The persona of Andy Warhol is probably more interesting to the art world than the works of art that he has created. He has, in fact, created his persona as an aesthetic object. There is something compelling about this idea, so long as it remains essentially theatrical. Warhol's performance is a match for Mailer's any time. But recently artists have become more literal in their thinking about themselves as the object of art. In speaking about his 1973 show at the Whitney, Bruce Nauman said: "I'm trying to explore how we experience things—occasions, spaces, situations. I use my body as an object, not autobiographically." I suppose this idea has already reached its ultimate—and I might add, absurd—expression in the work of the Viennese artist, Rudolf Schwarzkogler. Schwarzkogler's achievement—and there's no question about its being unique—consisted of amputating his own flesh, inch by inch, until he finally killed himself. This process was photographed and was reverently exhibited last summer at Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany. To be sure this is an extreme expression of the idea that the artist's own self is both the subject and object of the art work, but in its gruesome madness it reveals how the politics of experience gives way to the poetics of impotence. John Cage has recently modified the statement I quoted earlier to read: "I wouldn't say that we are interested in destroy-

ing the barrier between art and life or even blurring it. I would say we are interested in observing that there is no barrier or distinction between the two." But if there is no difference between art and life, then there is finally no difference between the artist and his public. Instead of representing creative mysteries, the artist becomes a cross between a co-counsellor, a recreation director, and a social worker.

IV. The Challenge to the Mimetic Idea of Art

However, once the artist no longer believes that art and life are separate and distinct—albeit related—orders of experience, he must also question the mimetic nature of the artistic process. This is the most radical and profound challenge facing the arts today. Certainly the most widely held traditional belief of the artist's function is the one which asserts that the artist's main job is to take the chaos and complexity, the ambiguity, contradiction, and inconclusiveness of actual experience, and to impose on them a meaning and order by means of the unique powers of his temperament, the depth of his imagination, and his capacity to create form. That is, through words, tone, color, line, or image, he creates an object in which the inconsistencies of life experience are made whole and within the work are organically and coherently expressive. This view is based upon the essentially Platonic premise that reality can never be directly or totally known and that our awareness of it will always be limited; that there is a realm between conceptual certitude and the chaos of sense data which can only be bridged by approximate realities and provisional truths. Hence the need for fictive possibilities, for only fictions can mediate between what men desire or hope reality to be and the way things actually are. I think one can safely maintain that this has been the dominant view in Western thought and art from the time of the Greeks until the middle of the 20th Century.

But once you challenge the Platonic view and replace it with the more existential belief that reality is whatever one experiences, then the relationship between art and life will begin to change. When Jackson Pollock said "Painting is a state of being," or when Mark Rothko insisted "a painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience," each of them is indicating that his concern is no longer with the finished work so much as the *act* of painting, which is supposed to guide him in his quest for personal identity. Thus, art becomes the occasion for a more heightened kind of participation in a reality which can be directly known.

Today's artists have, with increasing frequency, substituted the myth of immediate experience for that of derivative experience. And the aim of advanced art in all its forms is not to put reality at a remove through art, but to use art to remove barriers to reality by presenting the complexity and ambiguity of life as directly as possible. These artists are not interested in producing works of art for people to mull over, but to make the arts an immediately experienced transaction. The Aristotelian aesthetic of improving the audience's moral well being has been spurned in favor of professed involvement in social change. It is this shift of attitude which caught Herbert Marcuse's attention and which prompted him to observe in 1970 that the revolutions of the young were, in fact, aesthetic and not political. In their concern for life style and the quality of life they were demanding that art and life, politics and education, be totally interrelated and that art be not apart from life just as education should not be preparation for it. However, it should be pointed out that whenever anything becomes totally at one with its environment we cease to notice it. Thus, if these artists succeed in making art and life one, they will also have to accept the possibility that they may no longer be thought of as artists.

But I don't think they'll care. The famous graffito inscribed upon the walls of the Sorbonne during the student revolt of 1968 which read "Art is dead, let's liberate our day-to-day life. Poetry is in the street," is a striking example of how the aesthetics of direct experience is deaestheticizing. Actually, I am coming to believe that those who would deny the mimetic nature of art do in fact want art to become religion. Hence, their attraction to Lévi-Strauss, Eliade, and some of the primitivists. Hence, also the evangelistic stance of most of the leaders of the new actualist movements. They are not artists, but high priests, prophets, or voices crying in the wilderness shouting, "Prepare ye the way of the new lord!" And if not religion, then politics. Certainly the artists in the celebrated Judson Flag Show were testing a law, not the limits of art. The case of R. G. Davis is an even better, because it is more serious example. Mr. Davis was the founder and director of the San Francisco Mime Troup. Over the years his company became increasingly radicalized, but they were never political enough for Mr. Davis. Indeed, he was correct in realizing that their work was not political at all, but only something aesthetic presenting itself as politics. It was all a pose, a masquerade, politics *manqué*. So in the summer of 1972 he left his own company to go into politics. Given his views toward art and life,

Davis had the correct intuition. For him to satisfy his political concerns he would have to go outside of art altogether. Art has always been poor politics. And, I might add, artists have not been very good politicians either. Thus, the politicizing of the avant garde is yet another example of its self-destructing nature. Harold Rosenberg made this point very forcefully in his latest book, *The De-definition of Art*, where he wrote:

The notion that art is an obstacle to expanded creativity is an art-world notion. . . . In calling for the death of art for the sake of liberating mankind, art confronts not society, but the dilemma of its own existence in an epoch of new media that have assumed most of art's function.

V. The Collapse of Critical Judgment

I should like to touch upon one other aspect of the problem. When the distinctions between art and life have been removed, how do you know what a work of art is and how do you judge it? James Joyce had anticipated these questions in a delightful scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

I have a book at home—said Stephen—in which I have written down questions which are more amusing than yours were. In finding the answers to them I found the theory of the esthetic which I am trying to explain. Here are some questions I set myself: *Is a chair finely made tragic or comic? Is the portrait of Mona Lisa good if I desire to see it? Is the bust of Sir Philip Crampton lyrical, epical or dramatic? If not, why not?—*

—Why not, indeed?—said Lynch, laughing.

—*If a man hacking in fury at a block of wood—Stephen continued—make there an image of a cow, is that image a work of art? If not, why not?—*

—That's a lovely one - said Lynch, laughing again. That has the true scholastic stink.—

A scholastic stink, indeed. The source of this problem can be traced back to the attitude expressed by David Hume in the second half of the 18th Century—we're back there again - when he asserted in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" that "beauty is not a quality inherent in things: it only exists in the mind of the beholder." Once you shift the source of beauty from the object of art to those who behold it, the whole idea of beauty becomes so relative, personal, and idiosyncratic that it soon ceases to have any real significance. We must remember that all conceptual revo-

lutions are defined by the questions that are asked. "What is the speed of light?" can be an intelligible question only when it is conceptually possible to think of light having velocity. In a similar way the shift from the question "What is the sublime?" to "What is beauty?" represented an enormous change. Today, the question of "What is beauty?" doesn't seem very relevant and is seldom asked. Santayana was the last person who discussed the question with any confidence. For most of us the more appropriate question, and the only one I ever hear being asked, is "What is Art?" And the answer, of course, is that art is whatever someone who says he is an artist creates and calls art. Increasingly, our artists do not think of art as something reserved for the high holy days of the spirit; in fact, in their desire to make art and life more interrelated and mutually involved, the idea of "going" to a museum, a theatre, or a concert hall has become repugnant to them. I remember going to a performance of Robert Whitman's *Prune Flat* a number of years ago. It was given in a loft and the work was a film but the actors in the film were acting live in front of the screen; it also had static visual images, strobe lights, and an electronic musical score. It all worked together, not in an additive but in a synthetic way, and I thought it was a very interesting and moving experience. Afterwards, I went up to Mr. Whitman and in an old-fashioned way, I asked: "Wouldn't this have been better if it had been performed in a theatre?" He replied, "That's just the point. We don't want it in theatres. We want it in the loft where we made it, where we do it, where we are all together, where you are a part of us, where you're totally involved with us, where we live, where we eat, where we make love, where we are related together. We want to break down the gulf that exists between the artist and the audience. We want, in effect, to destroy audiences." If art is a life experience, then at best it is a game and all that is required to make an object into art is, as Jasper Johns put it, "its introduction into the art context." (Cage meant the same thing when he said: "So long as there is a concert situation there is a concert.")

To ask "What is beauty?" implies the primacy of the art object and artists are simply those who create them. To ask, "What is art?" asserts the primacy of the artist and art is simply whatever he produces. The theory of beauty is centripetal in nature; it is concerned with those masterpieces at the center of culture which determine the standards by which all else is judged. The theory of art is centrifugal. It, of necessity, moves to the ambiguous peripheries of creation and is finally more concerned with the act of

creation itself than with what is created. But if art is in fact a life experience and whatever an artist does is a work of art, then the qualities of art objects become irrelevant in judging it. Indeed, even the objects become irrelevant; the only irreducible remainder of the idea of art is the figure of the artist. Such a condition invalidates the whole idea of aesthetics, and hence redefines the critic's role. When, as Rosenberg observed, "art springs from ideas about art, rather than admired art objects, the evaluation of works cannot avoid being interpretative in a partisan way." It is no longer a question of aesthetics, but of ideology.

This explains one of the most remarkable characteristics of avant garde art. When ideology is more important than objects, intention becomes more significant than results. This makes it possible to ignore, dislike, or hardly know the work of any given new movement in the arts and still comprehend it. I know a number of reputable critics— who shall remain nameless— who do not go to the theatre or galleries, are not interested in the new music, dance or film, and yet are highly regarded because they write so knowledgably and intelligently about what is going on. The same can be said for most art educators. I have heard brilliant discussions of the avant garde by deans who hardly knew the difference between a harpsichord and a synthesizer, or street theatre and *commedia del arte*. At most schools the last person you would expect to see at performances or in studios and classrooms is the dean. When attitude and the *zeitgeist* are more important than the work of art itself, the critic does not need the capacity to judge so much as to be able to feel the process of history which is passing from potentiality into act. As Poggioli pointed out, "All one need to do to understand avant garde art is to understand the starting point."

Without normative principles, the idea of criticism as a judicial act is impossible. And this is the situation we are in today. Our critics have ceased to be judges and have become guides and promoters. But there will be plenty of work for them, since, as Hilton Kramer observed, "the more minimal the art, the more maximal the explanation."

VI. The Restoration of the Mimetic Nature of Art

However, enough of explanation and analysis. If my description of the present state of the arts is accurate, then it would appear that they have reached a kind of dead end. Not only does the emperor not have any clothes on, he isn't even an emperor. In

a sense this is true, but I really think it is more a case of our mapmakers having gotten lost. They are reading the territory wrong and hence producing the wrong charts not only for themselves but for the rest of us as well. Back in 1925, Bertolt Brecht observed that "when one sees that our world of today no longer fits into the drama, then it is merely that the drama no longer fits into the world." What he meant by this was that the theatre had ceased to be meaningful to audiences because it was based upon outmoded premises. That is what is so clearly happening today. The reason the relation of art to life has become so askew is because the ideas governing our experience of works of art have become both inadequate and false.

The idea of antiformalism is as illusory as it is fraudulent. Fraudulent because the subversion of form cannot be established except by artistic means, that is through effects that are essentially formal. Illusory because it is impossible for there to be any aesthetic which is not mimetic and hierarchical. Let's not forget that the conceptual and process artists still need some form of documentation. Those documents become the art object or the performance; they involve selection and choice; they are mimetic in nature. The same thing holds true for the so-called random art events. This is so because as long as I am I and you are you there can never be perfect communication or total participation. Even when we are most involved with another—say, in making love—we are always conscious of otherness. Indeed, given our divided nature, it is impossible for us to experience these things within ourselves. So long as this condition exists all experience will always be more or less real, true, or significant according to some standard of value. In short, separateness creates hierarchies and judgments based on hierarchies. To be sure, the nature of our hierarchies can and do change—sometimes quite radically—but no matter how they change, we will never be able to bridge the gulf between I and Thou without some metaphoric "form."

What has really happened is that it is becoming increasingly apparent that the reigning paradigms of our modernist culture are not working or have already broken down. We certainly can no longer believe in an economy of limitless sufficiency when we know that the world's resources are being depleted at a faster rate than we can discover new ones. We are well aware of the energy and fuel crises, but who would ever have thought that in this "Plastic Age" we could have a shortage of plastics. But we do; just read the morning papers. Equal opportunity and other welfare programs may be noble ideas, but economists are telling us that

no matter how we may alter our priorities our social needs and the cost of supporting them are growing at a rate that far exceeds that of the Gross National Product. Given the extent of pollution, the time-honored capitalistic idea of growth or stagnate doesn't bode well for industry. Already many are predicting that the future of the Ralph Naders looks better than that of the Henry Fords. We have discovered that you can do away with kings and princes, but elitism somehow survives in new forms. And we didn't need Happenings, chance music, and self-destructing artifacts—all strategic denials of the future tense—to convince us that the idea of progress is no longer tenable. In short, as those paradigmatic experiences which gave rise to the idea of avant gardism in the arts cease to be operative, it is reasonable to assume that the end of modernism is at hand. There is plenty of evidence to support this view, the most persuasive being the avant garde's almost mechanical determination to carry on its own processes in a vacuum. Today's vanguardism has become ritualized. It attacks non-existent enemies and it heralds new advances when there is in fact nothing being advanced.

This condition doesn't worry me very much. For while it is true that our existing paradigms are collapsing, it is also clear that new paradigms are emerging to take their place. As and when they do, the hierarchies which are implicit in all paradigmatic structures will return and the mimetic nature of art can begin to function more easily. It is only during this time between reigning paradigms, when the principle of syntactically organized vision of necessity gives way to more paratactical ("to exist side by side") conventions, that the distinctions between art and life tend to dissolve.

No one can say with certainty what the new paradigms of our post urban consciousness will be. I agree with Arthur Clarke that "the real future is not logically foreseeable." But I cannot help but notice that increasing numbers of historians, scientists, and anthropologists are beginning to discuss the future in terms of a transformation of human consciousness. William Irwin Thompson, in his most important book, *At the Edge of History*, asserts that what we are experiencing is not just a technological revolution, but a cultural transformation. And he predicts that we are moving into a very hierarchical, mystical, Pythagorean, and anti-democratic system. The recent work of Andrew Weill (*The Natural Mind*), Rene Dubos (*The God Within*), and Edward T. Hall (*The Hidden Dimension*) discuss psychic transformations of unbelievable dimensions. The mind-boggling work—not yet pub-

lished—of the zoologist J. T. Robinson indicates that we are actually going through a fourth phase of evolution which is probably psychic in nature and is in no way comparable or related to the first three phases. How do you account for the increasing popularity of Castenada? Maybe C. S. Lewis was right when he predicted thirty years ago that human travel in outer space would be an experience of spiritual conversion. Edgar Mitchell's research in healing, E.S.P., psychokinesis, and astral projection are as startling as Rusty Schweikart's embrace of the Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation is unexpected. I know Bishop Pike's family and many of his closest friends, and they insist that he was completely sane even as he believed he was communicating with departed spirits. The writings of Teilhard de Chardin, scientist and theologian, pointed in this direction. So do the recent works of George Leonard (*The Transformation*) and Theodore Roszak (*Where the Wasteland Ends*). The British philosopher/physicist, Sir James Jeans, adumbrates this new vision when he writes:

Today there is a wide measure of agreement, which on the physical side of science approaches almost to unanimity, that the stream of knowledge is heading toward a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter; we are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter.

All of these writers are arguing that what appears to be a breaking down of civilization is not an eruption of madness or self-destruction, but a process that is entirely natural and inevitable. It is simply a breaking up of old forms by life itself.

If new paradigms based on the transformation of consciousness are in fact emerging, then those hierarchies so essential to the making and judging of art will do so also. Thus, even as the once creative and now debilitated notion of the avant garde is transformed, we will begin to discover a great new vitality. Many cultural historians have pointed to the medieval nature of our times. This is probably a correct assessment. But if this is the case, I would add that it is also not too optimistic to think that there is a new Renaissance on the way. A Renaissance which in the arts will be based on the restoration of the mimetic. A restoration that will invalidate those hallmarks of our present collapse, especially the widespread attitude of dilettantism and the belief that "being into things" is the equivalent of creation. I believe that the rebirth, if it comes—and I have faith that it will—will cele-

brate the qualities of energy and stamina, discipline and commitment. It will make us aware once again, although I am sure in new ways, that renewal is as dependent upon our capacity to maintain—even through the most excruciating boredom—as it is upon our ability to discover. It will reaffirm for us that the ideas of art as creation and as increment, while they may be in tension, need not be in dialectic opposition. In short, I think we may be coming to realize that our most profound discoveries are almost always things we already knew.

The stolen fire of the Promethean myth is the capacity through intelligence and imagination for man to create constructs and metaphors which will enable him to better understand himself and his world. While these metaphors can never fully express reality. Since the tongues of fallen men can only relate to reality as through a glass darkly; nonetheless, no metaphysic is speechless. Even Samuel Beckett, who has expressed the breakdown of the paradigms of modernism more powerfully than anybody, can still say “I look for the voice of my silence.” Such a continuing commitment is the great hope of these otherwise bewildering times. It is this commitment which is being celebrated once again here by the Hopwood Awards. Yeats said that the “Fiddles are tuning all over the world.” And they are—on campuses and in coffee houses, at cultural centers and in ghettos, in rural communes and in cosmopolitan capitols. What is being re-affirmed here tonight is what Thomas Mann referred to as the artist’s “honorable sleeplessness.” It is a search for the right and redeeming word, shape, image or sound. Each of us has this “honorable sleeplessness” and we are here because we must go on working, giving form to truth, hoping darkly—sometimes even confidently—that truth and form will help set free the human spirit and prepare mankind for a better, lovelier, and worthier life.