

Between Avant-Garde and Kitsch: Deconstructing Art and/as Ideology

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Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda by Joes Segal.
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In a now infamous speech to the US House of Representatives on August 16, 1949, Congressman George Dondero (Republican from Michigan) railed against modern art, particularly abstraction, as a communist threat to true American values. “What are these isms that are the very foundation of so-called modern art?” he asked. “I call the roll of infamy without claim that my list is all-inclusive: dadaism, futurism, constructionism, suprematism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and abstractionism. All these isms are of foreign origin, and truly should have no place in American art. While not all are media of social or political protest, all are instruments and weapons of destruction. . . .”¹ Meanwhile, working covertly and independently of Congress and using secret funding provided by a number of CIA front organizations (most notably the Congress of Cultural Freedom under the leadership of Michael Josselson), these so-called “weapons of destruction”—specifically Abstract Expressionism—were being harnessed by the United States Information Agency (USIA) as the epitome of American freedom of expression against totalitarian Soviet state propaganda and its officially sanctioned artistic style, socialist realism. The innate contradictions of art’s role in the Cold War context—modernism as both quintessentially American *and* subversively communist—are further

complicated when one considers Clement Greenberg's distinction between *avant-garde* and kitsch in his eponymous 1939 essay in which he lionizes abstract painting as the ultimate realization of modern art's historical mission—i.e., absolute artistic purity whereby, following the tenets of Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766), painting can only be about painting as the subject of its own innate *process*.² Work with an overt political or social message cannot be considered art but is instead kitsch or propaganda, which, drawing upon the simulacrum of genuine culture, merely imitates art's *effects*. In Greenberg's eyes, the latter's cultural philistinism would conveniently relegate socially conscious artists such as Ben Shahn, Diego Rivera, and Philip Evergood to the same level as Stalinist hacks such as Isaak Brodsky.

Clearly, given these examples, any attempt to create a clear-cut opposition between “political” or “activist” art on the one hand (Greenberg's kitsch) and “purely autonomous” art on the other (Greenberg's *avant-garde*) is not only spurious but also irresponsibly unhistorical. In his brilliantly incisive new book, *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda*, Joes Segal sets out to deconstruct this false binary by showing that “politicians and government agencies may project their own ideas, interests and fears on artworks.

This is due to the fact that the visual arts cannot easily be reduced to unambiguous statements or clear-cut arguments” (8). In contrast, he argues, the political meaning of art “is in no way restricted to artworks with a declared political intention. The most interesting cases tend to be those works which at first sight are politically ambiguous or have no political meaning at all” (9). In short, “In this collection of essays I use another perspective by analyzing the political implications of the very idea of a pure and apolitical modern art” (9).

Using a carefully considered case study approach, Segal traces the ambivalent relationship between art and politics over a hundred-year span from 1914 to 2014. Obviously, given the book's limited length (a very tight 136 pages of text), Segal has been highly selective and acknowledges some key omissions: the relationship of Futurism to Italian Fascism; art during the Spanish Civil War (Picasso's *Guernica* is thus conspicuously absent); the clash between modern, socialist, and religious imagery in 1970s Iran; the competing art traditions in North and South Korea; as well as issues of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Nonetheless, his choices raise enough key points that they can be easily cross-referenced into other artistic and nationalist contexts, both within and outside the confines of the book. Thus Segal covers a wide range of nationalist paradigms,

including the public debates on art and identity in France and Germany during World War I; the false dichotomy between national and international “degenerate” art under the Third Reich; the shifting sands of communist propaganda in the Soviet bloc and China; as well as the individual, aporetic careers of Diego Rivera in Mexico and the US and Kara Walker’s brave attempts to carve out her own critical space between the “white” cultural master narrative (where she is dismissed by establishment critics such as Donald Kuspit as “an ideological failure and intellectually inadequate” [106]) and the “black” counter-narrative that accuses her of selling out to the dominant art market, a passive inoculation “passing” as cultural difference.

In each of the book’s seven chapters Segal explores four levels of fluidly intertwined and often mutually contradictory levels of political meaning: (1) artistic intention, (2) critical reception, (3) historical contextualization, and (4) political use or abuse (10). Perhaps the most insightful chapter is Segal’s opening survey of “Positive and Negative Integration” in France and Germany during World War I, which discloses some surprisingly narrow nationalist currents that cut across established art historical discourse and traditional aesthetic lines, laying much of the groundwork for the subsequent Nazi demonization of “degenerate” art in the 1930s. In both countries the war was

embraced as a “blood sacrifice,” a necessary redemption from a state of cultural decadence, a form of purification and hygienic healing tied to an upsurge in deeply entrenched national values. Led by the rhetorical discourses of playwright and art critic, Hermann Bahr, and the painter, Franz Marc, art was no longer evaluated through trans-national aesthetic movements and styles such as Cubism, Impressionism, or Expressionism but on strictly “us vs. them” national lines, epitomized by Emperor Wilhelm II’s *Burgfrieden* (castle truce) and French President Raymond Poincaré’s *union sacrée* (holy unity). Thus all art came to be situated within strictly nationalist traditions, and artists were quick to reject any so-called “colleagues” who deviated from this prescribed position, even if they were fellow Expressionists or Impressionists. Indeed, the latter were often dismissed as “internationalist” and thus beneath contempt. As Segal succinctly puts it, “Art history and art criticism had swapped the domain of aesthetic judgments for the domain of artistic treason” (26). In other words, aesthetics had become a matter of survival against rabid infection.

To give a typical example, the French art historian Émile Mâle claimed the Germans had no claim to anything of cultural importance (including Gothic architecture) and their sole source of expression was destroying other people’s culture

(epitomized by the German bombardment of Reims Cathedral, the apotheosis of French Gothic, which was quickly condemned as cultural barbarism by the French). In response, the German historian Cornelius Gurlitt argued that Gothic was produced solely by German elites in both France and Germany. The inferior Celts had guillotined these elites during the French Revolution, thus explaining the dearth of culture in France ever since. Kurt Engelbrecht went even further, proclaiming that all artistic creativity was exclusively German: great artists such as Dante or Michelangelo were explained away through their “obvious German descent.”

As one might expect, this fanatical national binarism didn't last long, not only due to the disillusion and cynicism wrought by the horror of modern warfare itself but also because “the moment artists and critics started to define artistic unity in more specific terms, tensions arose” (24). Thus French art critics condemned Cubism as a German-Jewish conspiracy, despite the fact that its leading exponents were Spanish (Picasso) and French (Braque). For their part, the Germans targeted the Expressionists *and* Impressionists—especially the leading German Impressionist, Max Liebermann (who was Jewish and thus “not really German”). Clearly, despite Greenberg's revisionist arguments to the contrary

throughout the 1940s and '50s, the idea of an internationalist, “immaculately” autonomous avant-garde is a myth, because national interests, at least for the duration of the war, trumped the transcendental value of aesthetic style. As Segal explains, “It is a mistake to conclude that because conservatives, nationalists, fascists, national-socialists and communists all hated modern art during large parts of the twentieth century, modern artists themselves were immune to ideological temptations” (29).

Interestingly, in his analysis of art and politics during the Third Reich, Segal notes that style (rather than concrete issues such as race and national identity) started to play a key role in both the definition and distinction between national and degenerate art. The common wisdom follows the curatorial template laid down by the two 1937 Munich exhibitions organized by Adolf Ziegler, President of Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts.

“The First Great German Art Exhibition,” staged in the House of German Art, showcased works approved by the regime, while the “Entartete Kunst Exhibition” in the Hofgartenarkaden, highlighted so-called degenerate (read: internationalist or Jewish) art, which was almost exclusively modernist in style. Approved art followed the basic criteria laid down by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, that “art is a direct expression of a nation, and can therefore only be understood and

valued by the people of that nation. 'Modern art' was to him a contradiction in terms, because true art is a timeless part of the universal essence of the people" (49). Hitler's objective was to create a clear-cut political divide by creating a collective enemy that could be "othered" on both racial *and* political grounds. While true art is easily recognizable by the masses, modern art was elitist and difficult to understand, and it was therefore easily exposed as fraudulent.

However, as Segal explains in some detail, the binary opposition between national and modern art was not as decisive as it seemed. Thus the German Expressionists actually had right-wing advocates, most notably Otto Schreiber, President of the National Socialist German Student League, who organized the 1933 exhibition in Berlin that included works by Franz Marc, August Macke, Ernst Barlach, Erich Heckel, and Emil Nolde. Indeed, Goebbels himself also supported the Expressionists in the early years of the Reich and collected both Barlach and Nolde. In turn, not all the Expressionists were against the new regime: Barlach, Heckel, Nolde and Mies van der Rohe all signed a call for support of the Nazi government and its leaders.

Nolde was easily the most extreme case, having criticized the destructive role of Jews in German art prior to the War, and

he became an early member of the NSDAP, joining the party in the early 1920s. Indeed, in his 1934 autobiography, *Years of Struggle, 1902–14*, he called modern artists "Half-bloods, bastards and mulattoes" (52) (conveniently excluding himself, of course). That Nolde was represented by twenty-seven works in the Degenerate Art Exhibition suggests that his presence was largely based on stylistic issues rather than his actual political loyalties. In addition, only two artists in the Degenerate show were actually Jewish—Ludwig Meidner and Otto Freundlich—while Rodolf Belling had work in *both* exhibitions. Segal's logical conclusion is that "the struggle against Jewish and Bolshevik art was in fact not a struggle against Jewish and Bolshevik artists. Artistic style defined whether an artist was deemed degenerate, and thus Jewish and/or Bolshevik. In the meantime, not all Nazi leaders shared the official criticism of modern art and not all modern artists disagreed with the political ideas of National Socialism" (58).

Segal's chapters on the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and the African-American artist Kara Walker provide contrasting yet complementary views of how artistic intention can come into an often irresolvable dialectic with critical reception and political co-option. As is well documented, Rivera had bona fide leftist credentials. A

close friend of Trotsky, from 1922 until his expulsion in 1929 he was a member of the PCM (Partido Comunista Mexicano) and briefly joined the Soviet art group, *October* during a 1927–28 visit to Russia before being expelled for “counter-revolutionary activities.” Yet for most of his career Rivera lived on commissions from a succession of anti-communist Mexican governments and American capitalists, most notably Edsel Ford (for his murals at the Detroit Institute of Art) and Nelson Rockefeller (for Rockefeller Center in New York). As a member of the socialist artists union, *Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*, whose manifesto was written by the would-be Trotsky assassin, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rivera worked under the strict proviso that no commissions should be accepted for private collections and museums and that all projects must reach the wider community in public spaces. Artists were deemed to be workers and must only earn an average worker’s salary. Caught between his commitment to radical social content and reliance on capitalist largesse, “Rivera thus came under attack from two sides: while conservative critics viewed him as a dangerous left-wing demagogue, many communists considered him mendacious and bourgeois” (35).

For Segal, Rivera is a prime example of an artist who believed that art could be meaningful to

the proletariat even if paid for by capitalists. As he argues, “Rivera had a fascination for modern technology and industry, and believed that the machine would eventually contribute to the realization of a classless society. His frescoes for Ford and Rockefeller attest to this expectation” (40). Consequently, each of Rivera’s murals needs to be evaluated according to its specific historical circumstances. Thus, although the Detroit murals feature workers, engineers, and businessowners working together for common interest, this somewhat “pie in the sky” approach led to attacks from left-wing critics who saw a blatant disregard for workers’ misery following the Wall Street Crash. Indeed, only a few weeks before Rivera started work, five protesting workers were killed by the police during a Communist Party demonstration against the Ford factory. In contrast, Rivera’s epic mural at Rockefeller Center—*Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (1933)—was quickly destroyed when Rivera refused to compromise over his inclusion of Lenin, depicted holding hands with a Russian soldier and an African-American worker. Rivera’s entire career was thus a history of incongruities, an attempt to make revolutionary art for conservative patrons, sometimes compromising (Detroit), sometimes not (New York).

Eschewing Greenbergian formalism in favor of a return to art's storytelling function or fabulation, Kara Walker's silhouettes reference American slave history as a means of constructing a collective memory (what Gilles Deleuze calls "a people to come") outside of the master narrative of both mainstream (read: Eurocentric) history and the art historical canon. This counter-cultural tactic is faced with a number of pitfalls, succinctly noted by Lucy Lippard: minority artists can either comply with the demands of mainstream art, shake off their provincialism and join the cultural elite, or dismiss official art's universalist claims and be pressured by their own community to conform to a static normative cultural identity. The problem is finding a middle ground between the two, which Walker achieves by widening the gap between story and reality through the jumbling of stereotypes, all the better to allow the spectator to construct their own ideological reading by projecting their own views (and identities) into the voids of her silhouettes. As Segal argues, "She does not literally illustrate history but creates a parallel world in which masters and slaves are engaged in an ever-changing continuum of domination and submission, aggression and love, destruction and desire" (103).

Although this has led to unsurprising critique from conservative

critics such as Donald Kuspit—the work is filled with "black rage, resentment and bitterness" (106)—the most vicious attacks have come from within Walker's own community. Thus in the summer of 1997, black artist Betye Saar sent over 200 letters to artists, writers, and politicians, urging them to keep Walker's work out of US museums, accusing her of betraying her slave subjects and selling out to the white art establishment. Similarly, Michael D. Harris accused Walker of suffering from Stockholm syndrome—she continually re-enacts the subjugation of African Americans under slavery to the point that we no longer need the Ku Klux Klan as a white supremacist watchdog. Although Segal doesn't mention Homi Bhabha's writings on stereotyping, they are clearly relevant here, as they disclose the ambivalent nature of Walker's images, caught between fetishism and the Imaginary, between assertion and anxiety, between what is already known and accepted but also what needs to be constantly reasserted (the connections to castration anxiety are obvious). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. rightly states, Walker appropriates stereotypes to free "our people from [the] residual, debilitating effects that the proliferation of those images undoubtedly has had upon the collective unconscious of the African American people" (108).

Finally, Segal discusses the shifting terrain of art produced under communist China and the Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe, both before and after the break-up of the USSR. Until the liberal de-Stalinization under Khrushchev led to an erosion of socialist realism in favor of international influences, especially Pop Art and conceptualism, Soviet cultural affairs during the Cold War were firmly controlled by the iron rule of Andrei Zhdanov, who continued the promotion of the official style by reinstalling the Tsarist art academy and promoting four basic decrees: against the lack of ideology in Soviet literature, bourgeois decadent influences in theater, false originality in music, and degenerate characters in film, which led to the public condemnation of leading Soviet artists such as Sergei Eisenstein, Sergey Prokofiev, and Dimitri Shostakovich. However, as in the cases outlined above, this was not strictly enforced. For example, Picasso (a member of the French Communist Party from 1944) was a key target of Soviet art criticism (his formalism typified the decadence of late capitalism), yet at the Paris Peace Conference of 1949, his peace dove design earned him the Stalin Peace Prize the following year. Thus, “in the international arena, the very symbol of Western cultural decadence was celebrated as an exemplary communist artist”(68).

At first glance, Maoist China seems even more rigid in its approach to anti-bourgeois tendencies in politics and culture. Although in 1956, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai launched “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom”—a year long period of relaxation and liberalization in the arts whereby practitioners were encouraged to experiment and learn from different artistic traditions leading to exhibitions featuring art from Europe (including Matisse and Picasso), Mexico, Japan, and Vietnam—it was quickly followed by Mao’s savage backlash, the “Anti-Rightist Campaign” against bourgeois influences and those who criticized the Communist Party the year before. Indeed, as Segal points out, “Without a doubt, the most cynical aspect of the Anti-Rightist Campaign was the stipulation that all societal organizations—factories, collective farms, universities, art academies, etc.—had to identify 5 percent of their members as counter-revolutionaries. The subsequent disciplinary measures affected hundreds of thousands of artists and intellectuals” (82).

It was only after Mao’s death that the official tropes of the leader’s personality cult and the endless reproductions of his image—where an appropriation or subversion of his likeness could be seen as an act of sacrilege—were finally turned on their head, in much the same way that

Warhol's silkscreens of Mao could be seen as the representation of a pop icon *and* his official branding as a commercial commodity. Thus former Red Guard Wang Keping gave Mao the Buddha's round cheeks in his sculpture, *Idol*, while Li Shan turned Mao into androgynous figure with colored lips and eyebrows. Wang Guangyi placed him behind a grid evoking prison bars, Gao Qiang had him swimming in a red-colored (bloody) Yangtze River, and Sui Jianguo created a series of "empty" Mao jackets—as if to show that a once potent political and cultural symbol had now become a vacuous and hollow shell.

It is this "heavy heritage" turned into an empty signifier that is the subject of Segal's fascinating final chapter, which deals with the fate of public monuments in the former Soviet bloc following the numerous regime changes from 1989–91. "What happened to these monuments," asks Segal, "how did their meaning change in a completely different political environment, which monuments were destroyed, what came in their place?" (14). Also, what do the changes tell us about the construction of new collective identities?

Although Robert Musil once stated that "nothing is as invisible as a public monument" (111), this is no longer true after a regime change. To give a couple of examples, in 1970, Lenin Square in East Berlin

received the gift of a sixty-foot-high sculpture of the Soviet leader by the Russian sculptor Nikolai Tomsky. In 1991, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the borough council voted for its removal. It was cut into 129 pieces and buried in a sand grove in Berlin's Müggelheim district. This led to fierce protests from some of the local population, not because they valued the statue *per se* but because they wanted a voice (and public debate) in the appropriate handling of the newly unified country's East German heritage, as if to recognize that public space in a reunited Germany belongs to the people as a form of transversal, stratigraphic history rather than the upholding of a static status quo. For Segal, monuments are the public art form *par excellence*: they construct a canon of collective memory—timeless and universal—defying changes in regimes and generations.

In addition, monuments aid in the *invention* of tradition, a backwards construction of historical continuity (however fictitious) even though the symbols are brand new. "In a somewhat broader definition," argues Segal, "the term can also be applied to attempts to erase historical contingencies, discontinuities and ruptures from collective memory in order to replace them with a story of unbroken national continuity and progress" (120). For example, after Macedonia gained independence from Yugoslavia,

its quest for a national symbol led to an international dispute with Greece over their right to erect an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great in Skopje as a symbol of national identity. Because the Greeks had their own province of Macedonia, they not only refused to recognize their neighbor's right to the name, they also rejected any attempt to share "their" Alexander with the "Slavic" Macedonians. The fact that neither country can be traced directly back to Alexander as a "founding father" was deemed irrelevant.

While this might seem to be a preposterous storm in a teacup, a case of identity nationalism gone mad, it is a measure of the importance of Segal's book that such examples can also be fruitfully applied outside their specific content. For example, the August 11, 2017, "Unite the Right" Emancipation Park riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, underline the importance of historical symbolism as a determining factor in bolstering an otherwise waning national-racial identity. In this case, neo-Nazi White Nationalists descended on the liberal college town to protest the proposed removal of two symbols of the Confederacy (and by extension, slavery): an equestrian statue of General Robert E. Lee and one of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. In addition to vociferous anti-fascist counterprotests, which led to the

tragic death of Heather Heyer near the downtown pedestrian mall, the event raised a series of questions. Firstly, we have the shameful inappropriateness of President Trump's remarks, whereby he lumped together the neo-Nazi instigators with anti-Nazi counter demonstrators by denouncing violence "on all sides." Secondly, the event showcased the problem of how to deal with "unpopular" cultural symbols in the wake of long-term progressive changes in political consciousness. Should the statues be preserved as a key (albeit unsavory) part of the South's historical legacy, providing a catalyst for progressive discussion and debate, or removed as a form of "airbrushing" symbols of hatred from the history books (which, in turn, as the Charlottesville riots showed us, might spawn even more hatred)?

As a countermeasure, let's consider the example of Monument Avenue in Richmond, the state capital, where similar statues have been preserved but also supplemented by significant markers of difference, so that African-American tennis legend Arthur Ashe, another of Richmond's native sons, joins Lee and Jackson as part of a new racial cartography where public art plays a key role in re-inventing tradition *ex-post facto*, calling into question hitherto unchallenged political projections. The result is not unlike the pink and turquoise painted bust of Lenin rescued from a 1989

demonstration in Leipzig that is featured on the cover of Segal's book, for as Segal concludes, "it is the power of art to call these projections into question. The *Pink Lenin* on the cover of this book immediately shows that the power of politicians to reduce art to propaganda is effectively countered by the power of the creative individual to make propaganda into art again" (136).

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NOTES

1. George A. Dondero, "Modern Art Shackled to Communism" (speech), US House of Representatives, 1949, in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 497.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 3–21.