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David W. Galenson

Excerpt

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Introduction: And Now for Something Completely Different

WE DECLARE: . . .

That the name of “madman” with which it is attempted to gag all innovators should be looked upon as a title of honor.

Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and
Gino Severini, *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, 1910¹

The title immortalized by Monty Python has three distinct meanings in the present context. Most generally, it is a remarkably apt description of the history of visual art in the twentieth century. Innovation has always been the distinguishing feature of important art, but the need for innovation to be conspicuous is a particular hallmark of the modern era, and the pace of change has accelerated within that era. For example the critic Clement Greenberg observed in 1968 that “Until the middle of the last century innovation in Western art had not had to be startling or upsetting; since then . . . it has had to be that.”² Only a year earlier, a critic of very different sensibility, Lucy Lippard, wrote that “Today movements are just that; they have no time to stagnate before they are replaced . . . Younger critics and artists have matured in a period accustomed to rapid change.”³ The twentieth century witnessed artistic changes that had no precedent in the history of our civilization, and it is now time to recognize the century as the Age of Something Completely Different.

The Monty Python effect also neatly characterizes a new model of artistic behavior that was invented early in the twentieth century, and went on to thrive over time. Fittingly, it was the century’s greatest artist, Pablo Picasso, who first devised the practice of changing styles at will, and he was followed by a number of other key figures. The eminent critic

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David Sylvester observed that this was a kind of behavior that could not have existed before the twentieth century, for no artist who produced art in a variety of styles would have been taken seriously in an earlier time. That stylistic promiscuity was practiced by some of the greatest artists of the twentieth century clearly sets it apart from all earlier artistic eras.⁴

Finally, the Monty Python formula describes the nature of the present book. That this is true has come as a surprise to me. I began studying art history a decade ago, after doing research on economic and social history for nearly 25 years, as a member of both economics and history departments. It seemed natural to approach art history with the same blend of quantitative and qualitative techniques that I had learned and used in my earlier research. What surprised me, however, was the hostility I encountered from art historians, who almost unanimously refused to acknowledge the value that quantitative methods could have in their field, and who equally blindly refused to look past these methods to my conclusions. Unlike in the other fields of history I had encountered in my earlier research – not only economic, but also social, demographic, and urban history – quantification has been almost totally absent from art history. On the one hand, this meant that there were questions I could study, and large bodies of evidence I could use, that had effectively not been touched by earlier scholars, and this produced enormous intellectual gains: I have learned fascinating things about modern art that art historians do not know. On the other hand, I had to recognize that I would be treated as a hostile interloper by art scholars, simply because my work didn't look like theirs. I persevered in spite of their unfortunate lack of intellectual curiosity, and it is, therefore, with some residual surprise that I can point out that the use of measurement and systematic generalization in a study of twentieth-century art makes this study something completely different.

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I

The Back Story of Twentieth-Century Art

Making it New

What modern art means is that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself, to express the problems, that there are no settled ways, no fixed approach. This is a painful situation, and modern art is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself.

Louise Bourgeois, 1988¹

It has long been recognized that innovation is the core value of modern art. In 1952, for example, the critic Harold Rosenberg could remark that “the only thing that counts for Modern Art is that a work shall be NEW.”² The recognition of this association first arose roughly a century earlier. In 1855, Charles Baudelaire, the poet and critic who was one of the earliest prophets of modern art, observed that the growing acceptance of change in nineteenth-century society would inevitably have an impact on artists’ practices. He reasoned that the widespread appreciation of the great economic benefits of technological change in industry would lead to a demand for visible progress in all spheres, including art.³ In a celebrated essay published in 1863, “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire proposed no less than a new “rational and historical theory of beauty,” that explained why artistic change must occur. He posited that although beauty did have “an eternal, invariant element,” it also had a “relative, circumstantial element,” that represented the contemporary – “the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions.” The ambitious painter could not simply study the art of the Old Masters, but also had to seek to represent “modernity,” which consisted of “the ephemeral, the fugitive,

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the contingent.” And artists must be concerned not only to choose new contemporary subjects, but to represent them with new techniques, for in the accelerated pace of modern life “there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist.”⁴

Paris became a battleground for advanced art during the late nineteenth century, as artists and the critics who championed them debated the merits of a rapid succession of new movements, from Impressionism and its challengers onward. For example the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto recently compared the Paris art world of the 1880s to the New York art world of the 1980s – “competitive, aggressive, swept by the demand that artists come up with something new or perish.”⁵ Yet throughout these debates, the artists who played the leading roles implicitly accepted Baudelaire’s formulation of the two elements of beauty, recognizing that they must learn from the best art of the past, but that they also must add new developments of their own making. It was with both of these elements in mind, for example, that in 1905 the aged Paul Cézanne explained to a critic that “To my mind one does not put oneself in place of the past, one only adds a new link.”⁶ And as advanced art spread out from Paris into other European capitals, the need for progress was always clearly understood. Thus in Moscow in 1919, the logic of Kazimir Malevich’s declaration of the value of new artistic methods and means echoed Baudelaire’s argument about the origin of the demand for the new in modern art: “Life develops with new forms; a new art, medium and experience are necessary for every epoch. To strive towards the old classical art would be the same as for a modern economic state to strive towards the economy of ancient states.”⁷

Valuing Innovation

Well, thank God, art tends to be less what critics write than what artists make.

Jasper Johns, 1959⁸

Important artists are innovators whose work changes the practices of their successors. The greater the changes, the greater the artist. It is those artists who have the greatest influence on their peers – and the artists of later generations – whose work hangs in major museums, becomes the subject of study by scholars, and sells for the highest prices.

There is a persistent belief, not only among the general public but even among many art scholars, that artistic importance can be manufactured,

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deliberately and artificially, by powerful critics, dealers, or curators. In the short run, prominent critics and dealers can unquestionably gain considerable attention for an artist's work. Yet unless this attention is transformed into influence on other artists, it cannot give that artist an important place in art history. Thus in 1965, Harold Rosenberg, who was himself a leading critic, conceded that "Manipulated fame exists, of course, in the art world." Yet he emphasized that this fame was fleeting: "The sum of it is that no dealer, curator, buyer, critic or any existing combination of these, can be depended upon to produce a reputation that is more than a momentary flurry." Real power in the art world came from only one source: "the single most potent force in the art world is still, in the last analysis, the artist... A painter with prestige among painters is bound to be discovered sooner or later by the tastes of those who determine when an artist deserves to be bought, hired, or chosen as one of the four or fourteen Americans currently entitled to museum fanfare."⁹

In 1989, Sir Alan Bowness, the former director of the Tate Gallery, presented a more formal version of this argument in a lecture titled "The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame." Bowness explained that, contrary to the general supposition that artistic success is arbitrary or due to chance, there are in fact specific conditions of success, which can be precisely described, so that "Artistic fame is predictable." Bowness contended that there are four successive stages on the exceptional artist's path to fame: "peer recognition, critical recognition, patronage by dealers and collectors, and finally public acclaim." The key was the first stage, of peer recognition – "the young artist's equals, his exact artist contemporaries, and then the wider circle of practicing artists." Once artists gave a peer their respect, the other stages would invariably follow: "it is always the artists themselves who are first to recognize exceptional talent."¹⁰

Rosenberg and Bowness both spoke from substantial art world experience – one from years of writing critical assessments of art, the other from years of acquiring and exhibiting art for a great public museum. Thus for example in support of his contention that the artist was the key force in the art world, Rosenberg explained that "It is to him that dealers and collectors, curators and art department heads turn for recommendations. It is his judgments of his colleagues that reviewers listen in on before committing themselves in their columns."¹¹ But long before either Rosenberg or Bowness wrote the words quoted here, it was an artist who identified the most important reason why it is artists who are the key

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judges of artistic success. In 1910 the English painter Walter Sickert, who moonlighted as a critic, explained to an ambivalent London art world that there could no longer be any question as to the importance of the French Impressionists. Sickert analyzed two specific contributions of the group, in composition and the use of color, that led to a clear conclusion: “They have changed the language of painting.” This definitively settled the question of their importance, because of a simple criterion: “Perhaps the importance that we must attach to the achievement of an artist or a group of artists may properly be measured by the answer to the following question: Have they so wrought that it will be impossible henceforth, for those who follow, ever again to act as if they had not existed?”¹² Important artists are those whose work changes the practices of other artists.

Alan Bowness contended that there had been no major change during the modern era in the process he described, and he was correct with respect to its structure – the sequence in which the artist was first recognized by other artists, then by other members of the art world, and finally by the public. Yet one important change did occur involving the speed with which the process took place, as over time a series of critics, dealers, and collectors learned from the successes – and failures – of their predecessors. Each time a modern artist became famous, from Monet, Cézanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin on, one element of the retrospective narratives of their careers that always gained considerable public attention was the early, extended neglect of their work. For all those involved in the art market, whether critics who sought fame by becoming early champions of great artists, or dealers and collectors who sought riches by becoming early agents or patrons, each such episode carried a powerful lesson about unexploited profit opportunities. As time went on it became clear that advanced art was producing a steady stream of important innovators, each of whom was passing through the sequence of stages that Bowness described. As the awareness of this process spread, the search for new and unrecognized innovators intensified. In 1968 the poet John Ashbery, who also moonlighted as an art critic, remarked on the result: “Looking back only as far as the beginning of this century we see that the period of neglect for an avant-garde artist has shrunk for each generation. Picasso was painting mature masterpieces for at least ten years before he became known to even a handful of collectors. Pollock’s incubation period was a little shorter. But since then the period has grown shorter each year so that it now seems to be something like a minute.

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It is no longer possible, or it seems no longer possible, for an important avant-garde artist to go unrecognized.”¹³

Generation Gaps, Part 1

People who were formerly considered revolutionaries have now turned out to be counter-revolutionaries: the same thing happens in art.

Kazimir Malevich, 1920¹⁴

Significant artistic innovators are of course not simply initially unappreciated: they are vigorously attacked. Any innovative new art form necessarily involves the rejection of older values. For practitioners and admirers of those older values, this causes “a sense of loss, of sudden exile, of something willfully denied . . . a feeling that one’s accumulated culture or experience is hopelessly devalued.”¹⁵ It is hardly surprising that those committed to established forms refuse to accept innovations that would make those forms obsolete, and thus cause a devaluation of their own knowledge and skills. This phenomenon is not unique to art, but in scholarship is known as Planck’s principle, named for the physicist Max Planck, who observed that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”¹⁶

Examples of great artists who evolved from youthful revolutionaries into aging reactionaries are not difficult to find. In spite of the fact that some of the most important abstract painters were deeply influenced by his own innovation of Cubism, Pablo Picasso never accepted the validity of abstract art.¹⁷ Picasso’s companion Françoise Gilot reported a remarkable conversation between Picasso and Henri Matisse that occurred in the early 1950s, when the two great painters had both passed the age of 70. After looking at some catalogues Matisse had received from his son Pierre, an art dealer in New York, that reproduced recent paintings by the American Abstract Expressionists, Picasso categorically rejected the work: “As far as these new painters are concerned, I think it is a mistake to let oneself go completely and lose oneself in the gesture. Giving oneself up entirely to the action of painting – there’s something in that which displeases me enormously.” His old rival and friend was more circumspect. Matisse contended that artists couldn’t understand the innovations of their successors, and therefore couldn’t judge them: “One is always

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unable to judge fairly what follows one's own work." He explained that "One can judge what has happened before [one's own work] and what comes along at the same time. And even when a painter hasn't completely forgotten me I understand him a little bit, even though he goes beyond me. But when he gets to the point where he no longer makes any reference to what for me is painting, I can no longer understand him. I can't judge him either. It's completely over my head." Unmoved by Matisse's caution, Picasso dismissed it, together with Jackson Pollock's art, declaring: "I don't agree with you at all. And I don't *care* whether I'm in a good position to judge what comes after me. I'm against that sort of stuff."¹⁸

Others in the art world, including great dealers, are subject to the same forces. Leo Castelli opened an art gallery in New York in 1957, and only a year later presented Jasper Johns' first one-man exhibition, which was an immediate sensation in the art world. Castelli became the leading art dealer of the 1960s and 1970s, representing Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, the major Pop artists – notably Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg – as well as such younger stars as Frank Stella, Richard Serra, and Bruce Nauman. In an interview in 1994, Castelli recalled his dismay when the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition had forced him to recognize the impact of new developments that had been occurring in advanced art, with the increased use of new media, including video, and the prominence of younger German and Italian painters: "I had to accept the fact that the wonderful days of the era I had participated in, and in which I had played a substantial role, were over." He initially could not accept the legitimacy of the newer art: "I felt that what had been there before, during the great era of the sixties, was unbeatable, and that nothing of that kind could succeed the heroic times that we had had here in New York." On reflection, however, he realized that he had to accept the new art, so that he would not repeat the universal error of aging art experts: "There was a certain sadness that I felt about it, but well, with the Whitney show, I realized that I had to change my attitude, and not be rejecting – as people generally are, as you know. Someone like Kahnweiler, for instance, after Picasso and the Cubists felt that there was no good art anymore. I would say that there is a span, a relatively short span, in which somebody really lives seriously with a period of art and after that, all those people – whether it be dealers or art historians or museum directors – after that they don't see what's going on anymore. They reject whatever comes after that. I didn't want to be one of those." In spite of this recognition, however, in 1994 the 87-year-old Castelli confessed that he could not find any artist under the age of 50 whom he

could consider genuinely important: “So for me, Nauman was really the last groundbreaking artist.”¹⁹

Significant innovations inevitably impose losses on those who cherish the values the new innovations reject, but of course they also offer gains. The artistic innovators who are faced with attacks on their new methods understand this. For example, Kazimir Malevich remarked in 1919 that “People always demand that art be comprehensible, but they never demand of themselves that they adapt themselves to comprehension.”²⁰ When artists create significant new forms of art, they almost invariably see their innovations denounced by critics who are judging their new methods by the rules or conventions of earlier art, which the innovators have intentionally discarded. Thus in 1914, Wassily Kandinsky warned against critics who claimed to have found flaws in new art: “one should never trust a theoretician (art historian, critic, etc.) who asserts that he has discovered some objective mistake in a work.” Kandinsky explained that, in ignorance of the purpose of the new work, the detractor was invariably applying outmoded criteria: “*The only thing* a theoretician is justified in asserting is that he does not yet know this or that method. If in praising or condemning a work theoreticians start from an analysis of already existing forms, they are most dangerously misleading.” Ideally a critic would take care to understand the new methods of the innovative new work, then explain it to a wider audience: “he would try to feel how this or that form works internally, and then he would convey his total experience vividly to the public.”²¹

Yet the difficulty of understanding innovative new art has increased over the course of the modern era, because of the increasing prominence of highly conceptual art. Harold Rosenberg argued that a shift occurred with the innovation of Cubism, because it substituted intellectual for aesthetic values: “Cubism changed the relation of art to the public, and, in so doing, changed the nature of the art public itself. It excluded those who merely responded to pictures and replaced them with spectators who knew what made pictures important.”²² Understanding advanced art would subsequently be primarily intellectual rather than visual: “An advanced painting of this century inevitably gives rise in the spectator to a conflict between his eye and his mind; as Thomas Hess has pointed out, the fable of the emperor’s new clothes is echoed at the birth of every modernist art movement. If work in a new mode is to be accepted, the eye/mind conflict must be resolved in favor of the mind; that is, of the language absorbed into the work.”²³ It is perhaps not surprising that Picasso had earlier defended Cubism in almost precisely these terms. Thus

in 1923 he told his friend Marius de Zayas that “The fact that for a long time cubism has not been understood and that even today there are people who cannot see anything in it, means nothing. I do not read English, an English book is a blank book to me. This does not mean that the English language does not exist, and why should I blame anybody else but myself if I cannot understand what I know nothing about?”²⁴

In part, the difficulty at issue here is simply that of assimilating innovative new art in a period of rapid change. Thus Kirk Varnedoe recently reflected that “Early modern society created – and we have inherited – that paradoxical thing: a tradition of radical innovation,” and much earlier, in 1855, Charles Baudelaire’s sardonic sensibility had led him to ponder the bittersweet nature of indefinite progress, wondering “whether proceeding as it does by a stubborn negation of itself, it would not turn out to be a perpetually renewed form of suicide, and whether . . . it would not be like the scorpion which stings itself with its own terrible tail – progress, that eternal desideratum which is its own eternal despair!”²⁵ Yet as the specific terms used by Rosenberg and Picasso suggest, there is something more at stake here, involving the particular qualities of the art in question. This can be highlighted through the introduction of the analytical framework that will provide the theoretical basis for this study as a whole.

The Language of Analysis

Does creation reside in the idea or in the action?

Sir Alan Bowness²⁶

There are two very different types of artistic innovators. These two types are not distinguished by their importance, for both are prominently represented among the very greatest artists. They are distinguished instead by their conception of art – the goals they have for their work – and by the methods they use to produce that work.²⁷

Experimental innovators are motivated by aesthetic criteria: their goal is to present visual perceptions. They are uncertain how to do this, so they proceed tentatively and incrementally. The imprecision of their goals means that experimental artists rarely believe they have succeeded, and their careers are consequently often dominated by the pursuit of a single objective. These artists repeat themselves, returning to the same motif many times, gradually changing their treatment of it in an experimental process of trial and error. Each work leads to the next, and