

# PSYCHOSTRATEGIES

OF AVANT-GARDE ART

DONALD KUSPIT



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United States of America

Typefaces Aries 10.5/14.5 and Futura System QuarkXPress® [ba]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Kuspit, Donald B. (Donald Burton), 1935–  
Psychostrategies of avant-garde art / Donald Kuspit.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-521-45277-5 (hb)

1. Avant-garde (Aesthetics) – Psychological aspects. 2. Art, Modern – 20th  
century. I. Title.

N6490.K874 2000 99-049985

709'.04'0019 – dc21 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45277 5 hardback

Frontispiece: Edouard Manet, *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* (detail), 1862.

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## REASONS FOR ANXIETY AND AMBIVALENCE

*Tradition, Sexuality, the Crowd (The Exemplary Case of Manet)*

*However much we as adults may be able to talk about situations which provoke anxiety, we almost never grasp the character of such situations – certainly the child never grasps them. Hence all additions to the self-dynamism are either imperfect observations of the circumstances that have caused anxiety, and of the successful interventions of the self-system to minimize or avoid repetition of these circumstances; or certain definite inventions by which more complex operations are built out of simpler ones, new things are made by recombining the old. . . . Furthermore, the culture itself is based on no single great general principle that can be grasped even by a genius, but is based instead on many contradictory principles. And it is in education for life in the culture that we have all experienced a great deal of our anxiety.*

HARRY STACK SULLIVAN, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*<sup>1</sup>

*The hitherto predominantly friendly outside world, which bestowed every satisfaction, transformed itself into a mass of threatening perils. There had been good reason for realistic anxiety about everything new.*

SIGMUND FREUD, “Overview of the Transference Neuroses”<sup>2</sup>

*It would seem that in taking appropriate action resulting in reduction of anxiety, the ego also heightens the level of safety feeling. . . . In addition to directly defensive activity aimed at the reduction of anxiety, the ego will attempt to counterbalance the anxiety, so to speak, by heightening the safety level by whatever techniques it has at its disposal. Perhaps the most convenient way of heightening safety feeling is through the modification and control of perception. . . .*

JOSEPH SANDLER, *From Safety to Superego*<sup>3</sup>

**1** Modernism is in decline, we’ve been told, even by such modernists as T. W. Adorno.<sup>4</sup> In part this is a matter of what Peter Bürger calls “modernist conformism,”<sup>5</sup> in part it is a matter of the institutionalization of modernism.<sup>6</sup> It may even be

dead, as some postmodernists suggest.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the contradictions of modernism still inform art, and modernity is far from over, psychologically speaking.

“Mastery is the ground and horizon of the modern episteme,” according to Barnaby Barratt.<sup>8</sup> It is the prerogative of “a subject that is unified, autonomous, rational, self-certain.” Subjects still continue to pursue mastery, unity, autonomy, rationality, self-certainty – modernist ideals. To be a modern subject – self-possessed, master of all it surveys – is to be a hero, as Charles Baudelaire thought.<sup>9</sup> He sought to be one in vain, like most people, although he was one in fantasy, like all people.

The subject becomes modern – masterful – through the “acquisition of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> It imposes “mastery over its ‘objects’” by “acts of establishment” – “naming and predication” – that create a “tradition” of “meaning-practices.” “The modern era” involves the “domination, conquest, and possession” of “a world of things or ‘objects’” that seem “passively waiting to be mastered by means of representational discourse.” Representational mastery results in the “conspicuous technological successes” of Western industrialization. It is they that ultimately legitimate the modern episteme, giving it broad authority and credibility. It even finds its way into art, as Manet’s paintings – officially the first modernist ones<sup>11</sup> – show. (At least at first glance.)

But, as Freud pointed out, the more we know the more anxious we become. Anxiety is inseparable from “everything new,” and the modern is nothing if not new. It brings not only new technology but “new emotions,” as Baudelaire said, and with them a new kind of beauty – “modern beauty.”<sup>12</sup> To be modern in fact means to dispense entirely with the old and to be altogether new – to dispense entirely with tradition and embrace modern life completely, as Baudelaire recommended. But even he could not hide his despair at the loss, as his praise of Eugène Delacroix suggests. “The majority of the public placed” Delacroix “at the head of the *modern* school,”<sup>13</sup> but Baudelaire celebrated his ability to “translate” Dante and Shakespeare – “two other great

painters of human anguish” – “freely.”<sup>14</sup> That Baudelaire admired traditional painters of human anguish, and even commended Delacroix for “alone . . . in our unbelieving age” conceiving religious paintings – the mainstay of traditional painting, and often full of anguish – “which were neither empty and cold . . . nor pedantic,”<sup>15</sup> suggests that anxiety was never far from him, however sublimated into art.

Thus, however outwardly masterful, the modern subject is inwardly threatened by anxiety, sometimes to the extent of being overwhelmed by it. The more the modern subject learns about the world of things, and the more it realizes how small a thing it is in that world, the more it realizes how little mastery it really has, for all its knowledge. Especially mastery of itself: it names, knows, controls – represents, rationalizes, conquers – itself, becoming a meaningful practice – a substantial self – but it continues to feel endangered. For it discovers that it is not the center of the cosmos, nor God-given, nor even in control of its own mind, as Freud noted in his account of the narcissistic injuries that Copernicus, Darwin, and he himself inflicted on humanity by revealing its real – rather than fantasied – place in the scheme of things.<sup>16</sup> For Freud modern advances in knowledge increase narcissistic suffering rather than diminish it. They show that the truth is harsher than expected, and that there is nothing that can console humanity for the traditional illusions it destroys, nothing that can compensate for their loss.

Thus an insidious, irrational, inexpungeable anxiety corrupts modern mastery. It poisons and subverts the modern episteme. Anxiety is hardly new, but it seems more intense and pervasive in the modern era. Like Death and the Devil in Albrecht Dürer’s famous print, it is an unwanted but inescapable companion, for whom there seems no remedy – no God who can liberate people from it by taking it upon himself. One reason has already been stated: there is more knowledge of the world than there has ever been, and with that knowledge comes the awareness that the world is unsafe and unsatisfying – not made for one’s personal benefit. Indeed, the subject comes to

realize that the world is objectively indifferent to its existence, which all but overwhelms it with annihilative anxiety – drives it mad. The Faustian modern subject also goes mad because its ambition knows no limits: it wants to be intellectually omniscient and technologically omnipotent. By its very nature it can never be satisfied with its existing mastery and knowledge. It wants, unrealistically, to be as knowing and masterful as God. Unable to be God, it becomes violently anxious and manically restless. Finally, the modern subject experiences anxiety because its efforts at mastery produce heroic technologies. These new marvels, while designed to make life more bearable and easy and thus to reduce anxiety, ironically induce it because of their newness. Every new mastery of the world arouses anxiety until it can be emotionally mastered. The change it represents must be absorbed and digested: it is the anxiety of the new that prevades modernism, and until the new is humanized it is like to arouse anxiety, however unconsciously.

Thus modernism is trapped in a vicious circle. Anxiety gets the modern subject coming and going: anxious for mastery, mastery makes it more anxious than it was before. The first anxiety stops with mastery, but the second never seems to stop. For the process of coming to terms with the new mastery takes longer and is more difficult than the process of overthrowing the old mastery. To be modern, as Georg Bussmann writes, means “to demolish ‘worn out’ forms,”<sup>17</sup> but the forms that replace them are threatening simply because of their unfamiliarity. To habituate to the new takes time, during which the old lingers in memory, taunting one with its loss.

Thesis: modernist art is a dialectic of mastery and anxiety. It tries to demonstrate mastery, but in doing so it reveals small, telltale – later conspicuous – signs of anxiety. It is completely committed to the modern episteme, but it cannot help showing the anxiety that subverts it. It undoes its own mastery in the process of demonstrating it. Its motto is “make it new” – Ezra Pound’s advice – but the old keeps getting in its way, to the extent that its newness sometimes seem to be nothing more

than a way of working through the old. This is quite clear in Manet's major paintings, as I hope to show. They try to dominate their traditional humanistic subject matter, but it makes Manet doubt himself. Manet's famous irony – he inaugurates its use as a modernist psychostrategy – is the perverse form of his self-doubt.

Modernist art is highly conflicted, and it never quite resolves the conflict, however many models of integration it appears to offer. It conveys a compromised sense of self. On the surface this self seems ultra-modern – securely unified, autonomous, rational, self-certain, to recall Barratt's characterization of its mastery – but on the inside its anxiety undoes its self-mastery. For all its apparent self-determination, the modern subject is less the master of its destiny than it seems to be, because it is always in fear of being engulfed by the modern world – disappearing without a trace in the rush of events and changes that form the modern revolution. It is never more than an unstable compromise between self-certainty and self-doubt, a balancing act between grandiose assertions of autonomy and realistically fearful dependence on the modern environment. It becomes a self by way of its defiance of the modern world that makes it feel like nothing. It is always strange to itself, because it is formed around a feeling of the foreignness of the modern world. Like a pearl, there is a stubborn grain of alienness at its center. In a sense, it is rotten – perpetually irritated – at the core. All its mastery is an attempt to assuage its suffering, so that it can feel secure despite the constant anxiety that threatens to undo it. But it can be self-observant and learn to exploit its doubleness, its oscillation between surface mastery and deep anxiety. It can learn to reverse perspective, to use Wilfred Bion's concept of reversible perspective.<sup>18</sup> This is the true avant-garde achievement – the achievement of the dandy – of Manet at his best.

The modern subject can view its anxiety from the perspective of its mastery, and its mastery from the perspective of its anxiety, thus bridging the split between them without compromising either. The result is a kind of uneasy coexistence, a reluctant



truce: the masterful subject acknowledges its unavoidable anxiety, the anxious subject allows itself the possibility of realistic mastery. This is not integration, but it is the next best thing: aesthetic tension. It affords a minimally secure sense of self, for it cognitively reconciles what remains emotionally irreconcilable.

It is hard to sustain the reconciliation, for it is a numinous proposal rather than an act of establishment, to recall Barratt's term, which is why authentic avant-garde art – dandy art, as it were – is always rare. A reversed perspective is unstable; it keeps wanting to right itself. There has to be a right perspective, common sense declares. One can think the unthinkable, link the unlinkable, normalize the abnormal only for a fleeting imaginative instant. Then everyday rightness reasserts itself, declaring reversible perspective an anomaly. Reversible perspective can never be a secure foundation for art, for it is inherently catastrophic and absurd. Thus reversible perspective deteriorates into “dynamic equilibrium,” to use the term that authentic avant-garde artists used – artists who, however briefly, realized the avant-garde idea of art, which is inherently transient and unstable – to misunderstand what they were doing and why they were doing it.

Can one say that it is the anxious subject, rather than its masterful counterpart, that is the truly modern subject? It was the “traditional, academic, and classical . . . art of the past” that avant-garde art attempted to “liquidate,” to use Renato Poggioli's word,<sup>19</sup> that posited a unified, autonomous, rational, self-certain subject, not avant-garde art. The self it suggests seems like nothing so much as the dregs of traditional mastery. Modern mastery is fragmentary because modern anxiety is all but overwhelming. Fortunately, avant-garde art never does completely liquidate traditional art, for without its ghostly fragments the avant-garde artist would not even have a fragmentary sense of self.

John Gedo writes that “the history of western painting since 1400 is a steady progression in the degree of subjectivity permitted the artist.”<sup>20</sup> The climax of this increase in subjectivity – certainly its most visible consequence – is “the dissolu-

tion of object-representation in modern art” described by Michael Balint.<sup>21</sup> He argues that the representation of the object becomes an occasion for a display of the artist’s subjectivity. For him the purpose of modern art is not to represent the object but the subject, however difficult it may be to do so. Thus the object is “important only in so far as it has stimulated moods, feelings, emotions, thoughts, images, phantasies, ideas in the artist.” But Balint misses the point that the object evokes this great variety of subjective responses – more particularly, “highly [unstable] narcissistic states” – because it is more disturbing in modernity than it was in the past. This is partly because there are fewer culturally given ways to contain the anxiety the object invariably arouses than there once were. There are fewer myths to support and reassure the subject in its struggle with the object. We have become too enlightened – disillusioned – to believe in them. Thus the more analytic, knowledgeable, and realistic we are about the world, the more anxiety its objects arouse. (Myths are systematically sustained narratives that give coherence to the world they deal with, thus functioning as emotional safety nets, however cognitively and descriptively inadequate we know them to be. But they do all acknowledge the world’s contradictoriness.)

No doubt this is the opposite of what one expects to occur, but it does occur because analytic knowledge eventually destroys its object, disintegrating it into a composite of facts and ideas that are accorded more general credibility than the object itself. William Wordsworth’s “we murder to dissect” is the paradox of modern knowledge. It is also the paradox of modern art, as Balint indicates, probably because art is the frontier of the individual’s adaptive response to the environment and in fact epitomizes creative adaptation. Thus modern art indicates that the modern individual must invent his own subjective way of dealing with anxiety because there are no culturally reliable, let alone universally credible, ways of doing so. We are all on our own; we must all be avant-garde; we must all be self-innovative or not survive emotionally.

It must be emphasized that since the Renaissance artists have not deliberately set out to explore the terra incognita of subjectivity. Instead, they erratically responded to the increase in anxiety generated by the development of the modern episteme that effectively began in the Renaissance. Anxiety increased with the attempt to fulfill in reality the fantasy of omnipotent mastery that is at the core of the modern episteme. The modern artist has no special gift for introspection, giving him unique ability to plumb the psychic depths. He is not particularly curious about his subjective nature and determined to understand it systematically, like an ambitious new Leonardo. (The old one was clearly caught up in the modern episteme of mastery of objective nature.) Instead, the modern artist's consciousness of his subjectivity follows from his sensitivity to the paradoxical loss of "object-ivity" that results from the peculiar way the modern episteme changes the world of objects. Thus "emphasis on the subjective processes in the mind of the artist seems to be universal in modern art," but the point is that it is the result of the artist's mobilization of his subjectivity in defense of himself against the estranging anxiety the modern insistence on absolute mastery arouses in everyone.

Balint's psychodynamic account of modern art implies that the traditional art it opposed respected the object more than it did. The traditional artist accepted the object's autonomy and separateness, showing that he was more self-certain than the modern artist. He was able to be objective because he was integrated. He admired the object's wholeness because he himself was whole. In contrast, the modern artist's intense subjectivity reflects his feeling of uncertainty, even inadequacy, which he projects into the object. If it is no more than a narcissistic trope, as Balint suggests, then its dissolution enacts his own.

Thus in doubting and liquidating the object, the modern artist shows his self-doubt and feeling of being liquidated by the world. He projects his own dissolution into the object, defending himself against narcissistic injury by injuring the object. He destroys the world of things because he feels like a

thing destroyed by the world. He destroys reality because he feels unreal.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the traditional artist, who rarely lost touch with objective reality, even when he embedded it in religious myth, was more able to master anxiety than the modern artist. He understood that one could not have a strong sense of self without a strong relationship to the object. Indeed, he understood that the self is a relationship with the object, and the more reciprocal the relationship, the more authentic the sense of self and object.<sup>23</sup>

If this is correct, then the avant-garde's opposition to tradition is the key to it. It is time to reassess this opposition, which has become a formulaic cliché every self-respecting artist claims as his own in order to win his avant-garde spurs.<sup>24</sup> This is all the more necessary because in postmodernity it has become "avant-garde" to be "traditional." The return of the repressed tradition has been in fact a regular occurrence in the history of avant-garde art.<sup>25</sup> Many avant-garde pioneers yearned for tradition.<sup>26</sup> Should we dismiss such emotional backsliding simply as sentimentality and nostalgia, or does it express their feeling that something irreplaceable was irreversibly lost with the abandonment of tradition? Did they come to think of their triumph over tradition as a pyrrhic victory? They suggest the truth of Adorno's assertion that while the avant-garde "negates tradition," extending "the bourgeois principle of progress to the field of art," it also "surrender[s] itself to that which it opposes."<sup>27</sup> Its oppositionality and criticality thus lose credibility. They seem less convincing than they once did. As Adorno writes, "avant-garde" degenerates into a "label . . . monopolized by whoever happened to consider himself most progressive," conjuring up "comical associations of aging youth."<sup>28</sup>

**2** Even Edouard Manet, the first dandy of modern painting, found tradition inescapable. He had a perverse, peculiarly parasitic, even paranoid fascination with it: irresistibly drawn to it, but also threatened by it, he invariably violated it. He was not so much opposed to tradition as he was ambivalent about it.

His desperate struggle to be independent of it acknowledged its power over him, all the more so because he never quite succeeded in becoming independent of it. He looked at tradition from the point of view of modernity and found it absurd and pretentious, but he looked at modernity from the point of view of tradition and found it lacking and inhumane. Thus his reversible perspective: he could not live with or without tradition. His self-contradictory relationship to tradition – he evoked it even as he defied it – is fundamental to his art. Indeed, it is paradigmatic for avant-garde art, its dialectically negative mode of advance, as it were. It is the flaw in Manet's modernity, but it discloses the inner meaning the modern world had for him. It shows that he is not exactly the "revolutionary" his contemporary Armand Silvestre thought him to be.

Manet, Silvestre wrote in 1887, "asserted in painting, as Baudelaire did in poetry, a sense of modernity which may have been widely aspired to but which had not yet seen the light of day."<sup>29</sup> "One must be of one's time, draw what one sees, and not worry about fashion," Manet himself stated.<sup>30</sup> He was ridiculing Diderot "for asking the painters of his day not to depict certain hats because they would go out of style."<sup>31</sup>

But more than fashion was at stake, for to be of one's time was to abandon tradition, and it was not yet clear that one could have a credible art without tradition. However modern, art still needed to be anchored in tradition to be legitimate. Tradition had authority, which modern art needed for social if not creative reasons. Nor was it clear that to oppose tradition would automatically confer originality. Was it a creative breakthrough into modernity, or was it gratuitously destructive of tradition? Is it creative to obliterate or desecrate the achievements of the past, or is it nihilistic and emotionally regressive? They may not speak to the present, but that does not necessarily mean they are obsolete: one may not want to hear what they have to say to the present, so one may not allow them to speak in the present. This is the case with Manet, as I hope to show – the reason why, despite all his efforts to censor and

obscure Renaissance art, it remains the foundation of his art, for its mastery also represents a mastery of life and love that Manet was incapable of, and that seemed impossible if not preposterous in the modern world. Manet was all the more antagonistic to traditional painting because it embodied his wish for happiness, which he knew he could never fulfill under modern conditions.

From Manet's attempt to erase Renaissance painting through Marcel Duchamp's attempt to erase Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to Robert Rauschenberg's successful erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning – it took a century of modernity to go all the way – this question has haunted avant-garde art. Are these simply terroristic acts of destruction, or do they have a creative point? Is avant-garde opposition to traditional art opposition for its own malevolent sake, or is it a creative advance beyond traditional art? Is it a critical act of revolutionary reassessment, or is it a blanket dismissal of what it does not comprehend? Did the avant-garde artists recognize that traditional art was irrelevant in the modern lifeworld, or was it the scapegoat for their own feeling of being irrelevant in it? Was it the usual rebellion of youth against age, or was it the beginning of an aggressive new spirit in art, which had to erase the dead letter of the old art? Modern art's scorched-earth policy toward traditional art, epitomized by Manet's painting, reduced it to a ghost of itself, but the ghost continued to haunt modern art and proved to be the source of its inner life.

Manet knew that drawings of contemporary life would not be considered real art unless they were made in a traditional style. The timely needed the support of the tried and true to give it credibility. At the same time he knew that what Silvestre called "a sense of modernity" could not be achieved simply by describing contemporary life. It involved understanding what it meant to be modern. This was difficult to grasp and articulate. The modern world looked different than the traditional world, but was it different on the inside? People wore different hats than they once did, but had modernity really made them dif-

ferent? What did it mean to be modern on the inside, not just modern on the outside? Was there a difference between the traditional attitude toward life and the modern attitude? Manet struggled to understand and convey the difference by comparing traditional art and modern reality in his paintings. He superimposed the modern on the traditional, creating a kind of contest between them. Modern reality seemed to win and dominate, but traditional art was hardly a submissive loser, for his reference to it gave his paintings a mysterious “gravity” and depth. Indeed, it supplied the skeletal substructure for his modern scenes. Manet was clearly torn between modernity and tradition: his modern paintings were a subliminal homage to traditional painting as well as a parody of it. However suspicious of tradition, he was drawn to its human self-image, to use George Frankl’s term.<sup>32</sup> It may have been a necessary foil to the human self-image of modernity, but he also wanted to believe in the ideal human beings tradition depicted, even if he could not. He wanted to trust the vision of the great traditional masters, however full of distrust he was.

Thus Manet’s break with tradition is not what it seems on the surface. He satirized it, as though to exorcise it, but it continued to possess him. His notorious *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863, may be an “irreverent take-off” of Giorgione’s *Fête Champêtre*, c. 1510 (Manet regarded the painting as a Giorgione, which is why the reference to him will be retained in the following discussion), and the equally notorious *Olympia*, also painted in 1863, may be a “parody” of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, 1528.<sup>33</sup> But, however perversely, Manet’s disrespectful reprises acknowledge the immortality of these masterpieces. They remain models, however theatricalized. However distorted, they have the instant recognizability of historical treasures. To mock them is nonetheless to remember them, centuries after they were made. It is no mean feat to escape oblivion. For all their oppressive familiarity, we are not yet indifferent to them. Manet envied their classical status. However ironically he treated them – and their respectability – he knew that his art could not transcend them. It could only render them

meaningless. But does it do that? How can it be called an advance on them when it depends on them? How can it be said to render them inconsequential when it uses them as its basis? Indeed, we must ask whether Manet's modern beauty, to recall Baudelaire's term, negates the traditional beauty of Giorgione and Titian, or perversely reaffirms it.

Manet is ambivalent about art history: his paintings are "rich with art-historical references,"<sup>34</sup> but also a "counterestablishment manifestation," "at war with [the] authority" of the art-historical establishment.<sup>35</sup> There is more to this ambivalence than meets the eye: it is emotional as well as intellectual, personal as well as cultural. It is no accident that Giorgione and Titian are Manet's targets: their paintings had to have raised sexual issues for him. They romanticize love as an ideal, tender relationship, while he aggressively uncovers its physical reality, its raw sexual core. He seems to despise love, replacing it with lust.

The difference between the traditional Venetian masters and the modern Parisian master is not simply technical – the difference between soft-focus, painterly painting and painting with sharply focused photo-realist features – but a profound difference in feeling and attitude. Manet's ambivalence about Giorgione and Titian reflects his ambivalence about erotic experience. It also clearly reflects his ambivalence about woman, who figures so prominently – nakedly – in the paintings of Giorgione and Titian as well as his own, however different the nakedness. "Curiously enough," wrote Manet's contemporary Pierre Prins, "the presence of a woman, any woman, would set [Manet] right again"<sup>36</sup> after he had gone "into hiding, like a sick cat, in his own words," which he often did during the illness of his last years.<sup>37</sup> But the cold stare of Olympia and of the seated naked woman in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (she is modern, while the woman bending in the background is traditional) – a Medusa stare that turns one into a thing – sets nothing right. Unless, for Manet, the denial of his subjectivity felt right, for it coincided with his sense of modernity, that is, his feeling of impotence and helplessness in the modern.