

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46922-7 - The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist
Donald Kuspit
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The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist examines the philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic premises for avant-garde art and its subsequent evolution and corruption in the late twentieth century. Arguing that modernist art is essentially therapeutic in intention, both toward self and society, Donald Kuspit further posits that neo-avant-garde, or postmodern, art at once mocks and denies the possibility of therapeutic change. As such, it accommodates the status quo of capitalist society, in which fame and fortune count above everything else. Stripping avant-garde art of its missionary, therapeutic intention, neo-avant-garde art converts it into a cliché of creative novelty or ironic value for its fashionable look. Moreover, it destroys the precarious balance of artistic narcissism and social empathy that characterizes modern art, tilting it cynically toward the former.

Incorporating psychoanalytic ideas, particularly those concerned with narcissism, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* offers a reinterpretation of modern art history. Exemplary avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists, including Picasso, Malevich, Warhol, and Beuys, and such movements as surrealism, expressionism, and appropriationism, are examined in depth to demonstrate their therapeutic aims and intentions, or lack thereof. The varieties of artistic expression and their attendant ideas are viewed in light of Kuspit's basic thesis, providing a fresh understanding of developments in the art of this century.

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FOR JUDITH

A charismatic group consists of a dozen or more members, even hundreds or thousands. It is characterized by the following psychological elements: members (1) have a *shared belief system*, (2) sustain a high level of *social cohesiveness*, (3) are strongly influenced by the group's *behavioral norms*, and (4) impute *charismatic or sometimes divine power* to the group or its leadership.

Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*

The first characteristic process [of ideological totalism] is “milieu control,” which is essentially the control of communication within an environment. If the control is extremely intense, it becomes an internalized control – an attempt to manage an individual’s inner communication. . . . A second general characteristic of totalistic environments is . . . “mystical manipulation” or “planned spontaneity.” It is a systematic process that is planned and managed from above (by the leadership) but appears to have arisen spontaneously within the environment. . . . The next two characteristics of totalism, “the demand for purity” and the “cult of confession,” are familiar. The demand for purity . . . calls for radical separation of pure and impure, of good and evil, within an environment and within oneself. . . . it ties in with the confession process. Ideological movements . . . take hold of an individual’s guilt and shame mechanisms to achieve intense influence over the changes he or she undergoes. . . . The next three patterns . . . to ideological totalism are the “sacred science,” the “loading of the language,” and the principle of “doctrine over person.” . . . in our age something must be scientific as well as spiritual to have a substantial effect on people. . . . The term “loading the language” refers to a literalization of language – and to words or images becoming God. . . . The pattern of doctrine over person occurs when there is a conflict between what one feels oneself experiencing and what the doctrine or dogma says one should experience. . . . Finally . . . perhaps the most general and significant of these characteristics, is . . . the “dispensing of existence.” . . . Impediments to legitimate being must be pushed away or destroyed. One placed in the second category of not having the right to exist can experience psychologically a tremendous fear of inner extinction or collapse. However, when one is accepted, there can be great satisfaction of feeling oneself part of the elite.

Robert Jay Lifton, “Cults: Religious Totalism and Civil Liberties”

CONTENTS

- 1 Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: From the Pursuit of the Primordial to the Nihilism of Narcissism 1**
 - 2 Preliminary Therapeutic Attitude: The Provocative Object as a Path to Primordially – Picasso and Duchamp 28**
 - 3 The Geometrical Cure: Art as a Matter of Principle – Mondrian and Malevich 40**
 - 4 The Expressive Cure: Art as the Recovery of Primal Emotion – Expressionism and Surrealism 53**
 - 5 Fame as the Cure-All: The Charisma of Cynicism – Andy Warhol 64**
 - 6 Enchanting the Disenchanted: The Artist’s Last Stand – Joseph Beuys 83**
 - 7 The Decadence or Cloning and Coding of the Avant-Garde: Appropriation Art 100**
- Notes 114**
Index 173