

The Guarantee of the Medium

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The contemporary avant-garde (Conceptual Art, Installation, Postmodernism) has jettisoned the idea of medium specificity – so important to modernism. There is another vanguard, however, that finds a new way to exploit the role of the medium for securing the meaning of the work of art through the modernist strategy of medium-specificity. This essay examines this latter for the practice of the French artist, Sophie Calle, the American, Ed Ruscha, the South-African, William Kentridge, and the Swiss, Christian Marclay.

The Dialectics of the Avant-Garde

The military associations of the term *avant-garde* have always linked it to destruction, to a pitched battle between a younger generation of artists and their academic elders—as a youthful resistance to order, to decorum, to rule. Nonetheless, the two most important theorists of the *avant-garde*—Peter Bürger and Clement Greenberg – obscure this oppositional image by showing that for all its claims to combat, the *avant-garde* is really dependent upon the very order and hierarchies of aesthetic tradition.

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger writes a dialectical history in which it is only the emergence of an autonomous realm for art in the late 19th century (such as the museum, the art market, the private collection) – institutionalizing what is known as *l'art pour l'art* or “art for art’s sake” – that made it possible for vanguard art to target the *fine arts* by identifying them as withdrawal – escapist or elitist – from lived reality. The *avant-garde*’s opposition consisted of contesting the very idea of art’s autonomy or purity – its effete separation from the everyday or, as Kant would say, the “purposive.” The form of the *avant-garde*’s opposition was thus determined by the very condition it opposed, Bürger argues, such that an embrace of the commercial or the instrumental would liberate vanguard work from

Tiina Arppe, Timo Kaitaro & Kai Mikkonen 2009

Writing in Context: French Literature, Theory and the Avant-Gardes
L'écriture en contexte : littérature, théorie et avant-gardes françaises au XX^e siècle

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 5.
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 139–145.

this claustrophobically separate sphere.¹ Duchamp's readymades were the perfect embodiment of a contestation of fine art and its autonomy. The commercial object, with its functional connotations (bottle rack, shovel, curry comb, urinal) laid siege to the separation of art and life.

The Logic of the Medium

For his part, Clement Greenberg tied the practice of the avant-garde to a notion of authenticity, a contestation of the mere semblance of art so widespread in popular culture. The guarantee of such authenticity was understood by Greenberg as the irrefutable materiality of the individual medium – painting's as the flatness of the picture plane; sculpture's as the solidity of the free-standing volume.

The readymade thumbs its nose at the medium and its guarantee of the "purity" of the work that stays within the limits of the medium's logic. Clement Greenberg, the relentless advocate of medium specificity, voiced his opposition to work such as Duchamp's. As he put it in "Modernist Painting":

What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art... Thus would each art be rendered 'pure' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.²

Greenberg dismissed Duchamp as the great obfuscator who cannily blurred the distinction between art and non-art.³ By the 1960s Greenberg's distress was focused on Duchamp and the rampant implosion of the separate mediums:

The different mediums are exploding: painting turns into sculpture, sculpture into architecture, engineering, theater, environment, "participation." Not only the boundaries between the different arts, but the boundaries between art and everything that is not art, are being obliterated. At the same time scientific technology is invading the visual arts and transforming them even as they transform one another. And to add to the confusion, high art is on the way to becoming popular art, and vice versa.⁴

1 Peter Bürger 1974. *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp.

2 Clement Greenberg 1955. Modernist Painting. In John O'Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 86.

3 See Clement Greenberg 1955. Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties. In John O'Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press. 292-303.

4 *Ibid.*, 292.

This text, condemning avant-garde attitudes in 1969, marks both Greenberg's and art's mutation in the decades since 1939, when in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", Greenberg had celebrated the avant-garde as the singular defense against the corruption of taste by the spread of kitsch's "simulacrum of genuine culture".⁵

The spectacular rise of Duchamp's reputation was a function of the success of Conceptual Art during the 1960s as it consolidated its own attack on the "purity" of the medium, applauding Duchamp's straddle between work (the Large Glass) and text (the Green Box).

Joseph Kosuth wrote "Art after Philosophy," the manifesto of Conceptual Art, as a celebration of Duchamp's cashing in of specific mediums, since the readymade, he reasoned, raises the problem of what establishes art's condition *in general*, instead of the *specific* one of the individual medium: "Being an artist now" he said,

means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a *kind* of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art.⁶

Our Post-Medium Condition

As medium specificity fell out of fashion, it seemed retrograde for artists to attempt it or for critics to praise it. Art had, it seemed, entered a "post-medium condition" in which the inauthentic seemed more daring and up-to-date than the exploration of limits and materials.

This essay is a consideration of such a "post-medium condition" from the vantage of those few artists who have resisted its seductive pretense to displace the avant-garde's relation to modernism. I will be arguing that these hold-outs against the "post-medium condition" constitute the genuine avant-garde of our day in relation to which the post-medium practitioners are nothing but pretenders.

5 Clement Greenberg 1955. Avant Garde and Kitsch. In John O'Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 1: *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 12.

6 Joseph Kosuth 1973. Art after Philosophy. In Gregory Battcock (ed.) *Idea Art*. New York: Dutton, 82. (First published in *Studio International* [October and November 1969]).

The “Technical Support” – a New Form of the Medium

Implicitly acknowledging the fact of postmodernism’s declaration of the death of painting as well as sculpture, the artists who still find the relay of some sort of medium necessary to the very possibility of artistic signification, need to replace the traditional supports of the now outmoded aesthetic mediums, such as oil on canvas, plaster on metal armature, or carved image on stone block. To this end they have tended to adopt what needs to be called “technical supports” for which commercial genres or objects might serve as the backbone (or undergirding) of their practice. To give just one example, we might think of the work of Ed Ruscha, the Los Angeles artist and photographer, who could be said to have adopted the automobile as his works’ “technical support.” His books, such as *26 Gasoline Stations*, and *34 Parking Lots*, as well as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, acknowledge the car as the underlying matrix of his production. In a manner similar to the way traditional mediums operate – establishing the rules of the procedures a specialized guild will follow – the technical support can be seen to generate its own specific rules, as Ruscha admits when he says: “I used to drive back to Oklahoma four or five times a year, and I began to feel that there was so much wasteland between L.A. and Oklahoma that somebody had to bring the news to the city. Then I had this idea for a book title – *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* – and it became like a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow.”⁷

Another example of a technical support is William Kentridge’s use of animation for his work, which he calls “Drawings for Projection.” Avoiding the traditional graphic medium, Kentridge methodically alters a charcoal drawing, taking a single filmic frame of it at each stage of the alteration. When the celluloid strip is run through a movie projector, the drawing seems to transmute itself into the movement familiar to us as animation. Just as modernist artists are committed to a self-reference along with the ostensive figuration of the work that figures-forth the nature of the medium they are using, Kentridge devises images of his own technical support – as when, in *History of the Main Complaint*, he shows his protagonist driving a car through the rain with the car’s windshield wipers imaging-forth the act of erasure: the procedure of his own access to animation.

The Support of Reportage

Ruscha and Kentridge are not the only members of the contemporary avant-garde to approximate medium specificity by adopting a technical support. Another is the French artist Sophie Calle, whose technical support could be said to be

7 Edward Ruscha 2002. *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*. Edited by Alexandra Schwartz. Cambridge (MA): M.I.T. Press. 232.

investigative journalism. One example is her work “A Woman Vanishes,” which documents the story of a guard at the Centre Pompidou stationed in her exhibition “M'a tu vu?” during its run at the museum. This guard, fascinated by Calle's work began to imitate her by following visitors to the exhibition and taking their photographs, by stealth. When a fire breaks out in her apartment, the police find the charred remains of her negatives and prints, but the young woman herself has disappeared. “A Woman Vanishes” is the documentary reportage of this incident. “The Address Book,” was actually published in a newspaper – *Libération* – as Calle systematically interviewed the entries listed in an abandoned address book which she found by chance. Asking about the friend to whom the book belonged, in order to construct a fantasy picture of its unseen and thus unknown owner, she daily published the results of her investigation, in *Libération's* pages. Her 2007 entry as the French representative at the Venice Biennale, called “Love Letter,” is a reprise of “The Address Book.” Built around the letter she receives from a lover, breaking off their relationship, she asks 104 women, some famous actresses – among them Jeanne Moreau, Natalie Dessay, Arielle Dombasle – to read the letter and to give their impressions of its writer. Another respondent is a marriage counselor who admires the man's brutal capacity for dismissal.

Leviathan

The American novelist, Paul Auster, made Calle herself into Maria, the central character of his novel *Leviathan*. Here, in *Leviathan*, Auster adopts Calle's own medium in that his narrator adopts her interview technique to construct a “true” picture of its hero, Benjamin Sachs, missing because blown up in a roadside explosion. When this narrator and sleuth discovers that, at the time of his death, Sachs had been writing *Leviathan*, his latest novel, the novel figures-forth Calle's technical support when Auster's narrator names his own investigative dossier, the one we are even then reading, *Leviathan*.

Singin' in the Rain

The Swiss artist, Christian Marclay, joins this avant-garde-of-the-medium by choosing as his technical support synchronous sound, the technique invented in 1929 to transform silent movies into “talkies.” *Video Quartet* can be said to be his masterpiece as it horizontally juxtaposes four DVD screens each the field of a compilation of clips of scenes from famous movies, such as Janet Leigh's scream from *Psycho* or Ingrid Bergman's meditative singing of “You Must Remember This,” from *Casablanca*.

Like the other artists I have been discussing, Marclay figures-forth his technical support by representing either the fact of its synchrony or by imaging the history of the technique by reverting to silence. Many of the clips present famous pianists in utmost intensity, their arms flailing over the keyboard. But at one point, the leftmost screen is filled with cockroaches falling onto the keys and running, soundlessly, over the ivory. Instantly, the viewer is transported back to 1929 and cinematic silence, not yet transformed into sound. Synchrony is figured forth within certain clips as in the shot from *Westside Story* where each member of the gang is clicking his fingers in sync with the others. Sometimes Marclay constructs his own synchrony as when Marilyn Monroe from *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* snaps her fan shut at the very instant when the Japanese actress on the contiguous screen does the same.

Perhaps sync sound is more easily grasped as a “technical support” than the others I’ve been discussing. The thin band of audio tape that runs along one celluloid edge of the movie’s film strip is obviously the support for the image’s burst into sound. That Marclay chooses to represent this support by images either of silence – for example a clip of bare feet moving over the pedals of an organ – or of synchrony, and that he does so throughout his work, joins him to Ruscha with his matrix of the automobile or Calle with her underlying recourse to reportage and journalism.

I have been presenting the reasons for seeing this continuation of working with a specific medium which the works themselves “figure-forth” (or represent) as the latest embodiment of the avant-garde, which, *pace* Joseph Kosuth and “postmodernism,” lives on.

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