

ART CHRONICLE

The Abuse of Clemency: Clement Greenberg's Reductive Aesthetic

THE AMERICAN critic Clement Greenberg in a recent essay¹ has made an informal list of rules delineating what a contemporary picture should look like and how it should be made. This list, remarkable for its detail and specificity, might have received a wry reception in other times. In our own, his radically reductive aesthetic has been and is widely influential. Its acceptance says something interesting about present day picture making and its public. Here are some of Greenberg's directives.

1. "Openness . . . is the only direction for high pictorial art in the near future." Openness, in Greenberg's usage, is achieved when attention to the sensation of pure color is totally undisturbed. Explicitly, there should be no interest in drawing or in paint surface; no great variation in color value, not too small a canvas or too many colors on it—and certainly no reference external to the materials themselves, either representational or expressive. He justifies this focus on "openness" by saying that it "is the quality that seems most to exhilarate the attuned eye of this time."

2. "Flatness and the delimitation of flatness" are the only pictorial conventions that remain essential. Mr. Greenberg sees the art history of the last hundred years as the history of easel painting becoming flat—a continuing reaction against corrupted, exhausted illusionism. The rendering of any spatial dimensions beyond those of the materials, therefore, is proscribed.

3. Relevant works are to be conceived beforehand and then executed impersonally. Conception and only conception gives value to a work of art. It consists, says Mr. Greenberg, in choosing, placing and relating the components of the picture. Manual skill is the villain, although it was once the "vessel of inspiration." Now it is "too easily copied, too accessible"—and therefore no longer a vehicle for originality.

There are several difficulties—the arbitrary narrowness of the list itself, its dependence on Greenberg's speculative reading of art history and his apparent plans for it. Evidently he aspires to a more central role than the critic's traditional one of discussing the quality and place of finished works. He believes that he can tell with precision where pictures of quality will come from next and what they will look like. (It is ironic that even the unlikely detailed fulfillment of his predictions would not support his theory. For one could not know if the event of its fulfillment were due to the theory's correctness, or to Mr. Greenberg's substantial influence and advocacy.)

Contemporary artists have seen almost every historical approach to picture making juxtaposed in museums and photographs. It requires a certain heroic presumption in a critic to single out one strain and pronounce it alone relevant. In doing so, Greenberg places the critic ahead of the artist's work. He appears to see history as unfolding in regular patterns that the critic is first to discern and analyze, and which, ideally, the artist is bound to follow. In essence, historical forces are working themselves out through the relatively passive medium of the painter's hand, and will continue to do so in a predictable way. Painters will pursue ever narrower, more completely self-referential matters until everyone grows tired and turns away—and there is no avenue of escape.

Strict and detailed determinism of any sort is difficult to defend when even relatively simple phenomena are at stake. Here, even volumes of closely reasoned analysis (which have not appeared) could not alter the fact that such a deterministic scheme is simply untenable without gross and emasculating simplifications. Art is more vulnerable to historical contingency than to historical necessity. Any work that is so predictable as to lie clearly within a simple historical trend, prescribable in advance, is probably worth missing. In this sense, Mr. Greenberg does a disservice to those artists he admires by suggesting unintentionally that their works are not intrinsically creative, when in fact, some of them are.

Greenberg seems to have mistaken one rather incomplete historical construct for reality and then derived from that notion the only next step possible. His theory, if well developed, might in principle, yield a satisfactory prediction of what will be bought and sold for the next twenty years, although the unpredictable turns of complex reality make even that unlikely. But Greenberg is talking about the fundamental qualities of creative work . . . with a theory derived from considerations quite external to the process of creation. He seems to hope that something more fundamental will be delivered by a theory based on considerations less fundamental—to explain and then limit the capacity for creation by reference to an idiosyncratic reading of art history.

We see the central difficulty best when we try to imagine Greenberg's reaction to the appearance, tomorrow morning, of an authentic artistic figure who did not conform to his specifications. He might ignore him, as his theory ignores, for example, the whole expressionist strain in modern art. Or he might deprecate his importance by comparison with his more ideologically sound contemporaries—stigmatizing him for the presence of sectarian, ritual imperfections in his work. Or he might "reinterpret" the work as consistent with the aesthetic it contradicts.

None of these adequately deal with surprising, unpredictable reality. Reality includes, perhaps, the artist's impulse to extend the scope of Greenberg's "attuned eye of this time"—or re-educate it, or even mock it. Although he offers the artist a chance to be aggressively negative (by rejecting each "irrelevant" artistic means in turn), he does expect a certain docility before this "attuned eye."

One might expect a critic to recoil from the destruction of his host. In Greenberg's view however, such considerations may be secondary. He has called the very future of painting problematic. Clearly it could be the more so if his views were widely accepted. It is dismaying to find then, that in the past few years, his special taste has measurably altered the public view of painting and its possibilities.

Greenberg has, in various essays,² mentioned historical or cultural justifications for his stringent criteria, demonstrating his idea of the intellectual roots of art. Here are three.

1. "The overall may answer the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted."
2. Nineteenth century empiricism has "generally become stricter and perhaps narrower. Aesthetic sensibility has shifted accordingly."
3. "It may express a monist naturalism for which there are neither first nor last things, and which recognizes as the only ultimate distinction that between the immediate and the unimmediate."

These statements offer insufficient technical apology for Greenberg's prescriptions, even granting his point-of-view. The statement about hierarchical distinctions, for example, could have an infinity of meanings. Even granting that something called hierarchical distinction has actually been exhausted, perhaps we need new ones, or perhaps their hierarchical character is irrelevant. Would a shift in aesthetic sensibility create in an artist the obligation to follow? Perhaps he should resist or undermine it. As for ultimate distinctions, even if nature didn't have them, perhaps we should, perhaps for that very reason. In sum, these statements convey, at best, a personal mood, not an analysis of trends in recent art history, even supposing that there are such things. They certainly can't be ex-

pected to support the singling out and enthronement of one conception of picture making above the rest.

Greenberg's rules concerning flatness demand an abdication from painters which some artists consider crucial. These rules stem from a simplification in Greenberg's account of art history which leaves out all recalcitrant material and substantially edits the rest in order to highlight one proclaimed inexorable trend. Flatness has indeed been a major feature of modern painting. However this interesting formal development does not begin to encompass even those figures Greenberg places in the mainstream . . . from the Impressionists (who de-emphasize fictive depth) to Pollock and recent color field painters (who achieve flat, overall painting).

To make his interpretation work, Greenberg is pressed to deal with lapses in the work of artists he admires. Matisse's vigorous rendering of rounded Odalisques in the twenties, for example, has to be reinterpreted as an indirect assault on the problem of composition and flatness, although Greenberg generally considers such treatment of volume retrograde. Matisse's works are evaluated in terms of his success in satisfying the requirements of flatness—Matisse is even advised to eliminate the figure altogether when it could not be "controlled pictorially."

In his generally acknowledged masterpieces—his late cut-outs—Matisse makes concrete the clash between conflicting aims. In his seated Blue Nude series, he holds in stunning combination, the flat patterned surface, the dramatic spatial dynamics of the figure and the rich associations he has brought to the female nude. These cut-outs explode the notion of impossibility and forced retreat even within the tradition Greenberg considers central. The writing-off of almost all the rest of modern experience, and almost all painting done outside this one strain, causes doubt that flatness alone is a criterion equal to the task.

The third axiom, that relevant works are to be conceived beforehand and then executed impersonally, is speculative, if not downright idiosyncratic. Taken literally, it implies that there is to be no live interaction between the artist and his unfinished work and no creative transformation of the final materials. That transformation is reserved for the plan of the final work. One might guess from this that Mr. Greenberg believes pictorial media are not plastic enough to convey real art. That is the usual reason for planning in one medium and executing in another. A plan is made in the more, and executed in the less plastic medium. An architect does not plan in stone and execute on paper.

In this, Greenberg is attacking pictorial art in its strongest point: for those things that are ultimately expressible in pictorial form, there is no

alternative medium in which they may be better dealt with. If it were otherwise, then the pictorial realization would be superfluous. The plan would be the ultimate creation—as indeed it is in the work of some of his followers.

In addition, the processes of artistic creation are not clearly understood. Everyday experience causes one to doubt that ideas can be summoned up at will. Creative processes are suspected of being more complicated. The ruling out of interaction with the materials does not take this into account, thereby arbitrarily limiting the artist in one more way.

One can sympathize with Greenberg's wish for impersonal handling of the materials. In the fifties, the excessive attention paid to nuance of personal touch had led to a decadent fussiness to which such Spartan reactions were a wholesome corrective. This is not to say that the alternative Greenberg proposes has any greater validity.

The polarity he sets up between modern impersonal handling and past value based upon skill is doubtful too. It would be difficult to find anyone who still looks upon skill as the central feature of traditional painting. Conception is involved as well, but the notion of conception is not so narrowly drawn. There are frustrating mysteries in painting that Greenberg is suppressing rather than dispelling.

The severity of a critic, as that of a surgeon, is justified by a presumed higher concern for the health of his charge. Mr. Greenberg, however, not only cuts off the options by which vigorous creativity might be achieved, but proclaims that the life of his patient is soon to end and deprecates its independent significance. Whatever the attractions of his bedside manner, therefore, contemporary artists are well-advised to view Mr. Greenberg's claims with caution and to yield reluctantly to his anesthetic, if not to his knife.

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¹ Catalogue for the exhibition *American Painting 1940-1970*, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

² Greenberg, *Art and Culture*.