

How useful is it to see the work of the painters of New York avant-garde of late 1940s – 1950s as ‘apolitical painting’?

The wild tulip is, then, seen as exemplary of this finality without end, of this useless organization, without goal, gratuitous, out of use. But we must insist on this: the being cut off from the goal only becomes beautiful if everything in it is straining toward the end. Only this absolute interruption, this cut which is pure because made with a single stroke, with a single *bout* produces the feeling of beauty.

~ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*¹

What is ‘apolitical’? ‘Apolitical’ is defined in Cambridge Dictionary as ‘not interested in or connected with politics, or not connected to any political party’. Being apolitical, however, does not equate to a total acceptance of one’s detachment from politics. If a person were not concerned with politics in the first place, he would not claim himself as being apolitical, there would not be a need. Therefore, ‘apolitical’ indeed implies a certain degree of the person’s concern, or say, relationship, to politics; the subtle difference between ‘apolitical’ and ‘genuine neutral (in politics)’ lies in the way one allows oneself to react to the events and circumstances. There are a lot of ways to look at a painting, one of such is to look at it in relation to its painter (his motive, psychology etc.), and in its ideological, historical and social context. To describe a painting as ‘apolitical’, as said in the essay question, automatically requires one to leave behind the multiple narratives underneath a painting, since only through pure aesthetic judgment we can look at an object without connecting it to its various politics and ideologies.

Based on my hypothesis, I would say it is not useful for art and cultural historians to ‘see the work of the painters of New York avant-garde of late 1940s – 1950s as “apolitical painting”’. Historians should take the ambiguity of the painters’ (‘apolitical’) point of view

and their work as a starting point to deconstruct the art objects from different perspectives in order to form a dimensional view. On the one hand, it might be useful for aestheticians to consider the New York painters' work as 'apolitical painting' because in that way, they can focus their reading of the object in their visual and imaginative domain as well as the nature of their beauty. In this essay, I would consider the dialectic of the New York avant-garde movement as a whole, study some painters' work in the period of late 1940s to 1950s. I would also examine how they and their paintings are and are not indifferent to politics and what is it that lead to such dividing line between the radically different point of view.

Conditions in the America & American art scene

There had existed in the American society a social dynamic created by waves of massive immigration since WWI. Politicians and intellectuals grew concerned about the rapid leap towards assimilation by immigrant groups as they explicitly acknowledged the fact that their nation was not yet ready to become a multi-cultural federal. During the Cold War (1946-1956), the politicians' worries were shifted to the penetration of communism in America². As regards art, there was a general indifference of the American society to the existence of artists. Painters were regarded as a non-essential profession, as artisans – skilled manual workers without intellectual or imaginative or creative purposes³ – rather than being valued as artists for their 'imaginative spirituality'⁴. Given the confusing and paranoiac social environment, it is not hard to imagine how that historical period of time posed problems to the immigrant-artists as well as local artists from small towns where the mentality of the town folks remain ignorant and skeptical towards art. These groups of people were alienated from the public and society, from the intelligentsia and art (in a spiritual sense). They were 'bewildered, uncertain, and straining after direction and an intuition of themselves'⁵. In search of better opportunities and interactions, many chose New York as the place to settle and develop their artistic career.

'The absence of an artistic milieu – that median between society and the artist was crucial. It was in the creation of such a milieu, in which the extraordinarily different temperaments of the abstract expressionist artists could find moral sustenance.'⁶

A part of the key figures who played a role in New York avant-garde came from the above-mentioned background. Possibly due to their original foreign roots and new experience as American citizens, they shared a common vision in establishing their art form and style. Moreover, many of them, having always lived in poverty and on the society's margin, also inclined to share the same Marxist political ideas; they believed in class struggles and wanted their rights – the rights of the working class. The alienation of the masses and of individuals gradually diminished since the introduction of Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) in the 1930s by Roosevelt administration. The community of painters (also poets, musicians and other artists) frequented in studios, cafes, galleries and artists' clubs, and formed a cohesive artistic and intellectual force in the American culture that was backed up by proactive, vigorous introduction and support of various art critics and writers like Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Robert Rosenberg and Thomas Hess to name some. The shift of political balance after WWII led America, as a nation, to re-think its global position and identity as different from the past which had been constituted in relation to Europe. This influenced the American painters' direction in their artistic production. The painters wanted their work to be seen and understood on a universal basis, they were not satisfied with an American label, they wanted their own brand -- one that could represent them and their work. They were looking a way out from European modern art represented chiefly by Picasso, Matisse, Cezanne, Mondrian and their alike. There came an avant-gardism in New York style -- Abstract Expressionism, is the umbrella name of this innovative stream of art, it is a whole new system of modern art which in a way is a combination of Cubism and Surrealism injected with a new, expressionist energy.

The Cold War

In *The Life and Times of the New York School*, Dore Ashton put forward the notion of the New York School as a Myth, one that had a fleeting existence in the history of art due to 'the violence of social change in America' and 'rapid alterations of values'⁷. She has observed 'that in the late nineteen-forties and early fifties, the momentum of the New York School reached that mysterious point in time and place: Art took over – the work of a few individual artists seemed to exist beyond and independent of its conditioning contexts.'⁸ An 'art for art's sake' attitude was adopted under the social climate. I take the 'conditioning contexts' as the major political spin that came about when 'Red Scare' was renewed during the Cold War (1940s-1950s). As the government forcefully censored all forms of social practices including art, literature, media and education, the avant-garde painters (many were once Marxist) remained peripheral to the sensitive situation. Fred Orton noted in *Footnote One: The Idea of Cold War*: 'Art News regularly commented on these matters (the Cold War and its effects) in its editorials. But somehow, the Abstract Expressionists were beyond all this. What they did was peripheral to it... As the self-professed avant-garde they situated themselves in their paintings and in their practice beyond the class struggle... But ideologically removed from it, they were nevertheless, related to it...'⁹ Judging from a Marxist point of view, Orton suggested that the painters painted because it was 'the umbilical cord of gold that attached them to the ruling class fraction of the national bourgeoisie and helped sustain their basic needs and their desires'¹⁰. The art scene was turned into a terrain for class fractional struggle where 'business liberal' internationalists stood 'for modernist art' and the 'old guard' nationalists, against it. The painters let their work and themselves being 'put to use by those persons and institutions that appropriated them', they were not bothered by what was going on in the political sphere, they withdrew to a side and let the ruling class (museum owners, art dealers etc.) 'made its move to win and secure hegemony in a world market more or less of its own devising'¹¹. Should it then be an issue of collective self-conscious that the avant-garde artists took a back seat in the 'class struggle' and 'communistic conspiracy' during the Cold War, made 'apolitical paintings' so that they would continue showing and trading their work? Did they do it because they wanted to take the chance to establish themselves in the

history of modern art? I do not know. One thing I am sure of is these issues were raised in an epoch of constant conflict between individuality and the will to cohesion, to consider the painters' artistic attributes solely with regard to the so-called marketing value would indeed devalue their art.

A or B

Jackson Pollock has been quoted by many historians as one of those painters who remained an outsider of the political circumstances, even when he was identified by Congressman Francis Walter 'as one of 34 of the 67 artists in a USIA exhibition of that year who had affiliations with Communist Causes.' in 1959¹². However, we could say he indeed subtly manifested his social critique through (the action of) his work. His action paintings are best illustrated by Harold Rosenberg's 1952 essay 'The American Action Painters': 'The American Vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea...Painting could now be reduced to that equipment which the artist needed for an activity that would be an alternative to both utility and idleness... he gesticulated upon the canvas and watched for what each novelty would declare him and his art to be.'¹³ It might not be about class struggle but it definitely was about the artist's personal revolution, reaction to himself and the world, it was about his energy, and his aspiration for the 'new'. 'The revolution against the given, in the self and in the world, which since Hegel has provided European vanguard art with theories of a New Reality, has re-entered America in the form of personal revolts.'¹⁴ Is Pollock's work not 'apolitical'?

Jasper Johns, another important New York avant-garde painter, played with the notion of Americanism in his work. His series of painting of targets, national flag and the States map were explicit reference to the expanding power of America. His other more 'pop' paintings and collages of daily objects are also often interpreted as critique of Capitalism and Consumerism. From such point of view, Johns' work should be more than political. However, was Johns really making his art of the American representation of themselves (as different from the Others – like the Communists)? Johns had this to say: 'the perception of the object is through looking and through thinking. "Meaning" is a product of unmediated "looking" and should therefore not be distorted by expectations,

prejudices, knowledge, feelings or ideas... I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I've done is not me - not to confuse my feelings with what I produced. I didn't want my work to be exposure of my feelings.'¹⁵

Obviously, these are not some simple A or B questions.

C

In the essay 'Avant-Gardes and Partisan Reviewed'¹⁶, Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton wrote: 'The avant-garde in painting, learning from music, had to pursue the particular identity of the medium of painting. Painting had to attend to its own pure form; it had to identify the sensations by which its medium appealed and by which it was to be known and responded to as a distinct art. Its emphasis, therefore, was found to be on the physical, the "sensory".'¹⁷ If we look at the avant-garde paintings as a style, we may not see any links to class struggle, internationalism and other 'politics', instead, we can see the painters were challenging the academic definition of art by heading into some formal and stylistic matters. These painters possessed a very modernist aesthetic; they have been valued for their simplicity, boldness and innovation in portraying their paintings in its own pure *form*, as against the traditional, classical narrative on *content*. This seemingly 'absence' of content might explain why is it difficult to define the political side of quality in a painting.

Barnett Newman was an artist influenced by anarchist thoughts, he enjoyed absolute anarchism. 'My politics went toward open forms and free situations; I was a very vocal anarchist... even learned to read Yiddish so I could follow the anarchist newspaper'¹⁸. Newman refused to accept organised structuring of things, not to mention government, national and international enterprises. He focused on creating a sense of sublime on the canvas using colours and materials. For instance, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51; Museum of Modern Art, New York) 'exemplifies how Newman controlled colour, here an immense redness, not only through the rhythm of its five vertical "zips", but also by predicating everything around a central observer whose attention unites them to complete the field'¹⁹. Barnett was after a unified totality and his subject matter was nothing but form, time, space and perhaps, himself. The avant-garde painters paid a lot

of attention to exploration and experiment with 'materials', the handling and aspects of materials. If we look at Frank Stella's paintings, we can perhaps see more of the 'apolitical' side of avant-gardism. Stella let his paintings to be dominated by shapes, and by lines that create illusions to the eyes. He played with dimensions, with the classical distinction between flatness and depth; he created a literal and visual experience for the person who stands in front of his painting. There is a void of time and space for the viewer to meditate. Stella's work challenge the physical limits of the painting, bring upon the notion of painting as different or indifferent to an object. It is clear that certain painters opted to philosophize their art through creating artwork. Yet, is philosophy pure metaphysics that has no connections to politics? Sure not.

I have followed my nose to write this essay. The question of this essay is an ambiguous one; I did not know how to handle and analyze the 'how useful' and the meaning of 'apolitical'. Yet, from the reading of the New York School and its historical background, I was inspired by the sense of intuition and spontaneity of the painters. Paintings can be seen as escapist devices from depression in real-life, it can also simply be a place where the painters explore the essence of art, of form and of their relation to the materials. Like any cultural text, paintings are open to individual reader's interpretation -- it is an irresponsible yet true statement. We cannot be sure to grasp the artist's meaning unless we apply some kind of psychoanalytic reading, but that would still be speculative. Amid the diversity of avant-garde paintings, we could however have a glimpse of their unconscious, of 'the sense of being at some pregnant historical crisis or juncture (which) seemed to obsess each artist differently.'²⁰ After all, imagination, rather than rationality, may be the only key to open the door of riddles.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Ian McLeod (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.87
- 2 David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978).
- 3 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana, 1976), p.41
- 4 Dore Ashton, *The Life and Times of the New York School* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1972), p.6
- 5 Harold Rosenberg, 'The New Yorker', (Dec 6 1969), in Ashton (Bath 1972), p.1
- 6 Ashton, p.14
- 7 Ashton, p.231
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Fred Orton, 'Footnote One: The Idea of the Cold War', in *Avant-Garde and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.214-215
- 10 Orton, p.215
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Orton, p.214
- 13 Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', in Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940 – 1970* (London: The Pall Mall Press Ltd., 1969), p.341-349
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 Tilman Osterwold, *Pop Art* (Köln; New York: Taschen, c1999), p.157
- 16 Griselda Pollock, Fred Orton, 'Avant-Garde and Partisan Reviewed', in *Avant-Garde and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.141-164
- 17 Pollock, Orton, p.159
- 18 Ashton, p. 73
- 19 David Anfam, 'The Extremes of Abstract Expressionism', in *American Art in the 20th Century Painting and Sculpture 1913-1993*, ed. Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), p. 86
- 20 Anfam, p.87

Bibliography

Ashton, Dore, *The Life and Times of the New York School* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1972)

Pollock, Griselda, and Orton, Fred, *Avant-Garde and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996)

Geldzahler, Henry, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940 – 1970* (London: The Pall Mall Press Ltd., 1969)

Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the avant-garde*, trans. Shaw, Michael; foreword Schutte-Sasse, Jochen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c1984)

Sandler, Irving, *Abstract Expressionism: the triumph of American painting* (New York; London: Harper and Row, 1977)

Sandler, Irving, *The New York School: the painters and sculptors of the fifties* (New York; London: Harper and Row, 1978)

Osterwold, Tilman, *Pop Art* (Köln; New York: Taschen, c1999)

American Art in the 20th Century Painting and Sculpture 1913-1993, ed. Joachimides, Christos M., and Rosenthal, Norman (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993)

Derrida, Jacques, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Bennington, Geoff, and McLeod, Ian (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987)

Deconstruction and the visual arts: art, media, architecture, ed. Brunette, Peter, and Wills, David (Cambridge; New York,: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

Caute, David, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978)

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana, 1976)