Calamities of art

by Roger Kimball

On the self-destruction wrought by the Dadaist tendencies of contemporary art.

The frenzied passion for art is a cancer that eats up everything else; and, as the out-and-out absence of what is proper and true in art is tantamount to the absence of art, the man fades away completely; excessive specialization of a faculty ends in nothing. . . . The folly of art is on a par with the abuse of the mind. The creation of one or the other of these two supremacies begets stupidity, hardness of heart, and unbounded pride and egotism.

—Baudelaire, L’Art romantique

There are indeed many things that are classified as “backward” that might be the starting-point of real inner progress.

—Hans Sedlmayr, Art in Crisis

Among the many peculiarities affecting our cultural life today, perhaps none is more peculiar, or more fateful for the practice and enjoyment of art, than the fact that virtually anything can be put forward and accepted as a work of art. “Virtually” anything? An unnecessary caution, surely. Let your imagination run riot: whatever grotesquerie you conjure up—from the numbingly banal and commonplace to the repulsively pathological—rest assured that it has been eagerly preferred and just as eagerly embraced as art. And if by some fluke you named something that has not yet done duty as art—no matter: it is merely an oversight and will be corrected within a season or two.

Not that this situation is entirely new. Indeed, we have been living with the consequences of the vertiginous fact that anything can be art for many years: since the 1960s, certainly, and perhaps, in essentials, since the ’Teens, when the Dadaist crusader Marcel Duchamp unveiled his “Ready-mades” and impishly offered them to the public.

But there are some important differences between then and now. One difference is that Duchamp’s pranks—as, for example, when he exhibited an ordinary bottle rack (the banal) or a urinal (the shocking, once upon a time) as works of art—were widely considered to be outrageous. Moreover, Duchamp meant them to be outrageous. We sometimes forget that the professed aim of
Dada was not to extend but to explode the category “art.” But something happened. “I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge,” Duchamp noted contemptuously some years later, “and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.” “They” were not the public—not yet—but taste-makers and suitably enfranchised members of that ever-growing congregation, “the art world.”

Duchamp’s own motives were, to put it mildly, mixed. But his exasperation is understandable. Looking back at the unfolding drama of avant-garde culture in this century, we see that the remarkable thing was not really the phenomenon of Dada—one of many late-Romantic expressions of nihilistic Weltschmerz—but rather its quick certification as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Who would have thought it possible? And yet Dada is now an academic and museological topic of impressive pedigree, the subject of exhibitions and monographs and doctoral dissertations.

An ominous precedent, that. Among other things, it demonstrates the extent to which the outrageous has become institutionalized: assimilated into the predictable cycle of museum exhibitions, curatorial safekeeping, and critical commentary. To be sure, a Robert Mapplethorpe or an Andres Serrano will now and again appear to inspire a frisson of anxiety and unhappiness. Yet, really, what is most striking about such figures is not how “controversial” they are—or were—but how quickly they are docketed and filed away as certifiable examples of contemporary art—even “great” contemporary art, if we are to believe the encomia of some noteworthy critics.

This situation—a situation in which any object or activity can be baptized as art—makes it difficult to get our bearings. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, exactly; but it does tend to inspire a certain complacency. We are tempted to overlook, to take for granted, what has become blatantly familiar, no matter how odd it is in itself. We may look and register the presence of something without really seeing or understanding it. It may be worth pausing, then, to remind ourselves just how much the meaning of the word “art” has mutated over the course of this century. Words like “freedom,” “innovation,” and “originality” have typically accompanied this process of mutation. It is clear that, for many, the expansion of art has been synonymous with some imperative promise of liberation: not only aesthetic liberation, but social, political, and even, it seems, what we might call metaphysical liberation.

Yet here as elsewhere in human affairs, there has generally been a gap between promise and fulfillment. From our vantage point in the 1990s, what might have looked like freedom may now seem like irresponsible license; what struck some as cleverly innovative may now appear merely idiosyncratic. Consider: is it not odd that, in many quarters, “art” has degenerated into a kind of honorific that is bestowed or withheld for reasons that have nothing to do with aesthetic quality or achievement? What does it mean—to take a few contemporary examples—that someone can package his own feces and distribute the result as works of art? Or that someone can have herself videotaped undergoing a series of disfiguring cosmetic surgeries and on that basis be hailed as a bona fide “performance artist”? Or that someone who is ill can successfully designate his hospital
room a work of art? Such examples can be multiplied indefinitely, as anyone who has visited a
gallery or museum devoted to contemporary art well knows.

The truth is that the prevailing situation is one that is good for cultural hucksters but bad for
art—and for artists. It is especially bad for young, unestablished artists, who find themselves
scrambling for recognition in an atmosphere in which the last thing that matters is artistic
excellence. In one sense, what we have been witnessing is the application of the principle of
affirmative action to culture. Art confers prestige, celebrity, wealth; it is a social and economic
blessing; therefore, its perquisites must be available to all regardless of talent or accomplishment.
The logic is impeccable: only the premise and the consequences are disastrous. If anything can be a
work of art, then it follows that anyone can be an artist. Such ideas are not confined to the fringe.
They are, in various degrees, a staple of establishment prejudice. One recalls Mr. John Hightower,
a Rockefeller apparatchik who was briefly director of the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1960s.
In one memorable effusion, Mr. Hightower publicly delivered himself of the opinion that “I
happen to think that everybody is an artist.”

Of course, Mr. Hightower represents something of a special case: it is not often given to us to
encounter fatuity so deliciously blank and unadorned. But what matters is the extent to which Mr.
Hightower was a bellwether. Perhaps few people in his position would have been so incautious; it
surely would have occurred to most museum directors that indiscriminately bestowing the title of
“artist” might have undesirable consequences for the status of the collections over which they
preside. Yet Mr. Hightower articulated an assumption that, to one degree or another, informs
much contemporary thinking about art and culture. It is a quintessentially Sixties
assumption—there was a lot of starry-eyed talk about “unleashing creativity” then—but it is not
only a Sixties assumption. It continues to resonate. The irony is that it is an assumption that
conspires to rob artists of the things that should matter most to them: their talent and their art.

There are other ironies, too. There are more artists per square inch in our society today than
ever before. Museums and galleries of contemporary art have sprouted like so many
mushrooms across the country. Everywhere one turns there are appeals to “support the arts.” And
yet, and yet ... is there not also a widespread sense of stale-ness, futility, disenchantment? And
does this not have a lot to do with the character of today’s celebrity art—“art-world art,” the art
that makes it into the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and is
discussed in publications like Artforum?

When we look around at the contemporary art scene, we are struck not only by its promiscuous
nature—by the fact that it is a living illustration of the proposition that anything can count as art
today—but also by certain telltale symptoms. There is, first of all, its obsession with novelty. For
those in thrall to the imperatives of the art world, the first question to be asked of a given work is
not whether it is any good but whether it represents something discernibly new or different. Of
course, the search for novelty has long since condemned its devotees to the undignified position of
naively re-circulating various cliches: how little, really, our “cutting-edge” artists have added to
the strategies of the Dadaists, the Futurists, the Surrealists. But the appetite for novelty—even if the result is only the illusion of novelty—is apparently stronger that the passion for historical self-awareness. Never mind that the search for novelty is itself one of modernity’s hoariest maneuvers: for susceptible souls its siren call is irresistible.

It is in part to compensate for this encroaching futility that the third symptom, the desire to marry art and politics, has become such a prominent feature of the contemporary art scene. When the artistic significance of art is at a minimum, politics rushes in to fill the void. From the crude political allegories of Leon Golub or Hans Haacke to the feminist sloganeering of Jenny Holzer, Karen Finley, or Cindy Sherman, much that goes under the name of art today is incomprehensible without reference to its political content. Indeed, in many cases what we see are nothing but political gestures that poach on the prestige of art in order to enhance their authority. Another word for this activity is propaganda, although at a moment when so much of art is given over to propagandizing the word seems inadequate. It goes without saying that the politics in question are as predictable as clockwork. Not only are they standard items on the prevailing tablet of left-wing pieties, they are also cartoon versions of the same. It’s the political version of painting by number: aids, the homeless, “gender politics,” the Third World, and the environment line up on one side with white hats, while capitalism, patriarchy, the United States, and traditional morality and religion assemble yonder in black hats.

The trinity of politics, novelty, and extremity goes a long way toward describing the complexion of the contemporary art world: its faddishness, its constant recourse to lurid images of sex and violence, its tendency to substitute a hectoring politics for artistic ambition. It also helps to put into perspective some of the changes that have taken place in the meaning and goals of art over the last hundred years or so. Closely allied to the search for novelty is a shift of attention away from beauty as the end of art. From the time of Cubism, at least, most “advanced” art (which is not necessarily synonymous with “good” art) has striven not for the beautiful but for more elliptical qualities: above all, perhaps, for the interesting, which in many respects has usurped beauty as the primary category of aesthetic delectation. (Readers of Kierkegaard’s Either/Or will be familiar with the consequences of elevating the interesting from an aesthetic desideratum into a moral imperative.)

At the same time, most self-consciously avant-garde artists have displayed considerably less interest in pleasing or delighting their viewers than in startling, shocking, even repulsing them. Not for nothing are “challenging” and “transgressive” among the most popular terms of critical praise today. The idea, of course, is that by abjuring beauty and refusing to please, the artist is better able to confront deeper, more authentic, more painful realities. And perhaps he is. But one mustn’t overlook the element of posturing that often accompanies such existential divagations. Nor should one forget the many counter-examples and counter-tendencies. In a famous statement from 1908, when he was almost forty, Henri Matisse wrote that he dreamt of “an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the business man as well as the man of letters, . . . something like a good
armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” Matisse was one of the greatest and also most innovative painters of the twentieth century. Does this vision of balance and serenity diminish his achievement?

To a large extent, the calamities of art today are due to the aftermath of the avant-garde: to all those “adversarial” gestures, poses, ambitions, and tactics that emerged and were legitimized in the 1880s and 1890s, flowered in the first half of this century, and now live a sort of posthumous existence in the frantic twilight of postmodernism.

In part, our present situation, like the avant-garde itself, is a complication (not to say a perversion) of our Romantic inheritance. The elevation of art from a didactic pastime to a prime spiritual resource, the self-conscious probing of inherited forms and artistic strictures, the image of the artist as a tortured, oppositional figure: all achieve a first maturity in Romanticism. These themes were exacerbated as the avant-garde developed from an impulse to a movement and finally into a tradition of its own.

The French critic Albert Thibaudet summarized some of the chief features of this burgeoning tradition in his reflections on the Symbolist movement in literature. Writing in 1936, Thibaudet noted that Symbolism “accustomed literature to the idea of indefinite revolution” and inaugurated a “new climate” in French literature: a climate characterized by “the chronic avant-gardism of poetry, the ‘What’s new?’ of the ‘informed’ public, . . . the proliferation of schools and manifestos,” and the ambition “to occupy that extreme point, to attain for an hour that crest of the wave in a tossing sea.” The Symbolist revolution, Thibaudet concluded, “might perhaps have been definitively the last, because it incorporated the theme of chronic revolution into the normal condition of literature.” Commenting on this passage in his 1972 essay “The Age of the Avant-Garde,” Hilton Kramer observed that

the “new climate” of 1885 has indeed become the “normal condition” of a good deal more than literature. It has become the basis of our entire cultural life. Thibaudet's “What's new?” is no longer the exclusive possession of a tiny “informed” public. It is now the daily concern of vast bureaucratic enterprises whose prosperity depends on keeping the question supplied with a steady flow of compelling but perishable answers.

The problem, as Mr. Kramer notes, is that the avant-garde has become a casualty of its own success. Having won battle after battle, it gradually transformed a recalcitrant bourgeois culture into a willing collaborator in its raids on established taste. But in this victory were the seeds of its own irrelevance, for without credible resistance, its oppositional gestures degenerated into a kind of aesthetic buffoonery. In this sense, the institutionalization of the avant-garde—what Clement Greenberg called “avant-gardism”—spells the death or at least the senility of the avant-garde.

The road to this senility—what we might call a juvenile senility—really begins with the “anti-art” movement of Dadaism. For with Dada the “chronic revolution” of which Thibaudet spoke is itself revolutionized, turned on its head. In this sense, Dada did not seek to provide yet another fresh
answer to the question “What’s new?” On the contrary, Dada sought to subvert the entire context in which the question gained urgency. That the extreme strategies of Dada, too, were quickly incorporated as part of that “chronic revolution” suggests that Thibaudet may have been justified in identifying the Symbolist revolution as “definitively the last.” From this perspective, Dada, and every subsequent innovation, by definition appears as a variation on an already defined theme: an anti-theme, really, whose very negativity provides a foil for the ceaseless play of novelty. But in fact the incorporation of Dada into the fabric of the avant-garde did have consequences. For one thing, Dada altered the tenor of the avant-garde: Dada’s adamant nihilism helped to short-circuit the essential seriousness of art. Dada might seek to occupy extreme points, but it did so out of a systematic contrariness: it had no ambition “to attain for an hour that crest of the wave in a tossing sea” because it had given up on the whole idea of art as a spiritual quest. Indeed, Dada was an art form that had given up on art.

In this respect, anyway, Dada appears as a kind of forerunner of Pop Art, the next stop on the itinerary. The architect Philip Johnson once observed that Postmodernism insinuated “the giggle” into architecture. He was, alas, right about that, and the same can be said about Pop Art: it insinuated the giggle into art. If there was a certain grimness about Dada’s insouciance, Pop Art specialized in remaking art in the image of Camp. Pop Art was Dada lite: just as cynical, but without the kind of intellectual scruples that, for example, led Duchamp to abandon art for chess. Pop Art was a laughing form of nihilism, an art whose features compose themselves into a rictus of narcissistic despair while its practitioners eagerly dip their hands into the till of artistic celebrity and commercial success.

Many of these elements came together in that protracted assault on culture we sum up in the epithet “the Sixties.” It was then that the senility of the avant-garde went mainstream: when a generalized liberationist ethos and anti-establishment attitude infiltrated our major cultural institutions and began forming a large component of established taste.

To get some sense of the contours of this established taste today, consider a recent article from the front page of the Sunday New York Times Arts & Leisure section, “Testing the Limits in a Culture of Excess,” by Vicki Goldberg. It is not that this piece was significant in itself: indeed, its main point, that “the commercial sector has taken the lead away from art in the matter of breaking rules, abolishing taboos, pushing the envelope,” isn’t even correct. Whatever the tasteless excesses of Calvin Klein, they are as Pollyanna compared to the graphically pornographic and blasphemous staples upon which the art world habitually battens. No, the reason I cite this piece from the Times is because it perfectly epitomizes the bewilderments of received wisdom—if “wisdom” is the mot juste—and does so, moreover, in an influential organ that has lately identified itself with everything that is most trendy, ephemeral, and bogus in our culture.

In one sense, Miss Goldberg’s piece is simply a catalogue of current clichés about art: “It was and is a prerogative of art to probe regions deemed off-limits”; the attempt “to breach the borders of the acceptable” was “the domain of art”; “such exploration was often transgressive and sometimes
shocking,” because “art, of course, challenges society’s rules at every level.” Yes. Of course. Like every other champion of this view of art, Miss Goldberg adduces the scandal over Manet’s *Olympio*, (1865) and other *causes célèbres*.

And yet, much as she celebrates the “challenging,” “transgressive” role of art, it is also clear that she harbors some incipient qualms. “It seems,” she muses, “that once repressive and hypocritical barriers were knocked down, the result was less liberation than binge. We have achieved a stunning triumph of excess.” Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Miss Goldberg seems undecided. On the one hand, “the sexual liberation of images has a built-in imperative to escalate,” which, she implies, may be grounds for concern. On the other hand, “No doubt it has done us some good along the way.” Really? Miss Goldberg explains: “All the bedroom maneuvers on contemporary television soaps and in film may have helped a lot of people improve their sex lives.” Is this pathetic or merely naive? It is difficult to say. Miss Goldberg is troubled that the orgy of “liberation” she evokes has resulted less in “hedonism” than in “a free-floating anxiety and depression.” If only hedonism had won out! “In a sense,” she concludes, “we want popular imagery to substitute for lives we cannot achieve ourselves.” But the problem, “the down side,” is that “most lives cannot match” such “nonstop pleasure and excitement.”

Miss Goldberg’s disappointed hedonism and reflexive cultural radicalism are signs of the times. Although bristling with the rhetoric of “transgression,” her position is in fact a summary of establishment prejudice. A sad commentary of the establishment, you might be thinking. But considered as a cautionary tale, it has some salutary lessons to teach. Stepping back and considering the image of art it assumes, we can perhaps begin to outline a response to the calamities of art with which we are living. For one thing, it is time that we recognized that art need not be adversarial or “transgressive” in order to be good or important. In this context, it is worth noting that great damage has been done—above all to artists but also to public taste—by romanticizing the tribulations of the nineteenth-century avant-garde. Everyone is brought up on stories of how an obtuse public scorned Manet, censored Gauguin, and drove poor Van Gogh to madness and suicide. But the fact that these great talents went unappreciated has had the undesirable effect of encouraging the thought that because one is unappreciated one is therefore a genius. It has also made it extremely difficult to expose fraudulent work as such. For any frank dismissal of art—especially art that cloaks itself in the mantle of the avant-garde—is immediately met by the rejoinder: “Ah, but they made fun of Cézanne, too: they thought that Stravinsky was a charlatan.”

This is the easiest and also the most shallow response to criticism. The truth is that most art is bad. And in our time, most art is not only bad but also dishonest: a form of therapy or political grumbling masquerading as art. Like everything important in human life, art must be judged on the basis of firsthand experience: no formula can be devised prescribing its assessment, including the formula that what is despised today will be championed as great work tomorrow. The art world today retains little of the idealism that permeated Romanticism, but it remains Romantic in its moralism and hubris about the salvific properties of art. In an unfortunate, jejune moment,
Shelley wrote that poets were “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” This is an ambition that many artists continue, in more mundane ways, to harbor. But as W. H. Auden rightly pointed out, “‘The unacknowledged legislators of the world’ describes the secret police, not the poets.” Poetry, Auden said elsewhere, makes nothing happen: its province—like the province of all art—is in the realm of making, not doing. An artist, as the word’s history reminds us, is first of all someone who makes something. And just as a table can be well or poorly made, so, too, a poem or a painting can be well or poorly made. This is not the only criterion that we employ to judge a work of art, but it is a fundamental starting point that no disinterested critic can afford to abandon.

Similar considerations apply to the ambition to make art “relevant” to contemporary social and political concerns. Of course, art cannot help being of its time and place, but the interesting question to ask about art that deliberately comments on its time is what makes it more than a mere commentary? What makes it art? As Goethe put it, “only the mediocre talent is always the captive of its time and must get its nourishment from the elements that time contains.” The insistence that art reflect the tangled realities of contemporary life is a temptation that most artists should resist, if for no other reason than that giving in to that temptation is a prescription for ephemerality.

What resources does an artist possess to combat the temptations of relevance? Apart from his talent, perhaps his greatest resource is tradition, for it is through tradition that he has his most palpable link with something that transcends the contingencies of the moment. As T. S. Eliot explained in a famous passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” tradition is not simply “following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes.” “Tradition,” Eliot continued,

is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his generation in his bones, but with a feeling of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.
Eliot’s aestheticizing conception of the historical sense may not be the bulwark against arbitrariness that he hoped it would be. But by underscoring the element of transcendence, he reminds us that an embrace of tradition is not the enemy but the condition of genuine innovation. It is in this sense that we should understand Hans Sedlmayr’s observation that “many things that are classified as ‘backward’ . . . might be the starting-point of real inner progress.” At a moment when the art world has abandoned art for political attitudinizing, the path forward begins with a movement of recuperation. In an age when anything can be a work of art, the question of whether something is art has ceased to be compelling: what matters is whether something is a good work of art, and about this the official art world has rendered itself hors de combat.

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