

Art in America

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SENSIBILITY OF THE TIMES REVISITED

by cathy lebowitz 11/27/12



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) The critics' original questionnaire with Ad Reinhardt's answers, from the January-February 1967 issue of A.i.A.; Peter Halley: *First Position*, 2011, acrylic and Roll-A-Tex on canvas, 72 by 77 inches. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.;

NEW YORK To commemorate *Art in America's* 100th anniversary, we reenact a project from the January-February 1967 issue. Irving Sandler and Barbara Rose sent out questionnaires asking artists to describe the sensibility of the '60s, and A.i.A. published the responses. The critics encountered some resistance, which they detailed in their introduction. Jasper Johns refused to answer because the questions were "illogical and out of the forties." Robert Morris's reply: "I didn't think what was asked amounted to any kind of issue." Many others, however, replied enthusiastically and at length.

We recently asked artists to characterize a zeitgeist for the turn of the 21st century, using Sandler and Rose's questions. Our participants did not have to answer all the questions and were encouraged to submit whatever they wished. Mel Bochner sent an image, Mel Chin wrote a poem, and Liz Magic Laser recommended new questions.

Peter Halley

Uncannily, the ethos of contemporary art has undergone an almost perfect reversal since I started out as an artist at the beginning of the 1980s.

Until 1980, the ruling ethos of contemporary art embraced anti-illusionism. It cherished the truth of materials and advocated the idea that the way a work of art was made was a crucial and intrinsic part of its content. This ethos had a long history, starting all the way back with Impressionism, and embracing both spiritual and Marxist yearnings along the way. Various commentators also claimed that it arose in opposition to the cultural power and influence of the mass media and of capitalism. This ethos reached its apogee with artists like Agnes Martin and Donald Judd, with Minimalism, performance art, installation and early video.

After 1980, a series of shifts incrementally occurred that have resulted in a total reversal of this system of values. Today, astonishingly, the ethos of materiality and anti-illusionism has all but vanished, and contemporary art has instead embraced the Spectacle. (I use this term in Guy Debord's sense: in which all media and all production become inseparable from a seductive, soporific system of social control.) How this came to pass is a subject too complex to explore here. Suffice to say that it is, in a way, the most brilliant, cruel joke imaginable—that today's Spectacular art should be built on the delicate antiestablishment scaffolding first established by artists who were opposed to nothing more vociferously than they were to the Spectacle.

From North to South, Kiefer to Cattalan, from East to West, Murakami to Koons, the most widely recognized and successful artists today have embraced the Spectacle as the core subject of their work. For painters as well, Elizabeth Peyton, Lisa Yuskavage, Jenny Saville—along with many others—the Spectacle has become the unquestioned context of their work.

That's not to say that the work of every artist is a paean to the Spectacle. In fact, what's interesting is the variety of artists'

responses, ranging from euphoric embrace of the world of the Spectacle, to various strategies of *détournement* in which artists use the techniques of the Spectacle for their own distinctive purposes. (Peyton and Pierre Huyghe come to mind here.) There are even some artists who use the techniques of the Spectacle to express clear opposition to the hegemony of the Spectacle itself. (Barbara Kruger seems paradigmatic.)

What's so important here is the degree to which the world of the Spectacle has come to be considered a given, pervasive, unalterable condition in so much art being done today. The perception that the Spectacle is reality has completely replaced the older belief in Nature as the real.

When he wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, Guy Debord unequivocally judged the Spectacle to be a bad thing, resulting in "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing." The Spectacle, he argued, has as its purpose the degradation of knowledge, the disappearance of critical thought, and the obfuscation and erasure of the past.

Yet—is it possible to imagine the effect of the Spectacle on society as less impoverishing and degrading than Debord, as a Marxist, claimed? Is our own usual condemnation of the Spectacle the by-product of our own puritanical and productivist values? Does not the Spectacle unleash a heretofore unimaginable plethora of images and dreams—and even pleasures? These are the issues in contemporary art today.

Suzanne Lacy

Call me old school, but the first thing I noticed about the survey by Sandler and Rose was this: the decade that marked the beginning of feminist and performance art was summed up exclusively by white men, most of whom made objects. (I know, we've been there and done that. But if you look at public discourse on reproduction and rape in this election season, we have to be *there* yet again, with *that* to do.) Despite the article's lapse in gender perspective, many artists were concerned with current events, although overt reflections of this in their work are less apparent.

Today, artists excavate political life for signifiers not only of their political positions but also for strategies of making and display. The '60s and '70s provide the visual *plat du jour* for what is called "social practices" or "participatory art." We could see this as a trend. For those of us interested in these forms—we often cluster in conceptual and performance art—a flash mob, protest or table of pamphlets (as in Andrea Bowers's sculpture on view this fall at Vielmetter Projects in Los Angeles) is interesting in and of itself.

Because participatory art is based on "engagement," teaching/learning paradigms have become important, generating symposia, biennials and texts. Pedagogy models are adopted for art projects and installations. I can speculate on one of the forces leading up to this: the rise of art schools (in numbers and influence) and the proliferation of MFA programs offer a demographic push to think about education. Where once grad schools delivered skill sets and offered a passport into college teaching, now schools are centers of creative intellectual discourse, initiating students into theory, international practices and a collegial culture through which to participate in the next "academy" or trend. What these trends are, and who represents them (in the *A.i.A.* survey, it was white men), will be determined by current events. But so will the available pool of artists.

As it stands now, that pool, at least in the U.S., comes largely from MFA programs. If global higher education trends continue, the graduating classes 10 years from now will be quite different from those today. Here's a history lesson: the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education was developed as a progressive response to social inequities. It provided higher education, regardless of economic means. It was not a coincidence, then, that as people from the working class and ethnic minorities took advantage of this educational opportunity, California art began to change. Performance art, new spatial practices, the use of bodies and autobiographies and the incorporation of ideas and forms from radical social movements— feminism, Chicanismo, Black Power and war protest—emerged as the art of its time.

Now the disturbing part: artists being trained today could usher in a new wave of conservatism. Stripped of public funding, colleges face economic pressures, as access to higher education is politically and practically eroded. Soon the education available to my generation will be out of reach for many, and MFA classes could fill up with upper-middle-class (and beyond) students. Current working-class students struggling with staggering loans may keep the political turn (and participatory art) active for the near future, providing we can work out various dilemmas. One of these is how to resolve the conflict between the dematerialization impulses of temporary, relational and spatially specific practices and the compelling need to engage with the market. The market remains a crucial force in determining how an artist's career develops. Teaching jobs are one of the few economic supports outside of the market, but the number of positions available can't match the number of graduates in the field.

The relationship between the political sphere and the arts has never been more apparent than today, and activist advocacy for

equal education and pedagogical strategies that challenge authority are as relevant for art schools as for our culture.

Joseph Kosuth

There is a crisis of meaning in society in general, and this crisis now has a history and culture, which provide an agenda for those concerned with ontological questions. Such questions are unavoidable for artists who see their practice as politically relevant and a component in the production of consciousness. Such a practice has built in, as part of its self-conception, a critical relationship toward the mass culture that forms us all.

There are emerging artists with ideas different from those that public institutions and the market presently feature and promote (they will be featured and promoted later), but they hardly constitute an “avant-garde,” which is a rather sweetly old-fashioned but by now irrelevant category. What the term *wants* to suggest is an art practice that is uncorrupted, intellectually honest and authentic. One can find activity of this sort, in varying degrees, but it first needs to be untethered from the very dated historical context of an “avant-garde” and the implications of such baggage, if one wants to be able to actually locate and see such work.

One also must take into account that we now have *two* art histories that are, in a sense, competitive at the same time that they overlap. One is the art history that has traditionally gone under that name, a history of work that adds to the history of ideas, a record of influences shaping the discourse of art. One can call it, in the greater sense, a history of a self-reflective creative activity. The other art history that has emerged in the past two decades is a history of the art market. It is much more easily understood in a society where culture is expressed in economic terms, by those directly engaged in buying and selling, rather than through intellectual engagement with the production of art. It supports almost exclusively whatever art is promoted, generating desire in the marketplace and elevating scarcity, which results in higher prices— even if the work nominated for this attention is so derivative as to be nearly the opposite of what the other art history reflects.

Is there an artistic practice that runs semi-parallel to the one increasingly dominated by commerce? Is there an artistic practice that takes as basic to it responsibility as a producer of meaning independent of the market, even while being part of its information flow?

We better hope so.

Theaster Gates

What is the nature of the sensibility of the turn of the 21st century? Everything is up for grabs. Hit hard, then hope for the best. Repeat.

If there is an avant-garde today, it refuses to be fodder for historians who make people into things or objects into movements, summarized in 75 words or less. I am curious what would make someone who is busy pushing at boundaries stop to reflect on the fact that they are pushing. Maybe the nature of pushing the boundaries requires either ignorance of the boundaries, disregard for the boundaries, or courage to “make” despite the consistent threat of irrelevance, absurdity, obsolescence or even success. It is a moment when things don’t stay secret long enough, are not allowed to grow quietly. One can’t do anything without people saying, “Look at that person.” If you want, pedagogically or intuitively, to join the avant-garde, don’t tell a soul.

Mel Chin

A trauma at the turn of the 21st bent us back toward stasis

Punctuated by only a trace accelerated by crystal sedated by smoke.

Surviving in ruins of nature fleeced by immense privilege are mothers bearing the next enfant terrible.

They will perforate the poison and predation and meet in fields we advanced shred the hard we fostered resurrect the soft that festered.

What mattered then, matters now but communications outpace the capacity for _____.

The avant-garde is the public over there Spring outbreaks against tyranny speak in multiple tongues and overthrow without pretense.

At home, the assimilators encourage our mimicry

from a distance

an easy echo of foreign sentiment upholds the perps.

No attention paid to secondary opinions name colorful concoctions in honor of their struggle in the shameful glow of complicit contradictions.

Moyra Davey

From my limited perspective, I'd say that revisiting Minimalism is important to many contemporary artists. My sensibility is more narrative, and so, to rather spontaneously pick a few 21st-century personal touchstones, I'd propose:

1. A sculpture installation by Meyer Vaisman at Gavin Brown in 2000 about his shrink, featuring her as a kind of fairy godmother, her corpulent, naked body cast life-size and draped in a transparent tulle garment. Also part of this shrine was a harlequin suit made of Vaisman's father's clothes, and votive candles. A small poster of Vaisman in clown makeup wearing the suit, forlornly drinking beer in a rundown playground, was on the wall over my chest of drawers for many years.
2. Seth Price's 2006 "wave" installation with enlarged computer-generated images that he purchased on the web, the whole environment wrapped in heavy cellophane: this work suggests (again, from my hermetic outlook) a signal moment in internet technology breaking through into an art context.
3. Jeremy Deller's *Shaun Ryder's Family Tree* (2008), showing a genealogy of the working-class singer's family going back to 1820. The stark contrast between the culminating image of Ryder in glam-rock face paint and the listing of the menial occupations of his forebears is disquieting.
4. Sadie Benning's work, including her video *Play Pause* (2006) and the large figurative paintings on view alongside it in her 2007 show at the Wexner Center for the Arts, as well as all of her subsequent small, abstract paintings, sometimes accompanied by recordings on vinyl.
5. Lastly, I find Nicole Eisenman's prints from 2012 utterly mesmerizing and provocative.

Since I have to look up the meaning of "avant-garde" every time I am asked to consider it, I may not be the best person to comment. Likewise, I don't properly understand or think much about the relevance of the "academy."

Young artists are desperately devising ways to pay back their student loans. Since I went to a state school, I never had this problem, and cannot fathom the burden and pressure they must be under. Surely this is impacting the kind of art they are making.

Rob Pruitt

I see a sensibility that's market-driven. Painting is king, and all other practices—video, sculpture, performance— have essentially been squeezed out. And it's not just any kind of painting. It has to look expensive: large-scale, tasteful, modernist abstraction, and no social content allowed.

The avant-garde doesn't happen in a declared, radical break from the past—I don't see anything comparable to Braque and Picasso, isolated from the rest of the world, inventing Cubism in their studios. What I see is something more like micro societies, forming in places like Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, where there's a new farm-to-table, political food movement, a design esthetic based on recycling and new galleries popping up like mushrooms in the forest—young artists aren't even thinking about Chelsea. But I don't know that I'm describing something that's avant-garde—I might just be trend-spotting, like a lifestyle magazine editor.

I see in galleries, art fairs and art journals a conservatism, and with today's youth, I see little desire to participate in this endeavor to be "radical," rich and famous. Instead, a lot of young people today are making decisions regarding art and life based on practical concerns like the bad economy, social injustice and environmental ruin. They're more in conversation with the real world than the art world.

The condition of the artist has changed. If you look at the most famous artists of the day, they have an increased agency. Damien Hirst flipped the dynamic of the artist being at the mercy of the auction house, and Richard Prince used the Guggenheim as a commercial gallery to sell "new" work.

These days, the public perceives the artist more as a romantic than a radical. There's a lot of gorgeous process painting being made, but it's not changing the world. If you're looking for radicalism and shock, you're more likely to find it on TV and in pop music.

Rickety, aging genres are being shaken up by people like Lena Dunham, who exploded the sitcom with explicit, sexual self-representation, and Lady Gaga, who used a three-minute pop song to say homosexuality isn't a choice.

Carrie Moyer

The aughts can be characterized by a newfound awareness of art's utilitarian value. Over the past decade, the public's growing enthusiasm for "visual culture"—art, design, social media, entertainment and the many hybrids in between—has made contemporary art the ideal vehicle for instrumentalizing Big Ideas. No longer considered elitist, esoteric or even vaguely threatening, visual culture "works" best as an agile node for attracting participation from all quarters, from artists, audiences and consumers to speculators, corporations and governments. This is not necessarily a bad thing; after all, art should be democratic, right? But must it also be useful? Must it be enlightening, community building, workplace enhancing, real-estate developing? Vestigial traces of modernism's art for art's sake feel almost avant-garde in this milieu.

Liz Magic Laser

Perhaps the sensibility of the early 21st century is a neurotic one, in the sense that we are behaving in a way that was once responding to real conditions but is now inappropriate to the present situation. The premise of resurrecting this 45-year-old questionnaire is a case in point. I feel that the only way I can respond to these questions is to ask, "What are the questions for our era?" In response to your questionnaire I propose a few alternate questions.

Can you think of a new term to supplant "avant-garde"? I think we should come up with one, because I believe the "avant-garde" label only rightfully applies to artists who developed strategies in tandem with actual armed revolutionary movements (i.e., Paris in 1871 or Russia in 1917). Is the military model still applicable?

Is it generative to take a negative attitude toward the professionalization of the artist?

What kind of relationship do we want to see between art and the public?

James Welling

There is work made by contemporary artists that is deeply unfamiliar to many millions of Americans. In light of this, what, then, could be the meaning of the avant-garde? Art education is in peril in secondary schools, so talk of an avant-garde seems a bit beside the point to me. This year a profoundly small number of freshmen entering Princeton have expressed an interest in the humanities. The fate of art-making within the humanities might be a more pressing question.

Universities and art institutions are under siege economically. The crash of '08 and today's economic inequality seem more pointed and longer-lasting than communications advances.

The split between artists and the public is widening because of the arts education shortfall. How can there be contemporary art when there is no educated public outside of major population centers?

Haim Steinbach

Is there a sensibility of the turn of the 21st century? If so, how would you characterize it?

Object.

Is there an avant-garde today? What is its nature?

Thermorealism.

Has the sensibility of the aughts hardened into an academy? If so, what are its characteristics?

December.

Has the condition of the artist changed in the past 10 years? Has the speed-up of communications and the increased attention of the mass media made yesterday's avant-garde today's academy? How has this affected the artist? Does the growing participation of art schools in colleges and universities make for a more academic situation?

Speculative Kong.

Is there the same split between the avant-garde and the public as formerly? How has this relationship changed?

Which public, which avant-garde?!

Louise Fishman

At this time, there is not one recognizable, shared sensibility but a million—often characterized by impatience and commodification.

There can't be an avant-garde without an academy. There are many academies, but not one clearly defined as such. The gallery system might be described as the academy. There are galleries, and there are galleries. Ones showing established artists in the upper echelon of buying and selling often interconnect with museums and magazines, newspapers and auction houses. Then there are numerous small galleries scattered through Brooklyn, Chelsea and the Lower East Side that show younger artists and nascent ideas—galleries that don't construct an academy, but can lead to one. There's also perhaps the most important idea of an academy: the one embedded within each of us, to which we might succumb if we're not loyal to our best intentions to make original art true to our personal experiences.

I can't answer the question about whether or not the condition of the artist has changed in the past 10 years. I just know that it seems harder and harder for young artists to show their work or to even establish themselves in or near New York City. It's hard to get jobs, and nearly impossible to afford rents. But artists continue to persist in trying, despite the commercial pressure to speed things up rather than take time to develop one's work.

The rapidity of communications and increased attention of the mass media have deluded many people as to the real nature of a work of art—except, possibly, when the artist relies on computers to generate art. Then the work is effortlessly digested by the media, without the necessity of seeing it in person.

Art departments in colleges and universities make for broad generalizations about art and artists, which probably compromise originality—except among young people who insist on being artists despite everything. I know there are fine teachers who pass on their understanding of the art process, and make a space for talented young artists. The artistic spirit survives most obstacles. So, yes, an academy continues to function.

The public is used to the idea of an avant-garde. It takes 10 minutes for it to be digested once it presents itself. And another 15 to be gone.

Jim Shaw

The aughts began with a bubble based on lies, followed by a bust bigger than the recession in the '70s, when I came of age. So we're back to where we began, except that the art world has inflated to encompass the whole world, not just Europe and America.

If there is an avant-garde today, we wouldn't quite recognize it yet, since it wouldn't resemble anything that came before. The art world has realized that the next big thing probably looks unfamiliar, so it invests in the new thing, knowing it may well pay off better than something that resembles what we already recognize as art. Thus the avant-garde is deprived of its status as impoverished outsider.

Today we have lots of mini-academic styles, but no overarching academy. We do have a number of art schools that perform the tasks of weeding and tending our garden of hybridized art-star wannabes.

One part of the current economic trap is that most of the artistic communities we congregate in are not the bohemian ghettos of yesteryear but often the most expensive places. Another is that the academic system that has nurtured artists since the '60s has become an assembly line/insider-info track, with an ever-increasing price tag. One might hope that the Internet would allow artists from unknown backwaters, unencumbered by art school connections and debt, to shine. One might also imagine the Internet will come up with an alternate distribution and payment method, and new forms of art. I hope so, but the enormous amount of information surrounding us has so far only reinforced the need to make work that is big and splashy, that can attract attention at a crowded art fair, to stand out in the sea of art product.

We can all join up on the periphery. On YouTube the public is the performer—we only need to have cute cats in our work. I sincerely think that the art of the future will evolve on the electronic front porch that is the Internet, but that for an old foggy like myself, used to the pleasures and absurdity of rendering and polishing shiny objects for consumption, this venue is an unlikely place to end up. The artists of the future will figure out their own way.

Mel Bochner

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH

Walead Beshty

I think the flow of information just doesn't seem efficient enough to produce a singular sensibility. There are numerous iterations of the art world operating now, from regional or locus-centric worlds to more diffuse structures, like the academic, museum or gallery systems. Each has its own logic and hierarchies, and each has varying degrees of interest in, and compatibility with, the others. This in itself is positive and, at least in the short run, undermines the truism that globalization necessarily creates homogeneity and integration. The different centers tend to presume that their worldviews are global and inclusive, and to exhibit a general unfriendliness to or ignorance of other systems of valuation, as though each locus were pretending to a singularly dominant role. So I would say that if there is a sensibility I've become more conscious of, it's a kind of provincialism with global presumptions, and the sometimes massive disjunctions between these perspectives.

The idea of an avant-garde may have made some sense as a satirical provocation in the last century, but now it just seems vulgar. Beyond the parodic dimension of the term (staging cultural production in the language of war), the notion that artists are "in front" of something or are the leaders of their time seems presumptuous at best. A better and perhaps more realistic goal is to be thoughtful and ethical about one's participation in one's own time, rather than assume one is ahead of it.

As recently as 30 years ago, it was possible to argue that there were "sides" and that there was a clear "war" going on between factions with strong ideological differences. This no longer holds true. The current situation seems less centralized, making it far more difficult to identify positions in purely ideological or oppositional terms. If one is to continue with the war metaphor to describe artists, rather than "avant-garde," "sectarian" seems more appropriate; asymmetrical relations of power characterize most contemporary conflicts, and power alone (rather than ideology) seems to be the main concern. But I loathe war as a metaphor for art or any cultural production. It cheapens the real stakes of war and produces a misunderstanding of art. The absence of a clearly delineated "good fight" of moral certainty within the art world and a lack of artists and institutions lining up on one side or another of a great ideological divide have prompted some to claim that there is no "critical" work, that art is "depoliticized," without realizing that the terms and intellectual tools innovated several decades ago are simply ill-suited to the contemporary context. This is also why so many prominent and once progressive critics and theorists schooled in the strategies of the '70s and '80s often adopt a melancholic tone when discussing the contemporary. When there is a strong identification with contemporary practices, it tends to be premised on a fundamental misunderstanding. Of course, this is preferable to the other, even more crass form of criticism that prides itself on being populist. This is perennial, and it thrives on declarative blurbs and taste mongering. These critics assume populism is synonymous with the simplistic; in other words, the base assumption is that people are stupid, and complexity and intellectual richness are elitist.

I believe art schools or departments within universities can, as they come to occupy a larger role in the intellectual life of the university, radicalize it by example, forcing other disciplines to confront the monetization and instrumentalization of intellectual discourse, something that art has always understood about itself, and that academia has been mostly oblivious to. Beyond this, I think the growth of art schools' involvement in universities has been positive for art, creating a freer, more open, and more ambitious dialogue, all the while changing the culture of the professional art world by releasing generations of artists who are more willing to engage in open discussion and are more intellectually generous.

Carolee Schneemann

The sensibility of the 21st century: Feminist analysis of historic exclusionary traditions; the immense shift to integrations of creative works by women artists. Explicit analysis of militarism, sexism, biological imperatives, linguistic models, gender deformations have all been transformed to potentially affect art process.

The nature of the avant-garde today: Occupy Wall Street, eco-activisms (vilified as eco-terrorism). And of course, the myriad forms of "performance art" deflecting its sources in painting.

Has the sensibility of the aughts hardened into an academy? Current ideological language uses "practice" to define art concepts at the expense of process. Practice implies perfectibility, strategy, products: dentists have a practice, violinists practice, yoga is a practice, elephants practice for the circus. Process invites risk, uncertainty, vision, unpredictability, concentration and blind devotion.

Yes, the current situation is more academic. But I unpack hegemonic liminal indexicality by proleptic reifications . . . I'm inspired by the candy ad "Skittles-Walrus" on YouTube, and I need a good dose of "Key & Peele." Is there the same split between the avant-garde and the public as formerly? The public seeps into art as mass media, entertainment, glamorization, feminization, hyper-masculinity. Now we have an ocean of curators, of new artists with expectations of economic rewards and fame.

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