

FORMAL

cunt-positive

bad PAINTING



new image painting
feminism
modernism



BY KATHY KELLY

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Outside of my thoughts on Greenberg's eating habits, a few personal notes here and there, and the imagery, no original thoughts or creations are held within this paper. Consider the text an assemblage of decontextualized and recontextualized ready-mades that I acquired from Dana Padgett's lecture series on Contemporary Painting taught at the University of Houston, 2004, and from the texts listed at the conclusion of this document.

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THE FORMAL | Modernism via Clement Greenberg

Clement Greenberg's views on Modern art can be summed up in his eating habits. Imagine the round white disc of the dinner plate sitting in front of Greenberg—gravyleless mashed potatoes neatly stacked to the left, tightly corralled green peas on the right, low and central on the plate a bland ~~pork chop~~ (oops, not pork) filet of fish. Most assuredly, Greenberg carefully compartmentalized this meal, breaking it down into the most elemental groupings, never allowing his food to become co-mingled or touch. Each item would remain independent of the others; each basking in its own uniqueness and being most palatable in its pure form. For instance, a pea would lose value if it became embedded in the potatoes or mixed with the fish. The pea should be valued for its innate structure of being a pea. This formal structure was to be fully explored—the surface, the shape, and the properties of its pigment. The pea should justify itself; render itself pure by making explicit that which was irreducible about it. The pea should avoid anything that called up associations with potatoes or fish. Then Greenberg, with great author-

ity, could speak and write to the power of the pea. He would stand tall and firm and promote his formal view of the modern pea. The pea would justify the pea in the same way that logic established logic or paint, the painting. All other foods would fall by the way side and he would proudly taut this pea-ness. It would simply be the pea-ness for pea-ness' sake.

Simply substituting the pea for painting reveals truths and fallacies in Greenberg's theories of Modern Art. As far as I am concerned the story of the pea sums it up, but, since you need to know that I know what you expect me to know, I shall set silliness aside and connect some of the peas.

Greenberg had many great ideas about art and its evolution. His dogmatic rigidity coupled with his inability to weave together conflicting but coexisting art trends hurt his defining of what is Modern. Perhaps Post-modernism would be less "Post" and more on his historical continuum if he could have theorized a bigger picture

that incorporated movements such as Dada and Surrealism. His theories of Modern art have left me wanting.

Greenberg believed that art was universally significant and needed no context—it could and should stand alone—art for art’s sake. With each art exhibiting only that which was unique and irreducible about its medium, it would render itself pure. The art should be exclusive unto itself; painting should have no hint of the sculpted and the sculpted should have no hint of the painted.

Above all arts, Greenberg championed painting. He evaluated and promoted painted works based on their fulfillment of the formal qualities unique to painting—“the flat surface, the shape of the support, and the properties of pigment.”¹ The painting should be sustained by these formal elements with no narrative, figuration, history or the descriptive. The form as content should not be incidental but must constrain to the processes by which the art was made.

Greenberg’s assessed that Modern art began sometime in the 1860s, when artists found themselves freed to

define the content of their own work. These artists began to turn away from subject matter and towards the medium and processes of painting. “Manet’s paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted.”² Specifically this can be seen in *Olympia* and *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863. In both, the flat surface of the canvas became apparent in the nonsculptural handling of the deep shadows and highlights. For this, there was an outcry from the critics of the time: “...Such perilous procedures. We prefer to think he has made a mistake. And what is his aim? His canvases are too unfinished for us possibly to tell.”³ The Impressionist following Manet’s lead continued down this road. Gauguin stopped working from observation and painted from memory, thus recording his internal responses. This move away from direct observation resulted in a flattening of shapes and a reliance on vivid colors as seen in *The Vision After the Sermon*, 1888. In *The Basket of Apples*, 1895, Cézanne deformed the illusion of space in order to accommodate the shape

and flatness of the canvas. Upon Cézanne's death, Picasco and Braque further decreased the illusion of three-dimensional space through Cubism. The imitation of nature as content became insignificant. Invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, and colors took over. Works became more and more abstract resulting in a greater dependence on the formal elements. Kandinsky's, *Composition VII*, 1913, reveals his abandonment of realism and his exploration of the spiritual through abstraction, relying heavily on the formal elements.

By the 1940s and 1950s Abstract Expressionism represented Greenberg's ultimate peace-ness of what was truly Modern in art. Their "all-over" approach of paint application to the pictorial plane emphasized the flatness of the canvas. The large scale of the pieces furthered this "all-over" flattening affect. Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are a prime example. In *Number 1* (68" x 104"), 1948, with its decentralized drips, lack of hierarchy, and "all-overness," he relied on the application of

paint and pigment choices for its sense of harmony and rhythm without the inclusion of recognizable objects.

Number 1 was an example of Greenberg's autonomous art for the sake of art. If there was any external subject matter that may have been crucial to Pollock, Greenberg gave it no voice. Post-painterly abstraction also fits on Greenberg's continuum with their use of pigment to create the dissolution of all definite space. Examples of the dissolution of space are found in the works of Morris Louis' *Blue Veil*, 1958-1959, Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains & Sea*, 1952, and Mark Rothko's *Four Darks on Red*, 1958.

"Only optical facts were significant in the discussion of painting. Subject matter was irrelevant, illusion forbidden, and anything that did not fit Greenberg's logic was dropped from his definition of modernism as if it never existed...Greenberg's Modernism worshipped newness and originality, but it bogged down in rule making and a critical attitude which was translated into an esoteric and formalist language of abstraction..."⁴

Robert Rauschenberg, working concurrently with Pollock, in many ways met Greenberg's formula for Modern art in his use of pigment and the shallow picture planes created by his compositional "all-overness". Breaking away from Greenberg's formalism, Rauschenberg explored the painting surface through the introduction of recognizable imagery and by adhering actual objects to his *Combines*. He bastardized his formal content by bring together art and life; a Greenberg "no-no". Thus Greenberg's tunnel vision for Modern art and art making would lead him to reject Rauschenberg.

Minimalism, in the 1960s, with its reductive impulses in reducing works to the minimum number of colors, values, shapes, lines and textures, overtook Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism, primarily sculptural, had a mechanical sensibility. The artist's self became absent from the works. Highly formal and nonrepresentational, Minimalism spoke the language of modular repetition, elemental geometric form, and impersonal material-

ity. The works of Minimalist sculptures and paintings attained objecthood. All these characteristics seem to have fallen in line with Greenberg's theories of formalism, yet Greenberg could not reconcile Minimalism to his view of Modern art. One of the main complaints was the way in which Minimalist art was dependent on its environment, the object of art no longer autonomous. The objects were not placed on pedestals, but were positioned in a manner that made them inseparable from the viewers' space, creating a collaboration of sorts between the artist, environment and viewer. This interaction of artist, environment and viewer deviated from Greenberg's idea of purity within an art form in that it took on characteristics of another art, theater. Via his disciple, Michael Fried in "Art and Objecthood"; 1967, Greenberg would reject the Minimalist painters such as Robert Ryman, Brice Marden and Agnes Martin. In spite of their formalistic treatment of the canvas surface, the interplay of artist, environment, and viewer, erred on the side of theatrical.

Greenberg's big pea-ness consistently got in his way of
developing a holistic theory of what is Modern art and
his theory leaves me wanting!





I'VE FALLEN AND CAN'T GET UP | inspired by First Generation Feminism



THE CUNT-POSITIVE | First Generation Feminism

First generation feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s was responding to the females' lack of voice in conjunction with the misrepresentation of women and their uniquely feminine experience. This was made evident to women via the civil-rights movement, Vietnam anti-war activism, mass media and art objectification of women, and the absence of the female artist in the Modern art world. The feminists, led by artists and critics such as Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and Lucy Lippard, sought to promote a gender consciousness that would make evident the female sensibility. This sensibility focused on the female's body, sexuality and social roles.

Some of their artwork, such as the parody of *Buy My Bananas*, 1972, by art critic Linda Nochlin and *Turkish Bath*, 1973, by Silvia Sleight, pointed to the discrepancies between stereotypical images of women and men; they countered the male inventions. Further they hoped to "distinguish the art of women from that of men and to discover images that accurately represented the essential nature of women." ⁵ They raised gender

consciousness to improve woman's position with her self, society and the art world.

Feminists discovered that the personal was political. They unmasked their experiences in marriage, childrearing, sex, work and culture as not unique but rather a shared experience among women. Their individual feelings of being excluded and exploited were held in common—political forces appeared to be ruling their personal lives. Their artwork spoke to this collective struggle against discrimination happening both inside the home and in the public domain, yet they celebrated all that was feminine. The movement promoted women working together to make social change. They believed they could become the makers of meaning not simply receptors of meaning. "The personal is political" became one of their battle cries.

In the creation of their personal/political works, the women used handcrafted materials and techniques historically feminine. Contrary to formalism and minimal-

ism, feminist art had a narrative, a subject. This subject revolved around their lives as women, portraying their experiences, emotions, desires and dreams. It was distinctively feminine.

Much of these feminist goals, subject material and methods are evident in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979. The Dinner Party is a triangular shaped table measuring 46 1/2 feet on each side with thirty-nine place settings, thirteen on each side (reminiscent of the apostles and Christ at the Last Supper). Each place setting, commemorates the achievements of a great woman in history. These settings are lush and elaborate, with hand-stitched runners setting off hand-painted china plates. The plates are vivid colored forms representing the vagina. The ones representing more contemporary women are three-dimensional. Each plate is referential to the specific woman it represents. The table sits on top of a porcelain floor decorated with the names of 999 other great women. Women from all aspects of history were chosen, including goddesses,

poets, writers, early feminists, artists, and many others.

Chicago used different mediums created by and associated with women to create the installation. This included the use of fabric, embroidery, ceramics, china painting, and needlework. Chicago noted, "The inclusion of women's crafts...was intended to pay homage to women's too-often unacknowledged creative contributions while calling into question some of the distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art." ⁶ This type of artwork, handcrafted in nature and historically associated with women, has often been considered "low" art by the predominately male art world. It was Chicago's intention to blur the distinction between "high" and "low" art by using traditionally "low" art in a "high" art context. Chicago specifically rebelled against the established ideas of Greenberg's formalist ideas. She successfully pulled these feminine crafts into the spotlight, but was largely rejected by the established art museums.

Happenings—performance and body art—also played a major role in feminist art and tended to be extremely controversial for both men and women. Using her own body as the medium, the happenings gave immediate voice to the female artist's feelings. This can be seen in Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, 1976. As a reaction to negative feedback from a female critic regarding a male filmmaker's response to Schneemann's films/happenings, Schneemann stood naked and extracted a paper scroll from her vagina. The first time this was performed, it was for an all female audience. Her behavior, her art, was controversial then and now. I get her point but YUCK! I cannot fully relate to the need to be so shocking and visually loud since currently our role as women within society is not so oppressed and voiceless (maybe I am in complete denial).

Nancy Spero represented the more traditional medium of painting/drawing. She deviated from historic male painting by using paper as her support. Spero incorporated text as well as borrowed images into her artwork.

In her content she raged against helplessness and "the powerlessness of the...artist, the woman herself." ⁷

This can be seen both in *Codex Artaud*, 1971-1972 and *Torture of Women*, 1976. Robert Storr commented, "Under the pressure of their conviction and research, diaristic imagery, emotionally charged eclecticism, new materials and previously unacceptable attitudes toward craft were all admitted as serious points of departure for looking at old art and making the new." ⁸

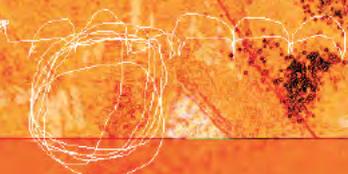
What was the impact of feminist happenings and image making? Not equal to men but an increase in the representation of female artists in museums; improved acceptance of the use of the "low" arts (sewing, ceramics, use of fabrics, pattern and decoration, etc) within "high" art; and, rejection of the male as the sole source of creative genius.

One of the things I specifically respect about this first generation of feminists is their celebration of what is uniquely feminine, in contrast with later

feminists that waged war against those bad, bad,
overbearing men. Though I liked their theory of
being “cunt positive” (which is incredibly difficult to
write, let alone say out loud), their happenings and
visual artifacts are not aesthetically, intellectually,
emotionally pleasing or celebratory to me.



HORSE | inspired by Susan Rothenberg



CULTURE POSITIVE

New Image painting, Bad Painting, set the stage for a return to the acceptability of painting. The paintings of New Image artists reintroduced the representational, the figurative, in a highly simplified or primitive manner. Exaggerated or abbreviated, the recognizable forms were dissociated from their natural habitats and recontextualized. The works tended to be emotional and containing an implied narrative. The influences of Abstract Expressionism can be seen not in their content but in the use of the gestural and large color fields. This is evident in the bulk of Susan Rothenberg's paintings of horses. Even in reproductions, her brushwork defining both the horse and the background are evident and highly gestural. They are full of expressive energy. Additionally, as seen in *Butterfly*, 1976, the horse is silhouetted on an expansive monochromatic field reminiscent of the Color Field paintings of the 1950s.

The use of mundane objects is a commonality between New Image painting and Pop Art. Pop Art's

use of the mundane feels once removed—less intimate—than New Image painting. Compare Andy Warhol's *One Hundred Cans*, 1962, to Neil Jenney's *Saw and Sawn*, 1969. Where Warhol uses cold hard edges and large solid blocks of color, Jenney reduces the elements in the painting to the essence of the forms, applying paint with intentionally naive and crude gestural strokes. Warhol's use of color, shape and line references mass production; whereas, Jenney's work seems to elude to a narrative having to do with comic angst of everyday life.

Like Pop Art, photorealism often tended to be a bit cold and standoffish. It was literal and academic. If there was a narrative, it was incidental. This can be seen in Richard Estes' *Telephone Booths*, 1968, and *Waverly Place*, 1980, with its high finish, hyper-real details and absence of the human form (with the exception of reflections). He painted what he saw, everyday scenes. He used photographs as source material for

his paintings. The paints, like the photographs, captured everything yet simultaneously deprived the image of meaning. Everything was in focus. Bad painting rebelled against this calculated, neutered style. Their figurative works were painted with “bad” visible brush strokes and primitive, non-academic, object representation. The “badder” they painted, the “gooder” they gave voice to their personal expression (So if bad is good, then let’s not take off for gramatical errors or primitive, ackward sentence structure or logic since this only makes my paper more personal and “gooder”. I shall sign it and call it art!). Philip Guston is an example of a successful Abstract Expressionist gone “Bad”. His Bad Paintings were raw with feelings created by his crude figuration. Like photorealism, his subject matter referenced everyday life. Deviating from photorealism, Guston’s imagery was made vivid by his “...dreams...predicatments, desperation...memories...[and] love.”⁹ His evolution from abstraction to crude figuration was with the hopes to have a voice, a narrative—a response to “the brutality of the

world.” Instead of simply, “...adjusting a red to a blue.

I [Guston] thought there must be some way I could do something about it.”¹⁰ Guston’s “Bad” expressive paintings, full of the personal and the narrative, is a key example (and leader) of New Image Painting. The “Bad” can be seen both in his early works such as *At the Table*, 1969, and later in the like of *Painter in Bed*, 1973.

Bad Painting drew from the lessons learned from Action Painting, Color Field Painting and Pop Art, yet they went beyond by creating highly personal work containing an elusive but definitive narrative. It is a shame Greenberg could not reconcile paintings with the narrative, figuration, or alternative explorations in the formal elements. If Greenberg wasn’t dead yet, he would be soon with all this Bad, Bad Painting.



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- Kathryn Kelley, *Formal Cunt-Positive Bad Painting*, 2004, Acrylic on paperbag and Adobe Photoshop.
- Kathryn Kelley, *Modernist Peas*, 2004, Acrylic on paperbag and Adobe Photoshop.
- Kathryn Kelley, *I've Fallen and Can't Get Up*, 2004, Acrylic on paperbag and Adobe Photoshop.
- Kathryn Kelley, *Horse*, 2004, Acrylic on paperbag and Adobe Photoshop.

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