Who’s Afraid of Visual Culture?
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Contemporary artists are increasingly producing works that mimic fashion photography, derive from television, or otherwise struggle to compete with the production values of the entertainment industries. This is hardly news. But the theoretical discussion of fine art as a cultural practice is still largely dependent on outmoded ideas that "art" defines itself in critical opposition to mass culture. Clearly there is a problem here. The gap between the reality of artists' sensibilities and the theoretical apparatus of much (especially academic) art criticism suggests that the understanding of the relation between fine art and visual culture needs a major conceptual overhaul more in keeping with what's actually going on. Revisiting aspects of early twentieth-century art that provide a precedent for contemporary activity, and that have been systematically excluded from the mainstream of what has come to be regarded as modern art history, is a useful place to start.

The history and critical discussion of modern art that developed with European innovations in abstraction and the avant-garde at its core has never been able to find a place in its arguments for those visual works that figured their engagement with modern life through representational imagery or an enthusiastic dialogue with the mass media. Yet, such work is irrefutably modern in its visual forms and requires a theoretical discussion that considers the relation between fine art and mass culture in its vernacular, popular, and commercial manifestations. There has to be a way to take seriously early twentieth-century visual forms of response to modern life that were not exclusively concerned with either transcending it in favor of a universal language of abstraction or with radical political negation. When the map of visual modernism is redrawn with these works supplementing the familiar coordinates of abstraction and the avant-garde, the topography of modern art will be radically reconfigured to include works whose visual form is specific to twentieth-century modernism, but which draw on visual traditions outside of the fine arts.

The recent exhibitions The American Century: Art and Culture 1900–1950 and Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age offer an opportunity to do just this. The American Century was curated by Barbara Haskell for the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Graphic Design, featuring works from the Merrill Berman Collection, was curated by Ellen Lupton, Darra Goldstein, and Deborah Rothschild for the Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution and the Williams College Museum of Art. The American Century, whatever quibbles one has with its curatorial foibles, was a phenomenal display of works and artifacts that demonstrated the unique contribution of American art to the field of modernism. Unprecedented in its scope, Graphic Design also set a benchmark for scholarship and curatorial work in the field. Yet, in marked contrast to the glut of critical, academic, and journalistic attention lavished on recent retrospective blockbuster exhibitions in modern art, there has been a conspicuous absence of serious critical engagement with these exhibitions. The American Century has come in for its usual share of journalistic Whitney-bashing, but Graphic Design barely managed a passing notice. And in a few instances, the deplorable poverty of critical means available for understanding this work has been glaringly obvious. Reading Arthur Danto’s review of The American Century
Thomas Hart Benton. City Activities with Subway. From the America Today murals, 1930. Distemper and egg tempera on gessoed linen with oil glaze. 92 x 134 1/2 (233.7 x 341.6). Collection The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the U.S.
was akin to watching some refugee character from a Henry James novel try to wrestle with a greased watermelon at a county fair." As for Graphic Design, in spite of historian and critic Maud Lavin’s statements in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, art history has not only not expanded to include its products in its scope of inquiry, in my experience it has locked down the borders ever more stringently under the threat that expanding research in this field seems to raise. If American art of the early twentieth century remains beneath notice in the minds of many art historians, then graphic design has the status of a dangerous interloper.

The historical reasons for these antipathies go to the core of the theoretical issues opened by the work included in the two exhibitions. Many attempts to recuperate American modernism have been fueled by work informed by the social history of art, the examination of crucial cultural movements in documentary photography, and the instrumental use of images in reinforcing gender, class, racial, and ethnic divisions. But such studied examination of these images has not asserted their modernity as images, their visual specificity with regard to the historical development of forms constituting twentieth-century art practice. The figurative, and often journalistic, reportorial, and diaristic dimension of the most original contributions of American art in this period should be taken seriously as visual forms whose characteristics can sustain a rigorous theoretical discussion of imagery as a site of modern culture. There is a tendency to be apologetic in assessing the illustrational quality of much American art of the early twentieth century, just as there is an unwillingness to assert that what has been long perceived as a liability in modern American art is in fact its strength: that it was conceived through formal strategies that partake of mass-media culture from the very outset.

For instance, there is a perverse prohibition against considering the work of even such a figure as Winslow Homer in terms of the ways he used, rather than ignored or transcended, the seductive strategies he learned in illustrational work. His cunningly contrived vignettes, carefully posed dramatic moments, and touching, even sentimental, instances of human drama are all elements the skilled illustrator brought into fine art. Such a prohibition has its roots in the disadvantage American culture has always felt in its relation to European art. As an institutionalized discourse, critical modernism promotes Constructivism, Neo-Plasticism, Cubism, and Futurism as the defining movements of modern art. The history of Surrealism’s difficult path to critical legitimacy only reinforces this stereotype—that work using figurative modes borrowed from traditional and commercial realms has traditionally been anathema to the modern critic dedicated to a resistant, and fundamentally elite, fine art practice. If Surrealism, a late addition to this canon, has been “let in,” it is because it seemed to lend itself to the psychoanalytic critique favored by Eurocentric modernists.

The problem that graphic design poses in bidding for serious critical attention is more bluntly stated: it simply is not considered art. The idea of remaking the discipline of art history into the field of visual studies finds its most vociferous opposition in the modern period. In other areas—classical, Precolombian, and Chinese, for example—the fine arts, the decorative arts, and other aspects of visual culture interpenetrate in a way that makes such

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distinctions difficult to sustain. But the apparent threat to fine art’s privileged status posed by modern visual culture, or such fields as graphic design, hits a nerve—perhaps because from the outset modern art’s identity was grounded in a turn away from the industrial modes of production associated with these other art forms.

Reassessing the contribution of American art to modern art requires some effort if its uniqueness within the modern field is to be asserted. American modern art looks anemic and feebly derivative if one assesses only those pale reflections of the European tradition that contribute to the history of abstraction. The work of Burgoyne Diller, Patrick Henry Bruce, or Ilya Bolotowsky, whatever merits their individual pieces might possess, will always pale in contrast to the pioneering efforts of Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, or Pablo Picasso, for the contest has always been set up by art historians already convinced of the intrinsic superiority of European models. On those terms, modern American art can never compete for serious critical attention, because it is always perceived to have failed to innovate in the areas deemed central to what constitutes modern art’s essential modernity. Even if American artists were able to draw on indigenous philosophical belief systems within Transcendentalism or nature-oriented animism, as in the abstract landscapes of Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, or Georgia O’Keeffe, and thus made their own unique contribution to the field of abstract formalism, these are not works that require a rethinking of the terms of critical modernism. They simply add an interesting, homespun footnote.

But the vigor and authenticity evident in the work of John Sloan, George Bellows, even Robert Henri, with their well developed reportorial and journalistic line, illustrationally trained eye, and instinct for successfully communicating a perception of direct experience through a visual record create the first substantive contribution to modern art in twentieth-century America. This work is important because of its difference from modern European art—most significantly because of the use it makes of the figurative and illustrational forms of modern visual culture. By contrast, European modernism appropriated the materials of mass culture through collage, but the strategies that are its hallmarks carefully marked the transformative distance from vernacular sources through radical formal innovation. Vernacular imagery was generally circumscribed as outside the fine art mainstream until Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s Learning from Las Vegas. But it figures as a significant influence and source for form (and all that such a dialogue suggests in terms of cultural exchanges and the purported identity of fine art as a cultural practice) in the Shaker architecture and interior furnishings

Lester Beall. It’s Fine for Us, 1930s. Poster: silkscreen, lithograph. 40 x 29½(101.6 x 75.9). Merrill C. Berman Collection. Photo Jim Frank.
from which Charles Sheeler absorbed patterns of design and visual order. While not posing any of the issues of the later postmodern critiques, the visual strategies by which Walker Evans’s photographs of building types helped to create a distinction between rural vernaculars and more contemporary architectural design played a part in legitimizing narratives of progress. Grant Wood’s attention to decor and dress within an American culture tied to the heartland and its assertions of particular ideological values had their instrumental effect as icons articulating factions within the modern era. The vernacular, therefore, weaves through modern visual culture as strongly as does the strain of popular art that shows up in Sloan’s studies of social groupings in the streets of New York, Bellows’s boxing clubs, Isabel Bishop’s careful record of working-class women, or Archibald Motley’s dancing figures. It is not only the thematic content of these images that partakes of popular sensibility, but their way of being rendered in illustrative, cartoonish, or representational styles, each of which signals its own area of competence within a thoroughly modern idiom. This synthesis is strikingly obvious in the work of those artists, such as Stuart Davis and Gerald Murphy, for whom commercial work was either training ground or direct inspiration. Less obviously, Thomas Hart Benton incorporated new visual qualities of cinematic action and movie poster layouts within his murals, while Reginald Marsh’s admiration of tabloid formats, mass-circulation publications, and posters is evident in his compositions, as well as his attitudes toward display and visual seduction.

That American artists willingly and knowingly absorbed the strategies of mass media, illustrated papers, and books and observed their effects upon the field of visual culture is a thesis that finds support in every instance of the work displayed in The American Century. That so much of this work was motivated by a compelling belief in the potency of representation to depict lived conditions and then argue for their transformation is another major feature of representational modernism. Such an attitude informs the work of a number of key Europeans in this period as well, but it is the earnest and overwhelming impetus behind a critical mass of American art of the 1920s and 1930s. The complexities and contradictions of class relations revealed in many of the works of Sloan, Bellows, and the Soyer brothers, as well as the photographers Dorothea Lange, Lewis Hine, and Margaret Bourke-White, still read clearly in spite of the falling away of the historical moment in which their specificity resides. The belief system that sustained such work is pragmatic and positivist in its nature, rather than founded on the principles of aesthetic negativity that fostered difficulty and resistance to consumption as tenets of an avant-garde politics. This latter model, deeply entrenched in late twentieth-century academic art history cultures, continues to justify the production of esoteric work in the name of a politics from which it has long been disengaged and to which it served, at best, a dubious function even in the early stages of its appearance. The notion that an elite culture performed a political function through production of...
advanced art was put to its crucial test within the Soviet avant-garde’s experimental and ultimately fatal relation with the post-Revolutionary state bureaucracy and its repressive regimes. The rhetoric of revolution central to the avant-garde forged its own curious connections between commercial and fine art realms in the work of early twentieth-century graphic designers. Graphic design historians, perhaps because of the compromises evident within the historical record, are more disposed than many art historians have been to point out the transformations that qualify these earlier claims for the political efficacy of visual forms.

At first glance it might seem that The American Century and Graphic Design have very little in common. But in important ways, the issues they raise are complementary in bringing methodological problems in the criticism of visual modernism into focus. Graphic Design surveys the contributions to the development of modern forms of commercial art in the first four decades of the twentieth century, stopping short of the years of World War II and its aftermath. Its scope is European, Russian/Soviet, and American in scale, and most of the works are poster designs for events, propaganda and information campaigns, or product advertisements. This highly visible arena for graphic design, its most public face, nevertheless leaves out the many other domains in which graphic art interpenetrates daily experience through newspaper, magazine, and product design. More pervasive by far than fine art, commercial work has been the vehicle for the dissemination of aesthetic developments since the early modern era—which is to say at least as far back as the sixteenth century, when innovations in print technology made the mechanical reproduction of images and text a viable commercial proposition. Modern graphic design produced and reflected the style of its various sites and moments of production, and challenges to fine art’s claims for visual form as an instrument of social change can be mounted on the evidence of graphic art’s capacity to continually redefine the ideological value of any given visual style. As the curators point out, the very forms that originated within radical movements of the early twentieth-century avant-garde as graphic advertisements for Futurist and Dada sensibilities quickly became tamed and assimilated into corporate and state campaigns. That they were tamed is significant, of course, and until relatively recently the fully illegible and chaotic compositions that characterized the most radical pages of Tristan Tzara or Filippo Marinetti’s works would not have been made use of in any commercial venue. But in a general sense, the visual innovations that were formed in the crucible of radical artists’ independent and
ephemeral publications provided one of the major sources for the rapidly expanding industry of graphic art and design in the twentieth century. Other sources, as in the case of American art of the period, can be traced to commercial illustration, vernacular imagery, and the already developed fields of graphic arts: photography, typography, lettering, printmaking, and poster work.

In the rush to establish critical legitimacy for the history of graphic design, its fine art credentials tend to be placed in the foreground. The irony of returning authorship to some of these works is significant, for there were designers for whom being absorbed into a cause or campaign was an important statement against bourgeois exultation of individuality and artistic identity. There were also phases of early twentieth-century design in which the signature of a graphic artist became a selling point for an ad—when the identifiable styles of a Lucien Bernhard or a Cassandre added a mark of quality to the product being sold. The complicated flirtation that graphic design has had with fine art has brought about several cycles in which anonymity and celebrity are alternately considered appropriate attributes of a designer’s identity. But beyond the superficial trendiness of these ideas is a more significant concern: graphic design, like fine art, but perhaps more conspicuously, is as much the result of historical, economic, and social forces as it is of aesthetic choice. Insofar as the visual forms of graphic design inscribe ideological values and cultural attitudes in the very specific modes of their composition, finish, treatment, and other features of visual rhetoric, they are potent indices of the social conditions in which they are produced. The kind of visual analysis that Deborah Goldstein, in her catalogue essay “Selling and Idea,” brings to the discussion of a particular fashion for isolating commodities into objects and reifying products that resisted such easy depiction (gas, for instance) in the 1910s says something profound about the ways visual means of advertising enable strategies of economic production and consumption. Likewise, Lupton’s original and highly informed discussion of the relations between actual modes of print production and the depiction of the visual hallmarks of photography and advanced technological innovations in typography (she discusses a poster hand-drawn by Aleksandr Rodchenko to create the appearance of a manipulated photographic image) is an exemplary study of the links between visual form and ideological values. Such methodologies could be productively reapplied to the study of fine art, if the sense of historical forces, rather than aesthetic autonomy, could

2. The work of David Carson, for instance, or P. Scott Makela, and others of the “end of print” sensibility of the early 1990s.

Designer unknown. V pokhod za chistotu (Get on the March for Cleanliness), Lithograph. 26 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. (67.6 x 52.2). Merrill C. Berman Collection. Photo Jim Frank.
be brought to bear on, for instance, the study of modern American art. Graphic design history has an important methodological role to play at this moment, and should be wary of falling into a celebrity/author/artist model of stylistic innovation and history of forms or movements. It is easier to trace a lineage of forms than it is to research the conditions that sustained their production, and this is equally true for fine art, where such questions challenge the fundamental autonomy granted to modern art, as it is for design. Fully aware of these contradictions, the curatorial team responsible for Graphic Design acknowledged the difficulties of finding an audience willing to engage with an exhibition of visual work that doesn’t have a celebrity name attached to it.

The visual forms of contemporary life, fine art and commercial alike, have been shaped by the history of graphic design. If the idea that the same individuals made significant contributions to both fine art and commercial realms in the early twentieth century seemed like a radical notion, it was because the act of cross-pollinating fine art with commerce was perceived as transgressive. The use of fine art imagery for commercial purposes already had an established track record, and the movement of images back and forth across the borders of fine and commercial art established a precedent for a similar migration of forms of composition, layout, and communicative rhetoric. The appropriations of commercial imagery and design that populate Pop art and then postmodern art, are simply part of a long history of such exchanges, each with its own historical character and charge. My major criticism of the selection of materials in Graphic Design is that it kept so closely to the history of avant-garde art and graphics. Such an approach runs the risk of replaying the errors of modern art history and stressing the radical forms, geometric tendencies, and photographic innovations that characterized an important strain of design. But it leaves aside the illustrational work that featured prominently in product and ad campaigns of the period.3

In effect, Graphic Design makes a bid for the art status of graphic design and, in so doing, truncates the field along lines quite similar to those established by canonical modernism. Since much of that work shows up in venues other than that of poster art, such as the pages of mass-circulation magazines, it would have required an unwieldy expansion of the exhibition to include them. But it would be regrettable if the heterogeneous spectrum of graphic design history were reduced to those strains that originate within the gene pool of high modernism just at the point when modern art is challenged to expand beyond those artificial limitations.

3. Refer to the studies by Michelle Bogart, Roland Marchand, and so on.
Each of these exhibitions and accompanying publications had its strengths and problems, as is to be expected in such ambitious undertakings. Haskell’s curatorial logic is so deeply rooted in the conviction that formal similarities should govern proximity and juxtaposition that substantive distinctions between works were often lost. Likewise, the implicit faith in the capacity of images to communicate in and by themselves left many of these works without the necessary context in which to understand their iconography, let alone their historical significance. The work of Ben Shahn provides an excellent case in point; the details of the history of Sacco and Vanzetti, as well known to his contemporary audiences as the minutiae of Monica and Bill’s exchanges were to us a year ago, are no longer immediately invoked by the image itself. The value of the painting is not at issue here; rather, the viewer’s appreciation of the painting would have been amplified considerably by having that history refreshed. More insidious is the assumption that the terms of identity in class, ethnic, racial, or gendered terms can be read from images that themselves often articulated the stereotypes according to which social lines were drawn and then policed. There is a tacit complicity with prejudicial distortion in not explaining that images of Dust Bowl farmers and migrant workers served to reinforce the status quo, demonstrating the indomitable “spirit” of the American worker or the inherent and essential backwardness of the disenfranchised poor.

Haskell’s curatorial approach and her catalogue essay seem to disregard American art historians who have struggled to bring these considerations into scholarship in the last fifteen years. It is as though no critical interrogation of cultural history had ever had a place in American art, and as though the way to celebrate its legacy were with a mere presentation of artifacts. The brief wall text panels that accompanied the exhibition used the most clichéd characterizations of history, as if the general public could not handle any critical argument or more nuanced discussion. A title like “Nostalgia and Spirituality,” used to bracket work ranging from major figures in the American Arts and Crafts movement to Arthur Davies’s inexcusably inept reworkings of late Symbolist painting, seems ill-conceived to communicate the integrated vision of aesthetic organicism of Arthur Matthews or Louis Comfort Tiffany. More disturbing was the inclusion of illustrational works by Marguerite Zorach in a gallery where they were supposed to hold their own with paintings by John Marin and Georgia O’Keeffe, instead of being contextualized within the history of illustration, book production, and other visual forms. Likewise, showing Rockwell Kent’s paintings simply diminished this artist, whose visual strength as an illustrator helped promote a style of muscular modernity, monumental forms echoing those of proto-fascist European illustrators in interesting, if somewhat disturbing, ways. (By contrast, the juxtaposition of Soviet and American posters for rural electrification, farm reforms, and agricultural programs in Graphic Design made its curatorial point

through striking visual means, showing the marked similarity of these works created independently in utterly separate circumstances.

The strengths of the Whitney exhibition were many, not least of which is the vibrancy of this work, and the insights it offers into the experience of modernity. These are works whose visual form reveals how modern life was looked at, as well as what it looked like—visual codes of modern representational imagery that constitute a field unparalleled within European modernism. Each image is like a teaser, a trailer to a full movie one wants to see unroll in all its detailed complexity. The use of films, music, and material culture artifacts enriched the exhibition considerably and broke up the homogenous prospect of viewing gallery after gallery of static images. Every attempt was made to make this an exhibition of cultural history, not just a history of fine art. But the mere amassing of this significant collection of objects did not compensate for the absence of essential critical contextualization as an integral feature of the exhibition. The catalogue, with contributions from every discipline of American studies, expands on this approach, and, the overall conservatism of its tone notwithstanding, goes a long way to remedy the shortcomings of the exhibition’s shortage of contextual panels.

But there was one really offensive moment in my viewing of the Whitney exhibition that I have to comment on. It was the entrance to the second-floor installation focused on the 1940s, which was divided into two discrete units: the war and after. The central gallery was dominated by a scrim image of the atom bomb exploding; without context or qualification, this scrim evoked a disturbingly ghostlike eeriness. The image was framed by two photographs enlarged to wall size (with the exception of a Dust Bowl image serving as backdrop to the 1930s, no other photographs in the exhibition were at this scale). On the left was the landing of the troops on Iwo Jima, and on the right was the well known V-Day photograph of a sailor kissing a nurse. These militaristic images of masculinity asserted power in terms of a narrative of aggression and eros, culminating in the libidinal satisfaction of the exploding nuclear charge. Their unqualified reinscription of the worst kind of imperialistic mythology assaulted the viewer with an unrelentingly violent force. The closing of U.S. borders to Jewish immigrants in the late 1930s, the hypocritical aspects of domestic and foreign policy complicit with genocidal fascism and antisemitism, and the self-righteous justification of the use of the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—all of the elements of historical complexity that would qualify the simplistic thematics of a triumphant America saving the
world from evil forces—were erased. This felt particularly poignant in a moment in which the reassertion of militarism as a solution to complex problems has once again found its ripple effects in a domestic agenda ready to be sacrificed to the building of techno-military supplies in war efforts that continually justify rearmament at a high level. Rendering history in simplistic terms as a backdrop to visual art, as if its function were to reaffirm the rightness of the tale through its mirror effects, is a simulacral approach. It does not conceal "truth"; instead, it makes the notion of any reflective counterpoint seem pointless and impossible because the terms on which the tale is being told are sealed into an endless refraction of its own making, utterly remote from the considerations of ethics and social accountability.

There are many problems in this exhibition that make it more than a missed opportunity to engage with the critical discussion of American art and its place in modernism. It suggests a deeply disturbing tendency that hopefully does not signal the future direction of the Whitney’s curatorial program. Graphic Design, by contrast, provided an intelligent survey of an area of modern visual culture central to its historical project and critical conception. The catalogue essays avoided the glibness of Haskell’s (albeit informed and lively) coffee-table tone. Nevertheless, the optimism of the curators seems a bit overstated: the incorporation of the history of graphic design into modern art history is still a highly elusive and controversial goal. It can be argued that the history of visual culture requires a synthetic integration of the work in graphic design, imagery in advertising, editorial, and commercial contexts, into the history of fine art. The dialogue that artists themselves have with these varied histories and visual vocabularies could be better understood by enlarging the scope of modern art to include visual culture broadly defined.

Throughout the history of modern art, whether demarcated from the onset of Romanticism, Impressionism, or early twentieth-century movements, the identity of art practice has been intimately bound up with that of mass culture. Keepers of the flame of critical modernism cast this relation as one in which fine art is the privileged term in any opposition—high/low, elite/popular, authorial/industrial, and they carefully guard the distinctions between them. But the complex nature of the relation of fine art to mass-media imagery requires a more subtle characterization of the interlinked identity of the two domains. Fine art has become increasingly dependent on media culture, and on the forms of visuality generated within mass media, for its vocabulary of images. The tail of fine art no longer wags the monster dog of commercial production, and thus it seems urgent to expand our historical understanding of this relationship by looking more carefully at those manifestations of modern visual culture that can help lay the critical groundwork for a nuanced discussion of this relationship in terms not circumscribed by a disdainful dismissal of the early twentieth-century dialogue of modern art and mass media.

The esoteric privilege to which modern art subscribed and by which it has been supported failed absolutely to provide a solid political base to sustain the claims on which its original premises were based. Abstraction did not, for instance, preserve those values on which civilization is founded. And as the theoretical premises of modernism have become increasingly academic and

4. Thomas Crow's "Modernism and Mass Culture," which summarizes Meyer Schapiro, T. J. Clark, and much Frankfurt School Marxist thought in its discussion of fine art’s elite identity, is paradigmatic in this regard. The notion of what is frequently termed “advanced art” as the research and development arm of the culture industry, and of the residual artisanal authenticity of the art object as a specialized commodity, are all elements of this characterization. The comfortable habit of thought that extends from this permits contemporary artists to rest assured that their works have an inherent integrity that makes them superior on moral grounds to those that are the output of the so-called culture industries. This insidious moral stance is largely an excuse to defend all the class biases of elite connoisseurship built into the institutions of high art in academic, gallery, and museum contexts. The continued disdain for the relation between media culture and fine art has retarded the development of useful critical frameworks for discussion of a changed dynamic in which fine art’s potency as a tool of radical critique and epistemological defamiliarization has been largely circumscribed by its insular isolation within academic culture.

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institutionalized, the possibility of thinking through the real relations between the production of its critical discourses and the social forces by which they are shaped becomes increasingly difficult. In being willing to look in the most specific way at the work of early twentieth-century American art, and at the work of graphic design, as well as other arenas of modern visual culture, a fundamental understanding of these forces will begin to emerge. These are the forces that shape our current lives, and disregarding them in the name of an elite critical stance of aesthetic negation and an embrace of the esoteric features of early modern art and the avant-garde is something we do only at our peril.

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