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How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War

IT OFTEN SEEMS AS THOUGH art historians want to reduce the practice of art to something like their own business, a business in which a major piece of news is most often a squabble over a minor piece of information. Art historians like to worry about provenance, to argue about priority, about who did what first; they like to organize artists into schools and parties and to demonstrate similarities. They seem especially fond of this last activity, working hard to deny the particularity of artworks, their relations to the conditions that helped create them, presenting instead a rather disinterested array of tokens to be exchanged for brownie points during a debate at College Art Association meetings.

This reduction of the history of art into various arrangements has been criticized from among the ranks, but such criticism too often takes the form of a simple inversion, accepting the same arrangement of commodities, but declaring them the ideological baubles of a ruling class. Most art historians (most critics also) understand the world through the word, pursuing a reasonable explanation of things through a more or less rigorous application of logic. Art, however, does not follow the reasonable rules of logic, but rather adheres to the unreason of rhetoric. This allusive, untrustworthy discourse rightly appalls the liberal-minded; it makes the academic mind blush with uncertainty, and so elicits a barrage of categorization.

At the beginning of his book it appears that Serge Guilbaut understands the folly of most such attempts at rational reductionism, the empty pattern-making of most surveys of recent art. He

wants his book to be taken as an antidote, a representation of the history of Abstract Expressionism. He sees very clearly the problems of most such histories and has some very sharp words to say about these unthinking litanies of triumph. Most of his observations ring true, and we look forward to his own arguments with pleasure, anticipating at last the sophisticated reading of Jackson Pollock et al that he demonstrates we lack. But as we read we find that we still lack it, for Guilbaut has, perhaps all too predictably, simply fallen into the inversion argument, doing little more than standing the likes of Irving Sandler on their heads. (That we might have thought them already on their heads is another story.)

Guilbaut's book is nevertheless useful on two counts: it provides a lot of day-to-day detail about New York's art world in the late '30s through the '40s, and in doing so helps demystify the amazing, seemingly magical rise of the American avant garde. He documents the intensity with which artists and critics alike embraced Trotskyism in the late '30s, and then the apparent speed with which they moved away from any overtly left-wing politics in the following decade. But he fills out his argument in such general terms that significant differences are lost—Barnett Newman's long commitment to anarchism and Clement Greenberg's drift toward formalism are, for example, treated as somehow equivalent. Guilbaut's hackles are up, and as a result he is all too often unable to appreciate the daily concerns that might have had a bearing on the development he maps out, nor does he want to consider in much detail the impact of major events like the Hitler-Stalin pact, the experience of war, and the fiasco at Yalta. In short, he is unwilling to acknowledge the dynamic of an idea, the way it changes in relation to lived experience. This is too subtle for Guilbaut—he wants to find a simple defection, a turning away from the left motivated solely by greed and ambition.

Speaking of which, Guilbaut is good on the machinations of some of the wheelers and dealers of the period—especially good on Samuel Kootz, an early enthusiast for American art who showed scant respect for the individual artists whose careers he helped and hindered. (So ruthless was Kootz in his pursuit of efficient promotion that, according to Guilbaut, he was willing to dump the work of Byron Browne, at one time one of his rising stars, in the bargain basement of Gimbels department store.) But Guilbaut is so outraged by the whole system that it seems to be impossible for him to actually analyze what was going on. This is too bad, since a more dispassionate look at the material he has collected would help us all understand the ways in which an art-market functions, and why its focus of attention might move. That he cannot provide this analysis is a disappointment, but an inevitable one given the contradiction at the heart of his enterprise. For Guilbaut is a hardheaded romantic, a social critic who sees art as a mere reflection of a despised market economy, and an "art lover" who thinks art should be able to transcend all that.

Or at least a lover of certain art, for there is a large piece of French chauvinism in Guilbaut's argument, an ingrained refusal to believe that anyone, particularly an American, could be as talented an artist as someone from France. An extremist, Guilbaut cannot allow himself to see the frustrating complexities of the relation between art and the world in which it is produced. He cannot accept the coincidence of events that lead to New York's supremacy—the destruction of cultural life in Europe as a result of the Nazi devastation, the emergence of very strong artists like Newman, Pollock, and Mark Rothko, and the continuing attempts of the New York market

to do what any market in a capitalist economy tries to do—replace imports with its own goods, and produce exports.

By 1945 American business hardly had to try to dominate trade, since all potential competitors had either been defeated or worn down by the war effort. But American business and government did go all out to create captive markets, partly, it must be said, out of humanitarian impulses. America wanted to help rebuild Europe, but in such a way that European business would become dependent on the trans-Atlantic connection. In the cultural field the most egregious example is to be found in the movie business, for here large amounts of economic aid were tied to agreements that the governments of Europe would limit the number of nationally made movies that could be shown, but would impose no such limits on Hollywood. This obviously dealt a near-mortal blow to the movie industries of Britain, France, and Germany, a blow that was not remedied at all until the late '50s and early '60s. More importantly, it ensured that the new generations of Europeans would grow up surrounded by the images of American mass culture, and would feel estranged from the images of their own. Guilbaut again provides a great deal of information about this, but chooses not to pursue the implications of this kind of propaganda victory, preferring instead to go after the more obvious examples of government interference in the promotion of art. But even here, Guilbaut glides over. The State Department, and later the United States Information Service, enjoyed only patchy success making contemporary art a direct part of anticommunist propaganda in those years. The general public, egged on by a relentless mass media, never could accept the use of abstract art—which, ironically, they thought “communistic” and perverted—to sell American ideals. Yet Guilbaut proves incapable of seeing the radical work of the American avant garde as anything more than the tokens in a cynical game of cultural domination. All he sees are feeble-minded paeans to free enterprise and the sacred notion of individualism.

There is enough to be learned from this book, a great many facts and figures that some other writer will be able to use to write the text we really need. New York did not steal the idea of Modern art, but big business certainly appropriated it. Someday we may read about that, and when we do, Guilbaut's book will be prominently footnoted.

[Thomas Lawson](#) writes regularly for Artforum.

How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War, by *Serge Guilbaut*, trans. *Arthur Goldhammer*, *University of Chicago Press*, 1983, 277 pp., 23 black and white photographs.

Lippard has traveled to China, Cuba, and Nicaragua, and written about the art she saw. She has written on artists working with unions (while organizing an exhibition program at District 1199 of the hospital workers union, in New York), on antiracist protests (against the show "Nigger Drawings," the film *Fort Apache*, etc.)¹ But Lippard's strength lies in her deep caring for art as well as her activism. What she describes as her formalist past is not really in the past—it lives in her insistence that art be not only combative but also innovative as art. That has sometimes created dilemmas for her, as it has for other progressive thinkers in art. I recall a symptomatic event: she was hanging a show in solidarity with Chilean democracy after the people's rule there was brought to a bloody end by Augusto Pinochet and the U.S. She arranged one wall of beautiful Minimal, holistic,² and other abstract works, mostly black or white, and she arranged another wall of expressive protest images. She looked at the first section and said, "I like the wall, but I don't like the works." Then she looked to the other wall and said, "I like what the artists do, but I don't like the wall." Ten years later this is still her search. It is expressed well by the Cuban poet Nelson Herera Ysla, whom she quotes in the chapter "Some Propaganda for Propaganda":

Forgive me, defender of images and symbols,
I forgive you, too.
Forgive me, hermetic poets for whom I have
boundless admiration,
but we have so many things left to say
in a way everyone understands as clearly as
possible . . .

Get the Message? was written by a revolutionary romantic, by a New England abolitionist who came to the Mudd Club. The language is breezy but it carries a clear message which should be heard.
—RUDOLF BARANIK

Rudolf Baranik is an artist who lives in New York.

1. In "Necessary and Unnecessary Words."
2. "Nigger Drawings" was the title of an exhibition of works by Donald, held at Artists Space in New York in February through March, 1979. A committee of artists and critics (Carl Andre, Amy Baker, Rudolf Baranik, Edie Dick, Cliff Joseph, Kalle Linke, Lucy Lippard, Howlandena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Ingrid Sischy, May Stevens and Tony White) protested against the racist title. *Fort Apache* (1960), a film starring Paul Newman, purported to portray realistically life in the South Bronx, but Hispanic and black activists saw the film as distorting and racist.

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