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IS DIY Culture The New Avant-Garde?

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A Unique Dealer Heads Chicago's Oldest Michigan Avenue Gallery

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Radical Form/Radical Politics: A Talk about Today's Avant-Garde

by *Evan Carter*

Chicago's influence in the art world is unique. With its storied history of experimentation, social and civic activism, ample space, and affordability for young artists, the city offers opportunities to test new ideas and endeavors in art making and exhibiting, specifically the DIY movement. As this issue of the *Examiner* explores some of smaller independent galleries in Chicago and beyond, the editors thought it worthwhile to investigate the force that often drive the mind of the independent artist: the avant-garde. I spoke with artist and educator, Geof Oppenheimer, to discuss notions of the avant-garde in our 21st century cultural landscape.

Evan Carter: It seems that the common understanding of the avant-garde in art is that it is the presentation of unconventional and experimental ideas that stand in contrast to the mainstream, the accepted, or established notion of what art is. For the sake of our conversation, would you like to add anything to that or further unpack the term and its common historical definition?

Geof Oppenheimer: I think you are correct in the sense that today the avant-garde is thought of as primarily formal innovation. Novel forms. And that may be true as far as it goes. But if you think about it historically and perhaps in the way that I'm interested in it, the avant-garde is about pushing the policed boundaries of culture and meaning.

Avant-garde is a military term for the waves of assault troops that first define the terrain of the battlefield. The waves that set the precedent for what follows. I find this way of thinking about the term more productive. Or at least it more closely reflects my ambitions for it.

EC: Would you agree that art history has shown us that the defiance of convention is treated as controversial but comes to be accepted as the norm shortly thereafter?

GO: In my mind, to make this argument in 2018, that the defiance of convention is radical, is a socially conservative position to take. It's a bourgeois value.

Today, I think the most radical thing one can do is to embrace formal convention as a tool to explode social convention. One of the most radical things an artist today can do is wear Brooks Brothers.

EC: You mentioned having ambitions for the avant-garde. It sounds to me like you have a kind of personal investment in furthering the idea of the avant-garde.

GO: Absolutely.

EC: Do you see this in artists today and in contemporary art practice today? To what degree?

GO: I think there always has been and always will be people who use art to further social discourse. I think that's something that art can do really well.

With the financialization of certain aspects of the art industry, not all art does that anymore; some art is just there to kind of ingratiate itself to capital—which there has always been a place for. Art has always had that aspect. That's what the Medici were.

I do think that there are groups of artists now, and hopefully always will be, that use art as a tool to push the boundaries of culture and to reorganize vision. Those are my ambitions for my own art, and I think there are other artists in the world who also aspire to that. I'm not as pessimistic as I think some of your questions frame it.

I totally understand your pessimism. The world's pretty fucked up. But I actually think that there's a healthy space in art for unpacking meaning, and I think that's what the avant-garde does.

EC: I think my pessimism comes from a few different places. Such as seeing how the aesthetics of the avant-garde get used under the assumption that they are still serving the purposes of the avant-garde but don't necessarily succeed. I guess I'm trying to locate the avant-garde in the midst of today's landscape.

GO: I think that's true. Maybe something that's more pernicious now but maybe is also historical is that the forces of aesthetic capitalism sort of take, not the ideas of the avant-garde, but only the aesthetics and usurp it for the forces of power. There is an unquenchable appetite in post-capitalism to take the aesthetics of novelty that the avant-garde produces and use it for the service

of power and capital. And that metabolism is fast, they take that shit quick for sure. So it's easy to get bummed out. But I don't know. It might just be that the social metabolism is naturally fast now.

EC: That connects to a question I have about education. One of my concerns is the capitalist metabolism and the usurping of aesthetic power you described. Have educational models also succumbed to that same kind of usurping of aesthetics for capitalist power?

GO: Talk more about that.

EC: Some of my experience in seeing, and not just in my education at DOVA but across the higher art education spectrum, is that the aesthetics of the avant-garde are presumed to be functioning or behaving as avant-garde when perhaps they are not necessarily succeeding at doing so. Rather, capitalism has had an influence on education to the point where these academic programs may sit in some kind of gray area where the work is seen as performing the avant-garde but is really functioning within the banal confines of a capitalist system.

GO: I think the art education system that I taught you in, and that I also went to graduate school in, is a kind of '60s/'70s Marxist critique that has become mannered. The education I was part of as an undergrad was grounded in a conservative, Beaux-Arts model. That's really different from what art education is today at the graduate level. Today, it is an extension of the 1970s rejection of that nineteenth-century model, influenced by Marxist critique that saw itself as adversarial to the market. Fortunately or unfortunately, this has settled into middle age and maybe assumes radical form is radical politics. I think that is something that I question at this point in my life.

Part of the beauty of visual art is that it can, not always, operate on the level of the subconscious or the pre- or post-cognitive level, the animal aspects, that we all share. In graduate education today, that constant need for an academic rationalization of the form is something that, as I have gotten older, I've become very skeptical about.

EC: When you bring up the sort of subconscious or the 'shared animal' characteristics, would you say that is a realm of the avant-garde?

GO: For sure. I mean you'll get a million different opinions on this, but I think radicalism today really needs to sort of...actually, this is totally my own shit so I'm really only speaking for myself, but I think we live in such a hyper-codified world where everything is a metric, that what the avant-garde can do today is reconcile

that with the irrational, maybe destructive animal aspects human beings still have.

How you reconcile Amazon Prime with our death drive is something that I think needs to be worked on.

EC: Can you describe [what you mean by] death drive?

GO: I'm using that as a kind of blanket term for our animal desires and drives. Fuck, food and money. The less rational aspects of what we are.

EC: So, going back to the question where I asked if you agree that our history has shown us the defiance of convention is treated as controversial but comes to be accepted as a norm—you said that it is conservative to make that argument and that it's a bourgeois value. Can you further explore that?

GO: Again, going back to that historical narrative, the art education that I was raised in and that you were raised in, it's a modernist ideal of fetishizing the shock, like our goal as artists is to constantly radically shock conventional value, aesthetic value.

That to me is a conservative, well-worn track that the of role of the artist is to "blow up form" and "shock and offend" the sensibilities. That has become a bourgeois, conservative value; art for a kind of novelty. People want to be challenged and offended. That is a role the arts can play and is definitely part of the market. Rich people go to art and are like, "Oh, it's so shocking," and spend their money on it. There is a place for that, but I also think it is a limiting way to think about art. I also think you can embrace formal convention and redeploy social convention. Take those more historical conventions and weaponize them. Make them tools to explode social conventions.

EC: That's really helpful because I think I was seeing defiance of convention and going against the mainstream as kind of the same thing, but you have made a helpful distinction here between the two ideas. So, thank you for that and for this conversation. To wrap up, could you cite a few examples of work you have recently encountered that could be described as avant-garde?

GO: Igor Stravinsky, *Ebony Concerto*; Zach Galifianakis, *Baskets*; Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*; Joan Didion, *Miami*. ■

Geof Oppenheimer is a sculptor who lives in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.