

4.607

Thinking About Architecture: In History and at Present

Instructor: Prof. Mark Jarzombek

TA: Ana María León

M: 9.30-12:30

LECTURE NOTES: OCTOBER 26

Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," 1939

Modernity and the aesthetics of Modern Art are often linked through the principle of abstraction. But what is abstraction?

Greenberg sees abstraction not as pure form in the traditional metaphysical sense, but as a type of aesthetic meditation on the art-of art-making: a "poet's poet," and "artist's art." The result may or may not look 'abstract.' He calls it "the imitating of imitating," the "avant-garde's specialization of itself." Ultimately, because of the dominance of kitsch, the avant-garde is not the NEW but the "preservation of whatever living culture we have right now." This means that the purpose of the avant-garde is not necessarily to be avant-garde in the political sense.

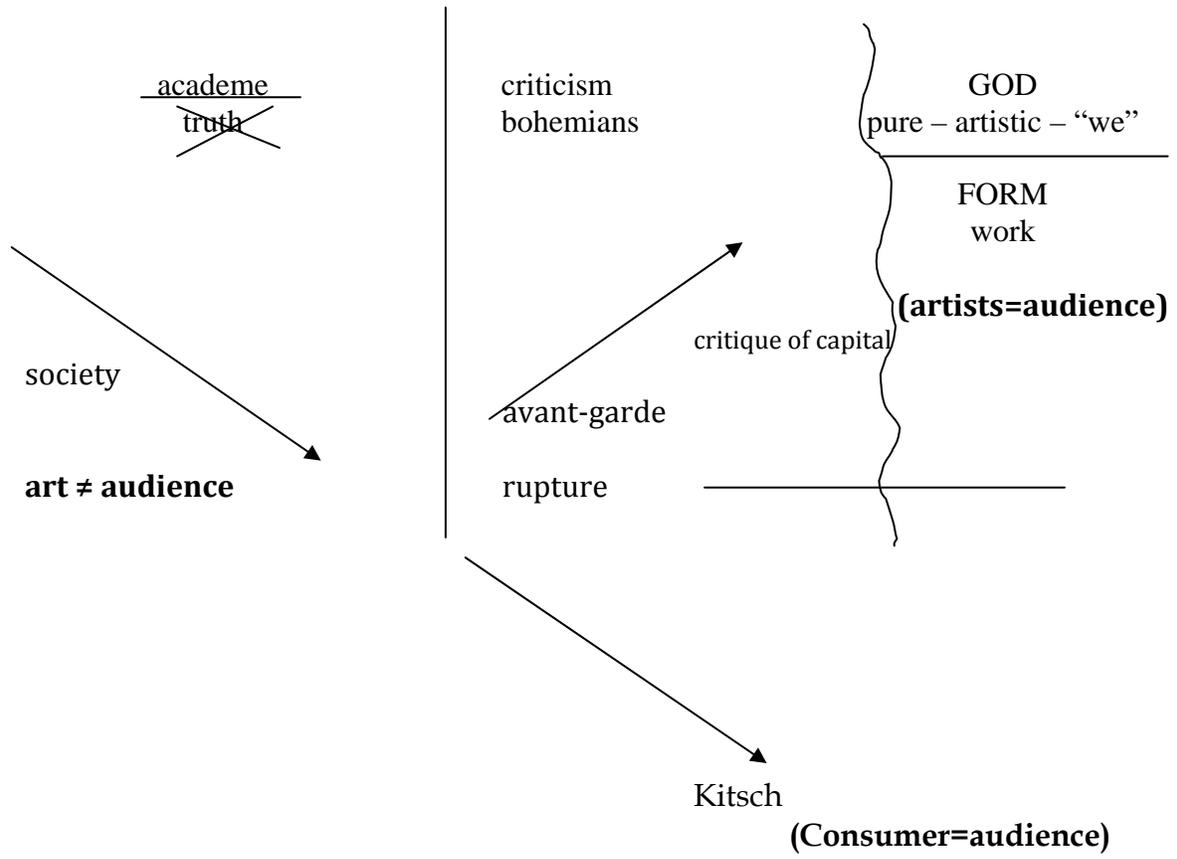
Greenberg's article presents a historical legitimation of abstraction as well as a theoretical one

1. society is in a state of decay in which artists and audience no longer communicate.
2. In the late 19th century, Bohemianism cut the ties with society.
3. But this freedom -though it constituted a type of purification - could only be temporary.
4. A small group of artists emerged who talked in essence to each other. They were their own 'audience.' [thus the creation of what we might call 'difficult art.'] They imitate "not God" but the "disciplines and processes" of art itself.
5. A privileged group of elite clients eventually arose who nurtured these artists "by a thread of gold."
6. Unfortunately while this was all taking place, society saw the rise of individualism, Realism, and peasant urban aesthetics leading to kitsch - born in the city - and the industrialization of bad taste.

Clement Greenberg (January 16, 1909 - May 7, 1994) was an influential American art critic closely associated with Modern art in the United States. Such was Greenberg's influence as an art critic that Tom Wolfe in his 1975 book *The*

Painted Word identified Greenberg as one of the "kings of cultureburg", alongside Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg. Wolfe contended that these critics influence was too great on the world of art.

Greenberg Diagram



MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

4.607 Thinking About Architecture: In History and at Present
Fall 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.