Barbara Rose's Right Turn

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> But she is a special case, because she has no idea of how dangerous she is, above all, to the things she thinks she is committed to.[1]
>
> – *Philip Leider, 1966*

I. From "ABC Art" to *American Painting: The Eighties*

In histories of postwar American art criticism, Barbara Rose makes two notable appearances. The first is as the author of "ABC Art," the 1965 article that introduced readers of *Art in America* to Minimalism. Since its publication, "ABC Art" has been anthologized many times over, recommended for Rose's grasp on what one editor called "history-in-the-making."[2] Rose's second notable appearance is as the subject—or, perhaps more accurately, the target—of Douglas Crimp's 1981 *October* article "The End of Painting." Here, we find a very different Rose from the one behind "ABC Art." Far from grasping "history-in-the-making," Crimp engaged Rose as the reactionary curator of *American Painting: The Eighties*, her 1979 exhibition that showcased a new generation of artists returning to the methods and forms of modernist painting.[3] Although Rose certainly did not view herself as a reactionary, her curatorial proposition—that contemporary art was continuous with modernism—consciously challenged attempts by Crimp and others to break with that history.

Demonstrably, something had changed for Rose between 1965 and 1979. What I have termed Rose's "right turn" lies at the crux of this change. Between writing "ABC Art" and curating *American Painting: The Eighties,* Rose had become disillusioned by the promise of a new art after modernism, causing her to turn away from the 1960s avant-garde she had spent the early part of her career relentlessly defending, and back toward the tradition she had hoped that avant-garde would go beyond. The art critic's trajectory from vanguard to rearguard is a familiar one, especially for those critics like Rose who became associated with a single artistic tendency or moment.[4] Even more familiar is the rightward turn undertaken by

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[1] Philip Leider, letter to Michael Fried, June 3, 1966. Philip Leider Papers, Archives of American Art, box 1, folder 6.

[2] Jed Perl, "ABC Art," in Perl (ed.), *Art in America 1945–1970: Writings from the Age of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 722.

[3] See: Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (spring 1981), 69–83.

[4] This conundrum is illuminated by Leo Steinberg's wonderful formulation from 1962, that the critic is the "generator of cliché." Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art," in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 22.

many American intellectuals throughout the twentieth century. Worth pausing on, however, is the relative absence of such narratives in histories of art criticism after the 1960s. That the majority of modernist critics in America withdrew from contemporary art after modernism is understandable.[5] Far more curious, however, is the withdrawal of a critic so invested in the possibility of art after modernism. This is the unique purchase of Rose's right turn.

American Painting: The Eighties crystalized Rose's right turn in the year 1979.[6] But that shift had been set in motion by the events of the late 1960s, not the late 1970s.[7] Toward the end of the 1960s, Rose had begun to voice serious doubts about the direction of contemporary art. As she put it several years later, this was when her role shifted from "enthusiastic cheerleader of the art of my generation, to the critic of its (and of necessity my own) excesses and limitations."[8] Although ostensibly oriented toward the next decade, *American Painting: The Eighties* was essentially an elaboration of that critique.[9] In the foreword to the catalog, Rose turned the question of painting's viability into a question about the success of the 1960s avant-garde. "In their wish to be original at any cost," Rose polemicized, the artists of her generation had "arrived at styles that [she] ultimately found lacking."[10] Whether land-based or conceptual, video or performance, Rose located that lack within the decidedly anti-painting stance of 1960s art:

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[5] Robert Genter's distinction between high modernists (Clement Greenberg's generation) who despaired at the 1960s developments and "romantic modernists" (Rose's generation) who cheered them on is helpful here: "In fact, many high modernists, in particular, many New York intellectuals, eventually came to reject the cultural project they had long defined, seeing in the tumults of the late 1960s the worst excesses of modernism." Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 311.

[6] Rose, "American Painting: The Eighties," ii.

[7] The coordinates of painting's relationship to this post-1968 moment have already been mapped in *Selva*, specifically in relation to the activities of the French artist group Support/Surfaces. Like Daniel Spaulding, I am interested in recapturing the contingency of this moment, before "the revolution's collapse and art's return to arthood" was "a foregone conclusion": Daniel Spaulding, "Greenberg avec Mao: Supports/Surfaces and the Specific Contradiction of Painting," *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art*, 1 (fall 2019), 92.

[8] Rose, "Autocritique [1987]," in Barbara Rose, *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), xviii.

[9] This much was indicated by the title of the symposium Rose organized to coincide with the exhibition, "Painterly Traditions in New Art," which was held at the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center on September 29, 1979. In the discussion, Rose claimed that her motivation in mounting the show was to prove that modernist painting that "defines itself in relationship to its intrinsic properties [...] remains viable." She continued: "Now I realize that this is what Hilton Kramer calls the old-time religion, and there is no question about it, he's right. I still believe in the old-time religion. I happen to feel a kind of integrity about art that defines itself in this way that I don't feel about other kinds of art." Grey Art Gallery Records, box 18, folder 6, NYU Special Collections.

[10] Rose, "American Painting: The Eighties," i.

> Ten years ago, the question "is painting dead?" was seriously being raised as artist after artist deserted the illusory world of the canvas for the "real" world of three-dimensional objects, performances in actual time and space, or the second-hand duplication of reality in mechanically reproduced images of video, film and photography.[11]

From the canvas to the "real world": in providing a starting point for the question "is painting dead?" Rose addressed the expanded field of 1960s art. The vexed place of painting within this, decidedly American, portrait was perhaps best summed up by the artist Donald Judd's 1964 quip that "the main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall."[12]

But to get even more specific, Rose's ten-year timeline for the question "is painting dead" set the clock to 1969, positing the origins of its attendant debate in the long caesura of art after 1968. This was deliberate. Not only did it allow Rose to reject the apparent newness with which calls to end painting were made in the late 1970s, it provided her a longer span to prove that the search for an alternative had fallen flat. Thus, according to Rose, by the late 1970s anti-painting had become sufficiently tired as a proposition to inspire a new generation of artists to paint again. By gathering their paintings together in a single exhibition, Rose hoped to prove conclusively that the 1960s project had gone nowhere. One critic who was attentive to this intervention was Hal Foster, who began his review of *American Painting: The Eighties* by claiming that her titular claim on the 1980s before the decade had even begun was "preposterous."[13] How could such a position be maintained, Foster probed, when "one feels that nostalgia for the old, as much as faith in the new, compels Rose."[14] Elsewhere in the review, Foster glossed that nostalgia with the words "conservative," "reactionary," and "revisionist."[15]

Foster's choice of words underscores the political stakes of Rose's exhibition, stakes that are also implied by my naming her about-face a "right turn." To be clear, Rose was not *of the right.* However, to designate the 1960s a failure was to define oneself against the Left—or, to be more precise, what remained of the New Left after 1968. In the provinces of American art, these remains were latterly charged with new life under the mantle of postmodernism and in the pages of *October.*[16] As the most self-evident expression of Rose's right turn, it makes sense that the art critics most committed to this intellectual project took *American Painting: The Eighties* seriously. Both Foster and Crimp knew that a judgement on the 1960s

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[11] Ibid., 1.

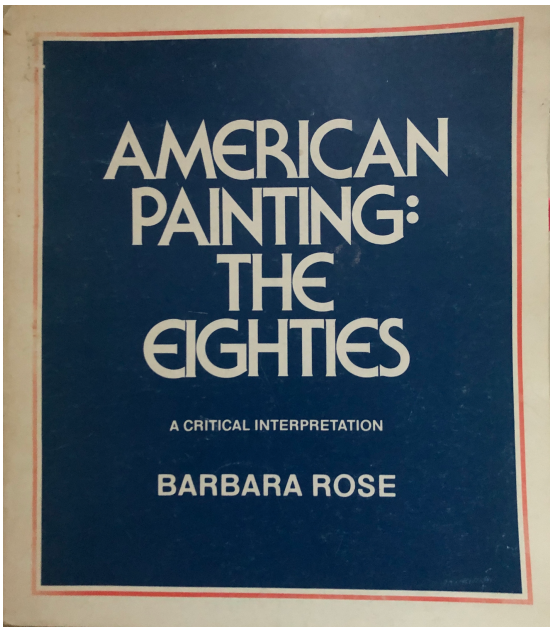
[12] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in Donald Judd, *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (New York: Judd Foundation, 2015), 181.

[13] Hal Foster, "A Tournament of Roses," *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 3 (November 1979), 62–67.

[14] Ibid., 67.

[15] Ibid., 63, 65.

[16] Discussions with Laurie Rojas, Ivan Knapp and Diva Gujral were crucial in helping me to map this context.



1. Barbara Rose, *American Painting: The Eighties – A Critical Interpretation* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 1979).

had been passed, even if their protestations were ostensibly bound up in a debate about the end of painting in the late 1970s.

If Rose's right turn was confirmed in *American Painting: The Eighties*, it was first broached in her three-part *Artforum* article "The Politics of Art." This article provoked another discussion about the 1960s, although here the stakes here were much higher. Written during the heat of the years 1968–1969, Rose used her three-part article to ask where the 1960s avant-garde was headed whilst she was still on the train. The remainder of this article will focus on "The Politics of Art" and the late-1960s context in which it was developed. Rather than leave the 1980s behind, however, I am interested in whether rereading "The Politics of Art" might help us to imagine another route out of 1968 for Rose, one that does not necessarily end in *American Painting: The Eighties*.

II. Problems of Criticism

Between September 1967 and November 1971, *Artforum* ran a series titled "Problems of Criticism." Comprising ten features—three by Rose—the series weathered a period of major transition for the magazine, bookending the movement of its offices from Los Angeles to New York in 1967 and the departure of its founding editor Philip Leider in 1971. Before it snowballed into a multi-issue affair spanning four years, "Problems of Criticism" had first been conceived as a special issue on criticism.[17] The idea was Leider's initiative, and the titular problem—as he saw it—was the growing plurality of approaches to art criticism in his magazine. Rather than gather around a single method (formalism) or medium (painting), art

[17] See: Philip Leider letter to Michael Fried, May 16, 1967, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 7, Archives of American Art. The idea of a special issue on criticism is a recurring feature of the frequent correspondence between Leider and Fried in 1967, with Fried largely making the case against such an issue (or series, as it later became) being published.

criticism in the 1960s was becoming increasingly diverse in both form and content. In *Artforum,* Leider was able to represent this diversity more or less in full, yet he feared that his editors and contributors' varying art-critical approaches might calcify into unresolvable differences. By giving these writers a chance to clarify their positions, Leider hoped to stem this potential art-critical stalemate.

Before "Problems of Criticism" existed as either a series or a special issue, Leider had initially imagined airing the divergent approaches to contemporary art criticism at a symposium. In Leider's correspondence, this idea first appears in a letter to Michael Fried from June 27, 1965, although here the vague notion of an "open-ended panel by younger critics" at the Los Angeles County Museum seemed merely to be a pretext for getting Fried to travel to the West Coast so the two could meet in person.[18] A few weeks later, however, the idea had become more fully formed. In another letter, also to Fried, Leider referenced a panel discussion in which both Leslie Fiedler and Philip Roth had participated on the "alienation of the Jewish American intellectual" at a four-day symposium in Israel.[19] Pitched principally in generational terms, Leider posited that he could imagine a discussion being had in the same vein amongst "what could be called the post-a/e [Abstract Expressionist] younger writers."[20] Under this tentative umbrella, Leider placed Fried, along with Rose, Max Kozloff, Robert Rosenblum and Anette Michelson.[21] Rose, another key correspondent for Leider during the early *Artforum* years, was keen on the symposium, and seemed to have convinced Fried over the course of a weekend at her and Frank Stella's Long Island beach house. Shortly after, Fried not only confirmed he would participate, but also put forward Hilton Kramer and Donald Judd as additional discussants.[22]

Although the critic and artist were exact contemporaries, Leider considered Kramer too avowedly hostile to contemporary art for the kind of discussion he had in mind. Rather than having a wide "spectrum" of opinions represented, Leider envisaged a panel constituted by critics belonging only to the generation that had "emerged since the late fifties" who were largely sympathetic to the new art of their generation.[23] As he put it to Fried, he did not want

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[18] Philip Leider, letter to Michael Fried, June 27, 1965, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art. Despite both the frequency and the familiar tone of their letters, Leider and Fried only started corresponding in 1965 when Fried had begun to write for *Artforum*.

[19] The subject of the symposium was Jewish literary and cultural issues and took place across a series of auditoriums in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa between June 17 and 21, 1963. For an account of the proceedings, see: Blake Bailey, *Phillip Roth: The Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021), 241–45. Thanks to Elon Julius for alerting me to this reference.

[20] Philip Leider, letter to Michael Fried, July 6, 1965, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art.

[21] Ibid. Anette Michelson's role within this grouping was largely as a placeholder rather than a potential panelist, as she was still living in Paris at the time.

[22] Michael Fried, letter to Philip Leider, August 2, 1965, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art.

[23] Philip Leider letter to Michael Fried, August 6, 1965. Philip Leider Papers, Archives of American Art, box 1, folder 5. Leider posited the two poles of that spectrum as Fried on one side and Max

the discussion to entertain "dead questions" about whether or not Stella was a good painter.[24] Such a discussion did eventually come to pass, but not under Leider's watch. Entirely separate from the various efforts on Leider's part to stage a symposium in Los Angeles, the art historian William C. Seitz put together a panel in New York at Brandeis University on May 7, 1966. Fried participated, along with Rose, Kozloff, and Sidney Tillim, another *Artforum* regular.[25] Titled *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, Seitz's panel intended to keep both art and criticism in play, positing that "new criticism cannot be separated from new art."[26] Although perhaps too neat, Seitz's formulation does effectively capture the problem of criticism as it was understood from the standpoint of mid-1960s New York. The decade's new art had indeed provoked a question about the possibility of a new criticism, and that art's "diverse tendencies" (Seitz again) had indeed sparked "fundamental disagreements" amongst critics.[27] The stage was set for a lively debate.

Like Leider, Seitz hoped that encouraging the speakers to articulate their disagreements would help clear the way for a more coherent art-critical landscape. In this way, both Seitz and Leider's efforts in art criticism can be connected to a wider turn in New Left journals of the late 1950s and 1960s. Efraim Carlebach has shown that the hallmark of British journals such as *Labour Review*, *Universities and Left Review*, and *New Reasoner* was an ambition to publish a variety of tendencies and opinions.[28] By foregrounding the "necessity for theoretical discussion" between and across all sections of the New Left, these journals attempted to break with the perceived sectarianism and ideological brittleness of their Old Left predecessors.[29] In the case of all three journals this ambition was short-lived. Any thawing of ideological differences engendered through written debate was quickly reversed as the journals either folded, merged or split.[30] Although the disagreements hosted by Seitz and Leider were staged

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Kozloff on the other, something echoed when he reflected on the "Problems of Criticism" series decades later for Amy Newman's oral history *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974*, in which he asserts that "I wanted Michael [Fried], and, for example, Max [Kozloff] to make their opposition clear and open." Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 239.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Seitz also acted as moderator for the discussion.

[26] William C. Seitz, "Introduction," in *Art Criticism in the Sixties* (New York: October House, 1967), 1.

[27] Ibid., 1, 3.

[28] Efraim Carlebach, "Three Magazines: Ghosts of the New Left," in *Platypus Review* 147, June 2022, https://platypus1917.org/2022/05/31/three-magazines-ghosts-of-the-new-left/ (accessed 12 October 2023).

[29] Ibid.

[30] As Carlebach shows, *Labour Review* folded in 1964. *Universities and Left Review* and *New Reasoner* merged to form *New Left Review* in 1960, but was not able to sustain the differences between E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall; the latter stepped down in 1962. See: Carlebach, "Three Magazines."

in America and at a later point in the history of the New Left, they followed a similar trajectory.[31]

Even before the debate about art criticism had moved from Brandeis to the pages of *Artforum*, fissures were already detectible. It is significant, for example, that Fried participated in the Brandeis debate but did not contribute an article to the "Problems of Criticism" series.[32] Indeed, far from adding nuance and clarity to the variety of approaches to art criticism amongst the new generation of writers, the Brandeis debate instead drove a wedge between Fried and his peers, creating an unfortunate binary opposition that smoothed over the panelists' individual differences. Tillim, as the slightly older panelist holding a self-described "eccentric position," had not helped matters by dividing the disagreement into the "exclusive, formalist approach of a Mr. Fried," on one side, and the "inclusive, basically anti-formalist approach of a Miss Rose and/or a Mr. Kozloff" on the other.[33] While Fried's retort that "we agree, so to speak, and only up to a point, about who the best painters are but not about what painting is" could have given way to a development of the notion of "anti-formalism" beyond mere negation, none of the other speakers took the bait.[34] Later, Rose attempted to deal with this question in her contribution to the "Problems of Criticism" series by addressing Fried directly. That Fried chose not to respond made their debate somewhat one-sided.

Unfolding in slow-motion in print over four years, "Problems of Criticism" certainly diffused the heat of the Brandeis debate. But Tillim's delineation of art criticism into two separate camps—formalism and anti-formalism—was preserved, even without Fried there to fly the flag for the former. In the end, the formalist approach was represented in the "Problems of Criticism" series by one Clement Greenberg. Although this put the other side of the debate at a generation's remove, there was a certain logic to this addition. As Leider himself put it in an ingratiating letter soliciting Greenberg's contribution, he was the "*cher maitre* [sic] to all the staff."[35] Underscoring this point, Stephen Moonie has posited that "under the editorial guidance of Philip Leider, the magazine was marked by Greenberg's influence."[36] This influence can be read in two directions. First—and this is the reading offered by Moonie in his

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[31] It feels important to note here that Amy Newman's survey of *Artforum* ends in 1974.

[32] The merits of continuing such discussion were immediately discounted by Fried post-Brandeis, who stated in a letter to Leider shortly after the debate that "I no longer want to sit at the same table with Max and Barbara, as though I felt that what they had to say were worth hearing or refuting." Michael Fried letter to Philip Leider, June 14, 1966 Philip Leider Papers, Archives of American Art, box 1, folder 6.

[33] Sidney Tillim in *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, 27.

[34] Michael Fried in *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, 13.

[35] The letter also relayed Fried's resistance to the series. Fried had reportedly said that only those who had produced a reputable body of work should be asked to contribute, and because only Greenberg fitted that bill the series was nonsensical as it would only have a single contributor. Philip Leider, letter to Clement Greenberg, April 21, 1967. Philip Leider Papers, Archives of American Art, box 1, folder 10.

[36] Stephen Moonie, "Historians of the Future: Harold Rosenberg's Critique of *Artforum*," *Visual Resources* 31 (2015), 105.

account of the early years of *Artforum*—through the continued import the *Artforum* cohort attributed to Greenberg's narrative of modernism, as theorized in "Avant Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940).[37] At the same time, Greenberg's influence also asserted itself negatively (albeit productively) on that same cohort, especially in the latter half of the 1960s.

Kozloff was one of the first critics of the *Artforum* generation to attempt to work through Greenberg's influence. He defended this stance at the Brandeis conference as follows: "The work we do now stands simply in itself as a critique of our predecessors or mentors."[38] Kozloff had embarked on this project in 1963, when he submitted a letter responding to Greenberg's article "After Abstract Expressionism" to the editor of *Art International*. Amounting to a five-page essay, Kozloff's letter did not pull any punches. A short excerpt:

> All else being tabu [sic], [Greenberg's] remarks about color painting are among the most short-winded and arcane, or rather incantatory, that I have read. If one is a severely formalist critic who at the same time wants an art bent on eliminating most pictorial relationships, that is, on making formalist analysis irrelevant liturgy can be the only result. Thus, very strangely, an attempt to substantiate a way of talking about art has strangled itself, just as a very healthy scepticism has declined into a dubious credulity.[39]

Kozloff's letter was of a piece with a wider reassessment of Greenberg's writings after the publication of his collected criticism *Art and Culture* in 1961.[40] Kozloff's position that Greenberg's formalism had become "quasi-religious" was highly influential on subsequent interventions, which variously posited formalism as too restrictive a method to engage the diverse tendencies in 1960s art.[41]

Given this context, it would have made sense for Greenberg to use his contribution to the "Problems of Criticism" series to clarify his own critical position. And, at first blush, this is exactly what his article promised. Titled "Complaints of an Art Critic," the article set its author at the center, implying that some flavor of critical self-reflection would follow. Better yet, the second section opened with a dictionary definition of formalism, seemingly inviting Greenberg's clarification of the term with which he had become associated. But clarity was not provided, only a defense. Greenberg put formalism in scare quotes, a move that allowed him simultaneously to distance himself from the term while also destabilizing its critical purchase.[42] Moreover, while he did offer something of a potted history of formalism (one that artfully skipped over his own contribution), the real focus of Greenberg's article was "anti-

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Max Kozloff in *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, 18.

[39] Max Kozloff, "Letter to the Editor," *Art International*, vol. 8, no. 6 (June 25, 1963), 90.

[40] See: Robert Goldwater, "Art and Criticism", *Partisan Review*, vol. 28, no. 5–6 (1961); Hilton Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg," *Arts*, October 1962, 60–63.

[41] Kozloff, "Letter to the Editor," 92.

[42] Clement Greenberg, "Complaints of an Art Critic," *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 2 (October 1967), 38–39.

formalism."[43] In directing his attention here, rather than toward formalism itself, Greenberg set the terms of the debate that followed. Narrowing the spectrum even further than Leider had originally intended for his symposium, "Problems of Criticism" ended up staging a conversation in which various versions of "anti-formalism" were attempted. Kozloff lead the charge, followed by Rose, and—perhaps appropriately—Rosalind Krauss got the last word.[44] Of these competing versions, however, Rose was the only one to present "anti-formalism" as a political issue.

III. The Politics of Art

Rose's title for her three-part contribution to the "Problems of Criticism" series was a declaration of intent. With it, she sought to move the *Artforum* debate about art criticism into the arena of politics. This was not to clear the way for a more committed or avowedly political art criticism—or indeed, for a political art. Rather, in "The Politics of Art: Part I," Rose intended to prove that political art was a false promise whose lie was sustained by political art criticism. Rose charged both Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg with entertaining this deception, a pairing that likely dismayed both critics. Yet despite their conflicting approaches to art criticism, Rose contended that Greenberg and Rosenberg both belonged to the same "disenchanted American Left" for whom art had become a "surrogate for the revolution."[45] Targeting Rosenberg in particular, Rose claimed that his concept of "action painting" was tantamount to a "displacement of political ideals into the area of aesthetics" by confusing painting—not politics—with an arena in which one could act.[46]

By addressing the "disenchanted American Left," Rose set her sights on the Old Left rather than the New Left, whose own disenchantment was yet to set in. Yet, according to Rose, these two Lefts and their respective revolutionary moments were not so easy to delineate, precisely because writers like Rosenberg "still resort on occasion to the vocabulary and polemical tone he used as a political writer in the thirties."[47] Notwithstanding that Rosenberg and Greenberg had occupied two different corners of what Rose called that decade's "socialist camp," and notwithstanding that the meaning of socialism had dramatically shifted since the 1930s, Rose wanted to demonstrate how these two critics' political formation continued to assert itself in their art criticism.[48] This was Rose's explanation for what she

[43] Only one "anti-formalist" was named Robert Goldwater, a peer of Greenberg's who had contributed the first essay to the series. See: Goldwater, "Varieties of Critical Experience," vol. 6, no. 1 (September 1967), 40–41.

[44] See: Kozloff, "Venetian Art and Florentine Criticism," *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 4 (December 1967), 42–45; Rose, "The Politics of Art," part I, *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 6 (February 1968), 31–32; part II, *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 5 (January 1969), 44–49; and part III, vol. 7, no. 9 (May 1969), 46–51; and Rosalind Krauss, "Pictorial Space and the Question of Documentary," *Artforum*, vol. 10, no. 3 (November 1971), 68–71.

[45] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part I" [1968], in Rose, *Autocritique*, 229.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 232.

perceived to be the "tone of polemical virulence that has characterized recent American art criticism."[49] At an earlier moment, Rose claimed, the same degree of intensity "might have found another kind of outlet, specifically a political expression."[50]

To make her case, Rose added a third critic into the mix: Fried. Fried was born two decades after Rosenberg and Greenberg, and three years after Rose. Yet despite only having been alive for one year of the 1930s, Rose argued that, by cloaking his art criticism in "Marxist political terms," Fried's art criticism reproduced the problem she had diagnosed in the writing of his art-critical forebearers.[51] Specifically, Fried's *formalist* art criticism, which he had claimed was "better able to throw light upon the new art than any other approach" in his 1965 essay "Three American Painters."[52] Fried theorized the development of that "new art" as follows:

> [T]he most important single characteristic of the new *modus vivendi* between the arts and bourgeois society gradually arrived at during the first decades of the present century has been the tendency of ambitious art to become more and more concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself.[53]

Rose quoted extensively from this essay in "The Politics of Art: Part I."[54] But her critique of political art criticism essentially flowed from these few lines. "What this means for Fried," Rose sniped, is that "art has become purged of all political content" and that "political content can actually work against aesthetic quality."[55] This point was very important for Rose, who

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[49] Ibid., 229.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 231. Interestingly, Rose also references Fried's remarks at the Brandeis debate.

[52] Fried, "Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella" [1965] in Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214.

[53] Ibid., 217.

[54] Fried wrote two angry and poisonous letters to Leider responding to Rose's essay, neither of which amounted to a comprehensive or studied response of her argument. However, one of the valid points Fried raised was that Rose had neglected to deal with his more recent article "Art and Objecthood," in which he had further elaborated his critique of content (here engaged as "literalist" content). Michael Fried, letter to Philip Leider, March 2, 1968, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 10, Archives of American Art. From this exchange, we also learn that Rose had shared an early draft of "The Politics of Art: Part I" with Leider, which he claimed to have heavily edited, and which he in turn shared with Fried. Although many such edited drafts appear in Leider's papers, this particular one is missing, so Fried's claim that Rose "cribbed" many of Leider's ideas cannot be verified. Whether or not this was true, the fact that Leider was willing to lay claim to the article reveals its distinction, despite Fried's protestations.

[55] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part I," 231.

was keen to present the purging of political content in art and the emergence of political art criticism as two related phenomena. [56]

While it makes sense to pair Greenberg and Rosenberg on the basis of a shared political formation, and Greenberg and Fried on their shared formalist approach, Rose's triangulation of the three men only really makes sense through the framework she provides in "The Politics of Art": as a transmission of political memory from one generation of critics to another. Although Fried himself would have been the first to acknowledge his indebtedness to Greenberg—both for his formalist approach and for his account of the development of modernism—that this influence could be conceived of in political terms was Rose's unique gloss on this situation.[57]

To be very clear: Rose was not claiming that Fried was attempting to reproduce Greenberg of the 1930s. This was not "Avant Garde and Kitsch 2.0." Rather, Rose wanted to suggest that Fried had followed a post-political Greenberg by engaging art criticism as a proxy for politics. Drawing again from "Three American Painters," Rose pointed to Fried's claim that the "dialectic of modernism" would be sustained in "the establishment of a perpetual revolution—perpetual because bent on unceasing radical criticism of itself."[58] Here was Rose's smoking gun. Never mind that Greenberg himself would not have defended "self-criticism" in these terms in the 1960s. From Rose's perspective, Fried's sublimation of "political issues within an aesthetic context" made "it possible to ignore (or even begrudge) the political

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[56] This point was also made by Hal Foster: "What was involved here, then, was not merely the hypostatization of aesthetic attributes into critical values but the displacement of commitments that were moral, intellectual, and, yes, political. Already in his 1965 essay 'Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella,' Fried had pointed to this displacement yet did not name it as such." Rose's article is not referenced in Foster's essay: Hal Foster, "Hal Foster on Criticism Then and Now," *Artforum,* vol. 51, no. 1. (September 2012), 147.

[57] Of course, Fried's indebtedness to Greenberg was not straightforward. However, in his introductory essay to his collected criticism, Fried posited that formalist criticism "as practiced by Roger Fry and, especially, Clement Greenberg is therefore better suited than any other approach to throw light on modernist painting." Interestingly, Fried claimed he only read Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" in 1965/66, stressing instead the influence of "After Abstract Expressionism" on "Three American Painters." Although Fried used this essay to articulate subtle differences between his own approach and Greenberg's, his indexing of the development of modernism onto ambitious art becoming increasingly concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself is certainly consummate with Greenberg's claim in "After Abstract Expressionism" that the "self-critical process" provides "the infra-logic of modernist art." See: Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism" in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 17; and Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" [1962], in O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. *4,* 131.

[58] Fried, "Three American Painters," 217. As Rose points out, "perpetual revolution" echoes Leon Trotsky's theory of "permanent revolution," a formulation he reworked from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League" (1850) following the Russian Revolution of 1905. Fried did not, however, not reference Trotsky in his original text. See: Leon Trotsky, "The Permanent Revolution" [1929], https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr-index.htm (accessed 22 November 2023).

content in art."[59] Much more than his appeal to the dialectic, for Rose, this was what really betrayed Fried's inheritance to Greenberg.

Rose's evidence of Greenberg's disregard of political content in art was certainly damning. She raised a recent *Artforum* article in which Greenberg had managed a close reading of the Picasso painting *The Charnel House* without mentioning once that its subject was a death camp.[60] Political content in art is, of course, different from political art. As we shall see in the next section, Rose was deeply skeptical of political art—to borrow her own term, she begrudged it. Rather, Rose's intention was to present Greenberg's omission as the logical outcome of an art criticism that functioned as a substitute for politics.

We have arrived at Rose's critique of formalist criticism. Far from apolitical or politically avoidant, Rose claimed that formalism facilitated the rerouting of politics into the arena of art criticism. Moreover, this "misplaced zeal" had—in Rose's view—laid the groundwork for the political art of the 1960s.[61] The irony being, of course, that this was precisely the kind of art derided by Greenberg and Fried. Making her own position on that art quite clear, Rose closed the first part of "The Politics of Art" by issuing the following warning:

> Fried's position is dangerous because it would extend the aesthetic to encompass systems of ethical and political value. Such a displacement of ethical and political values to the sphere of aesthetics has already produced inferior art.[62]

It is toward that "inferior art" that the next section will now turn.

IV. Letter to the Editor

The second instalment of "The Politics of Art" was published in January 1969, almost a year after "Part I."[63] Much had happened in the intervening months, most critically, an election. Bracketing a year of occupations, protests and demonstrations, the election of President Richard Nixon seemed to provide the first indication that the American New Left was hurtling away from, rather than toward, revolution. The anti-war movement was particularly demoralized by Nixon's election, which had been marked by the assassination of the anti-Vietnam War candidate Robert Kennedy and the violent suppression of the anti-war protests

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[59] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part I," 232.

[60] Greenberg, "Picasso Since 1945" [1966], in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 235–36.

[61] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part I," 233.

[62] Ibid., 232.

[63] In Leider's papers, a very different version of "Part II" is preserved, one that continues Rose's critique of Greenberg by claiming his criticism functioned as propaganda following Jacques Ellul's conception of the term. An adapted version of this article appeared in Rose's collected criticism under the title "Criticism as Propaganda" and was captioned as "Unpublished, 1970." See: Philip Leider papers, box 1, folder 12, Archives of American Art; Rose, "Criticism as Propaganda," *Autocritique*, 220–28.

at the Democratic National Convention. Nixon was sworn into office the same month that "The Politics of Art: Part II" went to print. While Rose's article did not acknowledge the changed political landscape directly, it is the vital context for the sharpening of her critical stance on political art.

Reflecting on the first part of "The Politics of Art" in her conversation with Amy Newman in 2001, Rose posited that her motivation had been "to show that 'politics' in art was so clearly a sham, and probably the intensity we brought to these issues was a misplaced political energy."[64] Much hangs on Rose's choice of the word "misplaced." For Rose, there was a *right* place for that political energy in February 1968, the month in which "Part I" had been published. Identifying herself as a "political activist," Rose recalled that:

> I felt people were suppressing a lot of energy and certainly a lot of social criticism because as long as there was a rhetoric of radicality in art then nobody really had to *do* anything radical, they could just talk about it.[65]

The charge of talking as opposed to doing was a typical New Left complaint, one that was often leveraged against the Old Left.[66] It is precisely along these lines that Rose's argument with Greenberg and Rosenberg had proceeded in "Part I."

Yet when Rose came to write "Part II," her critique shifted toward her New Left peers. If Rose had initially held that art criticism allowed art to function as a "surrogate for revolution," this later article claimed the same role for political art.[67] Both, according to Rose, blurred the line between art and politics. Both were ways of avoiding action. Yet whereas in "Part I" Rose had attempted to rescue politics from art, in "Part II" Rose sought to rescue art from politics. This was a key step in Rose's right turn, but it was not decisive. "The Politics of Art: Part II" still shows Rose to be committed to the art of the 1960s, precisely through her attempt to disaggregate it from the political art she deemed to be "inferior."

Two currents of 1960s American art are brought together in "The Politics of Art: Part II": Pop and Minimalism. This pairing recalled Rose's celebrated 1965 essay "ABC Art," with one crucial difference. In "ABC Art," Minimalism and Pop were addressed as two related but diametrically opposed tendencies in contemporary art. Rose contrasted Pop Art's assimilation into the mass culture it took as its subject with Minimalism's "oversized, awkward, uncompromising, sometimes brutal directness" which "refus[ed] to participate" in mass culture,

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[64] Rose in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 239.

[65] Ibid., 296.

[66] Much of this tension is captured in the correspondence between Theodore W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse on the German student movement in 1969. Relaying the position taken by the students, Marcuse wrote in a letter to Adorno on June 4: "But our (old) theory has an internal political content, an internal political dynamic, that today, more than ever before, compels us to concrete political positions." Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," trans. Esther Leslie, *New Left Review* 233 (January/February 1999), 129.

[67] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part I," 229.

"either as entertainment or as whimsical, ingratiating commodity."[68] While sympathetic to Pop Art, Rose essentially threw it under the bus to champion Minimalism—she even went so far as to suggest that Minimalism might be Pop Art's "antidote."[69]

Departing from the oppositional logic of "ABC Art," Rose brought Minimalism and Pop Art together in "The Politics of Art: Part II" by means of a similarity. Here, Rose claimed that both tendencies shared an "antagonism to 'modernism' as a European or alien style."[70] At stake was a "native-born" American art, one whose emergence Rose was attempting to map.[71] It no longer mattered to Rose that one art appeared different from the other. What mattered was that both Minimalism and Pop Art sought to "expunge any vestiges of the European tradition."[72] Rose bolstered this claim by proclaiming Precisionism—rather than Dada or Constructivism—as the twentieth-century precursor for these 1960s tendencies. According to Rose, artists such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth had paved the way for Pop Art and Minimalism by basing their art on what was "authentic in the culture, rather than adopting forms and subjects inconsistent with their experience."[73] Following this lead, Rose contended that Pop and Minimalist artists had converted "indigenous American forms" into monumental ones, whether those forms were drawn from American mass culture (as in Pop) or the industrialized American landscape (as in Minimalism).[74]

To be sure, Rose's invocation of both indigeneity and authenticity betrays a certain nativism. Yet for Rose the political climate of 1969 had rendered a return to the "authentic" and "indigenous" American value of democracy necessary. Rose located that value in Minimalist and Pop art's shared impulse toward repetition and uniformity. As she posited in the concluding lines of her article:

> Indeed, one might go so far to interpret that the current widespread use of standard units, "self-sufficient" nonrelational forms and nonhierarchical arrangements of equal members, as a metaphor for relationships in an ideally levelled, unstratified anti-elitist democratic society.[75]

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[68] Rose, "ABC Art" [1965], in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995), 297.

[69] Rose, "ABC Art," 297. Later, Rose would change sides. Her unpublished book on Andy Warhol claimed pop art as the true inheritor, and annihilator, of the avant-garde. See: Barbara Rose papers, Getty Research Institute 930100, box 2, folder 21–22.

[70] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part II," in Rose, *Autocritique*, 233.

[71] In this way, "Part II" of "The Politics of Art" crystallized Rose's larger project in her book *American Art Since 1900: A Critical Survey* (New York: Praeger, 1967).

[72] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part II," 233.

[73] Ibid., 234.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 236

This was Rose's counter-vision for political art. It was a politics that revealed itself through metaphor, not representation, and thus pointed beyond the world, rather than at it.[76] By preserving the non-identity of art and life, Rose criticized the terms on which political art was being staked elsewhere.

Rose's challenge to political art was, therefore, more subtle than the critique leveled in "The Politics of Art: Part I." Rather than name names, Rose's critical position in "Part II" was forged by laying out an alternative vision for political art. One reader who was attentive to the challenge of that counter-vision was Leon Golub. Along with his wife, the artist Nancy Spero, Golub had spent much of the 1960s agitating for a more politically committed art.[77] Unlike the kind of political art that Rose proposed, Golub's *Burnt Man* paintings from this period directly referred to the political turmoil of the twentieth century. After reading Rose's article, Golub submitted a long letter of complaint to *Artforum,* which was published in the next issue.

The letter did not hold back. Breezing past Rose's chauvinism, which Golub essentially took as a given, he challenged the way in which she had equated the "theoretical positions" of artists like Judd and Morris with an "egalitarian, democratic American vista of human promise."[78] In Golub's view, such utopianism had been voided by the 1960s, whose wars, violence, and racial struggles had blotted out Rose's much-venerated American landscape. Turning to Rose's art criticism, Golub claimed that it amounted to political scaffolding for an untenable political position. "It all comes out very clean," seethed Golub, "utopian vistas and no historical or social hangups."[79] He continued:

> But her correlation of Minimal art with a democratic and utopian America is farcical in respect to the America of the 1960s. American in the 1960s doesn't correspond to a Constructivist utopia. Nor does Minimal art etc correspond to a Constructivist vision. Is it possible to export destruction, to burn and drive peasants from their homes, and maintain the dream of the perfectibility of art? Well, it is possible if art concerns itself with itself and does not dare to presume political meanings. Barbara Rose writes of the "correspondence of facts and reality" and the "politics of art" but ignores politics and history (facts) as they occur.[80]

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[76] Rose's engagement with metaphor is very briefly taken up by Gavin Parkinson in his recent book *Robert Rauschenberg and Surrealism*, in which he deals with her original disavowal of both the metaphorical and metaphysical in "ABC Art" and her subsequent change of tack when pressing Rauschenberg to comment on the allusive and poetic quality of his paintings in an interview. Although "The Politics of Art: Part II" does not appear in Parkinson's discussion, it certainly fits with his argument that Rose had quickly renounced her role "as advocate and explainer of numb, unresponsive Minimalist art." See: Gavin Parkinson, *Robert Rauschenberg and Surrealism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 5–8.

[77] For a survey of Golub's efforts in this direction, see: Lawrence Alloway, "Leon Golub: Art and Politics," *Artforum,* vol. 13, no. 2 (October 1974), 66–71.

[78] Leon Golub, "Letter to the Editor," *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 7 (March 1969), 3.

[79] Ibid., 4

[80] Ibid.

By accusing Rose of willfully flouting political facts in her art criticism, Golub repeated the allegation Rose had levelled at Greenberg in "The Politics of Art: Part I." It is not clear whether this was intentional on Golub's part. As demonstrated by his misattribution of Constructivism to Rose's vision for 1960s American art, Golub was perhaps not one of Rose's most careful readers. But Golub had correctly identified a critique of political art in Rose's article, and this was enough of an offense to fold her critique of formalism back in on herself.

Golub's slippage between the Rose of "The Politics of Art: Part II" and the Greenberg of "The Politics of Art: Part I" is telling. Does it matter that the critic whom Golub charged with "ignoring facts" was the very same one who stood up at the 1966 Brandeis debate and declared that "the art of the time is inextricably linked to history"?[81] Not according to Golub. His letter proves that Rose's anti-formalism was all but obscured by her critique of political art. Later, when that critique mutated into a rejection of the full gamut of 1960s art, her anti-formalist stance was lost completely. Golub's letter set the trend for Rose's later reception, in which her new conservatism became far more legible than her old avant-gardism. But Rose sustained these two positions in "The Politics of Art." Entirely consonant with an author in the throes of changing their mind, the challenge posed by Rose's article is to grasp both positions at once, which is precisely what *this* article seeks to do.

Rose's right turn looms large in Golub's letter. It is hard not to see the Rose of *American Painting: The Eighties* lurking behind some of her claims in "The Politics of Art: Part II." Tempting though it is to follow that premonition into the 1970s, we must remember that those claims developed from a commitment to the non-painterly tendencies of the 1960s. Although much had changed politically for Rose between "Part I" and "Part II," her belief in that art was still intact. "Part III" added Conceptual Art into the mix, although—as the next section will attest—by this point it was becoming increasingly clear that Rose's commitment to the art of her generation was waning.

V. "Criticism is Judgment"

"Part III" was not only the last installment of "The Politics of Art," it was also Rose's last word as one of the champions of American art of the 1960s. The article was published in May 1969, in an issue of *Artforum* whose cover bore an image of one of Robert Motherwell's then-new paintings.[82] Rose chose to focus her attention on dematerialized art, which she defined as art that "does not traffic in objects but in conceptions."[83] Her intention here was to demonstrate how formalist criticism was unable to account for a work like, for example, Oldenburg's 1967 *Placid Civic Monument*, which consisted of a grave-sized ditch dug up in Central Park. "By making immaterial, ephemeral, or extra-objective work," Rose wrote, the role of the critic as "connoisseur of value or gourmet of quality" is made redundant.[84]

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[81] Rose in *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, 9.

[82] The painting in question was: Robert Motherwell, *Open #29 in Orange with Charcoal Line*, 1968.

[83] Rose, "The Politics of Art, Part II," in Rose, *Autocritique*, 241.

[84] Ibid., 238.

Thus, in addition to elaborating on the discussion of 1960s art in "Part II," "Part III" also extended "Part I" by continuing Rose's critique of formalist criticism. While the article might have approximated a synthesis, however, it in fact revealed that the various parts of "The Politics of Art" did not add up to a whole. Rose took two further leaps in "Part III": first, by proposing what she called a "pragmatist criticism" to replace formalist criticism; and second, by advancing her own version of a political art. As we shall see, neither leap made a smooth landing. Not entirely convinced of either proposition, "Part III" reveals that Rose was growing increasingly resigned to the fact that the issues she had set out in Parts I and II would not be so easily overcome.

"Part III" begins promisingly enough, with a tentative proposition about what a "pragmatist criticism" might look like.[85] Rose opened with a line taken from William James's famous 1906–7 lecture series, "Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," in which he had posited the "pragmatist method" as "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, fact."[86] Rose, who was at that point still invested in overturning the supposed necessities of formalist criticism, demonstrably found such an attitude highly agreeable, even urgent, given that the art of the 1960s appeared to traffic in consequences rather than categories.

Although James provided Rose her jumping-off point, John Dewey was the far more significant pragmatist in the mapping of a "pragmatist criticism" in "The Politics of Art: Part III." Working primarily from the 1934 lecture "Art and Experience," Rose claimed that Dewey's presentation of art as a kind of human activity rather than a rarefied category made it particularly "apposite" for the new aesthetic attitudes manifest in 1960s dematerialized art. Rose did not reference the section in "Art as Experience" dedicated to criticism, but Dewey's repeated refrain "criticism is judgment" had clearly had made an impression on her.[87] Dewey's words had already found an echo in Rose's contribution to the 1966 Brandeis symposium, which was introduced with the statement "The act of art criticism is the value judgment. Everything else is art writing."[88]

By adding the word "value" to Dewey's formulation "criticism is judgement," Rose revealed her hesitancy to entirely jettison those rarefied categories against which he had defined his own pragmatist method. Several years later, she would harden against relative aesthetic judgements derived purely from experience, characterizing it as an art criticism "whose point of departure seems to be that no further distinctions can be made between good and bad art and that, as Donald Judd put, a work need only be 'interesting.'"[89] Although a much softer version of that critique was put forward in "The Politics of Art: Part III," it is

[85] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part III," 237.

[86] William James, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1907), 54–55.

[87] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1931] (New York: Penguin, 2005), 310, 22.

[88] Rose, *Art Criticism in the Sixties*, 5.

[89] Rose, "Twilight of the Superstars," in Rose, *Autocritique,* 268.

detectable nonetheless in Rose's pitch for the renewed relevance of a pragmatist criticism, which was essentially presented as a concession to art that defied categorization.

Rose's ambivalence regarding her so-called "pragmatist criticism" somewhat undermines the claim made by Sylvia Harrison that she "turned to pragmatism in an attempt to formulate a critical system that was capable of accommodating pop, minimal and the 'anti-formal' trends that followed."[90] Harrison dedicated a chapter to Rose's 1960s writings in her 2001 survey *Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism*. Heretofore, this chapter represents the only sustained academic engagement with Rose and her art criticism. In her reading, Harrison made much of "The Politics of Art: Part III," claiming it as the essay in which Rose presented the most compelling articulation of the kind of art criticism she saw herself practicing in the 1960s.[91] However, the problem with hinging Rose's critical system on the pragmatist method offered in "Part III" is that it was short-lived; it barely survived to the end of the essay.

Really, in surveying Rose's 1960s output the word "critical" is far more operative than "system." While Rose recognized that the old system of formalist criticism no longer worked, her art criticism from this period largely pivoted around that recognition. While reading Dewey and James might have helped Rose to further "look away" from the "principles, 'categories' and supposed necessities" of that old system, pragmatism did not provide her with a new method as such.[92] Thus Harrison is right insofar as Rose was convinced that the new art "could only be negatively appraised by the prevailing theory of art criticism: Greenbergian formalism," but her notion of a pragmatist criticism cannot by the same token be thought of as a positive appraisal. By criticizing formalist criticism, Rose was able to maintain her commitment to those trends of the 1960s it could not account for. "The Politics of Art: Part III" reveals that that critique could only take her so far.

In the second section of the article, the concept of pragmatist criticism was left entirely behind. Here, Rose turned more fully to the study of the "extra-objective" art promised in the introduction, as well as the theme of politics promised by her title. A hint that this was the direction Rose would be driving toward had already been provided by the two epigraphs, the first of which cited Kazimir Malevich's revolutionary essay "To the New Limit" (1918), and the second of which quoted Carl Andre in his response to the 1967 *Art in America* survey "The Sensibility of the Sixties."[93] In its explicit reference to the Vietnam War, the latter

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[90] Harrison, *Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism*, 16.

[91] Sylvia Harrison, *Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2001), 98.

[92] James, *Pragmatism, a new way for some old ways of thinking*, 54–55. Of course, Dewey's objections to Kant are also relevant here, especially given Greenberg's commitment to Kant. Indeed, when Rose asserts in her discussion of the relevance of his theories to the "new art" that "the critical criteria for such an art obviously are not the adherence to categorical imperatives", her target is demonstrably Greenberg, not Kant. Rose, 'The Politics of Art: Part III' [1969] in Rose, *Autocritique*, 239.

[93] The Andre quote read: "The same fat surplus which burns in Viet Nam feeds us. Let the art armies be disbanded. In the wake of the anarch, all marches are up... Art is what we do; culture is what is done to us." Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part III," 46. It is important to note that Rose, along with

epigraph was particularly pertinent to the development of Rose's argument in the latter part of "Part III." If, she reasoned, an artwork does not produce an object, then

> such non-cooperation can be seen as reflective of the certain political attitudes. It is the aesthetic equivalent of the wholesale refusal of the young to participate in compromised situations (e.g. the Vietnam War).[94]

This is a very different proposition for political art than the one Rose had presented in "Part II." There, Rose had located the politics of art in its non-identity with society. Here, Rose suggested that art could provide an aesthetic equivalent to a political act. This is still not quite agitprop, but it is a far cry from the claim in "Part II" that Pop and Minimalism might function "as a metaphor for relationships in an ideally levelled, unstratified anti-elitist democratic society."[95]

It is not a coincidence that the lines offering Rose's modest proposal for political art are the only ones from "The Politics of Art" that Julia Bryan-Wilson quotes in her book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009).[96] This is Rose at her most radical, in the "art worker" sense of the word.[97] Yet whereas Bryan-Wilson fleshes out Rose's parenthetical concession to the Vietnam War by addressing the wider context of withdrawal and nonparticipation in the international artworld, Rose never elaborated on this point—not in "Part III," nor anywhere else in her writing.[98] Indeed, as soon as the next sentence, Rose poked holes in her own argument. Asserting that "work which cannot be absorbed by the museum-gallery patronage situation still needs an audience to exist," Rose pointed to the

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Irving Sandler, had been behind the *Art in America* questionnaire "The Sensibility of the Sixties." It is also important to note that Rose chose not to include this epigraph in the reprint in *Autocritique.*

[94] Ibid., 241.

[95] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part II," 236.

[96] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 201.

[97] For the most part, Rose kept her anti-Vietnam war activism separate from her professional life. The exception was a statement opposing the war that Rose co-wrote with Dore Ashton, Max Kozloff and Philip Leider urging artists, critics, art historians and curators to reconsider attending the American pavilion at the 1967 Venice Biennial, lest it "be interpreted as our acquiescence in American foreign policy." See: Statement of January 25, 1968, Philip Leider Papers, box 1, folder 13, Archives of American Art.

[98] In a talk with art students in the mid-1970s, Rose made the following (small) concession about the Art Worker's Coalition poster "Q. And babies? A. And babies," designed by Irving Petlin, Jon Hendricks, and Frazer Dougherty: "There was one poster, which may have had a tiny little influence, a tiny influence. An anonymous group of ours made a poster out of that horrible image of the My Lai slaughter. And it said underneath it 'and babies too,' and they printed it in a mass edition and they put it all over the place, and it may or may not have changed some people's minds about the war." See: Barbara Rose papers, Getty Research Institute 930100, box 14, V2 (video).

limitations of nonparticipation.[99] Object or no object, the dependence of dematerialized art on an audience meant institutionalization could only be deferred, never avoided.

Although parenthetical and brief, "Part III" saw Rose flirting with a political art adequate to the art and politics of her time. The match was not to be, and, in her retreat, Rose ended up even further from her peers than where she had begun. For while Rose capitulated to the "present split" between "'revolutionary' function" (read: political art) and "'radical' form" (read: modernism), she claimed that such a split "constitutes yet another step in the decomposition of modern culture."[100] Rose dedicated the second half of the article to proving that 1960s art—in its entirety—had been "robbed of any critical sting."[101] Adding insult to injury, Rose also claimed that art criticism, pragmatist or otherwise, had been invalidated by a newly empowered mass media whose "single critical criterion" was not quality but "*newsworthiness* [...] whether the news is good or bad, trivial or portentous, is irrelevant."[102] If "Part I" and "Part II" had expressed Rose's search for an art criticism adequate to the most ambitious art of the 1960s, "Part III" seemed to suggest that that search had been in vain.

As if to prove how far Rose had traveled between the article's first and third parts, "The Politics of Art: Part III" ended with the following assessment of her contemporary situation:

> And the truth is, we are not going to see the "return" of this or that or the other thing, nor possibly the survival of much of our own tradition. There are, in fact, many indications that art, or at least art of any spiritual depth, is, for the mass of humanity, if not for the surviving "happy few" about to follow religion as an illusion without a future.[103]

Even in this bleak closing statement, however, Rose had not yet entirely capitulated to that future. Although there were "many indications," at this point she was still speculating, hoping, perhaps, that the art of her generation might still make good on its promise. Almost exactly ten years after "Part III" went to print, *American Painting: The Eighties* opened. Directly contradicting her earlier article, Rose's exhibition not only announced the return "of this or that" (namely, painting), it also claimed that art did indeed have a future, just not the one Rose had written towards in "The Politics of Art."

VI. The Other Side of the Mirror

In three articles written over a period of fifteen months, Rose grappled with the meaning of American art and criticism of the 1960s. Her umbrella title for this effort—"The Politics of Art"—captures the ambition of these texts. Their contradictions point towards an art critic in the process of changing her mind, as well as the extreme flux of the political situation in which

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[99] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part III," 241.

[100] Ibid., 243.

[101] Ibid., 241.

[102] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[103] Ibid., 244.

she was writing. Given where Rose ended up, the temptation to ascribe a definitive conclusion to "The Politics of Art" is understandable. Holding onto the immense contingency underpinning these articles, however, calls for a different reading. In this article, I have presented "The Politics of Art" as Rose's right turn in motion, rather than at full tilt. Although later she would definitively turn away from the promise of the 1960s (and away from those who held onto that promise), here we find Rose pulled in multiple directions, with contrasting loyalties and commitments.

Rose would go on to add a "Part IV" for her "Politics of Art" series in 1979, yet by that point the contingency of the first three parts had all but evaporated. Critically, Rose chose to resurrect the series to respond to a particularly scathing review of *American Painting: The Eighties*.[104] Much like the exhibition that provoked it, "The Politics of Art: Part IV" confirmed Rose's right turn – it was more of a conclusion to the original series than a fourth part. In it, Rose conceded that the two "futuristic assumptions" of the 1960s avant-garde no longer convinced her: neither the idea that "art progresses", nor the one that "art can change the world."[105] That conclusion had been reached long before Rose decided to write "The Politics of Art: Part IV", or even curate *American Painting: The Eighties.* In May 1970, just a year after "The Politics of Art: Part III" was published, Rose found herself speaking at another conference on art criticism. At the 1966 Brandeis conference Rose had made her departure from Greenberg public. Here, Rose made a public declaration of a very different order. Addressing her audience, Rose contended that:

> We must dispense with the clichés and rhetoric of an avant-garde that does not exist, or an historical situation that no longer obtains [...] Living in a world upside down, many of us find ourselves today, like Alice, on the other side of the mirror from our point of departure.[106]

If "The Politics of Art: Part IV" was conceived from the other side of Rose's mirror, the first three parts were written as her world was turning upside down. Although the historical situation Rose was navigating may no longer obtain, by moving with her right turn, rather than ahead of it, we might be able to grasp the history of 1960s American art criticism as it ended.

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[104] Donald Kuspit, "The Presumptive Critic: Eighties Art in the Seventies from Barbara Rose," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 3 (November 1979), 114–15.

[105] Rose, "The Politics of Art: Part IV," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 4 (December 1979), 132.

[106] Rose in *Conference on Art Criticism and Education*, organized by David W. Ecker, Jerome J. Hausman, and Irving Sandler at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, May 1970, 18.