

# Fulcrum

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## against the gods.

L.ortega govela

The avant-garde is not dead! A few weeks ago, while I was walking around @FriezeLondon, I realised there is still hope in the vanguard. It wasn't Jeff Koons oversized kitty, hanging out in the Gagosian space, that proclaimed this. Rather, it was something that wasn't shown in any gallery stall, but on visitor's iPhones; Rihanna's "Pour it up" video (the most exciting thing I've seen since Miley's VMA performance). The video, in which the pop songstress walks on water inside a strip-club, culminates in a ritual that can only be interpreted as the baptism of twerk. Here we were, looking at @badgalriri's Vevo account, surrounded by post Millennium-bug art, and Riri was #winning.

The notion of the avant-garde has become #problematic, mainly because, when taken to its logical end, vanguardist expression leads to mainstream audiences. Take Warhol's @CampbellSoupCo screen prints, an avant-garde artist using an industrial process to create a piece that has already been digested by mass media. It is through Warhol that the avant-garde makes its passage to the mainstream; a natural progression given that every revolution always leads to its foundation, the counterculture of the past has become the culture today. Going against everything that the gods of the avant-garde prescribe is the genius of the current mainstream; by gradually embracing every subculture around it, the mainstream has reached its periphery, eventually when this gets overcrowded, it turns back to the centre: the mass media. This somewhat formulaic change in a movement is only refreshing in the context of the recent evolution in mass media. Just as the conditions of artists have changed since high modernism, so too have the conditions of the audience. The mainstream audience has ceased to be that 20th century concept; it is now simultaneously spectator, producer, artist and subject.

**Today the audience exhibits itself. There is no division between the representation of the everyday and its actuality.**

It is through these moments of reality turning into simulacrum that one finds a darkness and sensitivity that could only come from a work of avant-garde art, which by definition is an image that is both influential and transcendental, yet purposefully made to create a foundation for a new world. This concept is best embodied in the reality TV shows of today. Anyone who has seen the second season of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* can attest to that moment of pure beauty when the cast confront the harsh reality of domestic violence in a staged environment (a room solely decorated in different shades of pink), all the while the smiles that seemed so perfect now show a primitive emotion which has been domesticated through plastic. Here bare emotion is exhibited as performance art.

More and more #generationZ relies on virtual interfaces to interact socially. The concept of IRL interaction has become somewhat alien and is only assimilated through what is seen on TV. These simulations of 'real' social moments seen in shows like *The Hills*, *Made in Chelsea* and *The Simple Life* become their prime notion of how de-interfaced human interaction should happen. Simulation is becoming the reality. If the avant-garde prides itself on being influential then what is more influential than changing how people communicate with each other.

The avant-garde is still very much alive in places like *Educating Yorkshire* and Tumblr; it is the context in which we are used to seeing the vanguard that is dead. The main problem with contemporary art is that it has been poisoned by capitalism yet it still pretends to be a genuine expression. The avant-garde masterpiece has ceased to exist in the white cube gallery. We now live in a time where Joseph Beuys's utopian proclamation 'Everybody is an artist' has become real. Now is the time when you are more likely to find a masterpiece in your 12 year-old cousin's YouTube channel than hanging in the walls of @ArtBaselMiami.

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## avant-garde is kitsch.

j.self

"Kitsch, using for raw material the debased simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates the new urban masses capacity for boredom. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money — not even their time."

In his seminal text *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg (quoted above) describes the kitsch as ersatz culture — a kind of imitation art founded on the idea of abstracting artistic production into rule sets that can be easily duplicated. This foundation, he says, is inherently capitalist. Or more specifically, it is commercial: the kitsch is not only culture with mass-appeal, it is culture with the capacity to be infinitely mass-produced. By contrast, Greenberg posits the avant-garde as a way of resisting the simplification and reduction of intellectual content in art. While the kitsch is funded by the free market, the avant-garde is funded by the bourgeoisie — an arrangement which positions the avant-garde close to the powerhouse of social norms, and which also allows it to operate without commercial imperative. In other words, bourgeois avant-garde is not the problem it appears, since it is from within this haven that it can be most effective. It is also here that the avant-garde can preserve its aesthetic purity, since it is free from the degradation of standards of popular taste. This should not be a moral reflection on the poverty or ignorance of the masses, which is a facile attack from the position of privilege. However, it may be a moral reflection if framed by what Baudrillard calls *the ethics of debt*.

Consumerism has a critical feedback loop embedded into its modes of production, one which constantly drives the future to be nothing else than a commercially more successful

version of the past. If one follows the annual catalogues of any company (from Prada to Ikea) one sees at work the iterative cleansing and remarketing of products based on their performance in the previous sales period. A popular blouse is repeated, with inconsequential variations, infinitely. An unpopular jacket is never repeated. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this form of Neoliberal Darwinism in popular objects. At least, it can't be extracted from their production in any case. Where it gets really problematic is in the application of this Darwinism to avant-garde production.

**The result is an avant-garde that confuses political reform with mass-media exposure, and social critique with "criticality" — the dumb fallacy that building awareness of the mechanisms of domination turns the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation...**

(as Rancière would say). What I'm describing here is the voluntary collapse of the avant-garde into the kitsch by its total commodification as an asset class. Today, the avant-garde *is* kitsch. There is no difference, and therefore there can be no distinction.

Applying this condition retrospectively, we find that there was never anything radical about Warhol, and that the last artist of the vanguard was probably Duchamp. The intervening century has been nothing but stale re-runs. The absence of opposition to the mainstream, free-market, Late Capitalist, Neoliberal (or whatever you want to call it) can seem depressing. But if the avant-garde as a form of aesthetic resistance is dead, it simply means that social change and political reform are today no longer aesthetic projects; and this presents a new possibility, what Dan Hill has called *Trojan Horse* design. The separation of form from function permits the operation of the form to distract from its hidden function. Today, the avant-garde should wear a suit, drive a high-end European car, strategically sell out. The avant-garde should, in the words of Lady Macbeth, look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't.



