

# The Greenberg vs. Rosenberg Debate

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The Greenberg vs. Rosenberg debate marks itself at the commencement of a period in modernism, where critique influenced art and vice versa. This controversial debate took place at a time when America was at the brink of experiencing a new world hegemony in bourgeois capitalism. There was now an unexpected outburst of art so independent that it challenged the leadership and aura of Parisian artists — a new wave of American abstract expression.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1950's Greenberg was known to be a formalist, he enabled the establishment of abstraction from a possibility to a necessity in critical discourse.<sup>2</sup> His points of critique demanded that painting must remain true to itself, and 'to all that was unique to the nature of its medium.' Thus, his critique called for artists to entrench abstraction more firmly in its arena of competence, and support what he termed as 'post painterly abstraction' — a characterization that covered a range of new approaches to composition, scale and texture. It exhibited a purely factual type of art, redeemed of mysticism and references to the external world.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Rosenberg viewed the canvas as an 'arena of action'<sup>4</sup> his discourse argued in favor of action painting, which viewed the artist as a combatant and the critic as warrior. For him it was an expression of the artist's psyche and identity; the creative process with which the artist navigated art and life.<sup>5</sup> Theorists point out that, Rosenberg's love for process as much as product left him open to representation of conceptual art and the artist's intentions. His critique, encouraged mythical interpretations<sup>6</sup> of the artist's work and ambitions.

In this essay we examine the starkly opposing sides of both critics and their advocacy, through the works of Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning's work respectively. Greenberg is often described as the custodian of Pollock's work; he championed him for the grand scale of his work — the innovation of the drip technique and the way in which the work removed itself from 'illusion' and the painting's 'internal logic'.<sup>7</sup> However, Rosenberg viewed De Kooning's art as 'the ultimate psychic actor on canvas'<sup>8</sup> where the work itself was a witness and record of the artistic action.

While both artists created their own respective discourses with the drip technique, for both critics the American painter was faced with a choice — for Rosenberg it was between the 'true or false self', for Greenberg it was the choice between being an Avant-garde or Kitsch. Greenberg viewed Pollock as an artist who used drawing to create a painting; more archetypical and presented an understanding of art as critique. Rosenberg celebrated De Kooning's work as painting that arrived at drawing-like cartoons. When '*De Kooning's Woman I*' was painted, Rosenberg celebrated its hints of pop culture even before *Pop Art* existed.<sup>9</sup> He viewed artists like De Kooning as "survivors who underwent a crisis and then emerged as a new artist." However, Greenberg viewed De Kooning's work as a betrayal to culture and the Old Masters, where the methods of the discipline were implemented to criticise the discipline itself. A heretic demand of self-criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Both critics rose through politically tumultuous times of the 1930's, which commemorated their aesthetic positions which were Marxist-influenced and anti-Stalinist, steeped in the belief that "*art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself.*"<sup>11</sup> Similarly, their individual discourses ascertain and insist upon the artists independence from the shackles of worldly reckonings, which echoed of the American ideology during the Cold War. <sup>12</sup>

While, both bodies of criticism were eventually disparaged, by the new waves Neo-Dadaism, Minimalism and pop art.<sup>13</sup> Still, it encouraged new ways of viewing art through the lens of

subjectivity and objectivity. Rosenberg's criticism was of an existentialist variety, and concerned itself with emphasis on will, anxiety and phenomenological and subjective dimensions of human experience. Greenberg was more concerned with formal properties of shapes and color; the Avant grade as a continuation of art from the past.<sup>14</sup>

Today, cultural or art criticism cannot agree on a definition of art and thus it remains flummoxed with the meanings contained within it, as theorists say it seems to have lost its own internal logic. <sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic that Greenberg and Rosenberg established remained ill equipped to tackle the contentious art of the 1960's and beyond.

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