

R. Bruce Elder's films have been presented at New York's Museum of Modern Art and The Millennium Film, Workshop, Berlin's Kino Asensal. Paris Centre Pompidou (amongst many other venues) and in retrospectives presented at Anthology Film Archives, the Art Gallery of Ontario, La cinematheque Quebecoise, Il Festival Senzatitolo (Trento). Festival des Cinemas Differents, Images'97 (Toronto) and by cinematheque Ontario, who proclaimed in their program note for their Nov. 2008 tribute : "R. Bruce Elder is not only one of Canada's foremost experimental filmmakers, he's one of our greatest artists, thinkers, critics, and filmmakers, period." In 2007, Bruce Elder was awarded the Governor General's Award in Media Arts and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada that same year.

Elder has published numerous articles and three books, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film Culture* (1989), which includes extensive treatments of the films of Michael Snow and Jack Chambers; *A body of vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (1997); His most recent book, *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* was awarded the prestigious Robert Motherwell Book Award in 2009. m

Bruce, I am so honored to have such a chance to have an interview with you. My business here is to ask for your thoughts on the role which the avant-garde art played in the history of art?

English writers borrowed the term "avant-garde" from the French. In French, the term refers to the foremost part of an army advancing into battle means. One oddity associated with this borrowing is the English military used the terms "vanguard" and "advance guard" to refer to that part of a battle-group that go out ahead of the main phalanx. So an equivalent English term was available—so why on earth artists and cultural historians would have taken over the French term is difficult to fathom. Perhaps they thought a foreign borrowing would have greater cache. To my sensibility, the military provenance of the term is rather unfortunate, and the use of French term when a perfectly good English equivalent—"vanguard"—was available is pretentious affectation.

The metaphoric application of the term in the cultural domain suggests a group (especially of artists) who is in advance of the majority of—of what? One can only say an assault force that strives to transform the status quo.

For reasons I set out below, I doubt very much that conception correctly construes the relation between the avant-garde art and the other (non-avant-garde) of its time. I believe that conviction that motivated nearly all avant-garde groups is the conviction that our culture is a culture of deprivation. The gods have fled, and earth beneath us been hidden we have cocooned ourselves of in an abstract second nature. An event that shook traditional beliefs and so helped produce the culture of modernity was Galileo's discovery that the earth rotates around the sun, and that it is this rotation that produces the impression that sun revolves around the earth, crossing the heavens each day in transit from east to west. This discovery lent new vigour to a distinction that had been traditional in Western philosophy since the time of Plato: that the senses are not to be trusted, but need to be corrected by reason.

What resulted was a corrosive skepticism that eventually confined the mind in prison of its own devising. I want to be clear and precise about the historical effects of this disparagement of the senses. To achieve that clarity, I must outline the epistemology

that this skeptical theory of knowledge replaced. To contrast the skeptical conclusions with the ancient and medieval theory of knowledge, I have to provide an outline of the traditional view, which proposed that there is a harmony between the senses and reality, for the senses are adapted to disclose the remarkable sensuous variety in reality. The traditional theory of knowledge rests on the premise that humans long to understand the Whole, to grasp the connections amongst things and their causes and that this wonder (in which the senses have a role) ultimately leads us to God. This conviction developed out of the Platonic tradition—and, contrary to most historians of ideas, I maintain that there is still a lingering Platonism in Aquinas—so when Galileo overturns the “new” learning associated with the Aquinas (and the rise of the Dominicans and the Franciscans in European centres of learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), he overthrew a tradition that was still fundamentally Platonic.

The Platonic tradition in metaphysics (like Scotist tradition in theology) maintains that Beauty colludes with Truth, the Good with Understanding, and Love with Knowledge, to draw the mind onward. Consciousness begins in love (it is nurtured first in the unity-in-duality of mother and child) and ends in love, the beatific vision with which Dante’s *Commedia* ends (as faith becomes not a set of propositions assented to, but a state of being). The desire of God (I am using that expression both to refer to God’s desire for us and to ours for God) is the active element in knowledge. Aquinas understood that conceptual thinking, which is allied with reflection, is not an act of mind severed from a body, from the senses and from emotions. Knowing is a full human act (and so embraces the senses)—that act is animated by the love and the desire to be united with object of knowledge. In its ultimate form it is united with ultimate object of knowledge, that is to say, with God. The search for truth leads towards God and culminates in an apprehension of the Divine.

Every judgment is an affirmation that draws us towards the end of Truth, which is the knowledge of everything. It is to the end of attaining union that soul engages in reflection and abstracts a common nature from the sensuous particular. “Now,” Aquinas says, although it knows things which have a form residing in matter, still it resolves the composite into both of these elements; and it considers the form separately by itself. (*S. T. I q. 12 a 4 ad 3*). What Aquinas says next is remarkable: “Since therefore the created intellect is naturally capable of apprehending the concrete form, and the concrete being abstractedly, by way of a kind of resolution of parts; it can by grace be raised up to know separate subsisting substance, and separate subsisting existence.”

These universals, these forms or common natures, are real: “Form is made finite by matter,” Aquinas writes, “inasmuch as form, considered in itself, is common to many; but when received in matter, the form is determined to this one particular thing (*S. T. I q. 7 a 1*)” Particulars, then, are fully real. But so are these forms or common natures. Why are they real? First, because Aquinas’ ontology proposes a hierarchy, according to which spirit is higher than matter; hence, the immaterial nature of these common forms does not disqualify them from being real. On the contrary, the form (the *species*, the common nature), insofar as it is divorced from matter, resembles the Divine, the end of all knowledge, more than particular things do. Matter represents the limiting factor in those composite beings that are known by the senses. But knowledge strives to become knowledge of what is freed from determining limitation. Abstracting the common nature from objects allows one to know a spiritual being that lacks the determining limitations of matter. Thus, knowledge of common natures puts one on the “ascent of the mind to God.” “All cognitive beings also know God implicitly in any object of knowledge.” St. Thomas writes (*De Verit. q. 22. a. 2. ad 1*). Every act of knowing

discloses something of God's being, since the human act by which spiritual things are known (and even perception involves the separation of a spiritual entity from matter) resembles somewhat God's knowing.

The mind participates with particulars to realize these common natures. What is more, the mind, because it operates according to the principles of the intellect, of which the Divine Intellect is the exemplar, forms particulars in a manner that is consistent with God's understanding, and so with the ordinances of being. The object that is thrown against the mind in coming to knowledge is the idea in the mind of God. Things, then, in Aquinas, are no different than thought. The adequation of the intellect to things is the conformity of the human intellect to ideas in the divine intellect, the similitudo of human thought and divine creativity, whose very emblem is the Word.

Thus, each affirmation leads to a higher question, and apprehending the answer to that question leads to a yet higher question. In the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas lays out the final goal of life as "full participation in divinity, which is humankind's true beatitude and the destiny of human life" (*S.T.* 3.q 1 a .2). This spiritual itinerary is actually conceived by Aquinas as an ascent toward deiformity. Thomas maintained a version of idea that now is known only in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, of theosis or divinization—the *Doctor Angelicus'* way of describing that result is to say that one becomes 'deiform.'

But the idea was not always restricted to the countries of Byzantine imperium. Patristic writings testify to a vigorous soteriological tradition which taught that the destiny of man was to become like God, and even to become deified. Later theologians felt the need to soften the early Church's divinization theology. God's energies, grace, life and power were interpreted to fill the whole universe. These energies are the active expression of God's being, his self-manifestation. When a person knows or participates in the divine energies, he knows or participates in God. This what the Greek fathers referred to as the theosis of human being, human's deification. Though one with the divine, the human knower remains human. Humans are not annihilated or swallowed up in God. Thus, we participate in the energies of god, which he transmits to mankind, but we do not participate in, or know, God's essence. Aquinas compared this process to a poker being held in a fire. The poker becomes a fire, in that it takes every attribute of the fire. It burns, radiates heat and light, emits energy as it is transformed by the fire's energy. And yet, it though it has "become fire," it is unquestionably iron as well. So, too, when we participate in God's energy (i.e., in his spiritual being), we become deiform.

I am aware this doesn't sound much like the familiar Aquinas. But I believe Aquinas himself doesn't sound much like the familiar Aquinas.

The faculty of seeing God, however, does not belong to the created intellect naturally, but is given to it by the light of glory, which establishes the intellect in a kind of "deiformity" . . . Hence the intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly; and he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more charity; because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.

We ascend the ladder of understanding, from discursive understanding (Aquinas understand ratio, reasoning, as "dis-currere," or the mind running around, from premise to conclusion to next conclusion) to the simple act of intellectual vision as the mind

conforming itself to (i.e., according to the Neo-Platonic strand in his thinking, participating in) thinking that is closer to deiform: “Consequently, although the knowledge proper to the human soul takes place through the process of reasoning, nevertheless, it participates to some extent in that simple knowledge which exists in higher substances, and because of which they are said to have intellective power (*Quaes. disp. de Veritate*, Q. XV, a.1. resp). And since things are, in essence, objects of divine intellect, in conforming itself to (or taking on attributes of) the divine intellect, it comes to apprehend the truth of being.

The Doctor Angelicus’ epistemology (and soteriology) dispenses with the distinction between the realms of nature and grace, as with that between natural reason and revealed truth. The light of any thing is the radiance and clarity that comes from its intelligibility, which follows from its being a *creatura*, brought forth first in the mind of God: “The reality of things is itself their light. (*Expositio in librum De causis*. prop. 6, n. 168). Grace attends to our knowledge, for only grace permits the even most ordinary activities of human reasoning. Dante, I suggest (and will go on to argue) embraced this notion— indeed, he took its implications to the extreme.

Dante, too, maintained that all knowledge requires divine illumination and all knowledge is akin to the experience of light flooding the intellect with love; indeed, Dante radicalized this belief by connecting the idea of knowledge of co-production with another, that of the creative word, founded in the comparison between the Creator’s making and the inspired poet’s making. The strong poet, truly inspired, knows intimately the higher truths he writes about, because he knows them as their co-maker. He participates with the divine *energeia*, which, at every moment of its existence, maintains each existent in being being. Dante’s many expressions about the doubt about his capacity to convey the experiences he wishes to tell the reader about are really invocation to the creator spirit to come and fill his mind with love. He calls out for the *incendium amoris* (fire of love) to bring him knowledge.

Deprived of the faith that senses accurately report the condition of reality, moderns (as Descartes philosophy shows) turned inward—but not towards an inward light that would conduct them towards completely unified reality. Descartes, by way of contrast, sought for truth in a realm of bloodless and fleshless immaterial forms. Descartes accords an epistemological privilege to what is disclosed in private apperception. The common world is undercut, and replaced with a world that populated by the immaterial forms engendered by reason and calculation. The realm of things of which all humans share a common understanding is either dismissed, replaced by a purely private world of introspection or redefined as what the product of mental processes which are basically the same for all humans. Kant makes the latter redefinition explicit. In the *Critique of Judgement* he notes

we must [here] take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense shared [by us all], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general... Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else.

A second nature is evolved as the product of a limiting form of understanding, instrumental or calculative reason, which moderns mistaken take to be the highest form

of understanding, the form of understanding that has given humans the (indisputably impressive) technological implements that have come the central agent in the transformation of society and in shaping the culture of modernity. This second nature is no “blooming, buzzing confusion” (to use William James’ phrase from *Principles of Psychology*). We apprehend what we have replaced nature with, a second nature that lacks sensuous richness, whose beauty (if it is apposite to speak of beauty in this context) is not the sort of beauty that seizes one’s attention, and through that attention, enters the self, to de-create it. Rather it is a purely formal beauty, a thing more of the mind than of the flesh. The erotic experience (and other forms of primordial experience, such as trance and prayer) calls us away from this sort of experience, towards another, to thinking’s truer character.

Obviously we cannot go back and repossess the spirit the Middle Ages gave way. But neither can we live without the sense of the integrity of beings and Be-ing. In the place of an ladder of knowledge, we have stacked a wage on the proposition that revitalization of primordial experiences that granted awareness of reality as a whole, of the body’s belonging to the whole of reality, of being one with it, will serve the needed therapeutic ends. The various avant-garde art movements of the last century and half have all dedicated themselves to attempt to return humans to the capacity for primordial experience—to forms of experience that, though required for human well-being, have been so disenfranchised in the era of modernity that they all have been reduced to vestigial form. (That explains the great importance I believe nude performance art to have: it proposes to reconnect us with the flesh’s primal sensations –indeed I believe that body art, and especially nude performance art, is the form that current avant-garde has assumed.)The idea that a primal domain underlies, indeed gives birth to, the world as we know it in conscious, focused awareness is one that has been formulated by many artists over the past century. In his book of essays *Body Music*, the Canadian poet (for reasons he explains in that work) refers to this experience of something that is prior to all but the most rudimentary forms of language as “cadence”; Jean-François Lyotard refers to this realm out of which experience evolves as the matrix; Julia Kristeva (following Heidegger following Plato) refers to that generative zone as “chōra,”; and I refer to it, with my customary splendid vagueness as the “primordial domain.” All these other writers highlight modernity’s reason for anathematizing this primal realm: a destructive capacity arises from this primal realm, a capacity that disrupts gestalt order, that dismembers form, that liquifies all that is fixed, and that lays representation in ruins – this is as much in evidence in the poetry of William Blake and Christopher Smart as it is in the painting of Jackson Pollock. Or in Dennis Lee’s poetry.

Just to make concrete what exactly I am claiming, I’ll take a simple example for one of Lee’s own books, *Riffs* (1993):

When I lurched like a rumour of want through the networks of plenty,
A me-shaped pang on the lam,
when I ghosted through loves like headline, a scrap in the updraft,
and my mid-life wreckage was close & for keeps—

when I watched the
birches misting, pale spring
voltage and
not mine, nor mine, nor mine—

then a
lady laid her touch a-
mong me, gentle then, for which I stand still
startled, . . .

It is not just the grief of the individual that impacts us—here the conventional forms of language are under attack. Indeed, our common experience of the phenomenon that the form of the self and surety of language are felt to dissolve together makes this passage so moving. The traces of something terrible that rises up against the sureties of language are everywhere: “lurch like a rumour” —our expectations concerning the form of language are exploded, as we are left wondering why Lee likens his lurching to that of a rumour. Of course, we do come to partial resolution of the defiance of that unexpected phrase – rumours do travel fitfully, and to destructive effect, careening this way and that, and then arresting themselves, only to veer off in another unexpected direction—but it is that the resolution is only partial that makes the passage poetic. For something of the defiance of the phrase remains even after we have unpacked some of the significance of the phrase’s use—an element of “babble remains to testify to the undoing of “good form.” “[L]ike a rumour of want”—another defiance of expectation: rumours are generally about something disreputable, so what is this “rumour of want?” The phrase arrests us, though of course soon enough we realize the poet is suggesting that his neediness is felt to be disreputable, or worse, to make him disreputable. And again, “a rumour of want through the networks of plenty”: here again our expectations are sabotaged. We ponder and realize that the contrast between abundance and need generates this compelling expression; nonetheless that understanding doesn’t completely allay the sense that the poet’s despair is disordering language. And so it continues: the phrase “I ghosted through lives like a headline” also rises against our expectations, as though impelled by some dark force beyond our understanding. Given sufficient space, I could show how the shifting, syncopated, jazzy rhythms of the passage defy our expectations regarding metric regularity.

The violence that the primordial domain exercises against gestalt form explains why great works of art seem to be nearly misbegotten, to come so close to being ill-formed, awkward, ungainly, risible, to be so strange, odd, unusual, different, unique, weird, out-of-the-ordinary, so filled with strange ideas, developed in wild forms, that provoke such exotic experiences. If this seems hyperbole, consider the coarseness of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, or the repetitiveness of Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*—that makes Stein’s writing so easy to parody (as great artworks often are). A great work of art is never merely pretty, or merely elegant; it also has truck with something elemental, something that threatens to disrupt order, to liquify all that is fixed, and to lay representations in ruin. This commerce is what Abstract Expressionist artists of the 1940s and 50s used to refer to as risk: they understood that a work of art brings about a dynamic accord between forces that create order and forces that promote disorder, and they had the sense that their great achievement was to have managed to balance a unprecedentedly large quantity of disordering forces—a quantity of such magnitude that it threatened constantly to leave the work a shambles. Nonetheless, to tame those forces would utterly deplete the work one was making.

The primordial lays waste to emerging order. Dennis Lee writes, “[A] poem can change the inflection of its voice five times in thirty lines. It can rage, state, noodle, cavort, then shudder with grief. Polyphony in writing is the art of orchestrating

successive voices across a work. . . [T]o be a meditation at all, a poem must embody in voice the way its experience of the world is initially focused—and then proceed to envoice another focusing; and then another. To live its way to deeper and more complete knowing, which is what a meditation does, it must move from one vocal embodiment to another.” (“Polyphony,” sections 6 and 8, p. 54). It is common for artworks to elicit a sense of an emerging order, and then to depart from it, only to return to it in the end. The departures from the regulative pattern are generally understood to engender tension (by defying our expectation) and then to provide satisfaction as the expected order becomes re-established. Lee seems to share that understanding (at least his commentary of the nursery rhyme “Jack be nimble. . . .” suggests that he does). But I believe there is more to it than the traditional explanation allows—I believe that the deviation from the expected order is not felt simply as an accidental disordering of the established pattern, as a random deviation might be. Rather the deviation is felt as motivated: it seems to disclose the operation of a force that would undo established pattern. The thrill we feel as the emerging order is dismantled is a delight in the discovery of a motivated disordering factor, which puts all order in peril. This disturbance to convention, I suggest, is the very *raison d’être* of art. What is more, I maintain that that conviction is the mainspring the energizes *avant-garde* art.

Thus the role of form is not so much to reconcile this deviant element to a fixed order; rather, it is to prepare us to experience the deviation—to open us to the destructive element, and to immerse us in it. Form allows us to sense the violence of that which defies form, and is impelled to lay form to waste. The conventional way of considering form takes the pattern that is departed from and returned to as normative—that is, though it may disavow the fact, it takes the order embodied in that pattern as the ideal, and deviations from that pattern as negative factors (though the temporary disturbance they create is discovered, in the end, to contribute to the reinforcing that order). I suggest, to the contrary, that we consider the impulse to deviate from that pattern as having primary value, and the pattern itself a way of opening us to that deviation.

Rexroth had right all along. In *Bird in the Bush*, he noted, “the greater poetry is nobly disheveled. It never shows the scars of taking care.” “Disheveled art” might be the best term to refer to art of the *avant-garde*—or, rather “disheveled and denuded art,” to highlight the character of contemporary art that has persevered the best in vanguard tradition.

The word “avant-garde” is a borrowed word from Western world for the Eastern people. In China, the translator translated it into Chinese as “先锋”, which is a Chinese word means “pioneer”. However, “pioneer” in China is easily to be connected with “revolution”, “reformation”, say, “politics”. So compared with other words, like “modern art”, “modernism art” and “experimental art”, the word “avant-garde” is comparatively rarely used. And few people in China know the precise meaning of “avant-garde”. What is the meaning of “avant-garde” in the western cultural context? Would you please tell us about the common view of the western people on the word and your own opinion to that?

I have noted already metaphor is embedded in the term “avant-garde,” and that metaphor rests on certain assumptions, many of which we might question: first, among these is the very notion of change in the arts. Do the arts really change? More to the point, do the arts exhibit progress.

Is it not one of the delights of the arts to discover that experience that seem odd, peculiar, extreme have seized thinking over the ages, in all times and places? When a teenager reads

Lady you bereft me of all words,
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
And there is such confusion in my powers.

does his body not respond knowing to the feeling that Shakespeare describes? Is it not great comfort to him to know that we belong to a common humanity. Or again, when a teenager reads

When griping grief the heart doth wound,
and doleful dumps the mind oppresses,
then music, with her silver sound,
with speedy help doth lend redress.

does she not immediately recognizes this truth applies to his own life, and knows that her is experience is part of the common human experience?

Literature of eras long before Shakespeare provoke the same shock of recognition. We read in the *Iliad* "Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another" and we are arrested by the pity expression of the searing pain of falsehood, of deception, we have ourselves experienced, millennia later.

In reading, we recognize that the common community embraces even those outside civilizations that share a genealogy—and even across gender: a man reading these lines composed by woman knows her feelings.

To the tune of "Red Embroidered Shoes"

If you don't know how, why pretend?
Maybe you can fool some girls,
But you can't fool Heaven.
I dreamed you play with the
Locust blossom under my green jacket,
Like a eunuch with a courtesan.
But lo and behold
All you can do is mumble.
You've made me all red and slippery,
But no matter how hard you try,
Nothing happens. So stop.
Go and make someone else
Unsatisfied.

I cannot agree that there is progress in the arts. No recent writers have surpassed Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, rendering them obsolete: they remain transhistorical testaments to the enduring human character. No recent writers have surpassed Shakespeare's achievements, rendering his plays or sonnets obsolete. Perhaps there is progress in the technical materials artists use, as advances in

chemistry have allowed for colours to mix ways that (arguably) would have made 13th century painters envious. In fact, I have doubts even about that claim. Have the blues pigments synthesis in the era of high chemistry really surpassed the gold, vermillion and ultramarine in Italian, Anglo-Saxon and Normal Italian illuminated manuscripts of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries or the late-medieval early-Renaissance Italian paintings, manuscripts and frescos from the 14th and 15th centuries—has that genuine ultramarine been surpassed by Prussian blue, cobalt blue or phthalo blue? Just think of the effort that were made to transport that precious ultramarine blue to far-flung reaches to get a sense of the medieval painters' convictions about that blue that they associated with the heavens and with The Virgin: ultramarine blue was made with lapis lazuli from Afganistan, whence the names *azzurro oltramarino* or *oltremare genuino* (Italian), *outremer lapis* (French), *ultramarino verdadero* (Spanish), all from *azzurum* ultramarine or blue from *beyond* the seas (ultramarine blue made from Afgan lapis lazuli also appeared in Chinese paintings from the 10th and 11th centuries).

But let's set those reservations aside, and give at least rhetorical assent to the proposition that the technical means that artists have at their disposal have undergone improvement over the years. Even if we grant that (as for the sake of argument I have), we still have to ask whether the arts have really undergone development. We can readily see particular styles mature over a short period—for example, impressionism matured in the years from 1860–1900. Local styles develop over short spans of time—but what about long temporal intervals? No similar development is evident. It is only rarely possible to say that a style from one historical era is better or worse than a style from another historic era. It is hard to say that in general a Greek frieze is better or worse than early modern sculpture of 1890–1914. Certainly there are more or less mature examples of Impressionism, and certainly there are better and worse examples of Impressionism. It is evident that when a style starts, it begins tentatively, and as a general rule the earliest works in the style are rather immature. But the style grows, it matures, and works in the style become over time more confident in the statement and intricate in their structure and assured in their handling of materials. But then, after a number of fully mature examples of the style are produced, the style becomes to go into decline, and works in the style less frequently exhibit the savage originality that their predecessors did. Across the limited span of a particular style we can see genuine progress; but can we really see that the Romanesque church is progress over Greek temple? Over the Symbolist poem and advance over the medieval romance.

The idea that arts progressed across centuries until they reached an apogee (e.g., in the Hellenic *kouroi*) then went into permanent decline was a prejudice of the nineteenth century. One of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century European mind was a commitment to the idea of historical progress: Gottlieb Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, August Comte all affirmed the reality of progress. But note that each restricts himself to the technico-material: it is easy to believe that science and technology undergo genuine develop and afford ever greater insight into the structure of reality (though there are good grounds to doubt even that optimistic belief). Against such rosy views, we might place the picture of history that Vico sketched in his *Principi di scienza nuova* (The New Science of Giambattista Vico): Vico's historical *corso* descends from a poetic time, through an age of heroes, in which the most noble people (the aristocracy) take on attributes of the gods, to the age of humans, which records the loss of the gods, expresses itself politically in democracy. In this last age, humankind relapses to history's ἀρχή (arche, or origin), its barbarous origin.

This, in summary, is the metaphor: in its original use, as a military term, the vanguard, a small troop of highly skilled soldiers, explores the terrain ahead of a large advancing army and plots a course for the army to follow. This concept is applied to the work done by small collectives of intellectuals and artists as they open pathways through new cultural or political terrain for society to follow. But if we can't see art as making progress across the centuries, the idea that there is a group that serves as the vanguard of change seems to lose its purchase: we cannot sustain the idea that there are troops that go out in advance of a battalion main force and lead the assault against the *status quo* if there is no value attached to change. It is difficult to think of an group of artists who are ahead of others, who are early innovators, in advance of the majority, and making it possible for others to follow and to engage the battle for change, if change is not directed along a vector that points in the direction of progress.

What can be salvaged from this metaphor, which rests on fundamentally mistaken assumptions? One is the core notion that instills a political significance into the avant-garde—and that is the notion that the avant-garde tilts against the *status quo*. The frequency with which members of the various avant-garde movements of the early 20th century proclaimed their art was charged with the vital spirit of primitivism gives us a clue about the character of the revolt against the status quo: think of the shocking and vitalizing impact of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.K. Rue, 1911), Richard Hülsenbeck's performances of what he troublingly called *Negerlieder* ("Negro Songs"), Khlebnikov's interests in peasant folk magic incantations and the generally atavistic thrust of zaum. The Viconian analogy here takes on special value: we might see this "primitivism" as the "recurring" (*ricorso*) of life to "barbarism" (*barbarie*).

In his great, grievously neglected book, *Closing Time*, Norman O. Brown wrote of a cultural shift he believed was occurring as he wrote (in the late 1960s). It was, Brown opined, a return to barbarism. Barbarism is a state in which language and the body are at one, and it is this that sets it at odds with the culture of the modern, for which the word and world are separated. Barbarism vaults beyond the sundered world of modernity because barbarians cohabit with the divine. "Only barbarians are simple-minded enough to recognize the gods," Brown wrote, intending by "simple" not the quality of being stupid but to be integral, whole, undivided. (That quote in fact is from Brown's "Rieff's 'Fellow Teachers,'" *Salmagundi*, 24: 39.) Barbarians belong to an integral cosmos, and enjoy a simple, involving, participatory relation to language and the cosmos. Brown extends this to paganism to recognition, arising from barbarians' immersion in the intimacies of linguistic encounter, to the Blakean recognition that they themselves, as poets, make the gods: in this sense, barbarism leads to a deification of humanity, which, for Brown, founds a hope that Nietzschean hope that a gay science (that is, a joyous understanding of reality) might yet emerge.

So the avant-garde's relation to these Viconian intuitions merits further scrutiny. Let's consider the "barbarian's" (or the "primitive's") participatory psychology to the body through the concept of imagination (or fantasy). A reason for Brown's great admiration for Vico was Vico's commitment to poetic conception of reality—that is, of reality as made through feats of imagination. Vico, as Northrop Frye kept reminding us, proposed the "Verum-Factum" principle, the principle that we can know the truth only what we have made ourselves. Vico wrote, "For the Latins, verum (the true) and factum (what is made) are interchangeable, or to use the customary language of the Schools, they are convertible"—"verum et factum . . . convertuntur" (*On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*

45).” Or, again, “the true is precisely what is made” (*verum esse ipsum factum*). This is the most radical declaration (at least the most radical declaration with which I am acquainted) that presents the truth of ποιήσις (*poiesis*) as an all pervading truth, and Brown explicitly restates Vico’s main contention when he writes, “The origin of language in fantasy [for Brown, cognate with the Italian “*fantasia*,” which intends the imagination], not in reality” (CT, 72). Thus Vico integrates a conception of originary poieic being (a creating or imaginative being) with a reconstructed understanding of historical being and knowing.

Vico maintained (and Brown after him) that *fantasia* (imagination) is the faculty through which the early or primitive peoples conceived the world and gave symbolic, shape and meaning. We bring forth, through the imagination, the universe we inhabit, and so we can grasp its essential truth. The cosmos that “primitive” humans inhabits emerges from metaphor. “Primitives,” Vico proposed felt an indissociable association between their emotions and their senses—as a result, and movements that occur in their environment that are often confusing and sometimes threatening. This affective imaginative association is the base theme of “primitive” thought processes, an *ostinato* Vico referred to “Poetic Wisdom.” The poverty of reason displayed by early humans had the result that they thought in corporeal terms—that they understood what was remote and distant in terms of corporeal metaphors, thus bringing them closer. Vico laid out the somatic motivation for metaphor in such claims as, “Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things” (NS, §120); and “It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand” (NS, §122). That is to say, they understood the cosmos (and represented it to themselves) in terms of somatic metaphors. So the developed a feeling of sympathy between body and cosmos—I keep alluding to the mirror thinking that subtends such convictions (and, I maintain, is present in all erotic relations), but so far I have made no headway in convincing anyone, let alone my students, of the importance I believe the phenomenon to have.

But we have to be careful about this notion of “bringing forth in imagination” In “The Heart’s Garden and the Garden’s Heart” Rexroth said, “The speaker says, “visions are / The measure of the defect / Of vision. I loved. I saw.” The atomic individual of modern understanding conceives of mind operating exclusively according to its own constitution. Eros teaches us a different lesson (a lesson that has been little heeded because we have devalued Eros so that his roles have become, first, that of an agent of propaganda for capitalism and, second that of ring-master presiding over a circus of carnal attractions whose purpose is exactly that of the Juvenal’s “*panem et circenses*.” Erotic experience opens unto the truths of inwardness—that truth should give us grounds for cherishing it, beyond all its contemporary degradations—it is in being led furthest into one’s self that to the most profound connection: one turns inward to the profound self, in order to become open to the other. In turning toward the source of an illumination that emanates from deep within, one is led to strong and loving place where one become most open to the other, a place where one can allow oneself to be penetrated by the other. One turns toward the self to find the love that allows one to be open, first, to our significant others and then, if one cleaves to the love and fosters it, to a widening circle of others, until it encompasses (ideally) all and everyone—until all senses becomes an act of love. (The Nag Hammadi Library’s Gospel of Thomas has Jesus say “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”)

The modern mind finds peculiar the proposition that erotic experience is the basis of a truer epistemology, yet this is exactly what I believe. Erotic experience is important as model for what direct experience can be. It is the experience of otherness at its most intense. Direct experience (for which erotic experience model) is really the beginning of knowledge—if that were known the epistemological quandaries which he bedeviled modernity would be dispensed with. The sifting, sorting and configuring of experience that the British empiricists, and later (and crucially) Immanuel Kant imply is a precondition of experience is a fiction. A line of philosophy that descends from Aristotle, developed into the philosophies of mind promulgated by Locke and Hume, and reached its apogee with Immanuel Kant analyzed how percepts are formed into concepts, concepts into judgments, and judgments into action. The description of the mental processes is about as risible as that presented in the cognitive theories that have been fashionable for the past thirty years.

Perhaps the Marxists are right—perhaps the convulsions that philosophy has experienced in that past three hundred years are the result of a capitalism, and specifically, of alienated labour and the inapprehensibility of abstract system of power and value that arises from it. Human solidarity and the thick web of relations that united action with agent, agent with agent in one dense reality (what Hannah Arendt discussed under the rubric of “action”) has been shattered by capitalism’s alienating drive.

But as Pierre Hadot has made clear, what philosophy has become would have been unrecognizable to ancient and medieval thinkers. For them, philosophy primarily concerned being (including one’s own being, or how one is with oneself)—they were not primarily concerned with knowing. Perhaps Plato, Augustine and Aquinas all had it right (and not the philosophers of the sorting epistemologies): perhaps the highest form of knowledge is an illumination, a illumination which emanates from deep within, but through which one participates in the dynamism of an cosmos that is apprehended as unified through and through. The process of sifting, sorting and shaping doesn’t come first, as the British empiricists and Kant imply: immediate apprehension comes first and analysis—the process of sifting and sorting experience—come afterward. Or think of Richard of St. Victor: Richard maintained that the direct experience of reality precedes the Aristotelian sensing process that formed the notion of experience in philosophies of Locke and Hume—by the time of Kant it became philosophy’s innermost meaning, the wisdom acquired through a life of reflection.

Plotinus, Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, Grosseteste, Aquinas offered a very different one, which I believe to be much, much nearer to the truth. That is that the inner illumination is a presence of the divine within the human being, and that in following this light, in becoming more and more “illuminated” one’s mind becomes more like the mind of God. In cleaving to that light, one undergoes a gradual process of divinization, a stillness that is nonetheless active, of theosis (to use the term from Greek Christianity). As one’s mind becomes more like the mind of God, one comes to see that all things are brought forth by a divine act of imagining. One knows things immediately, in an act in which imagination and sensation are one act (one thinks here of Donald Winnicott’s deeply poetic vision). Yes, Rexroth had this, too, right all along: “Time is the Mercy of Eternity” states, “At last there is nothing left / But knowledge, itself a vast/ Crystal encompassing the/Limitless crystal of air/And rock and water. And the/ Two crystals are perfectly/ Silent. There is nothing to/ Say about them. Nothing at all.” That’s it: the crystalline we become encompasses the limitless crystal of all that is.

Vico’s *New Science* is in large measure an encomium to Poetic Wisdom. Poetry was the way of mythic thinkers at the origin of society and it was prevalent way of

thinking that until, with the advent of democracy, the *hoi poloi* gained control of society through the class struggle. Vico outlines, in detail, the nature of a poetic metaphysics, a poetic logic, a poetic economics and a poetic geography. The belief systems of early societies are based a “poetic metaphysics,” which “seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it” (“Poetic Wisdom,” §374, p.116). This metaphysics is “not rational and abstract like that of learned men now,” Vico emphasizes, “but felt and imagined [by men] without power of ratiocination. . . This metaphysics was their poetry, a faculty born with them. . . born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything” (“Poetic Wisdom,” §375, p.116). The earliest peoples were “sublime poets” and that this sublimity was a due to their savagery, not to their wisdom. “Men at first feel without perceiving. . . . This axiom is the principle of the poetic sentences, which are formed by feelings of passions and emotion” (NS, §§218–19). This early in “primitive” thought is thinking-through-metaphor, whose metaphoric character (“metaphor” derives from Greek μεταφορά (metaphorá, or transfer) involves a direct and unmediated connection between the energies that gives rise to a primal vocabulary that is more gestural than vocal.

Vico’s conviction in the values of ποιήσις led him to a critique of the education of his time (in the wake of the rise to dominance of Cartesianism) that, for Brown, a “counter-culture” hero of the 1960s, would have had resonance. Modern education, Vico averred, has been debilitated by ignorance the *ars topica* (art of topics), which (he argued in Ciceronian fashion) encourage the use of imagination and memory in organizing speech into eloquent persuasion. Undue attention is accorded to the “geometrical method” modeled on the discipline of physics and an emphasis on abstract philosophical criticism over poetry (on this, see Vico’s *De Nostris temporis studiorum ratione* (1709); *On the Study Methods of our Times*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 21ff). This undermines the importance of exposition, persuasion, and pleasure in learning; it “benumbs. . . [the] imagination and stupefies. . . [the] memory” (DN, 42), both of which are central to learning, complex reasoning, and the discovery of truth.

Brown proposed related ideas about our modern education in his Phi Beta Kappa oration (first published in the May 1961 issue of *Harper’s*, complete with a preparatory introduction by Benjamin Nelson, at the time a more established historian of the psychoanalytic movement, who expressed grave reservations about Brown’s maverick approach).

Democratic resentment denies that there can be anything that can’t be seen by everybody; in the democratic academy truth is subject to public verification; truth is what any fool can see. This is what is meant by the so-called scientific method: so-called science is the attempt to democratize knowledge—the attempt to substitute method for insight, mediocrity for genius, by getting a standard operating procedure. (*Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, 3f).

And, again,

And so there comes a time—I believe we are in such a time—when civilization has to be renewed by the discovery of new mysteries, by the undemocratic power which makes poets the acknowledged legislators of mankind, the power which makes all things new. The power which makes

all things new is magic. What our time needs is mystery: what our time needs is magic. Who would not say that only a miracle can save us?
(*Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, 4)

Among the most controversial of Vico's ideas is that of "imaginative universals" and it is through this concept that Vico connects language to the body and to *ποίησις*. The importance of Vico's idea has been challenged (Benedetto Croce deemed it a tragic weakness in Vico's writings and suggested it is best ignored). Vico, on the other hand, maintained it was as the "master key" to his *Scienza Nuova*. Vico's notion of imaginative universals on these key principles: that the earliest form of language was a combination of mute gestures and rudimentary, monosyllabic words (NS 225, 231). The second is that, like children, primitive people, for want of reason, "excel in imitation; we observe that they generally amuse themselves by imitating whatever they are able to apprehend (NS 215)." The ordinary, proto-poetic (and poetic) language would have been connected to the body. It served the ends of participation: the combination of somatic and verbal gestures would have served as a form of imitation of the dynamism of the circumambient world (which, for primitives as for children now, would have been experienced frequently as threatening).

In an insight that anticipated McLuhan by century, Vico identified the loss of this participatory use of language with the rise of the alphabet. Symbols had been mute, gestural, remained so in some cultures; in other cultures they had evolved into hieroglyphics. But both the corporeal gestures and the hieroglyphs into which, in some cultures, they evolved, remained concrete and particular—by and large, they were deficient in the ability to articulate abstract thought (and following the principle that "*verum et factum . . . convertuntur*" if they could not be articulated, they could not be true, or real). However, the alphabet, however, disposed of this antiquated form of understanding through somatic imitation. This shared, universal form of understanding, was supplanted and the new knowledge that took its place was more highly variegated. Thus, the alphabet laid the groundwork for democracy. After the alphabet, cultures could acknowledge changes in language and the diversity of linguistic forms. This recognition, along with the capacity to argue over truth and untruth, is the origin of the democratic paradigm. It is the capacity for reflection, grounded in the abstractions of alphabetic language, that dispatched the gods. A certain savagery and intimacy with bodily energies is necessary for *ποίησις*.

This imbues the avant-garde with political importance through and through. To understand the political importance of this line of thought, one has to think the notion of politics at a basic level, as arising from the need for human beings to realize their being (their potential to be) with others, to live in communities that nurture its members social well-being, their need to love and be love, to exchange thoughts and feelings, and to contribute to the making of a greater good. Among what (to my mind) remains most vital in Brown's oeuvre is the concept of metapolitics. The 1960s and 1970s saw radical thinkers in considerable numbers embracing a Nietzschean politics (or, better, metapolitics), and Brown was amongst the most historically, philosophically, literarily aware to do so. There is a Dionysian character in the Frederic William Atherton Lecture, delivered at Harvard College on March 20, 1967 and published as "From Politics to Metapolitics" (*Caterpillarly* October, 1967), he alluded to the Nietzschean of the need to "transvalue the old political categories," to pass from politics to metapolitics. What is metapolitics? For Brown, it is poetry. The rule of politics, Brown suggests, is "perpetual conflict." The political order is, Brown sensibly proposes, is a realm of repression—that

this is so was, for Brown, a conviction that his study of Freud (especially *Moses and Monotheism*) reinforced. To be sure, Brown did not accept our living together in social grouping required anything like the degree of repression that is presently enforced—but for our living together to require less repression would demand a greater tolerance of our being bound together by erotic bonds, and that would require an apocalypse. The apocalypse would result in what he characterized as “the resurrection of body.” The revolution that is called would acknowledge that we live together in groups to have our carnal needs met and that all social relations are fundamentally carnal relations.

Contrast that metapolitical revolution with political revolution: political revolutions, he maintained, result simply in “temporary break down” that inevitably will be followed by the “restitution of repression.” (Rexroth was in agreement with Norman O. Brown on this point—in *Bird in the Bush* he remarked that “In the final showdown, all our revolutions have turned out to be careers for some and programs for others.) Political change is not what is called. For Brown, the only real revolution, the revolution that could save a foundering humanity, is the “visionary breakthrough” of poetry. Like Matthew Arnold, then, he sees poetry as the way to salvation—which is to say that he sees poetry as performing the function of religion. On this point, at least, Brown is in agreement with a variety of nineteenth-century poets and critics. He is also in agreement with the avant-garde. The avant-garde is commonly described as questing to integrate art and reality. That description is not wrong itself, but it is often interpreted wrongly. The attempt to integrate art and life should not be construed as an effort to take art out of the theatres and museums and concert hall and bring it into the streets, where it would be encountered by a humanity that is hustling about to accomplish its daily round as hardly any different from the ordinary events they encountered. That was not the goal at all. Rather the avant-garde proposed to transform everyday life, so that every movement of living might be experienced with the intensity (the poetic energy) of the most vital, surging movements in the greatest art. They proposed to poeticize everyday life. Norman O. Brown joined with the avant-garde in calling for that revolution.

Brown proposes that the revolution that is needed to save a foundering humanity would have accomplished its goal when humans had recovered a body that is electric all over, a body the entire surface of which is erotically charged. The skin should be the primary erotic organ: then the body will be re-united with cosmos, as a conductor and transducer of electrical energies that serves as an antenna in a sea of cosmic electricity. That image of the body struck a resonant chord in the 1960 (as, perhaps, it should once again). But what made Brown particularly appealing was that he connected this conception of a prelapsarian body to poetry. The advent of a new (or renewed) body would bring with it a new (or renewed way of thought). The body that is separated from the cosmos is a body that understands texts as something to be understood and mastered. Its relation to language is through protocols: it is a distanced and mediated relation. Poetry is different: connected to the body, it is an integrative—an erotic—form of language whose challenge to a civilization founded on instrumental reason is complete. Rexroth had it absolutely right in the first essay in *Bird in a Bush*, “Unacknowledged Legislators and ‘Art Pour Art’”:

The arts presume to speak directly from person to person, each polarity, the person at each end of the communication, fully realized. The speech of poetry is from me to you, transfigured by the overcoming of all thingness-reification-in the relationship. So speech approaches in poetry

not only the directness and impact but the unlimited potential of art.

What are the differences and relationship between the words “modern art”, “modernist art”, “experimental art” and “avant-garde art”?

A crucial distinction must be drawn between modernist art and “modern art.” The term “modern” in the expression “modern art” has a very broad meaning, but one of its implications is to suggest the superiority of whatever is new. Accordingly, the word “modern” in the phrase “modern art” celebrates recent art for being up-to-date, as participating in the spirit of the new. It celebrates new art as marking an advance over traditional art, at least in relevance to contemporaries. Thus, the term “modern art” refers to art that partakes in the spirit of progress. It is a broad term that encompasses works that have little in common, but for their interest in presenting “the new” as novel, as belonging to the modern reality that so greatly excited many thinkers in the first decades of the twentieth century. Writers who celebrated “modern” art generally celebrated the new, industrial/technological culture that relentlessly (as we now know) offers novelty. Modern art was an art of the new age of technological progress.

The term “experimental art” is allied with these ideas of the modern, rooted as they are in notions about the role science has played in bringing about progress. To the extent that one doubts that the role of science in contemporary culture is altogether positive, one will have doubts about the appropriation of the “experimental” to characterize artmaking. Furthermore, the use of the term to distinguish progressive, transformative art (so-called “avant-garde” art) from other forms of art suggests that “avant-garde” artists experiment when they produce art: that they don’t really know what they are doing, but are willing to give new forms a try. It would be nice to believe that, but any thinker will soon realize 1) that avant-garde artists know as well as any other group of artists what they are doing and 2) all genuine artists, avant-garde or not, do their work in state of negative capability—in a state of uncertainty, and with willingness to tolerate the unresolved.

There is another term that is important here, the term modernity. Modernity is a broad term that refers to the social and cultural conditions that developed with the rise of capitalism. It is often used to stress the role that “modern science” (the scientific paradigm that began with Francis Bacon and was already quite mature by Descartes and Leibniz’ time) and Enlightenment ideas about reason play in the recent culture. While the term “modern art” was often used to herald an art that embraced and celebrated technology, the term “modernity” is often used in a critique of recent culture meant to expose the limitation of contemporary forms of life.

In contrast to the term “modern art,” the term “modernist art” can be precisely defined. Modernism offered a theory of art history, a notion of the purpose of art and conception of aesthetic value. Modernist thinking proceeded along the line of identifying the specific character and value of any entity or any process through identifying its *genus* and its *differentiae*. Thus, modernism took the question, “What is the value of art” to be equivalent to the question, “To what general category does art belong and, within this category, what does art uniquely offer?” They took as evident that artworks belong to the category of things whose function is to elicit experience. So the question that remained was what sort of experience does art elicit that nothing else can.” What it offered, modernists suggested, is aesthetic experience. The modernists’ analysis of aesthetic experience was admirably lucid. Modernists noted that other forms of experience are directed towards some end or interest. Aesthetic experience is

disinterested: we appreciate aesthetic experience for itself, not for the end it serves. But it is not alone in this: other phenomena evoke experiences that are appreciated simply for themselves—the fright we feel in a house-of-horrors would be an examples. What distinguishes aesthetic experiences is that elicits a focused attention. “What elicits this attention?,” they asked. They responded that it is the form of the work that elicits experiences—the message or the depiction a work may (or may not) present is apprehended discursively, and so not experienced disinterestedly. Only the form of the work is apprehended in a disinterested fashion. The disinterested apprehension of form has the capacity to lift us out of daily round, in which experience is always for an end. In being lifted out of our daily round, we are refreshed and revitalized.

It is the capacity of the form of the work to elicit disinterested attention that is the source of value in a work of art—a great work of art is one that can elicit attention at its most intense and most focused, and can do this repeatedly, as we return to it again and again. What gives some works of art this capacity? The modernists’ response to that question was equally lucid: they responded that a survey of works that elicit attention at its most focused and most intense are works with rigorous architectonic features. What endows a work with a rigorous architectonic? After surveying a range of great works, they concluded that in order for a work of art to have a rigorous architectonic, it must accord with the nature of the materials from which it fashioned.

This last belief, that the form of strong work of art conforms to the nature of the material of which it made, provided the modernists with a conception of the history of art. The history of various arts, at least for the past two hundred years (at least), is the story of question to identify the specific ontology of each distinct medium. Over the past two hundred years (at least) each medium has sought to identify its medium by distinguishing itself from the adjacent arts (there is that definition through *genus* and *differentia* again): for example, the history of recent painting is the history of painting defining its unique ontology by distinguishing itself, step by step, from all the adjacent arts—from drawing, from sculpture, from history. It reject, first, that scene painting (presented scenes either from real life, from fiction and mythology, or from history). Step by step, across two hundred years (at least), it distinguished itself from drawing and sculpture—painters came to reject the sculptural illusion, the illusion of presenting three dimensional forms, and the convention of modeling painting on drawing, on creating outlines of figures and colouring them in. Thus, painting came, step by step, to define its ontology: a painting consists of coloured goo smeared on a limited, two dimensional surface. Strong painters understood this and worked with flatness of the canvas and its boundaries.

Finally, as I have noted the term “avant-garde art” conjures up an unfortunate military analogy. However, I chose to use it, since it at least avoids suggesting (as the term “experimental” does) the value of scientific approach to artmaking, and, further, conveys a sense of the contestational nature of avant-garde art (though, of course, that suggestion runs the risk of mistakenly suggesting the social utility of that art).

In 1930s, there was a word “non-objective art” which was very popular in the groups of artists in New York City. (Even McLaren had never heard of it before his immigration to New York in 1939. He called his works “abstract films”. And then was reminded by others to use “non-objective films” instead of “abstract films”.) So what’s the difference between “non-objective” and “abstract”? And relationship with “modern art” and “avant-garde” art?

Modernists contended that the value of the work of art depends on its form. Its form is essential to its value. However, a work of art may also present an image or a representation. However, modernists argued, while a strong work may offer an image, its representational aspects are always irrelevant. So, in keeping with the historical logic of negation, art progressively dispensed with representation: there was no “object” that it represented. Such arts the Germans characterized as “*gegenstandlose Kunst*” or “objectless art.” This idea of a *gegenstandlose Kunst* influenced some figures who had central roles in flourishing of American art in the twentieth century. Hilla Rebay, one of the founders of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, had been deeply influenced by the notion of *gegenstandlose Kunst*, and so the Guggenheim Museum’s original name was the Museum of Non-Objective Art.

The Latin root for the term “abstract” is *abstractus* “drawn away,” the past participle of *abstrahere*, from ab(s)- “from” or “away” and trahere “to draw”; thus it means to draw away from or to separate. The term “abstract” refers to art whose forms have an correlate in reality, though their forms may have become so altered in becoming part of an aesthetic form—though their forms might have become so separated from reality—that they have become, to all intents and purposes, autonomous constructs. Nonetheless, the term “non-objective” puts a premium on artworks’ autotelic structure, “abstract” on drawing from the world and transforming the abstracted forms.

Abstract art highlights the figural dimension of all great art, including representational art. The figural (or what I refer to as the primordial) is a non-representational element implicit in all meanings—a element that cannot be brought to full presence, that cannot be fully rendered textually or pictorially. This element reveals itself primordially, at a level beyond language and representation. Yet, though it cannot be brought to presence it affects us, at a rudimentary level. (Francis Bacon’s paintings can be taken as suggesting the figural with that resides within all allusive forms, a raw power that is hinted at in Bacon’s transfiguration of the commonplace. figure has the forces of meaning and significance powerfully expressed within it; and nevertheless, the figures do not stand for something or present anything except what they fully are and fully express to us implicitly, through pure sensation.

In sum, non-objective art is an art that developed on the basis a specific set of ideas we identify as modernist. Abstract art, by way of contrast, evolved out of the effort to make evident an uncanny figural element in art.

In China, among all the researches on avant-garde, the research on the cultural implication referred by Saint-Simon to the avant-garde was one of the main streams. However, Saint-Simon defined “avant-garde” from the perspective of sociology aimed on the revolution of utilitarian instrumentalism. And that was quite different from Greenberg’s perspective of aesthetics, in which defined “avant-garde” from the angles of art itself, including form of art, media of art and so on. So the Chinese scholars sometimes overweight the social meaning of “avant-garde”. However, what is your opinion on the relation between the “avant-garde” in social context and in aesthetics context? (For example, McLaren’s animation played an important role for the Canadian government during the Second World War.)

I have not the least doubt that vanguard art offers a critique of society. In fact, I have said already that I believe that poetic thinking offers the most thorough-going and devastating critique of the status quo. But it is important to understand the form of this critique—it is

important because if its character is understood incorrectly, then the critique will be drained of its power.

My criticism of artworks that offer explicit critiques of power develops out of my belief that there are many different ways of using language (that's obvious) and that some of these ways are completely incommensurate with other ways of using language (that is not so obvious, but it is my way of stating my conviction that one cannot translate the content of a statement constructed belonging to one phrase regime, with a statement belonging to another phrase regime). There are many language games (here I allude to Lyotard's use of that term, not to Wittgenstein's), many separate systems within which meaning is constructed, and each system is regulated by a different set of rules governing production meanings and for the circulation of effects within each game's community of language users. In order to highlight the opposition poetic language to the language of power, we can draw a distinction (patterned on Lyotard's distinction between *discours* and *figur*) discursive or propositional thinking and poetic thinking. Discursive or propositional thinking is representation by concepts: it can be stated in the forms of Whitehead and Russell's predicate calculus. Discourse organizes the objects of knowledge within a system of concepts (units of meaning), and, correlatively, meanings are defined in terms of their position in the discursive network; meaning arises from one unit of meaning's difference from—or opposition to—all other concepts or elements in the system (here we enter into the Saussurian conception of language as structure—like Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic, Lyotard's distinction between "*discours*" and "*figure*" was framed to highlight the shortcoming of the structuralist approach to meaning). Discourse thus imposes a spatial arrangement upon objects which Lyotard calls 'textual', a virtual grid of oppositions. The poetic, by way of contrast, is a disruptive force which works to dismantle established structures of meaning. But Lyotard does not characterize the figural purely by means of binary oppositions (nor should we define the poetic purely by negation): for Lyotard, the positive attribute of the figural opens discourse to a radical heterogeneity, a singularity, a difference which cannot be rationalized or subsumed within the rule of representation. (So here we are, back to the notion of direct perception.) The object resists being reduced to the state of mere equivalence to its meaning within the system of signification—the figural marks this resistance, the sense that we cannot "say" all there is in an object's being. An object is always outside discourse—it remains at odds with whatever we might maintain about it. Its singularity, its being, is always in excess of any meanings we may assign to it. By way of response to this residue, this being which is in excess of meaning, is to develop a figural manner of thinking and speaking.

Lyotard later developed his notion of the figural (a notion adjacent to mine concerning the poetic) in his discussion of the Kantian sublime and in his idea of the Differend. Lyotard's interest in the Kantian sublime arose from the fact that the sublime revealed to that Enlightenment philosopher the fact that the mind cannot always organize the world rationally: as Kant pointed out, some objects are simply incapable of being brought neatly under concepts. Lyotard celebrates this resistance to concepts in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, because, he says, generalities (or 'concepts') fail to pay adequate heed to the particularities of things. (So here we are, once again back to the notion of direct perception.) The experience of the sublime precipitates a crisis as we realize imagination and reason are incommensurate with one another. Lyotard characterizes this as experience of the Differend; the mind straining itself as it reaches the realm of conceptual understanding. The Differend, I suggest, I suggest is the implicit subject of avant-garde art.

The mistake of political art is overlook the subversive thrust of the poetic and to corral all that is subversive with the realm of discursive. Modernity has taken the discursive normatively, so one effect of insisting that poetic must adjoin itself to the propositional is to insist that poetic deal with modernity in its own terms. That is a poor bargain as the history of political art makes clear.

There is another way of considering the opposition of the aesthetic to reason. The analogy between aesthetic and erotic experience is useful here once again: the deepening of understanding we experience as our love becomes ever more encompassing is not something for which we can easily find words. But what is more important is that if we develop to the point where love encompasses nearly all and everyone, we will not be able to abide the cruelty of the capitalist system which grinds so many under its heel, nor will we tolerate that vast inequities in the distribution of wealth the capitalist system produces. Abstract arguments concerning the evils of capitalism are much less effective than nurturing the love that makes one know viscerally that capitalism is simply intolerable and must be ended.

In his delightful collection of essays, *Bird in the Bush*, poet Kenneth Rexroth makes this comment about poetry's unassimilability.

You can never base an educational system on the "Hundred Best Books." A hundred of the truest insights into life as it is would destroy any educational system and its society along with it.

Bird in the Bush shows Rexroth to be in fundamental accord with Norman O. Brown (and, I would venture, every person who thinks enough to know how profoundly damaged our society, culture, and educational system are—few though they be).

I believe, with Rexroth, that no organized society could ever survive a thoroughgoing Christianity. A principal theme of Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* is the religion is the application of metaphor to the problems of living. In that sense, it is poetic—if you doubt that, think of the efforts at the restoration of liturgy as *tremendum*. If poetry and religion are at one, we can say, too, that no organized society could ever survive if any sizeable portion of the population began to think poetically.

Nor should it be left unsaid that the notion political art has often been used as an excuse for no excuse for sloppy craftsmanship, cheap melodrama and an entirely coarse sentimentality—I think of the vicious pseudo-art of my colleague Lila Pine as I commit that remark to paper. What little she has tried to do with art could have been done much better (and much, much, much, much less expensively—that is, at much much, much less cost to the effectively hoodwinked taxpayer) with a broadsheet or a contemptuously polemical, pseudo-militant internet site.

The history of the word "avant-garde" is very long. (It is said to have originated in the military textbook in France.) During the history of the development of the word "avant-garde", "avant-garde art" played its role in almost all sectors of the society. Do you think the word "avant-garde" lay stress on its social meaning as "a Pioneer in the social movement"?

I do not. I believe it much more true to say that avant-garde has been driven by desire to show how the human operates. It arises at the moment when it clear that the Enlightenment *imago humanis* is gravely mistaken. The Enlightenment conception of human being was simple—all too simple. It depicted humans as having dual tendencies.

One is a tendency to give way to elementary being, a tendency that is prey to superstition, given to group behavior and all the intolerance and conformity that implies, and a failure to realize the humankind's higher capacity; the other is towards rational being, through which the individual realizes himself or herself through humankind's higher capacities. In "Was ist Aufklärung" (What is Enlightenment) depicted the relation between the relation between the two tendencies on the analogy of the maturational process: the elementarist tendency is like humanity's childhood and adolescence, while the rationalist tendency is like humanity's adulthood. The Enlightenment dream of releasing humans from superstition to achieve through reason the best they are capable of is certainly a noble dream.

But it had shortcomings. Reason can fetter the mind just as superstition can. More to the point, reason, especially in its instrumentalist form, is directed outward, toward the control of material reality. It misses the inner question, the discovery within of what can save us. As humans acquired more and more material possessions, their lives became ever more empty of value. Worse, humans sacrificed knowledge of the self in their quest to control the 'outside' world—the consequence of that are still evident everywhere around us: often I will be stunned for a moment, as one or another of my faculty colleagues reveals how complete is his or her ignorance of internal realities. The avant-garde represents a turning inward, an recover those aspects of human being that the Enlightenment was willing to sacrifice. Think about the oneiric realities the Symbolists explored, the Futurists' interest in the new technologies of their time as a means for annihilating time (that is, bringing forth an absolute timeless reality), the Cubists interest in perception and simultaneity, the Surrealist interest in dreams.

A common feature of the various avant-garde movements was so-called primitivist interests. The primitivist proclivities evident in so much modernist art we should take as a metaphor for the excavation of deeper areas of the human psyche (and as the statement of the conviction that the means that earlier peoples used to bring forth from within what would save them—the use of rituals to promote group trance, spontaneous behavior to give unbridled expression to elementary feelings, the cultivation of carnal longings—were of enduring relevance). Freud once told the Wolf Man that like the archaeologist in his excavations, the psychoanalyst "must uncover layer after layer of the patient's psyche, before coming to the deepest, most valuable treasures." (V. M. Gardiner, ed., *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1972, p. 139,) Freud explained to the Rat Man, that everything conscious is in the process of wearing away, but that the unconscious is relatively permanent, its contents preserved by being buried. Peter Gay has characterized archeology as being Freud's "master metaphor" (See Gay's 'Introduction' to L. Gamwell and R. Wells (eds), *Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities* Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1989, p. 16), even though there is reason to believe that by the time he came to write *Civilization and its Discontents*, that he had become disenchanted with the metaphor. Still the idea of effort to uncover the deeper strata of the self was crucial to Freud's understanding of psychoanalysis and its therapeutic effects. Psychoanalysis, too, was a thoroughly interior quest, a sort of journey to the underworld that is required if one is to be freed.

The NFB in Canada is famous for its avant-garde films and animations. Besides their contribution to the art, the artists of NFB made contributions in the certain history to the politics and culture of Canada. Taking McLaren as an example, he is not only a master on animation but also a sign of the art spirit of the nation. What do you think about the position of the avant-garde art in the Canadian Culture? (I

know there are relevant contents in your work *Image and Identity*.)

McLaren explored the inner recesses of the psyche. This avant-garde method led him to connect with the nation's spiritual conditions. His inner quest is especially evident in his acute sense of rhythm: we discover the significance of rhythm in the inner recesses of our being, and yet rhythm connects us to all that is—"whoever has rhythm has the cosmos."

On Canadian thinkers interest in consciousness, I point out that one of the greatest surveys of consciousness was written by a Canadian philosopher who taught at the University of Toronto: the book to which I refer is Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*. Marshall McLuhan's great theme was how technology structures (and restructures) consciousness. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* offers a series of equivalents to the structures of conscious experience.

I have been attending a series of chamber concerts over the last three weeks. The opening concert was by the great Toronto pianist Anton Kuerti, who is one of the greatest living interpreters of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. That evening he played Schumann—and indeed Robert Schumann has been the principal subject of this series of chamber concerts. Schubert was a very troubled man, a borderline schizophrenic. What distinguished the Canadian Anton Kuerti's interpretation of Schumann was that he was inside Schumann mind: he played Schumann with an understanding of how the mercurial changes in his work convey the protean character of a borderline schizophrenic's thought process.

The history of Canada is not very long. And the history of the development of avant-garde art and the history of the Canadian identity have an important coincidence in time. Does such coincidence have something to do with the characteristic understanding and expression of the break-new-ground spirit of avant-garde art by Canadian people?

Yes. Early Canadians, huddled together in small communities, facing perilous conditions, they reconnected with a communal spirit.