

Joes Segal. *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016. 176 pp. \$18.99, paper, ISBN 978-90-485-3151-6.

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The back cover of this fairly thin volume communicates the author's aspiration in an exceptionally straightforward way: the seven chapters will explore the surprising ways in which art and politics (two domains conventionally regarded as worlds apart) often intertwine. The blurb also invokes some of the most riveting questions to be dealt with in the book, in which Joes Segal charts how politics contaminated, or simply conditioned, art making in the past hundred years. In doing so, he successfully takes issue with the Greenbergian account of the history of modern art. According to American critic Clement Greenberg, artistic purity and self-referential abstraction emerged triumphantly in the 1950s, after having shed any demand for artistic message or representation, the appearance of which in an artwork Greenberg dismissed as "propaganda" or "kitsch."^[1]

The seven essays tackle different geographical areas, from western and eastern Europe to the Americas and China, and are arranged in a roughly chronological order of the periods they straddle. While this temporal and geographical frame would obviously be too vast for a monograph presenting primary research, the particular purpose of this book might nevertheless justify it. Here, Segal reads and thinks through existing literature with the intent to reveal, and prove with a variety of examples, the illusoriness of an art theory that wish-

es to see art and politics (or ideologies of various kinds) as distinct domains. This is an ambitious enterprise and one that prompted the Amsterdam University Press to have the original Dutch version from 2015 translated into English just a year later.

Segal starts his narrative with the kind of wartime artistic nationalism both France and Germany sank into during the First World War. How did art become a measure of political identity, asks Segal; how was the rhetorical distinction between national and enemy art constructed, and what impact did these art debates—both in the conservative and modernist camps—have on art historical narratives? He then goes on to argue that this French/German enmity was remarkable in that the frantic attempts to set apart infectious enemy art from spiritually invigorating national culture were gradually leading to an uncanny resemblance between the two art worlds. To come to an equally uncanny conclusion, Segal stretches the narrative into the 2010s, when the Louvre's exhibition "De l'Allemagne" opened a new chapter of political alienation between the two countries.

Like this text, all others zoom in on the role of art in times of political tension, crisis, or rupture, and the analytical procedure is also fairly uniform: each study first briefly sets the scene and historical context for the particular tension to be expounded and articulates a handful of clearly

formulated questions which the short pieces will unpack. This may come across as either an extremely coherent or a somewhat bland structure, and the conclusion's revisiting of the central queries and theses of each chapter might confirm both sentiments, while the frequent cross-references throughout the book further underscore cohesion.

Chapters 2 and 3 catapult the reader into the interwar period through engaging with the politically contingent artistic decisions of the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera on the one hand, and the clear-cut distinction between good and degenerate art in the Third Reich, on the other. While some of the lucid thesis questions, both in these two texts and the rest of the chapters, turn the attention to broad and easily perceived dilemmas surrounding the given topics ("Where did the extreme ideas of National Socialist art theory come from?" or "Why did the communist painter Diego Rivera accept commissions from conservative Mexican governments and American capitalists?"), the author also identifies less self-evident or only rarely addressed dilemmas, such as "how did the art world of the Third Reich ... unwittingly inform the interpretation of art during the Cold War?" (pp. 46-47).

And so does chapter 4 venture into the period of a bipolar world order, in which the domain of culture was heavily drawn into the sphere of political competition and both superpowers loaded the visual arts with ideological projections, making clear-cut definitions of good or verminous, ideologically foreign art. It was not only Socialist Realism, the future-oriented artistic propaganda of the totalitarian Soviet bloc, that carried vested political interests, argues Segal; the allegedly autonomous, pure art of the democratic world was also deployed to make and fortify political statements. Moreover, modern avant-garde art had a different trajectory in the Soviet Union and the United States in the early years of the Cold War, with alternating phases of embracement and rejection, attitudes that were also influenced by whether pro-

gressive art was being presented, and promoted, internationally or domestically.

The cultural dimensions of the global Cold War is a quickly growing field of study. Following an initial focus on how culture had been used as an instrument of state propaganda in the Soviet Union and an early journalistic investigation into how similar processes took place in the United States and Britain, the subject had garnered, by the 1990s, considerable scholarly interest, primarily within Anglo-Saxon academia. In the past five to ten years, the field further expanded and fascinating new scholarship and country case studies have been produced internationally, indeed globally, to complement the previous limited focus on the two superpowers. While a considerable amount of this cutting-edge new research is also available in major languages irrespective of the actual national contexts they take as their focus, Segal's current discussion of "Internal and External Enemies" in the cultural Cold War regrettably does not reflect this new diversity. For the most part, he draws on the "classic" works that launched this research area.

Chapter 5 rushes through sixty years of Chinese art and cultural policy to review the means through which Mao and the Chinese Communist Party subordinated art to their political goals, how the economic reforms of the next leader Deng Xiaoping affected the art world, and what the current government's take on contemporary art is, considering both the critical charge and economic potential of artistic production. While the excesses or ideological underpinnings of the Cultural Revolution and the Deng reforms themselves are presented in an easily intelligible way, the post-Mao decades collapse into one another with little further distinction. This maybe the text richest in references to individual art works but only an insignificant fraction of them also bear the years of production, thus making difficult to establish the connection between claims made about political context and artistic output.

The African American artist Kara Walker's murals of silhouette figures lend themselves, in chapter 6, to a discussion of the dynamics of artistic intention and critical reception. Her case is further complicated by the particular aesthetic and political expectations of the "mainstream" and "minority" art scenes of the United States as well as the apparent fact that speaking to issues like slavery and racism in nonstandard ways is still capable of hitting a raw nerve. This essay considers the politicization of art as understood by post-structuralist theories rather than in relation to state or international politics, which distinguishes this case study from the rest.

Yet, Segal reckons (for reasons largely unclear to me) that it is actually the final chapter, on post-communist monuments, that falls, to some degree, outside the scope of the volume. If anything, it is the analytical laxity and the relative lack of circumspection in selecting the material and substantiating the argument that sets this piece apart. The text presents ways in which the changes in government and political culture in the former Soviet bloc have been reflected in the treatment of communist monuments since the 1990s. After briefly commenting on cases in several postsocialist societies, chapter 7 eventually concentrates on Macedonia and three Central Asian post-Soviet republics to feature a handful of utterly bizarre instances. On this small and practically arbitrary sample, the author allows himself to extrapolate on former communist countries as an indistinguishable entity incorporating unimbricated (national) cultural landscapes, whereby his approach assumes an eerie resemblance to exoticizing and orientaling discourses.

While this might be partly the result of Segal's considerable reliance, in this essay, on (Western) media reports and a relative neglect, again, of recent regionally authored scholarship, the length of the publication also sets inevitable limits to the depth of argumentation—which latter aspect is acknowledged, too, in the author's introduction to

the volume. This limitation on both analytical sophistication and the breadth of the literature consulted leads one to ponder who the expected leader of this incisive little book may be. Whereas the complexity of most of the issues Segal speaks to, together with his intention to unhinge a robust master narrative on the incompatibility of aesthetics and politics in modern art would likely call for a specialized audience, the plain language, the occasional journalistic formulations, and the necessary slippages imposed by the publication's brevity seem rather to cater to a much broader readership or undergraduate teaching. In this register, however, the essays are of exceptional value to spark critical thinking and encourage innovative approaches and a serious engagement with the historical context or political underpinnings of artistic production.

Now, Clement Greenberg, the originator of this master narrative under deconstruction, was a New York-based critic and his views seem to have remained a quasi "parochial" fad of the Manhattan art scene until the seminal publication *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983) started to disseminate the Greenbergian model worldwide. Although the contributing authors—postmodern critics gathering around the journal *October*—harshly opposed Greenberg, they nevertheless made him more central in their writing than he actually was. So that it was eventually through *October*'s writing that Greenberg became reified even in countries (from Germany, Portugal, or France to the Spanish-speaking world, including Latin America) where art historians had not formerly known of his existence, and never before understood their own modernisms in terms of Greenberg's purist theory. This realization transpired at one of the seminars of the Stone Summer Theory Institute,[2] and I am evoking it here because it presents, albeit in a lot more compact manner, another powerful moment of dethroning the Greenbergian perspective that, despite the deficiencies Segal also so astutely points out, has had a

curiously wide reach and persistent presence in histories of postwar art.

Notes

[1]. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press 1961).

[2]. James Elkins and Harper Montgomery, eds., *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 48–49.

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