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## Arts's Fight for Life or the Triumphant End of the Avant-Garde

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*The aim of the article* is to outline a logical sequence of events that led to radicalism in the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by studying the connections between art, life (reality), and science and technology. From the mid-nineteenth century through the 1970s, art acquired a unique quality: it rapidly radicalised, creating a number of alternative art practices, such as impressionism, abstractionism, cubism, ready-made, etc. Before that, except for random individual phenomena, art for centuries was just changing styles: Baroque, Rococo, Classicism. *Results.* The article identifies the cause for the revolutionary avant-garde trends in art and the reason for the end of the revolutionary era. It presents a view based on art's relations with life in competition with science and technology that had different effects on art, ranging from influentially adaptive to revolutionary rebellious. *The scientific significance* of this study is its innovative approach to the consideration of factors of the emergence and development of avant-garde trends in the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rational study and comparable analyses of events in science/technology and art in relation to life (reality) offers an inventive and coherent reason for the appearance and disappearance of avant-guard art. *Conclusions.* This article identifies the cause for the revolutionary avant-garde trends in art and the reason for the end of the revolutionary era. It presents a unique view based on art's relations with life in competition with science and technology and shows how an inadvertent battle of art for life (reality) with photography, film and television triumphed in the twentieth century and broke the very possibility of further revolutionary changes.

*Keywords:* Avant-guard, experimental art; Fluxus; Marcel Duchamp; Dada; science; revolution; linear perspective; postmodernism; photography; cinema; cubism; abstractionisms; realism; readymade

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### Introduction

This article's subject is a byproduct of my 2011–2014 curatorial work on the *Fluxus Time* exhibition, which had a strong connection to Ukraine. Being an experimental life-based artist for more than three decades and teaching art fundamentals for two-thirds

of that period also had an input. *Fluxus Time, 1959-1979* (Figure 1–2) was initially curated for the City University of New York’s Kingsborough Gallery (2013).

Works of Vagrigh Bakhchanyan, Bas Jan Ader, Tehching Hsieh, Linda Mary Montano, and others joined the Fluxus group at the exhibition. Because both Vagrigh and I were from Kharkiv, Ukraine, in February 2014 I brought the exhibition to Kharkiv Municipal Gallery (at the invitation of Tatyana Tumasyan, Director of the gallery). Coincidentally, it happened during the Maidan uprising: an exhibition of revolutionary (Fluxus) artists in revolutionary Ukraine. George Maciunas, a Lithuanian/American artist and the organiser of Fluxus died from cancer in 1978. His friend and fellow Fluxus artist Jeff Perkins noted that the idealist George’s dream of making a Fluxus exhibition in the (former) USSR came true, whereas he was unable to even imagine doing so during the people’s revolution.



Figure 1. Cover of the *Fluxus Time* catalogue by Irina Danilova, 2013



Figure 2. *Fluxus Time* in Kharkiv, February 2014: poster, Kharkiv Maidan, and meeting about reforms in culture at the Municipal Gallery during the *Fluxus Time* exhibition. Photos by Irina Danilova

The following material is based on a lecture that premiered in February 2014 at the Kharkiv Karazin University's Media Art Department (invited by Dean, Lidia Starodubtseva). It was also presented in 2018 at the Kyiv Art Academy and the National Art Museum of Ukraine and in 2019 at the Sound Festival *Delirium* during the *Fluxus days* at the MMOMA educational centre in Moscow.

## Aim of the article

The aim of this article is to outline a logical sequence of events that led to radicalism in the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by studying the connections between art, life (reality), and science and technology. It explains why there have been no revolutionary movements in art since then.

## Main research material

### *Linear Perspective*

In order to explain the end, I have to start from the beginning: when Life (reality) first entered modern art. In the works of pre-Renaissance artists (Giotto, Lorenzetti) depth was depicted with receding lines extending into the distance, though their angles were approximate (Figure 3–4). The visual Renaissance began in earnest once the rule of linear perspective (all parallel lines recede in distance into the same vanishing point) was found and popularised by Filippo Brunelleschi around 1420. After that art started to change dramatically. Linear perspective is imperative to our visual perception. When artists were able to portray depth exactly the way we see it, there was no space left for stylisation. Real spaces demanded real objects and real people. Life made the first step in art in the shape of reality.



Figure 3. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Bad Government on the City Life* (detail) 1337, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy

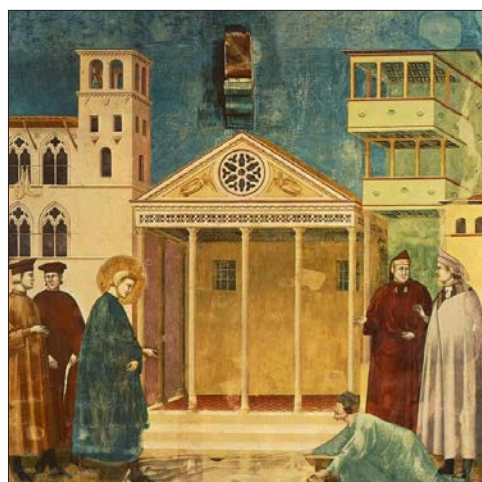


Figure 4. Giotto, *Legend of St Francis, Homage of a Simple Man* 1300, Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Umbria, Italy

Linear Perspective is usually recognised as one of the achievements of the Renaissance, while, in fact, it seems to be the main cause for the Renaissance in visual art. The Renaissance in general had several objective historical reasons: the series of disastrous plague epidemics that weakened religious links and led to a search for alternative solutions (science); the rise of city-states; Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio in literature; re-discovery of ancient philosophy (Plato, Aristotle). Visual art drastically changed the style; it broke through as water breaks through a breach and linear perspective created that breach.

The difference between Masaccio and Leonardo da Vinci was practically the same as the difference between Baby Boomers and Generation Alpha (Figure 5–6). One was born before, another – after. Masaccio was the first known artist who used linear perspective (Figure 7). His figures were quite real but still simplistically stylised. Liveliness in its full bloom was set at the tip of the brush of young Leonardo a few decades later (as digital devices are now at the tips of the fingers of new generations).



Figure 5. Masaccio, *A Young Man in a Scarlet Turban*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, USA

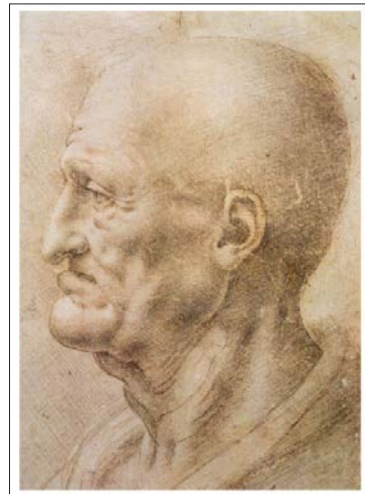


Figure 6. Leonardo da Vinci, *Profile of an old man*, 1480s Galleria Uffizi, Florence, Italy

The discovery of linear perspective could be considered a scientific act at the time when science was not pronounced as a science yet. Since then, other scientific and technological achievements have provoked major revolutionary accomplishments in art that have an intricate relation with science/technology through all the modern era, sometimes embracing and using it, sometimes inspired by it and sometimes considering it as a rival.

#### *Photography*

Fast forward into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, passing by centuries with a variety of optical devices used by artists for refining techniques of representational art (camera obscura), we find ourselves on the brink of the next revolution: independence

from elite commissions, art as self-expression, and a series of alternative art movements.



Figure 7. Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity*, 1427, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy. Scheme of linear perspective ("Holy Trinity (Masaccio)", 2023)

Gustave Courbet became a pioneer of a new independent art style, Realism: portraying life “the way it is” (after winning an academic prize in the late 1840s that secured certain liberties, including financial) (Figure 8). Courbet was influenced by the concepts of the French Revolution as well as liberal literature and philosophy. However, Realism emerged soon after the invention of photography (1830s).

The uniqueness of art as an exclusive form of representing visual reality was undermined. Photos could not (yet) lie, they showed life as it actually was. Solely academic, heroic, or mythological aristocratic art, was now influenced by a “democracy” of political movements and honesty of photography, adopting realism first and then becoming more loose, free, and expressive with colours (photography was black and white).

Since then, relations between art and technology can be described as influence/adaptation or rebelling reaction. With the advent of photography, plein-air painters like Camille Corot have used far more chiaroscuro in their landscape paintings. The influence of the rival device that would depict life at any moment cannot be understated regarding the rise of the realistic movement, the first revolutionary independent alter-

native movement. Photography's popularity spread rapidly and the use of photography in art has never stopped since. The fact that it was black and white anticipated the next drastic changes: colour fetish drove the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Impressionism, Expressionism. Fauvism.



Figure 8. Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers*, 1849-1850,  
Destroyed in the bombing in 1945, Dresden Museum

Art in any form is a kind of model of reality. The landscape is a model of scenery; portraits are models of people. When photography became more popular taking share in creating “models”, art began to rebel, creating “models” of feelings, impressions (impressionism) or emotions, expressions (expressionism), maintaining art’s exclusivity by expressing aspects of life that could not be depicted with any other device. It continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with “models” of intuition and inner balance (abstract art). Following the advent of popular colour photography<sup>1</sup>, experimental art shifted its emphasis from colour to the human mind, concepts, and logic (conceptual art).

#### *Film*

“We hear from Montrouge that friend Picasso is making a picture which moves just like this cradle”. Apollinaire (Popper, 1968).

The moving image became a new challenge in the fight for life between art and technology. Let’s rephrase it. Art’s fight for Life. Science/technology never cared. The invention of cinema at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1895) caused radical changes in the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Film could reflect life in continuity. Art has responded to that in different ways. Besides the production of the first art films by Luis Bunuel, Dziga Vertov, Maya Deren, and others, there was an evident cinema adaptation by art — Cubism that produced images as being seen simultaneously from different viewpoints or as in motion “comprehensive interpretation of movement, the method of putting

<sup>1</sup> Colour photography was invented at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but remained elite until the first Agfa Colorol in 1930 that was soon joined by Kodak Chrome roll of film. It became widely popular by 1970 after the price for film and its development dropped.

together a number of experiences simultaneously” (Popper, 1968). Marcel Duchamp’s cubist classic *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2* (1912) (Figure 9) is in his words “an organisation of kinetic elements — an expression of time and space through the abstract representation of movement” (Popper, 1968).

Abstractionism can be seen as a rebellious alternative to film as the ultimate medium for reflecting reality. On the one hand, it is a further study in the area of what photography cannot convey—intuition, inner balance of colours, shapes, and composition. On the other hand, it is a complete disregard for, ignorance of, the reflection of objective reality. Wassily Kandinsky once said, “men shift their attention away from external matters and direct their gaze inward upon themselves” (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 22). Abstract artist on another hand “can visualise what science of today ‘has not yet explained’” (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 23) and “turns his gaze from the external to the deeper essence within him” (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 26).



Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2*, 1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Cinema seemed to be the ultimate media for depicting reality but there still was a limitation: the screen. Film was a projection, not a real thing. Thereafter “real things” (wallpaper, newspaper) started to appear in the paintings of cubist artists (Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso — Figure 10–11) in the form of collage. The rise of industriali-

sation and mass production was part of it, including the fact that art rapidly occupied what film left behind, reaching its (art's) extreme opposite: readymade.



Figure 10. Georges Braque, *Fruit Dish and Glass*, 1912, The Metropolitan Museum



Figure 11. Pablo Picasso, *Still-Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, The Metropolitan Museum

Real objects and installations became part of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first readymade was a three-dimensional collage: kinetic installation *Bicycle Wheel* by Marcel Duchamp (Figure 12). His readymade works influenced art movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: pop art, minimalism, and conceptual art.



Figure 12. Julian Wasser, *Marcel Duchamp, Bicycle Wheel on a Stool*, 1913, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963



### *Television*

With the advent of television came a brand-new challenge: daily performative entertainment at homes. Alternative art poured into the streets with numerous ephemeral versatile performances and happenings. Exhibitions turned into mail art, where artworks were sent by mail, creating home-to-home events.

The final attack in the fight for Life started in 1959. In the spirit of Dada, Fluxus artists created a variety of experimental projects, including a series of works that recalculated life events into art Events with written “scores”. It appropriated Life forever. Starting with performance *Make a Salad* by Alison Knowles (Art Bazel, 1962), which transformed every cook into a performer or *Open and Shut Case* score by Ken Fridman: “Make a box”. On the outside, print the word “Open”. On the inside, print the words “Shut quick” (1965) and finishing with Ken’s last score: “Imagine life. Live it” (2003). “Everything in life is art”, said 81-year-old Duchamp (“Dada at the Museum”, 1968) in the interview by Newsweek, opening the floodgates back in 1968 and pouring the big EVERYTHING out. Forever. No more restrictions. Complete freedom means the impossibility of revolution. Avant guard did not die. It obtained what it wanted. It won.

Calvin Tomkins described Duchamp as an artist “whose playful principles toward living freed him to make art that was as unpredictable, complex, and surprising as life itself” (Tomkins, 2013, p. 401). Dada and the like broke the mold and put their marks and droppings on fields far beyond traditional media. For a few decades, their experimental activities slowed down with the Great Depression and WWII. With the economy booming in the 1950s, hordes of aspiring Fluxus and other experimental artists rushed into the new territories. Artists of Dada were the pioneers, artists of the Fluxus generation in the 1960s and 1970s became the settlers.

The development of Life-Art relations did not stop with Fluxus. In 1978, Tehching Hsieh started one-year endurance projects. He was the first artist to turn his life into performative art projects. Duchamp called himself a “risperateur” (Tomkins, 2013, p. 3), artist of breathing. It was a passive artistic act. Tehching Hsieh made specific adjustments to life during each of his yearlong projects (he lived one year in the cell, one year outside, etc.). Linda Mary Montano was the first artist who started a performative lifelong project, *Seven Years of Living Art* (1984 – ongoing). Each year in the cycle of 7 she would adopt one chakra colour, surrounding herself with that colour: painting the walls of her room, buying appliances and wearing monochrome outfits of the colour of the year. By pure chance at the same time, I started in Kharkiv, Ukraine my lifelong Quadrennial Shaving performance (1984 – ongoing) by harvesting hair every four years on the same date into the collection of braids. I would not know about Linda and her *Seven Years of Living Art* for at least 10 more years. Linda was in the USA; I was in the Soviet Union. It was far away and quite impenetrable back then. Both projects follow the initial concept, adjusting life and turning it into performance art.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roman Opalka and On Kawara were already making their lifelong projects (started in 1965 and 1966 respectively). Without adjusting their lives, they created lifelong projects in traditional media (painting).

## Conclusions

From Anagenesis to Cladogenesis.

“...every harmony, every advance is possible. However, I feel today there are also here definite rules which determine whether I use this or the other dissonance” (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 30).

“...greatest freedom of all — the freedom of an unfettered and unconditional art — can never be absolute” (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 30).

The march of revolutionary events in art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pushed by the fight for supremacy in representing life/reality, concluded with art’s victorious appropriation of life. The victory marks the end of the fighting, the end of revolutionary necessity. Art diffused into different aspects of life.

Soon after art acquired life, ironically, one of the first digital 3D art projects in the early 2000s was “Second Life” ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) and then Life attacked Art by a tsunami of public social media activity filled with big and small projects (including those influenced by Avant guard art). The Era of Parallel Projects and ideas arrived. In response, many artists grabbed brushes back to produce skilled artworks. New AI rising is starting to mess with that too.

Nevertheless, when Art obtained Life, it obtained everything in it: medicine, geography, history, science and technology, outer space with all known and unknown galactic, astral, aliens, ghosts, AI, microbes, viruses, internet, virtual or any other reality, whatever else could be done or discovered. Everything potentially can be art.

Since my first lecture in Kharkiv, I was each time addressed with the same question: “if everything in life is art, what is the difference between life and art?” For me, life becomes art through an artist’s intent. Street life is only street life until someone focuses on it with photo or video lenses, or even without lenses when someone perceives it as an art (performance). In the alleged Duchamp statement: “If I call it art, it is art” (“Dada at the Museum”, 1968) the key word is “call”. Life must be acquired by an artist to become art, while “artist” can be anyone, whether trained as an artist or not.

Will art survive the state of cladogenesis, its post-liberation, and the absence of radicalism or will art be possessed by technology? I am not sure but here are a few current reasons for its future paths:

1. Experimental nature is the human condition and art is not an exception. One of the most popular types of experimental art is art that follows science/technology. Science is experimental by default. Art’s relation with science may be described as a visual/philosophical interpretation and humanitarian implementation of breakthrough ideas, facts, hypotheses, and/or utilisation of new technology into art projects.

2. Technology brings new materials and tools, new possibilities, and techniques for traditional art media (painting, sculpture, etc.)

3. Art as an investment. Art will continue to entertain the art market. With long roots in the past, the art market should stay strong in the future.

4. Talent for artistic activities will continue to reproduce in future generations. Art may continue to be a skilled trade.

5. The art of political activism will be around.

6. As well as an alternative art as part of totalitarian regimes.

Is there a chance for an alternative art in the state of liberty for artistic expressions? One of the characteristics of alternative art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is non-commercialism. Life is now a fully habitable territory for Art, with houses, schools, stores, and... banks. What originally was an alternative, anti-market movement, was swallowed, digested, and defecated by the art market that became addicted to the wild art proving another Marcel Duchamp's visionary quote "Art is a habit-forming drug" (Tomkins, 2013, p. 89). With the common belief that professional art has to be commercial (limitation), non-commercial art remains an alternative, and I want to believe that it is part of human nature, not the idealism of particular generations. "The commercialisation of art which he saw right after the First World War, almost certainly influenced his (Duchamp's) withdrawal from painting in 1923" (Tomkins, 2013, p. 10).

Teaching academic drawing to a computerised generation makes me wonder if skills in art are going to become an anachronism. Will it still be necessary to reproduce, to construct reality by hand? The evidence of new visual talents gives some hope although talents may find another way for realisation and skills for visual representation may go away in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as horsepower went away in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Well, as it is in a famous song, "freedom is another word for nothing left to lose".<sup>3</sup>

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## Боротьба мистецтва за життя: тріумфальний кінець авангарду

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*Мета статті* — через вивчення зв'язків між мистецтвом, життям (реальністю) та наукою й технікою окреслити логічну послідовність подій, які призвели до радикалізму

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<sup>3</sup> *Me and Bobby McGee* lyrics by Kris Kristofferson (singer Janice Jacklyn).

в мистецтві XIX–XX ст. З середини XIX ст. до 1970-х років мистецтво набуло унікальних рис: воно швидко радикалізувалося, створюючи низку альтернативних мистецьких практик, таких як імпресіонізм, абстракціонізм, кубізм, реді-мейд тощо. До цього часу, за винятком випадкових окремих явищ, мистецтво століттями тільки змінювало різні стилі: бароко, рококо, класицизм. *Результати дослідження.* У статті визначено підстави виникнення революційних авангардних течій у мистецтві та обумовлено причину закінчення революційної епохи. Стаття представляє погляд, заснований на взаємозв'язках мистецтва з життям в умовах конкуренції з наукою та технологіями, які чинили різний вплив на мистецтво (від впливово-адаптивного до революційно-бунтарського). *Наукове значення дослідження* полягає в новаторському підході до розгляду чинників виникнення та розвитку авангардних течій у мистецтві XIX–XX ст. Раціональне дослідження та порівняльний аналіз подій у науці/техніці та мистецтві у зв'язку з життям (реальністю) пропонує винахідливу та послідовну причину появи та зникнення авангардного мистецтва. *Висновки.* У процесі дослідження виявлено, яким чином ненавмисна боротьба мистецтва за життя (реальність) із фотографією, кіно та телебаченням здобула перемогу в XX ст. і зламала саму можливість подальших революційних змін.

*Ключові слова:* авангард; експериментальне мистецтво; флюксус; Марсель Дюшан; дадаїзм; наука; революція; лінійна перспектива; постмодернізм; фотографія; кіно; кубізм; абстракціонізм; реалізм; реді-мейд

