

Provoking Democracy

Why We Need the Arts

Caroline Levine



Praise for *Provoking Democracy*

“Yes, democracies need art, especially art they don’t like or understand and Caroline Levine’s shrewd, eloquent, and often entertaining *Provoking Democracy* tells us why. From the controversies swirling around the defacement of Jacob Epstein’s *Rima* and the demolition of Serra’s *Tilted Arc* to the obscenity trials of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and 2 Live Crew, Levine shows how the avant-garde helps defend democracies from its worse excesses – the muting of marginal voices, the oppression of majority rule, and the blind conformism of consensus politics. Indeed Levine is to be commended for negotiating an honorable truce in the culture wars. Her important new work recognizes not just the right but also the obligations of the avant-garde to act as a permanent minority working within democratic institutions to ensure a more open and genuinely plural society.”

Maria DiBattista, Princeton University

“In these increasingly barbarous times, it is good and refreshing to see work that stands up for the provocative – and potentially emancipatory – powers of the arts. Caroline Levine’s wide ranging and serious engagement with the question of how the arts might provoke or even promote democracy, and her realization that this question is itself fundamental for us, is a timely and much needed rejoinder to the brutish dimensions of contemporary politics.”

Thomas Docherty, University of Warwick (author of Aesthetic Democracy)

“Caroline Levine’s *Provoking Democracy* gives an extremely compelling account of how Anglo-American law has, in counterintuitive ways, supported avant-garde art, and why Anglo-American democracies depend, in turn, upon such art, which provides a dissident voice that pluralism and an orientation towards the future demand. Covering a broad range of topics, from public involvement in decisions about whether particular pieces of art should be displayed, to the operations of the House Un-American Activities Committee during the Cold War, to the role of originality in judicial determinations of what counts as art, Levine’s book furnishes ingenious readings of the dynamic interplay between particular figures and events. In the course of reading *Provoking Democracy*, one is shocked at how the CIA secretly funded the work of Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock to promote the ideal of American freedom internationally at the same time as American publics and media reviled his painting, but one also laughs at how customs officials categorized Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture *Bird* as a kitchen implement. All of these revelations are conveyed in a pellucid and gripping narrative style. *Provoking Democracy* is a book that anyone interested in democracy or the arts simply must read.”

Bernadette Meyler, Cornell University Law School

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Provoking Democracy

Why We Need the Arts

Caroline Levine



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For Amanda and Martin

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Preface

More than ten years ago, when I set out to write a book about arts controversies, I had in mind a rather different project. I started by investigating the various theories of art that were circulating in the public sphere, considering the ways that journalists, politicians, academics, lawyers, and ordinary people talked about art objects. Drawing on long histories of aesthetic theory and cultural criticism, I set out to articulate the range of philosophical issues implicitly at stake in public battles over the arts. Yet what I discovered surprised me. No matter where I looked, I kept happening on a single clear pattern that shaped every controversy I investigated. Wherever I turned my attention, from battles over arts funding to propaganda to obscenity law, from Britain to the US to Poland to India, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, I found the complex and surprising relationship between art and democracy. Rather than investigating specific disputes over particular art objects, located in different historical contexts, I gradually realized that I needed to be able to account for the fact that the same problem kept recurring with surprising persistence. I set out to understand the basic organizing principles – the logic – that structured an array of disparate cases. This project took me far from my own field of aesthetic theory and pushed me into political science, sociology, and law. And it drove me to generate methods for describing patterns of recurrence and return. Ultimately, what emerged was this: a book that follows the strangely paradoxical

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relationship between art and democracy as it is played out in four contexts: debates over public art; the use of art as propaganda; obscenity law; and the question of originality in customs and copyright disputes.

All of these cases led me to a conclusion that also surprised me. We are used to telling ourselves that the arts need the protection of a flourishing democracy in order to survive. But in fact, the opposite is at least equally true: *democracies require art* – challenging art – to ensure that they are acting as free societies. Democratic citizens have gotten into the habit of believing that theirs are the freest societies in the world. But political theorists since Alexis de Tocqueville have warned that democratic governments can actually work *against* freedom. Intent on imposing the will of the majority, democracies are inclined to repress and silence nonconformist voices. And since majorities can – and do – decide to squelch unpopular expression, democratic societies always run the risk of becoming distinctly unfree societies. So: how can democracies guarantee freedom?

This book argues that democratic states need the challenges to mainstream tastes and values launched by artists in the tradition of the avant-garde. Since the beginnings of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth century, artists have claimed that they are helping to liberate society through their resistance to majority rule. Intent on shocking and unsettling conventional values, they have refused to allow the majority to imagine that its will is either absolute or universal. In the past few decades, artists have proclaimed the death of the avant-garde, but as this book will show, the idea that art represents a struggle for freedom from dominant norms and values remains surprisingly robust and influential. In fact, whenever art works are contested in the public sphere, artists and arts advocates leap to invoke the revolutionary, heroic, marginalized figure of the avant-garde artist and set that oppositional figure against an idea of the “people.” Arts controversies for a hundred years have hinged on a struggle between democratic majorities and deliberately provoking outsiders.

Despite the end of the historical avant-garde, then, what I call the *logic of the avant-garde* emerges again and again in the public sphere.

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This logic has earned the arts the reputation of being deliberately elitist, difficult, and challenging – and it is this elitism that has appalled populists, who have condemned the avant-garde as anti-democratic. But as I contend in this book, democracies that are committed to the value of freedom actually need the logic of the avant-garde. The art world’s anti-majoritarian impulse remains crucial whenever democratic majorities threaten to turn tyrannical. Dissenting and unpopular artists – from Jackson Pollock and Bertolt Brecht to D. H. Lawrence and 2 Live Crew – have allowed democracies to demonstrate their commitments to fostering and protecting marginal voices. And the logic of the avant-garde is portable, elastic – useful in a surprising range of times and places. Indeed, with democracy on the line today, the logic of the avant-garde might once again prove a surprisingly effective force around the globe.

This argument took shape over many years, and I could not have begun to address the questions explored in this book without the extraordinary support of students, colleagues, institutions, and friends. The first version of the book emerged in a seminar I taught at Yale in 1997, and the magnificent intensity of those students has invigorated the project from the beginning. Since that time, my students at Wake Forest, Rutgers-Camden, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have animated and reanimated the debates with liveliness and keen perception, and I could not have written this book without them. I am especially grateful to Cary Franklin and Amy Johnson, who read and responded to chapters in progress; Gwen Blume, who pursued Richard Nixon in the archives for me; and Jennifer Geigel Mikulay, whose own interest in the subject has made for many a spirited conversation, just as her reading has sharpened and improved my work.

Institutional support has allowed me indispensable time, funds, and collegial exchange, and I wish to acknowledge Wake Forest University’s Archie Fund and Rutgers University’s research leave program. In the past few years, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has provided a wonderfully hospitable context for my research, teaching, and collegial discussion: I especially appreciate the research

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time funded by the Graduate School. The Rockefeller Foundation Archives and Marje Schuetze-Coburn of the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library at the University of Southern California furnished me with crucial primary materials. Many thanks to Art Rogers and Scott Vanderlip for generously providing images.

A whole crowd of readers gave their time to making this a better book. I am thankful for the opportunity to present my work at Wake Forest University's faculty colloquium, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, the Delaware Valley British Studies colloquium, and the English Department Faculty Draft Group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am particularly grateful for the year I spent at Rutgers' Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture, where I reaped the benefits of an exciting – and always bracing – conversation. My deep thanks, as always, go to Carolyn Williams, who not only led our colloquium with striking intelligence, but also gave me the gift of her extraordinary generosity and friendship. The readers who responded to the text for Blackwell provided invaluable suggestions: Bernadette Meyler deserves special thanks for her thoughtful commentary. Jon Connolly and Tom Silfen offered me the benefit of their legal expertise, which I tried my best to absorb. I am indebted to Lew Friedland for his friendly skepticism and for his patient willingness to hash out the details of my arguments. Three perfect strangers kindly agreed to talk to me at length: Laurie Adams, Stephen Radich, and Art Rogers. Most recently, the editors at Blackwell Publishing – Al Bertrand and Emma Bennett – have worked hard to see this book through to completion. And finally, I cannot speak highly enough of Robert Shepard, who exceeded every expectation I had of a literary agent: performing the mingled roles of champion, critic, editor, counselor, and ally with endless cheerfulness and enthusiasm, he made sure that writing, even at its hardest, was never a lonely venture.

When it comes to the task of expressing my thanks to my friends, I find myself faltering. I would be nothing – and nowhere – without them. Jan Caldwell, Rachel Harmon, Louise Keely, Terry Kelly,

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Jonathan Marks, Nancy Marshall, Lisa Sternlieb, and Henry Turner offered me captivating conversation, thoughtful guidance, and boundless encouragement. I am so glad and grateful to have Susan Bernstein in my life and want to thank her especially for her writing camaraderie and generous hospitality. Jane Gallop's dazzling warmth and intelligence have brought with them many pleasures – among them, the delicious indulgence of talking about the emotional work of writing books. Rebecca Walkowitz started down the same professional path with me on the very same day many years ago, and I am not sure how I would have managed without her since: from the multiple drafts she has read to the counsel and encouragement she has offered along the way, I see everywhere her steadfast friendship, her wit, her luminous intellect, and her kindness. In their very different ways, two friends – Amanda Claybaugh and Martin Puchner – have had more influence on the writing of this book than anyone. They read, encouraged, disputed, defended, reread, stimulated, soothed, inspired, and advised, and through it all, expressed such utter and unfailing confidence in me, and in the book, that I could not help but keep going. Whatever is best about the work I have done can be traced back to their brilliance and their friendship. This book is for them.

My two extraordinary parents have provided support of every kind – emotional, material, and intellectual. My brother, Peter Levine, provided not only warm hospitality but also thoughtful critique and suggestions. As for my immediate family, I honestly don't know how I came to be lucky enough to share my life with Jon and Eli McKenzie. Jon's creativity and his intellectual sparkle shape every moment of my writing and thinking, and his care and companionship sustain me through everything else. Eli, who came along in the middle of it all, prompts a happiness I never knew existed. I wish I knew how to thank them for the astonishing gift of their laughter, their teasing, their encouragement, and their unwavering love.

1

Democracy Meets the Avant-Garde

Art is not democratic. It is not for the people.

Richard Serra

Mass Culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed.

Dwight Macdonald

What would an “art of the people” look like? In the mid-1990s, two Russian artists, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, proposed a post-Cold War answer to this question. Polling more than a thousand people in each of fourteen countries, including the United States, Russia, Kenya, China, and France, they set out to gauge public opinion on the question of art. They hired professional pollsters who asked participants about their favorite colors, their preferences for landscapes or nudes, abstract or traditional styles, wild or domestic animals. While Americans overwhelmingly preferred fully clothed figures, historical characters like Abraham Lincoln, and realistic-looking styles, more than 50 percent of Russians favored nude or partially naked figures, ordinary people, traditional Russian styles, and rural scenes. In China, the Komar-Melamid survey was one of the first public opinion polls ever conducted. The majority in almost every country preferred light blue to any other color.

Having gathered their information, Komar and Melamid then painted the results. That is, they produced a single painting to satisfy



Figure 1.1 Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, *Kenya's Most Wanted* (1994), courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

majority tastes in each national group (figure 1.1). The results are pretty comic: a parade of light blue landscapes, sporting recognizably local flora and fauna, highly conventional painterly styles, and hackneyed historical figures – George Washington for the Americans, Jesus for the Kenyans, Mao for the Chinese. But Komar and Melamid insist that they are drawing a serious connection between art and democracy:

We had this image in Russia of America as a country of freedom, of course, where the majority rules – which in a way is true, because in the election, you can win by sheer majority. So if 20,000 more people voted for you, it means that you are the President. That's why we mimic this in the poll. We trust – it's interesting – we trust this people, we believe that this system, among existing systems, is the best political and social system. We trust these people to vote for the President. But we never trust them in their tastes, in their aesthetic judgment.¹

Comic or serious, Komar and Melamid raise a crucial question. What is the relationship between majority rule in politics and majority rule in matters of artistic judgment? US Congressman Henry Hyde (R-IL) has argued that it is a grave mistake for a democratic government to sponsor art that offends any large number of people: “Public funds, in a democracy, are to be spent for public purposes, not for the satisfaction of individuals’ aesthetic impulses. And if the impulse in question produces a work which is palpably offensive to the sensibilities of a significant proportion of the public, then that work ought not to be supported by public funds.” Similarly, disgruntled citizens often raise the banner of democracy to voice their dismay at contemporary art. Here’s lawyer Peter Hirsch: “Democracy says we are not fools, we are not stupid, we don’t like the piece of art . . . [I]n a democracy, why not let democracy rule?”²

The question is a good one. Why *not* let democracy rule? Why not let the majority of people decide what they do and do not like in art? This book argues that this is precisely the question that has been at stake in every major controversy over the arts in the past century, from public funding to obscenity and from copyright to wartime censorship. And it makes the case that the solution to the recurring deadlock between artists and politicians is a new and more fundamental set of arguments than those we have become accustomed to. Battles about the arts cannot be put to rest by conventional claims for and against censorship, or by familiar arguments for and against government arts funding. Instead, we need a direct response to the question that implicitly and persistently haunts battles over works of art: namely – what *is* art’s proper role in a democratic society?

The Logic of the Avant-Garde

Speaking out in the *Washington Post* a few years ago, a sculptor named Frederick Hart condemned the contemporary art world, claiming that artists had abandoned their traditional role as servants of public ideals and shared values. In the past, Hart lamented, artists were

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responsible to society, just as society was responsible to artists, both dedicated to order and purpose, meaning and morality. No longer. For the past hundred or so years, artists had deliberately set themselves against the citizenry, holding public taste in contempt and only too delighted to provoke perplexity, revulsion, and shock:

Since the beginnings of bohemianism in the late 19th century, rejection by the public has become the traditional hallmark of what comes to be regarded as great art. . . . Every artist worth his salt yearns to create works of art that are (mistakenly perceived, of course) so offensive, so insulting to the public as to earn him a clear judgment of genius for his success at being misunderstood. . . . What is really going on is the cynical aggrandizement of art and artist at the expense of sacred public sentiments – profound sentiments embodied by symbols, such as the flag or the crucifix, which the public has a right and a duty to treasure and protect.³

The contemporary artist emerges here as elitist, self-involved, disdainful of national unity, and contemptuous of inherited emblems and values. On the other side is the public, proud of their cultural traditions, cherishing those signs of deeply held feeling which they have inherited from their forefathers.

Surprisingly, perhaps, champions of the art world are inclined to agree. When art is under attack in the public sphere, its supporters typically launch the defense that genuine works of art always and necessarily challenge social and political norms. In 1990, Vaclav Havel, the newly elected democratic leader of then-Czechoslovakia – and practicing playwright – took part in the US culture wars, arguing that it was the artist's *obligation* to upset settled values and conventions:

There are those around the world, indeed even those in democracies with the longest tradition of free speech and expression, who would attempt to limit the artist to what is acceptable, conventional, comfortable. They are unwilling to take the risks that real creativity entails. But an artist must challenge, must controvert the established

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order. To limit that creative spirit in the name of public sensibility is to deny society one of its most significant resources.⁴

Despite crucial differences, Hart and Havel reach the same conclusion: contemporary artists feel that they are required to challenge the status quo. Thus a strange consensus underpins the most ferocious debates about the arts. From right-wing politicians to radical outliers, voices across the spectrum tend to agree that artists have every intention of upsetting and unsettling the public.

But artists have not always been defined as adversaries of convention. Hart laments the contemporary state of the arts in part because he longs for a time before an antagonism toward the public defined the artist's role. Hart puts the transition in the nineteenth century, claiming that the battle between artists and the public accompanied the emergence of a new "bohemian" art world. And he is right: the idea that art should challenge mainstream values is not much more than a century old. In fact, although it is possible to find earlier examples of artists who shocked authorities and challenged dominant tastes – Michelangelo, for example, or Goya – it is only since the late nineteenth century that societies began to define art by its rebellious and oppositional character.

Hart calls the shift "bohemian." I prefer to use the term *avant-garde*.⁵ Although scholars debate the precise meaning of the term, in popular parlance "avant-garde" has come to mean art that is ahead of its time – shocking, insurrectionary, capable of summoning the future. The term comes originally from a military context – meaning the front line or vanguard. In the mid-nineteenth century, the word "avant-garde" was used almost exclusively to refer to the political radicalism associated with revolutions in Europe. But artists eager to challenge the political, cultural, and social status quo began to adopt the term too, and in France in the 1870s and 1880s the title began to attach to artists more often than to political radicals.⁶ The new artists of the *avant-garde* were a collection of deliberate outsiders – celebrating the margins, advocating an overturning of conventional aesthetics. Specifically, they were reacting to rigidly

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conservative art sponsored by national academies. They claimed authenticity only for art works that challenged familiar and conventional tastes, art that was embattled, unpopular, marginal, and, above all, new. The military roots of the name “avant-garde” invoked an image of warlike struggle: artists saw themselves not only as innovators, but as warriors against the status quo, doing battle with the present in the name of the future, provoking radical change through rupture and destruction so that a new world could come to take the place of the old. As the painter Giorgio de Chirico put it, “What is wanted is to rid art of everything known and familiar that it has contained up to now: every subject, thought and symbol must be put aside.”⁷

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that the emergence of the revolutionary avant-garde marked a new identity for art. Art became known as a special field, separate from the rest of social life. Artists described their work as an end in itself, pure, free, and supremely indifferent to official accolades and commercial taste. In the words of Italian artist F. T. Marinetti: “We . . . above all, teach authors to *despise the audience*. . . . We especially teach *a horror of the immediate success* that normally crowns dull and mediocre works.” He argued that applause was a sign of failure. Similarly, photographer Alfred Stieglitz urged fellow artists to refuse all rewards: “NO JURY – NO PRIZES – NO COMMERCIAL TRICKS.”⁸ In this new context, the “starving artist” became a heroic figure, deliberately repudiating financial rewards and state recognition, insisting that art could not be subjected to corrupt interests, whether economic or political. Art’s new identity, according to Bourdieu, was paradoxical, representing “an interest in disinterestedness.”⁹ The artist’s success was now contingent on failure – the failure to earn the traditional rewards of money, fame, and power. Art, in its very uselessness, seemed liberated from the demands of utility and profit. Artists started to see their role as standing for freedom itself. And ultimately, they imagined, artistic freedom would revolutionize all of life.¹⁰

Yet, each impulse toward freedom had to be short-lived. No sooner had groups of artists voiced their battle cries against the elite than

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that very elite hailed them as its cultural heroes – the best representatives of the freedom that their society had to offer. Even the uproariously lawless Dada group seemed in danger of being co-opted by the dominant culture: “The mediocrities and the gentry in search of ‘something mad’ are beginning to conquer Dada,” lamented Richard Huelsenbeck in 1920.¹¹ And so the avant-garde had to be dynamic, constantly changing to throw off the fetters of dominant norms and values.

Given the constant peril that they would be reassimilated into the cultural mainstream, avant-garde groups turned against the very idea of art itself, casting the traditional practices and concepts of art-making as repressive and conventional. A new kind of “art world” began to take shape to replace the old academic system. Now, little-known groups of artists who had begun at the margins, grandly indifferent to prizes and markets, would garner praise from critics and collectors, gaining ascendancy over more established figures, displacing them as the centers of the art world. But the more such groups won prizes and acclaim, the more their status as perfectly disinterested artists was threatened, and they would soon be displaced by new marginal groups. The insistent marginality of the avant-garde demanded a rapid obsolescence, as each rebellious artist was incorporated into the mainstream and lost ground to the purer artists on the margins. Thus avant-garde movements proliferated, giving way in quick succession: Impressionism, Symbolism, Pointillism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, Constructivism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism, among others. Playwright Alfred Jarry predicted that his own avant-garde contemporaries would be displaced by a new generation “who will find us completely out of date, and hence abominate us.” He added: “This is the way things should be.”¹² And similarly, here is Marinetti: “When we are forty years old, younger and stronger men will throw us in the trash can like useless manuscripts. We want this to happen!”¹³

Peter Bürger has argued that the defining characteristic of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-gardes was their attack on art as a modern institution: avant-garde groups bewailed

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the separation of art from life and aimed to shift art's liberating energies out of the rarefied sphere of the gallery into the experience of the everyday. But crucially, Bürger makes the case that such protests against the institutionalization of art have now themselves become accepted as art, and so can no longer perform the same critical function that they did a hundred years ago. Thus he claims that we should reserve the name "avant-garde" only for those movements that took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All later echoes and revivals of their efforts are not really avant-garde at all.¹⁴

It would certainly be a mistake to assume that contemporary art can be avant-garde in the same way as its precursors. But although it is true that the most intense moment of avant-garde energy came to its end in the first half of the twentieth century, the model of freedom and resistance associated with the avant-garde has remained surprisingly powerful both inside the art world and beyond. The characterization of art as oppositional, rebellious, and liberating persistently reemerges in the most recent debates about the arts, as though all art did still strive to belong to the avant-garde. Thus contemporary society exhibits a deep and longstanding attachment to what I call the *logic of the avant-garde*. This is the logic that comes into play whenever art becomes the subject of controversy in the public sphere: at the heart of arguments about the arts we typically find a shared understanding, as defenders and detractors alike connect the art work to the gestures of avant-garde rebellion, defining art – for better or for worse – as the social force that challenges the status quo in order to usher in a new world. When it comes to shocking contemporary art, commentators often remind us of the avant-garde as the historical origin of such scandals; or they accuse contemporary artists of being boring and out of date, continuing to strike avant-garde postures long after they are able to exert any impact.¹⁵ What I want to suggest here is that we cannot reduce the avant-garde to either a long-gone source or a tired gesture: the logic of the avant-garde is in fact eminently portable, adapting itself to new contexts. Indeed, as we will see, it performs a necessary

structural function within democratic contexts. Thus despite the death of the historical avant-gardes, the logic of the avant-garde continues, strong and vibrant, into our own time.

We do not have to look far to find art defined as critical, defiant, and challenging. Recently, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith adopted the classic rhetoric of the avant-garde to defend contemporary art works under attack: “Art’s job,” she wrote, “is to provoke thought in ways that are difficult to resolve and uncomfortable.” Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Modern museum in London, defended Damien Hirst’s *Mother and Child Divided* this way: “For me, the undoubted shock, even disgust, provoked by the work is part of its appeal. Art should be transgressive. Life is not all sweet.” Similarly, US Congressman Ted Weiss (D-NY) characterized art by its refusal to allow us to feel comfortable with the status quo: “Artists are society’s watchers, critics, and champions. They speak the unspeakable, even if it manifests itself in horrifying, untidy, or esoteric manners. . . . Art that challenges existing prejudices serves a most important function; it helps us to grow and reach a higher state of humanity.” And this position is not limited to the bohemian left. “Let us never forget,” warned the late Senator Jacob Javits (R-NY), “that one of the greatest works of art mankind has ever produced, Picasso’s *Guernica*, is neither likable nor pleasing.” Meanwhile, art’s detractors point to the same defiance of public taste. As conservative commentator David Gergen puts it, “artists . . . want to engage in the wanton destruction of a nation’s values and they expect that same nation to pay their bills.” And George Will bemoans the fact that “artists feel entitled to public subsidies, any denial of which is censorship that proves the need to shock the bourgeoisie from its dogmatic slumbers.” Popular culture too has taken up the logic of the avant-garde. In Showtime’s television series “The L Word,” a fictional museum director who has fought protestors and administrators to display a controversial show called *Provocations* explains that the art is important because it brings us to “the edge of our present culture where we stand to face ourselves before we jump into an unknown future.”¹⁶ In short, from leftist intellectuals to right-wing

Democracy Meets the Avant-Garde

pundits, from legislators to television shows, just about everyone in battles over the arts agrees that artists are on the side of critical resistance, inaccessibility, and minority values, while the “public” is on the side of tradition, faith, and majority tastes and preferences. The fundamental disagreement in arts debates centers on the *value* of critical outsiders and difficult challenges, mainstream traditions and popular tastes.

Strangely, the public image of the brave, combative, liberated artist survives despite the fact that most artists working now have deliberately distanced themselves from the historical avant-garde. We might think of artists working in recombinant media, site-specific installations, formalist poetry, popular music, community-based groups, and folk styles: all are producing art that quite purposefully rejects avant-garde claims to radical autonomy and thoroughgoing innovation. It is true, too, that artists who work in traditional styles and affirm transcendent, humanizing values continue to stand for “art” more generally in the minds of many.¹⁷ However, it is a striking fact that whenever art is the subject of controversy, its supporters will argue that art’s primary purpose is to displease, disrupt, and offend, and its critics will bemoan the fact that art has relinquished its duty to reflect traditional shared values. Even those artists who seem very far indeed from the historical avant-garde – Jeff Koons, a self-conscious recycler of sentimental kitsch, or the Dixie Chicks, a popular country band – find themselves wearing the mantle of the embattled, marginal artist in public battles over their work.¹⁸

What I want to suggest is that in every kind of arts controversy, art works under attack have the potential to *become* avant-garde. Here, then, lies the difference between the historical avant-garde and its contemporary manifestation: these days, no matter what the content or intention of the art work, the rhetoric of avant-garde defiance can kick into gear whenever art becomes the target of public controversy. And what I am calling the logic of the avant-garde is, in fact, a certain structural understanding of the role of art in society that almost always forms the backdrop to arguments coming from both right and left, advocates and detractors, art experts and