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## American Art Criticism between the Cultural and the Ideological (I)

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### **Abstract**

Starting from the presupposition that art and art criticism in the United States of America are closely linked and that the very meanings and receptions of art works have been reflected by various writings in the field of art criticism, this first part of a comprehensive study on the topic attempts, on the one hand, to divide the historical evolution of American fine arts and art criticism into several distinct periods, and on the other, to evaluate the major directions of art criticism by considering its historical periods as being markedly ideological or cultural, as the case may be. Thus, considering the approximately 150 years of historical accomplishments of art criticism in the United States, I will argue that the starting point of American art criticism is visibly cultural, while the next two periods are characterised by ideological art criticism, noting that the ideological orientation differs in the two time frames. The fourth moment in the evolution of art criticism marks the revival of the cultural, so that, within the fifth, the postmodern art criticism could no longer grasp a clear distinction between the cultural and the ideological. The present article will focus on the first two important orientations in art criticism in the United States, 1865-1900 and 1908-1940, respectively; a future study will consider the remaining three periods, following this historicist approach of art criticism in the United States.

**Keywords:** American art criticism, cultural art criticism, ideological art criticism, temporal periodisation of art criticism

### Preliminaries

A profound understanding of American art is not possible without highlighting those specific features of art criticism that become a

necessary complement of art philosophies articulated in the United States of America. As instantiated primarily within the limits of reportage or newspaper chronicle, art criticism is synonymous with a specific language dedicated to diverse aesthetic experiences: in Kantian terms, the aesthetic experience becomes a condition for the possibility of formulating clarifying reflections regarding the nature of the object of such an experience according to intellectual intuition. Although not always manifested as the theorising of an aesthetic experience proper, art criticism has been, more often than not, the preliminary act of thoroughly formulated aesthetics. This does not mean that all art critics were also art philosophers; rather, it means that a significant proportion of art thinking in the United States was fuelled by the interest, passion and understanding for the diversity of aesthetic experiences.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is no less true that artists themselves felt the need to critically evaluate either their own works or the works of other artists: therefore, it is legitimate for one to wonder whether the art critic is, in light of these considerations, an artist himself. Far from undermining or competing with artistic creation and production, art criticism remains relevant for a series of ingenious ways of translating an artist's intentions and the meaning of his art through an act of interpretation. In other words, although they are not naturally or not necessarily inseparable, art and art criticism do not mutually exclude each other, but rather function organically, the former representing the grounds for professionalised art criticism, while the latter contributes to the clarification of artistic goals, thus enabling the communication between artist and viewer.<sup>2</sup>

The tradition of American art criticism, which goes back over a hundred years, is characterised by a series of defining, paradigmatic moments that have shaped its destiny as a type of approach connected to arts. In my view, early American art criticism, in the first two stages, according to the four-part division below, was shaped by two predominant types of orientations: a culturally-driven understanding of the arts in most of the American art criticism in the period 1865-1900 and a distinct ideological shaping of its meanings and purposes between 1908 and 1940. On the one hand, what I would term 'cultural' can be considered a positive endeavour in the sense of attaching to art criticism the power of

explaining the diversity of artistic manifestations in terms of cultural emancipation, education and progress. According to this interpretation, cultural art criticism explains artistic manifestations as being both generated by cultural premises and generating cultural effects. On the other, what I would term 'ideological' art criticism is consistent with ideological art in the sense that the meanings of artistic works aim both to revisit, criticise and transform art traditions of the past and to state something relevant about certain states of things outside art (i.e., primarily social and political statements). The tradition of American art criticism was consolidated as a result of such critical contributions, so that its important role in arguing for the authenticity and specificity of American art can be easily exemplified. In what follows, I have divided it into four historical periods, plus a coda which interrogates the future of art criticism in the postmodern context of post-historical and pluralist arts. The present article, which constitutes the first part of my study on the tradition of art criticism in the United States analyzes and considers in retrospect the first two salient orientations. A second part will be added in a future issue of this journal in order to reflect upon the other major periods and characteristics of American art criticism.

Any retrospective of American art criticism that aims to highlight the crucial moments of its evolution, as well as its directions and specific interests, should include a process of careful selection of those contributions that best comprise the thematic aims and the conceptual resources which have consecrated its remarkably distinct approaches. The considerable number of publications dedicated to the analysis of the diversity of art productions in America could raise problems when one tries to figure out the cardinal moments that have shaped American art criticism. One of the publications that paid special attention to art phenomena as early as 1865, *The Nation*, is representative in this respect for two essential reasons: on the one hand, the uninterrupted consistency and continuity with which the publication recorded the artistic facts and manifestations are illustrative of the possibility of deciphering the major aesthetic facts and themes in which the US public has been interested; on the other hand, the fact that such analyses were delivered by the most authorised voices in the field of aesthetics in any given moment of the

time period mentioned is a mark of the publication's prestige, as well of the manifest interest in relevant aesthetic facts.<sup>3</sup>

### The Temporal Division of American Art Criticism between the Cultural and the Ideological

The American art criticism is a measuring tool whose acute sensitivity for the progress and evolution of the artistic consciousness in the United States can be put to good use for a deeper understanding of the history of artistic currents in this space, probably in a more categorical manner than the theoretical conceptualisations of American philosophies of art. Consequently, the clarification of the nature and peculiarities of aesthetic experience in American culture determines a subsequent commitment to the systematic reflection in the field of aesthetics – a reason why art criticism remains probably the most efficient means of clarifying the availability of artistic facts for comprehensive conceptualisations and theoretical reflections. This being the case, art criticism runs parallel to the historical destiny of American art, so that, in my view, the following significant critical paradigms are fully coherent with the historical path of American art:

- i) The critical paradigm of 1865-1900 highlights the tensions between the academic classicism, then at the climax of its presence, and the romanticism, realism and post-impressionism specific to the most authentic artistic endeavours of the period in question. The period after 1880 also marks the hesitant debut of ideological art; in this context, the tensions generated by the antagonisms existing among the various artistic trends are reducible to the opposition between academism and pre-Raphaelitism.<sup>4</sup> But the characteristics of this period are broadly cultural: the affirmation of the creative and individualist potential of the American artist, the emergence of a certain consciousness of socio-historical emancipation through art, as well as the manifestation of moralising attitudes in understanding the act of creation and the aesthetic experience, are all marks of the preeminent cultural role attributed to fine arts.
- ii) The art criticism between 1908 and 1940 is the natural expression of the affirmation of American art as a particular, original and specific

phenomenon. The most profound expression of the manifestation of a specifically American artistic consciousness has its origins in the context of two fundamental artistic events at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the famous *Exhibition of the Eight* in 1908 and later, in 1913, the *Armory Show* will shape the nationalistic, antirealist, economist, machinist, populist and individualist tendencies, all of these features revealing profound ideological connotations. This is the period when the American artists effectively commit themselves to the path of original creation, assuming both the overcoming and the departure from the canonical tradition of western art. The American artist displays the conspicuous awareness of an individuating aesthetic experience, alleging his creativity in the context of a specifically American way of life and denying his status as an epigone.

iii) The art criticism between 1940 and 1960 is almost entirely dedicated to the reflections on the undeniable originality and the theoretical and stylistic peculiarities that define the only true original American current, one that is unprecedented in any other space and time: the Abstract Expressionism. Unlike the previous period, the fundamental feature of abstractionism is to be found in its apolitical, yet purely ideological, significance, so that the art of abstract expressionism was critically appraised using a more profound conceptual framework which was supposed to explain the conflict between the formalist and the experientialist interpretations formulated in relation to the very nature and meaning of abstract expressionism.

iv) The art criticism between 1960 and 1980 signals both a deep crisis of creativity and an unprecedented explosion of consumer art: the dissemination of the work of art and the cultural implications of its reproductive possibilities, the impact of technologies and the meanings of mass art are now critical reflections focused on understanding a major cultural shift in the United States.

v) Finally, art criticism after 1980 records the difficulties of understanding and assimilating postmodern art in the context of undermining the traditional aesthetic canon. A pluralist theoretical vision, indecisively oscillating between the (multi)cultural and the ideological, accompanies in terms of explanation and interpretation the diverse manifestations in the

field of contemporary arts. The emphasis lies on the refusal of any narrative about art discourses, so that art criticism becomes markedly self-reflexive, multicultural and relativistic.

Each of the periods that make up this historical development is matched by a series of notable critical contributions whose defining ideas will be discussed in the following sections and in the second part of this study.

### The Beginnings: Cultural Art Criticism in the United States, 1865-1900

The starting point of the professional and coherent American art criticism is recorded around the year 1865, when a major event shook the New York public opinion, thus drawing attention to the art phenomenon: on July 13, 1865, the most important American museum, whose patron was P.T. Barnum, burned to the ground, an event which prompted, two months later, the critical intervention of the museum patron concerning the institutional and cultural mission of the new museum project that Barnum intended to build. His intention was that of founding an art institution whose outright aim was that of contributing to the education of the public at large, in a context in which the artists were stating their freedom of expression and a wide range of artistic productions were being exhibited. The role of the new museum was that of contributing to the cultural emancipation of the American nation while at the same time avoiding the display of vulgar artistic creations that lack educational value (Barnum 7-10).

Thus, during its inception, American art criticism drew attention to the presence of institutions popularising artistic creations, considering that the interest for art in the USA recorded a significant increase after 1870, when both private and public institutions dedicated to the preservation of art works emerged, namely the foundation of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and of the National Design Academy in New York. The effectiveness of the academic criteria for evaluating art productions on the American soil would give birth to a wide-scale dispute regarding the

legitimacy of the normative and cognitive criteria that include an artistic production in the art-world conventions of the time.

American art criticism was overwhelmingly influenced, in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the aesthetic considerations of the British art philosopher John Ruskin. For instance, the public controversy between two reputable American art critics concerning Ruskin's aesthetics is the expression of a more profound dissent between the supporters of innovative and anti-canonical art (who were labelled at the time as pre-Raphaelites) and their conservative detractors.<sup>5</sup> Also, the trial brought by James McNeil Whistler against John Ruskin on account of a review that was highly critical towards the American painter intensified the dispute between the innovators and the traditionalists. The publication by Henry James of two articles concerning this dispute was aimed at denouncing the radicalism of Ruskin's critical tone as well as the eccentricity of Whistler's creations; according to James, art criticism should find the right expression through which to state the necessity of art for life, avoiding artificial and gratuitous dissensions. Art criticism should remain profoundly realistic, attached to the traditional cultural and moral values, and moderate in denouncing the excesses of the new art (James 24-28).<sup>6</sup>

Although, beginning with 1880, the American artists became more confident regarding the potential and the resources of American art, a marked cosmopolitanism would define the American exhibitions and salons of the time; in this respect, art criticism was a bifocal one, highlighting at the same time both the merits of the American artists and the perennial values of Western art. Bernard Berenson promoted, from a critical point of view, the values of the Italian Renaissance art, while at the same time playing the role of mentor for some passionate American art collectors of the time, a fact that had a precise significance with regard to the impact of the artistic productions on the manifest commercial tendencies within a market of art products that, at the time, had become an undeniable reality that had been denounced more than once (Meyer 65, 79).<sup>7</sup>

To conclude with, the American art criticism between 1865 and 1905 oscillated between deference for traditionalism and cultural and emancipating humanism; the progressive tendencies of the age, which

praised the role of pre-Raphaelitism in defining a new path for the American art, remained moderate, especially as a result of the respect with which the American art criticism regarded the remarkable achievements of the classical masters; consequently, the American art would win ground as long as the creative innovation would have learned the lesson of Western art.<sup>8</sup>

#### The First Ideological Turn of American Art Criticism, 1908-1940

The progressive orientation in the American art criticism would make its presence felt in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a series of artistic manifestations aimed at a change of paradigm as far as the understanding of the arts and the authentic aesthetic experience are concerned. Especially during 1908 and 1940, ideological art achieved notoriety in the context of the emergence of some features characteristic to American art that was under the influence of marked nationalist, individualist or technological elements. Additionally, politics insinuated itself for the first time in the message that art aimed to transmit, this fact indicating a commitment of the artists and art critics to explain the avatars of art in the context of the decisive political events that prompted a reconsideration of the role of art and artists in the contemporary world.

The catalyst for the change in the criticist paradigm of art was first anticipated by the organisation of an exhibition in 1908 that would exclusively promote the most prominent American artists of the time: met with hostility by the art critics, the exhibition paved the way for interrogations regarding the near future of American art (McLanatham 184-186).<sup>9</sup> But the cataclysm that would forever change the old art criticism came with the organisation, in 1913, of the famous *Armory Show*. The American art criticism drew attention to this event, labelling it as an antirealist and anti-naturalist orientation bordering on ignorance as self-affirmation and on aberration (Cox, "International Art", 109-110; Mather Jr., "Old and New Art", 110-112).

The 1913 exhibition put forward the shift from the cultural provincialism of the American art prior to 1900 towards an internationalist

and cosmopolitan vision, as well as the necessity for reconsidering the traditional aesthetic categories as far as the evaluation of new art was concerned. Frank Mather Jr., who had initially denounced the way in which contemporary artists abdicated before an ideological fanaticism that subverted beauty and judgment based on taste, would reconsider his position by stating that the means of expression of the new art refused the compromises of the austere, fastidious traditional art, becoming a cry whose significance required an audience who was able to understand its message (“The Armory Exhibition”, 112-116). Understanding the spirit of the American avant-garde art would imply: comprehending the sources that formed its inspiration, exercising the intellectual facilities and abandoning the idea according to which art is intelligible as an expression of beauty (i.e., *aisthesis*), highlighting discovery and invention to the detriment of expressiveness or accuracy of representation.<sup>10</sup>

The period of American art criticism after 1930 was deeply marked by the personality of Paul Rosenfeld. His contributions brought him closer to the formulation of a comprehensive aesthetic definition of the significance of art: the inter-war art managed to intensify, orient and humanise, possessing virtues and aesthetic properties, as well as practical value; its mission was that of shocking the public and shaking realities, having a profoundly ecumenic role with regard to life’s meanings. The radicalism of the new art was manifest in the novelty of its forms of expression and illumination of the present (Rosenfeld 155-156).

The American art criticism between 1908 and 1940 also highlighted the relationship of art to the political, on the one hand, or to the scientific and technological innovations, on the other: for instance, an event with profound political connotations, which was highly reported at the time, was the elimination of Diego Rivera’s work, representing a portrait of Lenin, from New York’s Rockefeller Centre (Marshall 176-177).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the wide-scale use of technology in art implied a change that could be assimilated to a revolutionary approach in aesthetics in the sense in which art works had aesthetic connotations that were situated beyond their understanding as means or instruments (Brenner 179-181).

## Coda

Art criticism is, first and foremost, a type of narrative that translates notable artistic events in a chronicle, reportage or short story; as such, while not altogether lacking in theoretical value, art criticism can be considered only the launching pad or the starting point for some comprehensive theoretical reflections. The periodisation of American art criticism used as a methodological guide is, in its turn, a theoretical exercise applied to American art criticism. What remains to be done is to provide a satisfying justification for the reasons underlying both the limits of the time periods and my option for paradigmatic shifts in the focus on American art criticism from the cultural to the ideological and vice-versa, up to the point when, after 1980, these two dimensions characteristic of American art criticism seem to become indistinguishable. This study has dealt with American art criticism in the period 1865-1940; another one will continue with the assessment of art criticism in the United States after 1940. Before providing arguments for the labels of “cultural” and “ideological” attributed to each period in the evolution of American art criticism, a distinction between the two concepts is needed.

I use the term “cultural” to denote a type of art criticism whose goals are: aesthetic education in a broader sense, promotion of art for large audiences, art patronage and artistic manifestations to popularise arts, emphasis on the artist’s socio-professional status, as well as the status of art as a cultural fact, the revealing of the correlations between artistic productions and the dominant cultural trend of a certain period in the evolution of art. By contrast, the “ideological” expression in art brings forth not only relations between art and something outside its scope, but rather a “concern” of art to become autonomous, to purify itself of the content of its very object: for instance, the artistic avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century put forward rather an ideological distance from traditional art than an aesthetic view reacting to the social, economic and historical events of the time (especially World War I).

Evidently, this distinction between cultural and ideological is one deliberately oversimplifying, which means that each period in the evolution of American art criticism draws preeminent attention to either

the ideological or the cultural. Consequently, none of these periods could be described in absolute terms as purely ideological or purely cultural. What remains specific for each of these periods is, therefore, the more visible ideological or cultural character. On the other hand, one and the same feature noted by American art criticism as belonging to two different periods in the evolution of art criticism can take on, as the case may be, the epithet of cultural or ideological; for instance, the experientialism specific to abstract expressionism between 1940 and 1960 has a rather ideological meaning, while the experientialism of pop art after 1960 is predominantly cultural. But on the cultural and ideological meanings of art criticism in the United States after 1940, I will dedicate another study.

Finally, what might be understood as a historicist exercise in art criticism in America is not consistent with “the dialectic, which posits a permanent gap between subject and object within all our thoughts as well as in reality itself” (Jameson 296), but rather with the “sublimation” of reality and its boundless diversity. Such an approach might be, after all, a way of understanding the world, beyond fashionable objections denouncing the mystification of reality and reductionism.

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<sup>1</sup> It is common knowledge today that important American art philosophers also delved into art criticism: Clement Greenberg, Arthur Danto, David Carrier, Noel Carroll or Richard Shusterman, among others, brought their remarkable contribution to art criticism. In their turn, the exceptions to this rule are also notable: although Nelson Goodman formulated an art philosophy that had a profound influence on American aesthetics, he did not deal with art criticism. Within the limits of the present study, I make a distinction between professionalized art criticism and art philosophies in America.

<sup>2</sup> I will not insist here upon the complexity of possible relations between art and art criticism, because this issue falls outside the scope of the present study. However, arguing that “The claim that the critic has become obsolete because art had become critical makes as much sense as saying that the artist is obsolete if criticism is written artistically” (McEvelley qtd. in Hafif 130) is tantamount to supporting the reductionist argument that at least one of these two endeavours can be integrally replaced by the other. Actually, the relation between art and art criticism is a complex and nuanced one: see, in this respect, Donald Kuspit’s work, *The Critic Is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*.

<sup>3</sup> Recently, the attempt to bring together in one volume the most significant contributions in American art criticism has been materialized in a critical anthology entitled *Brushes with History. Writing on Art from The Nation 1865-2001*, edited by Peter G. Meyer. At any rate, the tradition of art criticism in *The Nation* has brought remarkable contributions, from Russell Sturgis and Clarence Cook, Kenyon Cox and William Coffin, Bernard Berenson and Frank Mather, Paul Rosenfeld and Anita Brenner to Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Fairfield Porter, Max Kozloff, John Berger, Lawrence Alloway and Arthur Danto.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Danto synthetically expresses the tension between the aesthetic canon defended by American artists and the new Pre-Raphaelite current in American art that insisted on the necessary presence of a new artistic consciousness, which would eventually influence the avant-garde movements. It goes without saying that the American pre-Raphaelitism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a collective epithet recurrent in the context of a new way of understanding and practicing art in general: “The art world, as we know it today, emerged in Victorian times, and much of it was the product of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which more or less invented the idea of the hot artist, the art movement, the breakthrough, the press release, the manifesto, the buzz of sensational openings and the idea that art must be set upon a new path. It was they who realized how important the support of a major critic could be in getting their work talked about and acquired” (Danto xxii).

<sup>5</sup> The above-mentioned dispute between one of the pioneers of American art criticism, Russell Sturgis, and W. J. Stillman was hosted by *The Nation*: the former praised Ruskin’s writings, stating that good art should not be judged in terms of whether or not it belongs to a traditional canon, but in agreement to the authenticity of art for life; Stillman was opposed to the expressionist aesthetics of the British art philosopher, arguing that he missed the meanings of genuine art. Thus, the controversy between Sturgis and Stillman boiled down to the opposition between expressivist and representationalist orientations of modern art philosophies; at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art as mimetic representation was still a canon of artistic expression that American Pre-Raphaelitism sought to disprove. Stillman, the defendant of representationalism in art, thus denounced Ruskin’s writings as “dispersive, analytic, iconoclastic” (22). As far as the Pre-Raphaelitism of the new orientation in American art is concerned, another important art critic of the period, Kenyon Cox, wrote: “He [Raphael – our note] became the law giver, the founder of classicism, the formulator of the academic ideal . . . . As long as the academic ideal retained any validity, his supremacy endured, and it was only with the definitive turning of modern art into the paths of romanticism and naturalism that revolt became possible” (*Artist and Public* 100), while Elizabeth Robins Pennell (the first woman who was turned art criticism into a profession in America between 1890 and 1918) argued that “What is important in this very rapid sketch is to point out the part the Pre-Raphaelites played in the revolt against Victorian vulgarity. For theirs was a revolt as truly as the romantic movement, some twenty years earlier, had been in France. Ruskin, the prophet, Madox Brown, the master, and Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt,

the brave crusaders, . . . proclaiming . . . belief in the Gospel of Individuality in preference to old outworn Academical dogma” (N. N. – Pennell’s pen name –72-73).

<sup>6</sup> Henry James’s career as a critic and his aesthetic views are analysed by Crunden, 57-80.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Jewett Mather Jr., one of the most passionate collectors of art works, a representative figure of American art criticism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deplored the unhinged commercialism of art works, highlighting the contrast between the value of the art works sold and their unjustified prices; the explanation for this difference was, on the one hand, the irrational and uneducated enthusiasm of art collectors, and on the other, their crass indifference towards the more profound cultural values of art works beyond their commercial evaluation. Art criticism needed to separate the commercial value of art works from their cognitive and educational attributes that should be made visible to a wider audience (“Art Prices and Art Values” 86-88, “The Artist in Our World” 88-90).

<sup>8</sup> Progressive criticism in the USA was overshadowed by the respect for the past achievements of western art tradition, so that there were not radical progressives in American art criticism; one could consider P.T. Barnum, Russell Sturgis or Bernard Berenson as moderate progressives. Kenyon Cox was the supporter of traditionalism in American art criticism, while Frank Mather Jr. or Henry James could be considered humanists, from the point of view of their plea for the educational and cultural values of art manifestations. (H. Wayne Morgan, *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz, and Frank Jewett Mather Jr.*).

<sup>9</sup> According to most art critics, the *Exhibition of the Eight* was a manifestation that transgressed the limits of vulgarity or an attempt to forcibly aestheticise the ugly, which is why this group was also known as the “Ash Can School.”

<sup>10</sup> “Art is not a mystery, never has been, and never will be. It is one with the laws of nature and of science . . . . That should be, and is, it seems to me, the special and peculiar office of modern art: to arrive at a species of purism, native to ourselves, in our own concentrated period, to produce the newness or the “nowness” of individual experience” (Hartley 126-127). In his book, *Struggle over the Modern: Purity and Experience in American Art Criticism 1900-1960*, Dennis Raverty wrote: “The Armory Show was so threatening to the critical establishment because it posited a progressive, open-ended alternative to both the conservative and liberal determinists of the time . . . . Within the new model, the moderns were no longer marginal eccentrics, but pivotal players, and the trajectory traced by their position not only implied a new direction for the development of American art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it essentially negated the premises of both the classical formalist conservatives and the organicist liberals that dominated the pre-Armory Show critical debate” (25-26). In the period before the 1913 exhibition, the criticist conflict between conservatives and liberals opposed Kenyon Cox to Royal Cortissoz; the conservatives argued for the universality of the ideal of beauty and of perfect forms, while the liberals supported free expression and individualism, cultural relativism and nationalism;

it is important to highlight that the American avant-garde exhibitions of 1908 and 1913 were followed by the emergence of a generation of progressive critics like Marsden Hartley, Lewis Gannett or Thomas Craven. Generally speaking, they argued in favour of adopting new forms of artistic expression, while at the same time refusing the conception on art as representation, imitation or reproduction.

<sup>11</sup> This event would lead to a polemic between the artist Diego Rivera and the well-known patron of arts Nelson Rockefeller; the subtext of this dispute was the ideological conflict between Soviet Bolshevism and American industrial capitalism.

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