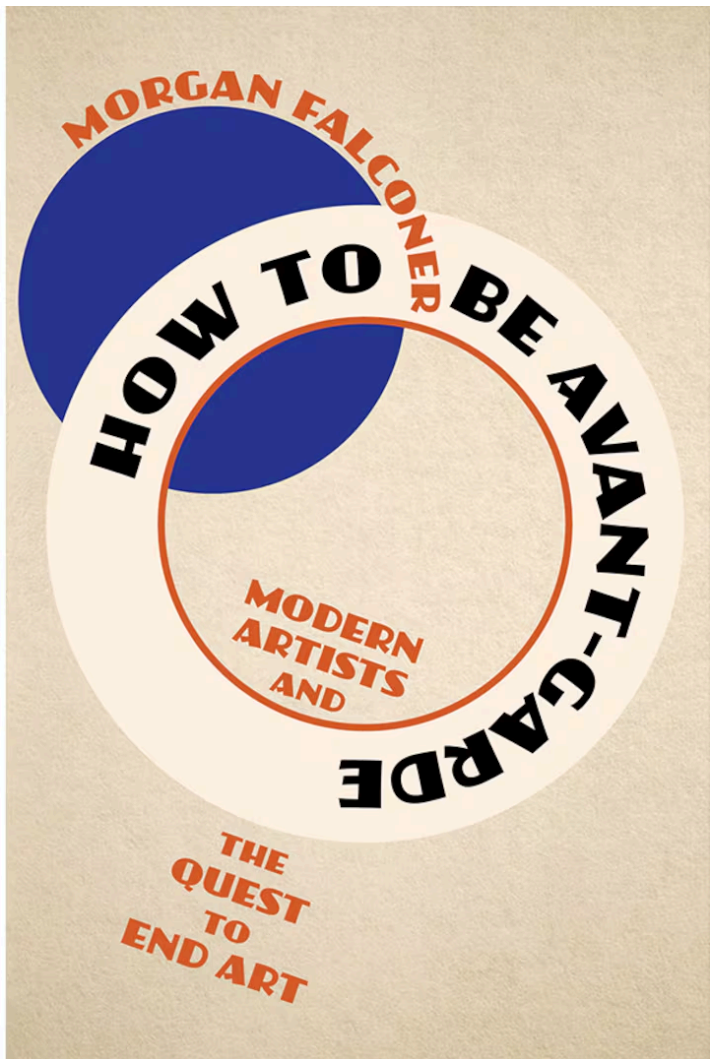


BOOK REVIEW

A look back at when art was revolutionary

Art-world insider Morgan Falconer ponders today's dull scene

By **Michael Patrick Brady** Globe correspondent, Updated February 11, 2025, 11:12 a.m.



Morgan Falconer and the cover to his book "How to Be Avant-Garde." ANTON FALCONER/W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

Is contemporary art tired? Or are the critics just getting old?

In a provocative essay for Harper's this past December, art critic Dean Kissick spoke of a malaise in the world of contemporary art, one that he claimed was the result of identity politics. In a time of profound social and technological upheaval, Kissick argues, artists should be confronting the world around them and exploring universal themes rather than simply mining one's affiliation with a marginalized community to create work that does little more than flatter the nominally liberal sensibilities of a moneyed elite. Perhaps. But it's also telling that he says that art was more interesting back when he was in his 20s — it can be difficult to cope when trends move on without you.

Nevertheless, while reactions to Kissick's specific diagnosis have been mixed, he's not alone in thinking that contemporary art is marked by a pervasive mediocrity. And if you've been befuddled by the news of multimillionaires competing over who can spend the most on a banana duct-taped to a wall, or baffled by the abstruse, hyper-academic labels at your local museum, you might conclude that he's onto something.

Into this debate marches Morgan Falconer, an art critic and educator at Sotheby's. His new book, "[How To Be Avant-Garde: Modern Artists and the Quest to End Art](#)," proposes that a solution to this problem may be found among the *enfant terribles* of the early 20th century, who radically transformed our perception of what art can be with their unorthodox, confrontational, and irreverent methods. It's an engrossing survey, full of colorful characters and winning personal touches. Like all good art, it ultimately raises more questions than it answers.

Falconer is bored by what he sees at today's big art fairs and exhibitions. According to him, where once artists sought to *épater la bourgeoisie* — that is, to disturb the conventions and the complacency of polite society — today, they seem more inclined to cater to it. He describes a sad epiphany he experienced at Art Basel Miami: "I sat down at a picnic table and tried to rouse my soul with another espresso and an intensely refrigerated pastrami sandwich. ... I realized I didn't want any more art. Not today ... but not tomorrow either. I wondered, in fact, whether I'd ever want to see more art again."

He, too, longs for the excitement of a bygone era, and out of this crisis divines his mission: “We need to recall what an extraordinary thing it could be,” he writes, “for art to enter life.”

With this in mind, he takes readers on a tour of last century’s most radical avant-garde movements — Futurism, Surrealism, Dada, De Stijl, the Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, and Situationism — in search of inspiring examples that he hopes can shake us — or, maybe just him — from this torpor.

The movements Falconer explores are by no means identical, but they share a few common threads: a bold vision, often articulated in a brash manifesto; charismatic hype men, capable of promulgating that vision beyond the movement’s insular clique; and a commitment to taking art out of stultifying museums and comfortable sitting rooms in order to recenter it in the daily lives of regular people. Their adherents were not interested in simply making pleasant, aesthetic works for the contemplation of high-minded collectors or appreciators. In the troubling aftermath of the Great War, when little seemed certain, these artists sought to make the world their canvas and desired no less than to reshape society in their own image. “Over a hundred years ago, a generation of artists were serious and ambitious enough to question what art’s purpose was in the world,” he writes, “and to ask whether it might be put to new ends.”

To illustrate this, Falconer provides readers with compelling capsule biographies of important figures, including the bellicose Filipino Marinetti, author of the Futurist manifesto, which declared the movement’s intention to “sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.” He illuminates the short life of the anarchic Cabaret Voltaire, which lasted less than six months but launched a slew of trailblazing artists, etching Dada indelibly in the annals of art history. And he charts the rise and fall of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus school, whose minimalist aesthetic and practical ethos is today essentially the foundation for all modern design. “They bound together in cultish cells,” Falconer writes, “they explored obscure knowledge, and they scorned the public.” And while he isn’t advocating that contemporary artists should mirror their tactics exactly, he

does believe that there's much to be learned from the avant-garde's disdain for convention and their desire to utterly separate from the past.

Art is a never-ending dialectic between a disruptive, revolutionary spirit and an anesthetizing bourgeois sensibility that seeks to blunt the cutting edge. Kissick and Falconer argue that the pendulum has swung too far in one direction and a rebalancing is in order. To put it simply: Art needs antagonists. But it's important to be clear about who exactly we should be antagonizing. Pinning the blame on identity politics lets the institutional-curatorial complex that has co-opted a genuine concern for marginalized voices to its own commercial ends off the hook, and risks inviting a reactionary backlash that would only serve to validate bad-faith culture-war grievances. One need only to look at Marinetti and the Futurists to see how easily the avant-garde can serve as a catspaw for fascism.

Falconer marks out his target more clearly — it's the money. “[T]he wealth that nurtures [art] seems only to increase its power and mystique, and hence its distance from us,” he writes. No matter what form art takes, be it a narrow exploration of personal identity or a broad, universal commentary on society, its future — and perhaps our own — depends on reducing that distance.

HOW TO BE AVANT-GARDE: Modern Artists and the Quest to End Art

By Morgan Falconer

Norton, 288 pages, \$32.99

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