Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4328
ISSN Online: 3104-4336
CD ISSN: 3104-4344
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9162

# Artistic Revolution: From Self-Legislation to Public Recognition

**Shan Jin**
School of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China
Email: jinshan0377@aliyun.com

**How to cite this paper:** Jin, S. (2026). Artistic revolution: From self-legislation to public recognition. Social Sciences and Humanities, 6(1), 88–96. ISSN Print: 3104-4328, ISSN Online: 3104-4336.
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9162
**Published: 2026-11-26**

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
CC BY 4.0

## Abstract

The development of art history is not simply a succession of stylistic changes; rather, it is a process through which artists continually challenge established rules and redefine the boundaries of art. Whether in the ZERO movement in post-war Europe or in the individual practices of artists such as Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana, we see a desire on the part of artists to establish new artistic languages through acts of self-legislation. Yet artistic creation alone cannot bring an artistic revolution to completion. From the moment an artwork enters the public sphere, to its gaining opportunities for collection, exhibition and dissemination, and eventually to changes in public aesthetic perceptions and the recognition of its historical significance by art institutions, this process involves complex and sustained interactions among artists, supporters, the public and the art system. Taking ZERO and the artistic practices of Klein and Fontana as its starting points, and drawing on historical examples involving Paul Durand-Ruel, Peggy Guggenheim, Iris Clert and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, this essay examines how an artistic revolution moves from individual creation towards public recognition. It further considers the paradoxes confronting contemporary art when rebellion gradually becomes part of the very institutional system it once sought to challenge.

## Keywords

Artistic Revolution; Self-Legislation; ZERO; Public Recognition; Art Patronage; Art Institutions

## Introduction: Why Must Art Always Begin Again ?

As an artistic movement active in the 1960s, ZERO may not be familiar to everyone, yet the artistic attitude it embodied has remained vivid in my memory. Something I encountered in the exhibition prompted me to consider a question: Why must art always begin again? After allowing the question to mature over several years, I have decided to put these thoughts into writing.

*Zero is silence. Zero is the beginning.*

These are lines from the ZERO group's manifesto. ZERO was not simply an artistic

movement, nor merely a visual style. It was more an attitude: art could free itself from existing definitions and start afresh with its most fundamental elements.

Art history seems to repeat this process continually. A particular artistic form gradually establishes its own rules, only for someone else to attempt to break them. New modes of expression may initially cause confusion, or even be regarded as a denial of art itself. Yet, over time, they may come to constitute new artistic standards.

Where, then, does the revolutionary nature of art actually originate? Does it arise from the individual will of the artist, or from the gradual transformation of public aesthetic perceptions? And how does an artwork that is initially misunderstood acquire legitimacy and eventually enter the history of art?

## Chapter One: The Artist's Self-Legislation — Who Has the Right to Redefine Art?

At times, artistic revolution, like other forms of revolution, is driven by a need for self-renewal. Although the revolutions of art history are bloodless, their destructive force in the cultural sphere can be no less intense. Some of the most radical transformations have taken place in the field of artistic experimentation since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Artists with strong individual identities often find it difficult to submit to established rules. Even within the world of classical art, artistic conventions were not always sufficient to contain the most gifted practitioners. The sixteenth-century Italian painter Caravaggio is a case in point. Although he worked devoutly in the service of God, he also portrayed prostitutes as the Virgin Mary. He was not necessarily seeking to commit an act of religious sacrilege; rather, he replaced the idealised figures of traditional religious painting with the realities of human nature and bodily experience. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in its account of his work, regards him as one of the revolutionary figures in European art history.[1]

The desire to transform established conventions is an artist's ambition, and artistic ambition has always been one of the essential driving forces of artistic activity.

In 1957, German artists Heinz Mack and Otto Piene organised a series of evening exhibitions in Düsseldorf, gradually adopting the name ZERO. On 24 April 1958, ZERO formally took shape. Günther Uecker began participating in the group's core activities in 1961. ZERO remained active until 1966, establishing extensive connections with artists across Europe and beyond.[2]

The emergence of ZERO was, of course, closely related to the atmosphere in Germany after the Second World War. Yet its approach also stood in contrast to the tendencies in post-war painting that emphasised individual emotion and free, expressive brushwork. Artists began to reduce subjective expression and instead turned their attention to light, movement, materials and space themselves.

They formulated their own manifesto:[3]

*Zero ist die Stille.*

*Zero ist der Anfang.*
*Zero ist rund.*
*Zero dreht sich.*

There is something intriguing about these lines. The artists seem to have rediscovered the world. The "zero" here is, of course, not simply the number zero. It is closer to a moment of beginning again: temporarily setting aside existing artistic languages in order to rediscover the relationship between art and the world.

ZERO was not a style but an idea. Breaking with tradition was an attitude shared by much of contemporary art, but ZERO went further by developing an aesthetic proposition of its own: at the point of utmost simplicity, a richer range of meanings could emerge. The exhibition also reconstructed the connections between the ZERO group and internationally active artists who shared similar ideas, including such avant-garde figures as Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana.

Klein became widely renowned for his signature blue, but white was equally important to his artistic explorations. I was particularly astonished by a pure white painting included in the exhibition. In the history of art, few had attempted to define a seemingly contentless "pictorial surface". Its appeal was not merely aesthetic; the work also involved a remarkable technical achievement: no traces of brushwork were visible. What confronted the viewer was colour itself, together with the perceptual experience it produced.

Another episode came to mind. In 1958, Klein held his celebrated exhibition Le Vide (The Void) at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. He emptied the gallery interior and repainted its walls white, seeking to bring visitors into direct contact with an immaterial artistic experience. The exhibition ran from 28 April to 12 May 1958.[4]

The exhibition attracted considerable attention, but it also raised questions. If a gallery contained neither paintings nor sculptures in the conventional sense, why could it still be called an art exhibition? Similarly, if a canvas appeared to contain nothing, why could it still be regarded as a painting? These questions touched upon the very boundaries of the definition of art. Must art necessarily take the form of a material object that can be seen and identified? If an artist considers space, perception and ideas themselves to be capable of constituting an artwork, should the viewer accept such a definition?

Klein's experiment did not provide an answer that everyone was obliged to accept. He simply placed the question before the public.

Lucio Fontana approached the problem from another direction. What immediately catches the eye is his apparent destruction of the canvas: he punctured intact surfaces or used a blade to make a series of cuts. His celebrated Tagli (Cuts), in particular, generally feature monochromatic surfaces, interrupted at the centre by a dark slit. At first glance, these works can easily be understood as acts of destruction directed against painting itself.

Yet what truly interested Fontana was not how to destroy a painting. I moved closer

to the work, hoping to examine the supposedly forceful cut, only to notice the carefully finished colour of the canvas and the clean edges of the incision, which showed no fraying and almost seemed sealed. I have not yet come across any documentation explaining precisely how he achieved this effect, but the result was certainly not that of careless destruction.

In 1946, Fontana helped establish the Academia Altamira in Buenos Aires. Out of discussions within this artistic and intellectual circle emerged the Manifiesto Blanco (White Manifesto). The manifesto argued that traditional art needed to confront the new conditions brought about by scientific and technological developments, and that painting and sculpture should move beyond the boundaries of their established media. After returning to Milan in 1947, Fontana continued collaborating with writers, critics and philosophers, advancing the development of Spatialism.[5]

If traditional painting represents space on a flat surface, what Fontana did was to allow real space to enter the picture. A cut altered the very nature of the canvas. It was no longer merely a surface on which images could be represented, but a boundary that could be penetrated.

I think the most fascinating aspect of Fontana's work is that he did not simply create a new style of painting. Instead, he raised the question anew: what, exactly, is painting ? Seemingly, with a knife, he brought a painting to an end; in reality, he switched on the light in a darkened room.

## Chapter Two: Who Supports Revolution ?

The narratives of art history often revolve around artists. We are familiar with their creative journeys, artistic styles and intellectual transformations, but we are not necessarily familiar with those who stood beside them and offered support.

Collectors, art dealers, gallery owners, publishers, and even people whose professions had little to do with art have all played significant roles in the making of art history.

Some of this support may come from steadfast members of an artist's own family. Vincent van Gogh provides an especially compelling example. Following Vincent's death, his most dependable supporter, his brother Theo van Gogh, also died, just six months later. Theo's wife, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, inherited the large body of artworks and correspondence left behind by Vincent. She gradually came to realise that she had a responsibility to bring these works into public view.

Thereafter, she consistently promoted the dissemination of Van Gogh's art by selling works, lending them to exhibitions, and organising and publishing the letters Vincent had written to Theo. In 1905, she organised a major Van Gogh exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, featuring 472 works. In 1914, Van Gogh's letters were published in a three-volume edition.[6]

These individuals were not always passive patrons standing behind artists. At times, they were active participants in the very emergence and dissemination of new art.

The early Impressionists faced considerable difficulties. Their new approach to painting did not conform to the aesthetic standards of the traditional Salon, making it difficult for artists to secure regular exhibition opportunities or a stable income. The French art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel played an important role during this period. Beginning in the 1870s, he took an interest in artists such as Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley, and continued purchasing their works. Between 1880 and 1886, despite considerable financial pressure, he continued to provide funding and support for Impressionist painters, organised exhibitions and sought to establish new channels for selling their work. The Impressionist exhibition he organised in New York in 1886 became an important turning point in the movement's acceptance in the United States.[7]

What Durand-Ruel did went far beyond purchasing artworks. Through sustained acquisitions, advance payments, the organisation of solo exhibitions and the establishment of an international gallery network, he created relatively stable conditions in which artists could continue their work. This demonstrates precisely why artistic revolution is not necessarily opposed to commercial activity. Artists need creative freedom, but they also need the material conditions to sustain their lives. The role of supporters often lies in ensuring that an artistic practice which has not yet gained widespread acceptance has the opportunity to survive.

Peggy Guggenheim, one of the most celebrated collectors of modern art, is another indispensable figure. One might even say that Peggy Guggenheim herself constitutes a remarkable chapter in art history. Her presence brings to mind the Medici family's role as patrons during the Renaissance. Her unconventional understanding of art seems like an echo of that history across several centuries.

Born into the wealthy Guggenheim family, she founded the Art of This Century gallery in New York in 1942. She not only collected European modern art but also actively supported American artists who had yet to receive widespread recognition. In 1943, she signed a contract with Jackson Pollock and commissioned him to create the large-scale work Mural. At that time, Pollock had not yet become the iconic Abstract Expressionist painter he would later be known as in art history. Guggenheim's support provided him with exhibition opportunities, financial security and the space to create.[8]

Of course, it would be simplistic to claim that Peggy Guggenheim created Pollock. An artist's creative power cannot be bestowed by a collector. Yet collectors can change the conditions an artist faces through funding, commissions, exhibitions and professional networks. Such external stimuli can also serve as a source of inspiration, helping to activate creative potential.

There is a relationship here worth noting: collectors do not necessarily appear only after artists have achieved success. Sometimes they must make their own judgements before the work has been widely understood. Such judgements involve both aesthetic discernment and risk.

This brings me back to the Parisian gallery owner Iris Clert, mentioned earlier. What she provided was not merely a gallery, but an opportunity for an artistic idea to enter the public domain.

Without someone willing to provide a space for such an experiment, Klein's idea might have remained no more than a personal artistic conception. The gallery owner assumed a double risk: on the one hand, an economic risk; on the other, a risk of artistic judgement. They, too, were pioneers of their time.

This leads me to the realisation that an artist's self-legislation never takes place in a vacuum. It requires someone willing to open a door, allowing new rules the opportunity to be tested by the public.

It also reminds us that an artist's reputation is not always established during their lifetime. Sometimes an artist receives insufficient understanding while alive, only for others, after their death, to gradually establish their artistic standing through preservation, organisation, dissemination and interpretation. This contribution deserves recognition. Art history is not only the history of what artists create; it is also the history of the sustained participation of the many people who support them.

## Chapter Three: How Does the Public Change ?

If artists propose new artistic languages and supporters provide the conditions for these languages to enter the public sphere, then the public constitutes another essential part of the process. An artwork does not acquire a fixed meaning simply because its creation has been completed. It still needs to be viewed, discussed and even questioned.

The criticism faced by the early Impressionists has by now become a familiar story in art history. Some viewers and critics at the time could not accept their seemingly loose and unfinished brushwork. They were accustomed to looking for clear contours, complete compositions and carefully trained technical skills in painting. The Impressionists, by contrast, sought to capture light, atmosphere and the visual experience of fleeting change.

The problem was not entirely that viewers did not understand art. Rather, there was a gap between the aesthetic standards with which they were familiar and the new forms of expression that artists were attempting to develop. This gap required time to be absorbed. Once an individual artistic language becomes familiar to the public, it may enter another domain: that of being incorporated into history.

Today, we admire Impressionist works in museums around the world, and hardly anyone questions Van Gogh's artistic value. Indeed, in the context of the twenty-first century, these artists may even seem somewhat too traditional. Looking further ahead in art history, Picasso, whose work was once dismissed as children's scribbling, and graffiti artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring have all found their way into museums. Countless people dream of owning a Picasso painting! The process is truly fascinating. Yet it is not a natural one. Why are viewers willing to be

educated, eventually becoming admirers of revolutionary art? This is a question that deserves closer examination.

Long-term exhibition reviews in the public media, discussions among professionals and collecting have all played significant roles. The performance of an artwork in the auction market can also have a certain influence. Since the Enlightenment, people's understanding of themselves has undergone important changes. They have begun to question established knowledge and systems, regarding the use of reason, independent judgement and the continuous pursuit of knowledge about the world as their own responsibilities. Recognising the limitations of one's own understanding also means acknowledging the need for continual learning and the revision of one's judgements. These ideas created room for new artistic concepts. Public perception is constantly changing. In my view, it is precisely the progress of viewers, perhaps even progress at an almost excessive speed, that has provided these works with a foundation of legitimacy.

This does not mean that the public has unanimously come to accept revolutionary art. In fact, opponents and conservatives remain numerous. Resistance comes not only from the non-specialist public; it also exists within the art world itself, sometimes even more intensely, because those within it may claim to be defending orthodoxy.

The value of an artwork does not depend on whether it is accepted by the majority for art to have meaning. Yet once an artwork enters the public sphere, it no longer belongs entirely to the artist's personal intentions. It encounters different viewers, generates different interpretations and acquires new life through these interpretations. Public acceptance is not simply a matter of stamping an artwork with a seal of approval. The public's own aesthetic experience is also transformed in the process.

Today, we seem to be witnessing an increasingly rapid transformation in public aesthetic perceptions. Artistic languages that once took decades to gain gradual acceptance may now enter exhibitions, the media and the market within a relatively short period. Does this rapid acceptance signify greater openness, or does it mean that new artistic ideas have become easier to consume and absorb? When an artwork gains recognition, is it because it has genuinely changed the way people look at art, or because it has already received the endorsement of art institutions, the market and professional critics?

One of the most fascinating, and also most contradictory, outcomes of artistic revolution is that art which once opposed tradition may eventually become a new tradition.

## Chapter Four: From Rebellion to Canon — The Paradox of Contemporary Art

Museums play an important role in this process.

Through collecting, exhibiting, researching and publishing, museums give artworks a

sustained presence in public view. A work is no longer merely an artistic experiment belonging to a particular moment; it becomes a cultural heritage that can be repeatedly viewed, studied and discussed.

Art institutions do not simply preserve art history; they also participate in shaping it. When an artwork enters a museum, it acquires a new identity. It may once have provoked controversy, but is now placed within a particular historical context, alongside other works, to form part of the artistic narrative of an era.

This transformation is not simply a change in the value of the artwork. It is also the result of a change in society's understanding of art. Once rebellion is accepted, it may be reinterpreted, classified and institutionalised. Works that once challenged the rules of painting eventually become classics of art history; practices that once opposed traditional exhibition formats may themselves become subjects of museum research and display today.

This does not necessarily mean that they have lost their revolutionary character. On the contrary, it may be precisely through their acceptance that they have genuinely transformed the boundaries of art. Yet a paradox remains: once an act of rebellion has been absorbed by the institution, can its original capacity to challenge still be preserved in its entirety? Art institutions possess the ability to absorb and transform rebellion. They can give new artistic languages a lasting life, while also potentially converting experiments that were once characterised by uncertainty into established historical knowledge.

Artistic revolution does not always end with the overthrow of an old order. It may also become part of a new order after transforming the old one. If the preceding discussion has examined how artistic revolution emerges, how it gains support and how it gradually enters public consciousness, then the final question is this: where will art go when revolution itself becomes a habit?

Let us return to the question with which we began: does the revolutionary nature of art originate with the artist or with the public? Artists possess the freedom to redefine art, but once art enters social space, the process becomes more complex. Supporters provide new art with the space and conditions it needs; the public transforms its own experience through viewing and acceptance; and art institutions reorganise art history through collecting, research and dissemination.

Perhaps what is most worth considering about artistic revolution is not how a particular individual breaks the rules, but how a new artistic experience gradually transforms our shared understanding of art. When a new artistic language is eventually accepted, it changes not only art itself, but also the expectations that the public brings to art.

And perhaps the next revolution will begin again precisely after this new consensus has taken shape.

## References

[1] Keith Christiansen, “Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi) (1571–1610) and His Followers,” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003). See also Francis Haskell, “Secrets of Caravaggio,” The New York Review of Books, May 12, 1983. Regarding the claim that a prostitute served as the model for the Virgin Mary in Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin, Haskell discusses the relevant early historical accounts and the controversy surrounding them. The authenticity of this claim should not be regarded as definitively established.

[2] Städel Museum, “ZERO,” Digital Collection, Städel Museum, accessed November 24, 2026.

[3] Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker, Zéro der neue Idealismus, exhibition poster for the exhibition at Galerie Diogenes, Berlin, March 30–April 30, 1963.

[4] Centre Pompidou, “L’exposition du vide,” Yves Klein: Chronologie. This source records Klein’s exhibition Le Vide at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, held from April 28 to May 12, 1958.

[5] Fondazione Lucio Fontana, “Biography,” Fondazione Lucio Fontana, accessed November 24, 2026.

[6] Van Gogh Museum, “Research Project: Biography of Jo van Gogh-Bonger,” Van Gogh Museum, accessed November 24, 2026.

See also Van Gogh Museum, Gallery Texts: Permanent Collection, “Family Treasures,” p. 11. The museum’s gallery text records the 472 works shown at the 1905 Van Gogh exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, as well as the publication of Van Gogh’s letters in a three-volume edition in 1914.

[7] Durand-Ruel, “Paul Durand-Ruel,” Official Biography and Chronology, Durand-Ruel, accessed November 24, 2026. See also Colin B. Bailey, “How He Ruled Art,” The New York Review of Books, December 3, 2015.

[8] Peggy Guggenheim Collection, “Jackson Pollock,” Conservation Lab, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, accessed November 24, 2026. See also Peggy Guggenheim Collection, “Pollock’s Mural,” Peggy Guggenheim Collection.