

Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism

The Myth of Post-Modernism

I will say at the outset that I am involved in what I call "neomodernism," which may be defined as a return to the most fundamental tenets of "formalist" modernism. This may seem an odd occupation in an era when we are apparently escaping from the long hegemony of modernism. Why return to modernism on the very threshold of a *new* style period: post-modernism? My answer is that there is something very suspicious about this "post-modernism."

Everyone who uses the term seems to have a different idea of what "post-modernism" is supposed to be. For some, it begins with John Cage, Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, "happenings" and concept art. For others it begins with the minimalist reaction against that sort of thing. Many intellectuals associate it with reflexive strategies growing out of structuralism. Anti-intellectuals welcome it as a relief from strategies of any kind, a return to less problematic expressive modes which had been popular before modernism became dominant. Even this group is divided among proponents of straight realism, narrative, fantasy, decorative abstraction, punk and "new wave." Until we can agree on when post-modernism began, it is impossible to determine whether it is really new. Until we can decide what it actually *is*, regarding it as a style period would be premature.

If post-modernism can in fact only be defined negatively, as a rejection of modernism, of this rejection we can be certain. Hardly a month passes when we are not made aware of yet another brave sally against the modernist goliath in the form of a book, magazine article or television series. Virtually everyone writing on the arts seems to be breathlessly celebrating their liberation from the "pretensions" of artists to whom they had once shamelessly deferred.

Seen in this light post-modernism is certainly real. But new? No artistic movement has been declared "over" as many times as modernism. Expressionism, Neo-Classicism, Dada, Surrealism, Social Realism, *Folcorismo*, the New Humanism, Pop Art, Earth Art, New Realism, Concept Art, Punk Art: all were created as reactions against modernism. With the advent of each, modernism was declared "over."

Now, of course, no one would dream of declaring Pop Art "over;" we can look forward to no *mea culpas* from *Artforum* confessing that Surrealism is

no longer "valid." No one needs to declare that any of them are "over" for the simple reason that all of them really *are* over. The most interesting of these movements live on only in so far as they have managed to become identified with modernism through some quirk of history.

It is true, of course, that the current situation seems new in the extremity of the attack and the apparent total victory of the opposition. We are, however, reliving an old and rather trite script, straight out of the Thirties. Exactly the same things were being said then as now. The same arguments, the same *mea culpas*, the mistrust of innovation, the need to look to the past. And the art, in a strange way, was similar too.

A Modernist A B C

In my opinion we will not get very far regarding modernism as a style period like the Renaissance, Baroque or Rococo. It is much more fundamental, something that will be with us for a very long time whether we like it or not.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to be more precise with our use of the term. We need, in fact, to think in terms of three "modernisms," which we can refer to as "A," "B," and "C." "A" can also be called "classic" or "formalist" modernism, which must be defined narrowly in terms of a very specific body of work: the Cubism of Picasso, Braque, Gris and Leger; Mondrian; much of Schonberg and Berg—almost all of Webern; certain works of Stravinsky; James Joyce and possibly Gertrude Stein. Some other, later figures, including Boulez, early Stockhausen and Brakhage are also important.

To me, "A" modernism is the true high road of Twentieth Century expression, a vigorous and profound reaction against the prevailing romantic idealism of the previous century. It represents something entirely new, something that will still be new and strange to us many years from now. A fundamental change of such depth is bound to be deeply threatening and, in fact, true modernism has been strongly resisted at every stage of its development.

Both "B" and "C" modernism can only be understood as forms of resistance to authentic modernism, despite the fact that they are so often associated with it. "B" modernism, often referred to as "hypermodernism," embraces some of the more

obvious surface characteristics of "A," and, in fact, aggressively carries them to extremes. While it has usually consciously allied itself with "A," it is my contention that the masters of "B" modernism (and there have been some truly great ones) have unconsciously sought to undermine true modernism. For "B" modernism is really the continuation of late romanticism in modernist guise. The flamboyantly extremist utopian rhetoric of such groups as the Futurists and Constructivists is typical of "B" modernism at its most aggressively ultra-romantic.

A more subdued late romanticism, leaning heavily toward subjective idealism, pervades the work and thought of Kandinsky, expressionist movements like the *Blau Reiter* and much of abstract expressionism.

"C" modernism is usually more consciously "anti-modernist," so much so that the fact that it is considered a form of modernism at all is quite interesting and highly ironic. Its purpose is to subvert what it regards as "modernism" by revealing its contradictions, debunking its "pretensions" and emphasizing that to which it is opposed. "C" modernism has taken many forms, some of the most extreme being dada, surrealism, pop art, concept art, minimalism, systems art, photo realism, etc. Despite the many obvious differences among these trends, all are fundamentally "reflexive." A reflexive work represents ("signifies") itself and, in so doing, promotes further "reflection" on the manner of its coming into existence and the process through which that existence is perceived and thought.

Reflexivity and Modernism

A great deal of confusion has grown from the very mistaken idea that there is something modern about reflexivity. This strategy is, on the contrary, both very old and fundamentally reactionary, having cropped up again and again throughout history as a means of "demonstrating" the futility of any new idea or practice. It is intimately connected with the tradition of skepticism.

Of course, great thinkers like Socrates have put skepticism to meaningful use in building thought. What enraged him about the skepticism of the Sophists, however, was their willingness to rest content with the contradictions they so cleverly revealed. The smug self-satisfaction of the Sophists has been inherited by their Twentieth Century counterparts, the "C" modernists. The fundamental message has remained the same down through the ages: "All thought is pointless, all action futile, but aren't I clever?"

The various reflexive strategies employed by "C" modernists can be complex, often requiring detailed

"deconstructive" analysis of a sort for which I have neither inclination nor time. Fortunately, a relatively simple example exists, from the career of the most sophisticated and interesting of the "C" modernists: Marcel Duchamp.

In 1912, Duchamp was humiliated by the rejection of his *Nude Descending a Staircase* at the hands of the group of Cubists with whom he had come to be associated. Within a few years he had left for the United States and declared war on the modern movement.

The most notorious of his many attempts to undermine modernism, as he understood it, was the well known "readymade" entitled *Fountain*: an ordinary urinal placed upside down, signed and exhibited as a work of art. This "work," a perfect example of the fundamental equivalence of reflexivity and parody, was intended to debunk what Duchamp perceived as the essence of modernism: an elitist search for the "spiritual" as pure form, signifying nothing, with no function other than disinterested contemplation.

When seen completely out of context a urinal *can* look very much like a "modernist" sculpture with the purest of forms. Yet it *does* have a function, one which can hardly be characterized as "spiritual." In the special context which Duchamp very cleverly created for it, the urinal becomes a powerful signifier, reflecting back upon itself as both ordinary object and "modernist" icon, inviting the thoughtful viewer to equate the uselessness of abstract sculpture with the uselessness of urine.

Despite its genuine cleverness, this, like all of Duchamp's barbs at modernism, falls wide of the mark. What Duchamp has assumed to be the essence of modernism is in fact characteristic only of "B" modernism, with its typically late romantic need for pure spirituality as "significant form." This has nothing to do with "A" modernism which, in fact, begins by disrupting form. Nor is there anything in "A" modernism that seeks to place itself above the most ordinary objects and situations: think of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, or a typical Cubist tabletop, or the use of bits of newspaper and wall paper in early synthetic Cubism. In its early stages, "A" modernism revels in the ordinary, the particular, even the debased. Its purpose at this point is in fact very similar to that of Duchamp.

Beyond the Reflexive

Here we are touching on an issue that is the source of the greatest confusions. Early "A" modernism is indeed destructive in a manner very similar to the destructiveness of "C" modernism and in fact is characterized by the use of reflexive strategies. But there is a development beyond re-

flexiveness which carries the true modernists into completely new territory. By the time we reach late Cubism, for example, the self-referential element is no longer dominant. With Mondrian it is completely absent. "A" modernism uses reflexive strategies as a lever to open up ambiguities which are then, eventually, *resolved* on another level. More precisely, ambiguities in signification or representation (referentiality) are resolved in the form of precise perceptual determinations which no longer signify but can be powerfully expressive nevertheless.

Although I am reluctant to use a term which has become almost empty through over- and mis- use, there is something very "dialectical" (in the Hegelian sense) about the evolution of "A" modernism. Reflexivity is a circular process in which something calls signification into question by signifying itself. But it simultaneously *asserts* signification since it operates *by signifying* (itself). To understand the real nature of this "dialectic" (the basis for both "C" modernism and current "deconstructionist" criticism) let us consider its central issue, what we may call the "paradox paradox" of thought.

Paradoxes are "openings" of thought which, according to the skeptics, mark the limit of what can be thought. Ultimately, so say the skeptics, there is a fundamental paradox central to thought which in some strange sense makes thought impossible. But thought *is* possible, in fact it is thought which has led us to the paradox. Thus the paradox at the center of thought is itself a paradox.

Is this a logical problem or a mystification? I strongly suspect that this "paradox," far from being the limit of thought, is actually only a disguised form of the fundamental ambiguity which makes thought possible in the first place and which, moreover, created the illusion that thought is without any limit whatsoever. Thus thought is "limited" by that which makes it seem unlimited. Acceptance of the "paradox paradox" as a limit of thought is, in effect, complicity in the fiction that thought is limitless, all powerful. (Thus Derridean deconstructionism "reduces" thought to an empty play of signification only to have it return "paradoxically.")

"C" modernism revels in this mystification. "A" modernism puts a halt to it by completing the dialectical process. Going beyond the reflexive *reductio ad absurdum*, the true modernists struggled to resolve signification back into its purely material elements in such a way that these elements would no longer signify anything, even themselves, but serve to determine and thus liberate sensory experience, the repressed "other" of signification.

Thus "A" modernism, by opening thought (iconographic signification) from *outside* itself (i.e., from the realm of the senses), reveals the bad faith of a "paradox" which exists only to disguise the fact

that anything at all *can* exist outside of thought. It is the difference between a dream in which one tells oneself that one is "only dreaming" yet continues nevertheless to dream ("C" modernism and deconstructionism) and a situation where one is shaken awake by someone in the real world outside the dream.

From Irony to an "Order of Sensuousness"

There is simply no way to briefly and succinctly illustrate the extraordinarily subtle and complex process alluded to above without a very real risk of misunderstanding. One must work through the whole process to understand it fully. The following, drawn from my own attempts at systematic treatment of the issue (in a monograph now being revised), must be regarded, therefore, strictly as a vague and incomplete sketch:

We may gain some notion of the workings of "A" modernism by considering the relation of Cubist practice to the traditional treatment of pictorial space. Basic is the following equation: organization of space = syntax. The perspective system and related conventions regarding the treatment of "realist" space are equivalent to pictorial syntax.

In attacking conventional space the Cubists thus were also attacking the process of pictorial (iconographic) signification. This is why certain Cubist spatial devices (such as reverse perspective) have the effect of paradoxes. The reflexive process generated by such paradoxes is the source of Cubist irony.

In some sense, Picasso and Braque could thus be regarded in the same light as Duchamp. But there is a profound difference between a purely conceptual attack on signification and one involving the treatment of space.

As is well known, the Cubist attack on perspective depends on the liberation of what artists call "negative space." The emergence of this space does more than simply "flatten" the picture *a la* conventional modernist theory. Negative space disrupts representation itself by attacking that "positive" space which serves as its syntax. Thus negative space (or, more precisely, that means of organization which promotes it) is equivalent to what may be called "negative syntax," the analytic dismemberment of signification.

While negative space as negative syntax has a good deal in common with that purely intellectual "negativity" generated by reflexive thought ("deconstruction"), the former has something which the latter lacks: the ability to precisely determine a perceptual field. Thus reverse perspective (for example) in the hands of Picasso or Braque is not simply a device for the negation of the perspective

illusion; it is also a division of a given surface area into clearly differentiated, thus clearly perceptible, proportions. These proportions, *precisely* determined by means of perceptual intuition (*not* geometry), become the basis for synthetic Cubism and the mature work of Mondrian. Significantly, that which serves to disrupt perspective (and, indeed, all forms of conceptually determined seeing) serves to liberate and establish what is probably best called, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, the "order of sensuousness" (probably the best translation of the much abused term, "aesthetic").

Unfortunately, modernist "theory" has become so encrusted with dogmatic and half-digested formulations of a kind which, at best, can serve only as a parody of the process I am trying to describe, that its real significance can be overlooked or taken for granted. The "order of sensuousness" must be clearly distinguished from the mere *assertion* of the sensory (and material) which is so characteristic of "B" modernism and has received so much attention in the critical literature. I am really speaking of what might be termed a sensory analogue of logic. Here again, prevalence of the phrase "perceptual logic" in various contexts associated more or less loosely with gestalt psychology can easily lead to a reversal of my meaning. Negative syntax is the *defeat* of gestalt perception, the liberation of exactly those elements repressed by the gestalt. At the same time, it is also opposed to the ambiguity that arises when gestalts are simply disrupted in the absence of a negative *structure* (as in Abstract Expressionism, for example).

If my analysis is correct, the advent of true modernism must be compared, not to the inception of a style, trend or period, but to the founding of a new and profoundly significant *discipline* on the order of geometry, logic or mathematics. We may then see, in the rigorous reductionism of Mondrian (and Webern!), the first steps in the search for a completely new kind of axiom, an "antimatter" of signification.

The Current Situation

We ought by now to have a clearer view of what everyone is calling "postmodernism." Despite the confusing array of styles to which I alluded earlier, it is not difficult to see that we are now experiencing a full scale revival of "C" modernism. Almost without exception the fashionable art of the day is an art in quotation marks. Even that art which seems to be seeking authenticity is really only seeking "authenticity." Any conceivable image or thing is acceptably post-modern as long as it carries the sign of reflexivity, as long as it is clear that the artist doesn't really mean it, that the thing is intended as a sign for itself as something else.

It now becomes apparent that the source of the current reaction against "modernism" lies in the fundamentally destructive, skeptical and reactionary nature of reflexivity itself. It is also clear that this sort of "post-modernism" can have no future apart from that modernism which it seeks to debunk. Like the strategies of post-structuralist "deconstructionism," to which it is closely allied, "C" modernism lacks (or refuses) that material, sensory basis on which it could resolve its vicious circle—ultimately it must feed on and destroy *itself*. The only way *beyond* the vicious circle is the path already blazed by the modernist masters.

Of course, there is another alternative. As I have already pointed out, the present period is much like the Thirties, which was also preceded by an explosion of "C" modernism. Most Thirties artists eventually recoiled from anything remotely reflexive *or* modernist to promote a "sincerity" which was in fact the height of bad faith, a cultivated naiveté. This sort of thing is now being revived and, I fear, may be inspiring those with the "smarts" to take a fling at sincerity (without quotation marks).

This is a depressing prospect, because in our time an educated person, certainly one with a knowledge of history, cannot simply decide to be sincere. Sincerity is either the result of a true naiveté or the fruit of long years of research and self-examination.



The Duchamp "readymade"

Neomodernism and The Cult of the New

Long years of research and self-examination. This, ultimately is the meaning of neomodernism, engaged as it is in the most difficult of tasks: the search for the fundamental principles of "A" modernism. Such a search, combining creative work with the most rigorous approach to theory, is not likely to appeal to budding post-modernists. It would, indeed, fly in the face of the prevalent myth that an enormous body of theory devoted to modernism already exists, to the point that everyone is now thoroughly "tired of" it. There are certainly signs of fatigue, but these can hardly be due to overinvolvement with modernist theory, if by that we mean a body of systematic thought devoted to central theoretical issues of modern art. Such works are very few and far between.

A huge historical and critical literature undoubtedly exists. And this literature reveals an enormous obsession with issues of a theoretical nature. But if one reads closely, one finds that each historian and critic usually presents us with his own theoretical patchwork amplified by references to certain philosophers and psychologists. The few works of a specifically art-theoretical nature which do exist are rarely cited in subsequent literature as the basis for a key concept. Significantly, the many current attacks on modernist theory are usually directed at

Clement Greenberg, an influential theory-minded critic, but hardly the author of a coherent, sustained theoretical work.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of what passes for theory in the literature on modern art. Most of this is and always has been tiresome. Of genuine theory there is still a serious lack.

Modernism is, of course, difficult. But the difficulty of the task before us is, in fact, its saving grace. Neomodernism takes too much time and effort to be compatible with the cult of the new, so often mistaken for modernism, which gives rise to an endless series of mutually destructive trends. The so-called "pluralism" of the present time is simply an explosion of this cult of the new into an uncontrollable frenzy of eccentricities. Behind this "trend of no trends" is, in fact, very clearly, the trend I have already described: the revival of the reflexive strategies of "C" modernism. The next trend will most likely be the bogus search for sincerity-without-quotation-marks. There will be no lack of others, equally superficial and redundant.

The serious artist has always been the victim of such trends, which leave him or her maximally vulnerable to the gallery owner, curator, critic, and, most recently, arts administrator. Despite all its difficulties, neomodernism can give the artist powerful theoretical tools with which to resist.

Victor Grauer

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