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Modernity and its Discontents

Introduction

Is the undoing of modernity the end of art history as we know it? If modernity is the having of the past as a problem, as something to be explained so that it might itself be employed, in turn, to explain the present, then the modern profession of art history has surely been at the dramatic heart of staging and articulating that problem. It takes a position or a stand relative to the past, making of it a picture and a world—a world which seems somehow to be designed to meet and address the art historical eye—which is, in the end, the eye of the camera, itself generalized into a world-scanning and thus world-building machinery.

Does postmodernism offer an alternative vision? Consider the following words of Stephen Melville, taken from his extract in Chapter 8:

> It may be tempting to say here something familiar like 'postmodernism offers us a new perspective on the past', but what needs to be said is something more like 'postmodernism compels a rethinking of the way in which we imagine "perspective" to offer us an access to the past'. It is perhaps worth noting that it follows from this that whatever 'postmodernism' is, it is not quite a period term and it is not quite within the existing terms of art history, an art historical object; it is more nearly a way in which attention can be drawn to certain 'grammatical'—a term I prefer to 'methodological'—difficulties in our talk of periodization and objectivity. What defines the postmodern within an art history curriculum is a certain slippage between it and the received terms of that curriculum.

What would it mean to go 'beyond' that? Not simply to put Hegel at arm's length—postmodernism as yet another art historical period-style, always already superseded by the dream (the 'myth', as Rosalind Krauss put it[1] of yet another avant-garde, yet another 'post')—but to cultivate perhaps a tactical indifference (however *ad hoc* and transitory) to a Hegelian historicism of the spirit?

It will have become clear in the readings and commentaries in this volume that art history has been at the same time (1) a *place* for reading (a virtual and material space where the truth or significance of what may be read is most clearly visible); (2) an *archive*, encyclopaedia, and

thesaurus (an infinitely expandable resource of 'material' for creating texts; for narratives of filiation and genealogy, influence and reaction); and (3) a scanning device or instrument; the *optical machine* that does the 'reading'.

While this may in itself be quite remarkable, it also gives rise to dilemmas that multiply like echoes in a cave (Platonic or otherwise). How can one separate oneself from this Hegelian contraption and still *see* what this (art) historical machinery is doing; see it as if its surface, which in the daily operational life of the machine is opaque, is transparent, with all the innards visible? All this may have begun to sound like one of those conundrums of particle physics, which we can memorize readily like a mantra but which continues to elude practical reasoning.

Art historical practice constitutes the becoming-visible of the historicality of art. Historicality is an artefact of perspective. Perspective is an artefact of privileging. And the privileging of objects is at once the birth and death of art. How can this be? Perhaps the answer can be explained as follows:

It is the *birth* because it is in the double evacuation of the heterogeneity of all that is present that an opposition is erected between a dead past and a living present, and a second opposition is erected between those things that are in the present that are like those things of the past that have been separated out and thereby linked with the dead and put aside from all the rest, which constitutes the living. It is the *death* because once separated out from other things, that which is art exists in opposition to the place of non-art where we now appear to be living once the cut is made, or else art would be invisible to us, and part of the (living) place where we are.

You may have noticed that this is resonating with issues that emerged in the discussion of Winckelmann's art history in the introduction to Chapter 1. If art history is the becoming-visible of art's historicity, art history is then intimately concerned with the fabrication and maintenance of modernity—it is what art history is *for* and what in its historical foundations in the Enlightenment and in its Hegelian spiritualization (I mean its dematerialization), and up to the present, it has been all *about*.

Now, if this is so, then any talk of 'postmodernity' is very important indeed. In fact, it is essential to any consideration of the very possibility of something calling itself 'the history of art' at present, for it returns us to art history's historical beginnings—which, as now seems unavoidable, are always beginning, even at the present moment (as Lyotard will have said more generically, as quoted below (p. 282)).

Three essays in this chapter directly address the question of the postmodern. These include a widely read 1980 text by the late art critic Craig Owens in the journal *October*, which is a fine articulation of the allegorical bases of all modes of art historical practice, and an essay

from 1984 by Andreas Huyssen, published in *New German Critique*, which opened up broader perspectives on these debates.

The earliest essay is the second, Michel Foucault's justly famous 'What is an Author', published in 1969. It problematized the notion of authorship as fixed and constant, and discussed the varying senses of authorship over the centuries in the West. Foucault argued that much of the inherited importance of what he termed the author-function has its roots in early Christian religious discourse, and specifically in biblical exegesis. Originally a very controversial lecture delivered in 1969 at the Collège de France, when Foucault's 'structuralist tendencies' were being hotly debated (and contested by Foucault himself), the essay revitalized the debate surrounding the nature of the individual subject by arguing that it too was neither universal nor constant. The argument has important implications for notions of art, artist, and artistry.

The first essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', published by New York art historian Rosalind Krauss in 1979, successfully achieved an effect complementary to that of Foucault's by demonstrating the non-universality and historical boundedness of 'sculpture' as an art historical category—thereby astutely troubling certain basic conventional disciplinary assumptions. This was pursued through the framework of a rigorously logico-formalist explication of stylistic change as the playing-out of a series of possible chessboard-like moves made up of artistic options at particular moments, namely those from New York school art.

She described the transformation from modernist sculpture (with its links to traditional notions of space, viewing subject, and monumentality) to a postmodernist 'expanded field' by adapting mathematical (topological) models and the paradigmatic logic of contraries and contradictions taken from linguistic semiology. It was a poignant early attempt to apply rigorous structural semiotic methods to traditional problems of stylistic evolution, with results that unsurprisingly harked back, for some, to the art historical formalisms of the early twentieth century.[2]

The bibliography on postmodernism, postmodernity, and modernity's discontents is enormous even without explicit references to structuralist or poststructuralist semiology, feminism, gender studies, deconstruction, critical theory, and so on, to name just a few of the usual critical rubrics commonly brought under the postmodern umbrella, and even then just limiting our purview to visual art practices exclusive of architecture and urbanism, where these debates also took place, and in some cases slightly earlier than in art history. Brave attempts were made in various countries during the 1980s to publish useful reading lists, but at the end of the millennium (and with the revival of various

millennialisms about which not a few poststructuralists have warned) such ambitions have waned. The following list is brief and idiosyncratic, but generally useful as a kind of browser-device for accessing this literature.

There were two key short texts that for many set the terms of the early debates on postmodernism. The first is Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris, 1979), translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1983), with a foreword by Frederic Jameson. The translated volume included Lyotard's 1983 essay, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in which Lyotard says (p. 79): 'Postmodernism ... is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.'

The second essay is by the German critical historian Jürgen Habermas (whom Lyotard cast as a neoconservative). His 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', first presented as a lecture in Frankfurt in 1980 and again in 1981 in New York, has (like Lyotard's essay) been republished many times. It may be most readily found in English (and under the altered title 'Modernity—An Incomplete Project') in an anthology which itself was an important and influential early collection of essays on postmodernism, H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, 1983), 3–15. The unresolved (and unresolvable) 'Lyotard–Habermas debate' was played out for many years; the readings in this chapter (and especially the Huyssen essay) touch on some of what has been most crucially at stake. On postmodernist architecture as symptomatic of latter-day capitalisms, see Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, (1984), 53–92.[3]

Several other useful anthologies are: Jonathan Arac (ed.), *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis, 1986); E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London, 1988); Howard Risatti (ed.), *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1990); and Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Essays on Rethinking Representation* (New York, 1984).

The most useful general collection of texts which over the years have become part of the 'critical theory' tradition is the 800-page paperback anthology *Critical Theory Since 1965*, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee, Fla., 1986). It includes influential texts and excerpts by some fifty twentieth-century authors.