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POSTMODERNISM — BACK TO THE FUTURE ?

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Modernism no longer has relevance as a social commentator. The failure of the avant garde to effectively resist commodification in late modernism, has resulted in a virtually complete loss of artistic integrity. The decline in modernism was seen as a crisis for the art world. Although current opinion would be that modernism has ended, the sense of crisis continues. In such a state of crisis there is an opportunity for new ideas to emerge.

Originally, I was convinced that postmodernism was simply an ephemeral concept, (created by critics who felt threatened by the seeming inadequately of their future role in postmodern society). Given the seemingly inconsequential nature of their thinking, I could not see postmodernists grasping this opportunity. Because of the disagreements and confusion which surround the thinking and methods of postmodernism, I misinterpreted their purpose in returning to the past. I erroneously saw this return as just an indiscriminate pastiching of former styles. I now believe that postmodern use of the past also includes an attempted scrutiny of society and of themselves.

There is a need for a more obvious integrity in postmodernism. In their re-evaluation of society, postmodernists must include a complete review of the status of art. Because this review is something with which social historians of art are involved, I feel justified in having included them in this paper. In my opinion, they have a

significant contribution to make, particularly with regard to the deconstruction of misleading art historical mythologies.

A failure to solve the inherent problems of both postmodernism and art history (e.g. the lack of vigor in, and the manipulation of socio-historical art theories; and the prevalent superficial reading of postmodernist productions), would, I believe, lead inevitably to a laissez-faire situation.

The formulation of a new criticality will be crucial in preventing this decline. Similarly, present postmodernism must be augmented, the current trend towards rapprochement consolidated, and a new socially effective position established for the progression of authentic art.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAILURE OF MODERNISM

AND

THE SUBSEQUENT IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTMODERNISM

The postmodernist re-evaluation of modernism

The prepared audience concept

The attempted resistance to commodification
and how it failed

The changes in audience, in patronage, and in the
location of art, and the effects of these changes

To be modern is to break with tradition, to interrupt the endless reiteration of classical themes, topics, and myths, to become self-consciously new, to attend to the modes of the times, to offer a critique of the conditions of one's own culture and society, to represent reality - not as it is - objectively and devoid of evaluation, but rather as it is experienced - subjectively and with the transcendental or critical consciousness available especially to the artist. ¹(Silverman,1990,p.2)

The present-day questioning of modernism is not so much a questioning of its principles and perspectives. It is the re-examination of these ideals and their closure where necessary. More importantly, it is the examination of its methodology in achieving those aims. Modernism, through the notion of a radical avant-garde, valued the techniques of progress, disjunction and crisis. Unfortunately, these means became absorbed by society to the extent that they were effectively just another set of conventions. As Jurgen Habermas put it, 'Modernism seemed dominant but dead'. However, although I agree that some of the ideals and most of the methods were bankrupt or even dead, 'dominant' did not accurately describe the position of modernism. It was a liquified and innocuous version of modernism that contemporary society had accepted.

Although modernism is not the sole subject of this thesis, in order to provide a fore-grounding, I believe it necessary to examine the relationship that existed between modernism's avant garde and its consumers. Even though this may seem to be a reduction of modernism, the investigation will concentrate on three points, namely:

- the resistance of the avant garde to commodification,

- its relationship to its wider audience
- and the avant garde strategies used to maintain its position as a force of social criticism.

Investigating these relationships has importance to the current questioning of the function of art in a postmodern society.

It is my view that the status of artists depends on their resistance to the commodification of their work by those who consume it. Without such resistance, the element of criticism of society, one of the principles of modernism, would not have been possible. Similarly, the status of artists would have been reduced to that of craftsmen, producing only what their consumers wanted.

The concept of an elite audience revolved around the idea of prepared viewers who believed that artists could see and understand more than ordinary people could.

This concept is pre-modernist, and I believe that it was essential for the emergence of modernist art.

According to their [Joshua Reynolds, James Barry, and Henry Fuseli] civic humanist conception of public life, a gaze that consistently registered what united rather than what divided the members of a political community was a requirement for participation in affairs of state. This lead Reynolds to abandon the then prevailing assumption that painting was fundamentally an art of deception. He substituted for it a 'philosophical' aesthetic in which the properly prepared viewer is struck less by the illusory presence of persons and actions in a painting and more by the truth of general propositions extracted from empirical experience. The ability to generalize or abstract from particulars was his principal criterion for inclusion in the republic of taste. ²
(Crow,1987.p.3)

Modernism encouraged introspective soul-searching among artists. Thus the modernist subjective, rather than objective representation of reality depended on reading further than the surface to discover meaning.

This notion is also vitally relevant to postmodernism, since many have begun interpreting postmodern features as a matter of surface rather than depth.

....a promiscuous pastiching of styles, the "de-centring" effect (in the viewer) of such a turn-round of images, a collapsing of the distinctions between "high" culture and "low", a stress on surface rather than depth - might be said to increasingly mark the directions of architecture and design. ³(Bode,1988,p.65)

Whether or not Bode is correct in his analysis, the fact that it may be read like this, even if it were not so intended, leads me to raise the question: should the postmodern approach be rethought already? It was the balance of criticism and the label of high art which gave modernist productions their sense of integrity. If however, the work of postmodernists, such as the painting of Julian Schnabel or the architecture of Charles Moore, were intended, or are allowed to be read as a matter of surface rather than depth, how does this effect their status as artists? Have they chosen to deconstruct and close the modernist principle of criticism of society, and to reject the status of high art? If so, can they truthfully label themselves as artists or their productions as art? Or has the modernist meaning of art and artist, which was based on a delicate balance between their criticism and status, already been changed irrevocably in postmodernist society?

In order to keep the status of art rather than craft, the avant garde had to resist commodification, something they did by including 'elements from debased marginal or alien cultures' (Lawson). An example of this is the fascination which African masks had for Picasso and some of his French associates, or the later appropriation of mass culture images by pop artists in the sixties. The same struggle against commodification had also been responsible for the widening of the boundaries of art. Ultimately as Lawson says: 'this necessary search for new material has forced the avant-garde into an ever quickening cycle of appropriation and reappropriation.' ⁴ (LAWSON, 1986) Opposition to the consumption of art objects as merely material commodities was present both in the 18th century theories of the civic humanist's aesthetics (Joshua Reynolds, James Barry, and Henry Fuseli); and in the early writings of Greenberg.

But if Reynolds saw art's elite community as in danger of disappearing Greenberg saw it as having substantially disappeared. No significant fraction of the directing classes appeared able to resist the counterfeit culture, the 'Kitsch' that it's economic machinery had brought into being. In his view the pre-capitalist cultural inheritance of the bourgeoisie had simply been merchandised away in so many commodities fashioned in the likeness of a once-living art. The bourgeois elites, Greenberg argued, no longer possessed a culture distinct from the debased products of the entertainment industries and hence constituted no adequate public, no adequate community for the serious artist. ⁵ (Crow, 1987, p.5)

This again has particular relevance to postmodernism and to the use of historical fragments, whether critically or as signifiers. The use of the avant garde strategy of recuperation as a means of questioning the notion of what is

or is not art, seems to be no longer useful. Also, if as Greenberg says, the bourgeois elites are no longer an adequate public for the 'serious artist', then at whom will the postmodernists aim their productions?

The recuperation strategy failed, due to the capacity of the art market and the bourgeois society not only to absorb and neutralize every shock, but as O'Neill has said 'even replay these outrages in anything from a rock video to a commercial.' In short, O'Neill says: 'The faster the cultural industry runs to outrage its bourgeoisie, the surer it can be of its own embourgeoisement'⁶.

Hal Foster questions the postmodernists' continued use of the past as a critical device:

The marginal absorbed, the heterogeneous rendered homogeneous: one term for this is "recuperation." In modern art recuperation often occurred when the non- or antiartistic was made aesthetic. Such recuperation is not now what it was for Duchamp, for the space of the aesthetic has changed (indeed its very category is in doubt). Shock, scandal estrangement: these are no longer tactics against conventional thought—they are conventional thought. As such they need to be rethought. Only that process too is in many ways conventional: as Barthes noted, such demystification is now the norm. This is not to say that it is useless — only that such criticism is subject to the very mythologizing that it would expose. (Foster, 1985, p. 26)

It is important to note in what Foster is saying that such a process is not useless. However, the present misunderstanding of its use by the postmodernists brings into question its effectiveness for their aims. Modernism to the end tried to use recuperation of the marginal or anti-aesthetic to shock the establishment. Foster, dealing with this says that the

reliance of such art on museums 'pushed art into a paradoxical position'. Ultimately the failure of the recuperation strategy and the replacement of the bourgeoisie with institutions has led to the present questioning of both modernism and its methodology.

Late modernism was literally corrupted - broken up. Its self-critical impulse was retained, but its ethical tone was rejected. This rejection led to an aestheticism of the non - or antiartistic. Such a reaction (much conceptual art is representative) allowed for many new modes of art: hybrid, ephemeral, site specific, textual. It also fostered an "institutional theory" of art - namely that art is what the institutional authority (eg. the museum) says it is. This theory pushed art into a paradoxical position: for if it was true that much art could only be seen as art within the museum, it was also true that much art (often the same) was critical of the museum - specifically, of the way the museum defined art in terms of autonomous history and contained it within a museological space. But this impasse was only apparent; and art continued to be made both against the institutional theory and in its name. ⁶ (Foster, 1985, p.14)

The erosion of the bourgeois patronage and its replacement by capital and state (institutional patronage), according to Foster has led to an erosion of the function and place of art and art criticism. The result of this, he says, is that '...art is regarded mostly as entertainment or spectacle (of interest to the public primarily as a financial item) and criticism as so many opinions to consume'. (Foster p.4) However, the art market boom and inflationary prices for art works has meant that the art museums with their limited budgets can no longer compete with corporate patrons and art

speculators. Besides inflating prices, art speculation has other undesirable effects. Because in many cases the works are being bought as investments, the name of the artist becomes more important than the picture. Art has become quite simply currency - its meanings are no longer necessary for the art market. (Adorno, 'The commodity is its own ideology.') Nevertheless, the reduced spending power of the museums may have a positive effect, since according to Martha Rosler, they were failing in their primary function, ie to provide public access to 'high art', and had become mass-culturalized, having lost much of their discriminatory skill. She deals with the effects of this loss of high culture status and the institutionalization of art in her essay on The public function of art. She states that the 'isolation and impotence that afflict artists are predictable' due to the loss of social meaning and standing of the artist. The bastions of culture (galleries and museums) are, she says, 'being transformed into specialized sites of its supposed adversary, mass culture.'

Rather, the current perceived crisis of art stems from the apparent swamping of the relative social prestige and significance of elite culture by mass culture, with the consequent evaporation of any dimension of remove - whether critical consciousness, aesthetic transcendence or some more spiritualized aim. ⁹ (Rosler, 1987, p.11)

Rosler quotes Alan Kaprow who, she says, 'was distressed over the art world's failure to notice that it had lost it's audience to the far more interesting perceptual effects of everyday life'. He writes with, I suspect, as much truth as humour:

To escape from the traps of art, it is not enough to be against museums or to stop producing marketable objects; the artist of the future must learn how to evade his profession....Kaprow goes on to choose these; NASA exchanges [between Houston and Apollo 11] over electronic music;.... Las Vegas gas stations over contemporary architecture; "the random trance like movements" of supermarket shoppers over modern dance...etc.;etc.; and finally asserts that non art is more art than Art-art.¹⁰ (Rosler,1987,p.10)

Is this to be the way of postmodernism ? To learn how to evade itself? Was late modernist production so inept that even its audience abandoned it ? In the future will the mass/high culture distinction be so blurred, as to cast doubt on the very production of art? The questions for whom art is made, the need for integrity of the arts, and the need for criticality are all very pressing problems for artists. The danger is that the art of the present may dissolve in a situation where no style, mode of production, or critical position is dominant and so be rendered impotent. Hal Foster calls such a situation pluralism and believes it to be here already.

The questioning of modernism which has now become the 'old' way, is indeed necessary, but in my view there should be some urgency about resolving the doubts of many people, as to the methodology of present postmodernism in achieving aims. These doubts arise from confused and fragmented argument, and if no resolved, may cause postmodernism to degenerate into pluralism a process which some people believe has already begun.

A polemic against pluralism is not a plea for old truths. Rather a plea to invent new truths or, more precisely, to reinvent old truths radically. If this is not done, these old truths simply return debased or disguised (as the general

conservatism of the present culture makes clear). Many modern premises are now eroded. The impulse toward autonomy, the desire for pure presence in art, the concept of negative commitment (ie. criticism by withdrawal) these and other tenets must be rethought or rejected. But the need for critical art, the desire for radical change are these premises invalid too? are we quite sure that such avant-garde motives are obsolete? Granted, the logic of the avant-garde often did seem foreclosed. But pluralism answers with a foreclosure-an indifference-of its own, one that absorbs radical art no less than it entertains regressive art. This, then, is the crucial issue that faces both art and criticism today how to regain or (restore) a radicality to art without a new foreclosure or dogmatism. Such foreclosure, it is now clear can come from a post modern "return to history" no less than of a modern "reductionism". ¹¹ (Foster, 1985, p.31)

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER TWO

AFFINITIES BETWEEN THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ART AND POSTMODERNISM, AND THE POTENTIAL EFFECTS ON EACH

The need for a comprehensive review of art in society

The relevance and emergence of New Art
History (social history of art)

The postmodern aspects of the social history of art

The benefits to postmodernists of social historians of
art having deconstructed misleading art-historical
concepts

The implications for the social history of art should
postmodernism fail

The irrelevance of the modernist ethos and the failure of its methods provides an opportunity for artists to review their situation in society and to question again the function and usefulness of their work for that society. I believe that a substantially new approach is needed. In the formulation of new methods to achieve a useful art, postmodernists should first examine previous artistic methods and situations. Such a review is already under way by a group of socialist art historians who are sometimes called the new art historians. These historians are not, however, a cohesive group though, in fact, they share each others aims and employ similar methods.

Rather than a tidy description of one trend, the new art history is a capacious and convenient title that sums up the impact of feminist, marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, and social-political ideas on a discipline notorious for its conservative taste in art and its orthodoxy in research. ¹ (Rees, Borzello, 1986, p.2)

Social history of art, we are told, is at present giving not only art, but also the society which enshrines it, a long hard look. This is something which postmodernists whose wish is to make active a living art which has integrity, and is critical of society, will need to do. In the introduction to their book New Art History? the editors A.L.Rees and F.Borzello state the aims of the new art historians:

They question the status of art, and the almost automatic assumption that art means paintings and sculptures in certain styles. They ask how such objects and not others came to be called "art" in the first place, and why they alone are worthy of study. Unimpressed by the special claims made for art, they ask what purpose it served for the people who owned it and for those who look at it today in books, stately homes, museums and galleries. Art's subject matter is scrutinized and questions asked as to why the

poor, or landscapes, or women look as they do in the "representations" art makes of them. Art's economic and political role in contemporary society is addressed, in particular the sometimes camouflaged links between scholarship and the market, and the uses made of art by states or corporations anxious to polish up their images. ²
(Rees, Borzello, 1986, p.4)

How new art history itself emerged is important to the understanding of where its future lies, and what effects this future might have for postmodernism.

In 1974 T.J.Clark called in the Times Literary Supplement for a renewal of art history. Clark saw that art history was isolated from history, economics, politics and social life. What he wanted was a social history of art, which Paul Overy says is described more accurately as a 'historical materialist' history of art.

In 1975 , under Clark's influence, an MA course in the social history of art was taught in Leeds University.

In 1979 the publication of the magazine Block from Middlesex Polytechnic, facilitated the expression of radical ideas by art and design historians.

However, it was not until 1982, at a conference in Middlesex that the new art history term was first used. The phrase 'New Art History?' was given a 'telling question mark to imply a certain scepticism about its usage.'

In my view, the futures of both postmodernism and the social history of art should be linked. I believe that their coincidental emergence at the end of modernism is no accident.

Harold Rosenberg once wrote in his essay on "Revolution and the concept of beauty" That "Revolution in art lies not in the will to destroy but in the revelation of what is already

poor, or landscapes, or women look as they do in the "representations" art makes of them. Art's economic and political role in contemporary society is addressed, in particular the sometimes camouflaged links between scholarship and the market, and the uses made of art by states or corporations anxious to polish up their images. ²
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Harold Rosenberg once wrote in his essay on "Revolution and the concept of beauty" That "Revolution in art lies not in the will to destroy but in the revelation of what is already

destroyed. Art kills only the dead.".... a revolutionary, or indeed a "new" cultural critique derives its potency from the fact that the "old" positions are already bankrupt. Art history, in other words, kills only the dead.
^a (Bann,1986,p.19)

At first the linking of 'new art history' and postmodernism might seem irrelevant. Yet although I have not found reference to postmodernism in connection with the new art historians, I do believe their investigation of the practices of the previous historical methodology, coupled with their emergence at the end of modernism could warrant them the title of postmodern.

The meaning and function of postmodernism is to operate at places of closure, at the limits of modernist productions and practices, at the margins of what proclaims to be new and break with tradition, and at the multiple edges of these claims to self-consciousness and auto-reflection. (Silverman,1990,p.1)

This quote would seem to be saying that since postmodernism is questioning what claims to be new, that new art history would be included in this. However, as Bann has pointed out, art history kills only the dead. He suggests that there is no reason to suppose that a revolutionary practice of art history has emerged or is likely to do so just because a significant number of art historians have committed themselves to radical or social causes. I agree that the label 'new art history' may be misleading. Therefore instead of using the term 'new art history', I have chosen to use the term social historians of art. By this I mean to denote the attitudes of new art historians, without the implication of newness.

The title new art history seems to me to be inappropriate. This subject also contain elements of 'old' history. Social historians of art are concerning themselves with the review of 'old' history, and as such 'new' art history is really a continuation of 'old' art history with new ideas incorporated.

A similar difficulty exists in the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, in that postmodernism is deconstructing modernism. This means that the lines of demarcation and the distinction between modernism and postmodernism are not well defined. Kuspit says that postmodernism has gone even further and perhaps forced the problem of identity into a situation where a conclusive solution will be extremely difficult.

The term 'postmodern' implies contradiction of the modern without transcendence of it. This is, I take it, what Jean Francois Lyotard means when he writes that "the post modern...is undoubtedly a part of the modern." Clearly, part of the identity problem of postmodernism is to identify the modern. Instead postmodernism has reified the problem of identity, absolutizing identity crisis as it were. ⁵(Kuspit,1990,p.60)

The investigation by the postmodernists of modernism is not simply a refusal to accept the modernist principles and perspectives. As I have said in chapter one, postmodernism aims at the extension and closure, if necessary, of its fundamental doctrines and actions.

Therefore the identity crisis seems also to apply to the title of new art history when this is viewed as a postmodern entity.

The emergence of the social history of art and the felt need for postmodernism was, I believe, due to the seeming lack of integrity and the ease of acceptance of late modernist productions. The aim of new art history and the aim of what Kuspit called 'authentic post modernism' are the same, to criticize the present situation. Both are attempting this through returning to the past, and with the use of this tactic they aim to criticize the lack of integrity which still exists in the present.

The criticism of the present which has been described as late capitalist would, I believe, be based in a socialist perspective to society. The seeming rapprochement of postmodernist productions with their audience indicates to me that this may be what is being attempted. Similarly, the influences of new art history are also based in socialism.

The theoretical strand draws on marxist and continental literary theory, psychoanalysis and the critique of patriarchy by the women's movement. Part of the aim is to "deconstruct" the most familiar and unquestioned ideas, in particular the notion that the work of art is a direct expression of the artist's personality, the belief that art contains eternal truths free of class and time and the conviction that art is somehow above society or out of its reach. ⁶
(Rees, Borzello, 1986, p.8)

The key word of this passage is 'deconstruct'. It shows that the same strategy is shared by postmodernists and social historians of art. Silverman has said that the very significance of postmodernism is to 'marginalize, delimit, disseminate, and de-centre the primary (and often secondary)

works of modernist and pre-modernist cultural inscriptions'.

⁷ (Silverman,1990,p.1)

However I believe that the current misunderstanding of postmodernism is intensified by some of its methodology. For instance, there appears to be no comprehensive 'delimitation' of modernism. This is due to postmodernism's 'fragmented, discontinuous, multiple and dispersed' methods and thinking. Because of the resultant confusion of this type of thinking and methodology (even among postmodernists themselves), is this really a valid technique for achieving their aims?

Postmodernist thinking enframes, circumscribes, and delimits modernist thinking.....This closure occurs in many places and in many different ways. Postmodernism enframes modernism without identity or unity. It is fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, and dispersed. Where modernism asserts centring, focusing, continuity - once the break with tradition has already occurred - postmodernism de-centres, enframes, discontinues, and fragments the prevalence of modernist ideals. But this self delimitation does not occur all at once. Indeed, the coordinate philosophical practices of the early 20th century reaffirm, reconstruct, and then set the stage for their own circumscription.
^a (Silverman,1990,p.5)

The approach to history by the social historians of art is not systematic either. Overy is critical of their lack of attention to movements such as Italian Futurism, German Expressionism, or Russian Constructivism. Such significant omissions, coupled with the choosing of subjects which fit their theories only, will not inspire confidence in their approach to their subject.

Postmodernism could gain from the results of questioning the methodology of art history in its construction of misleading ideas. Some of the concepts which are being deconstructed would be genius, pure space, 'the notion that the work of art is a direct expression of the artist's personality,' and in particular, the question of where art should be located. The social historians of art are critical of the institutionalization of art. It is regrettable that museums seem to insist on defining art in terms of autonomous history, in order to remove art from doubt, thus allowing themselves to posit art as the work of geniuses.

It is this concept of genius that is perhaps most detrimental to the return of art to social usefulness. In essence this is their corner stone used to jerrybuild⁹ art from its true social position into its present undesirable one. After all, traditionally it is by turning men into myths that historians remove art from doubt. Paradoxically, this mythification has also contributed to the downgrading of art from its high status position, by pandering to the desire of mass culture for stars and heroes. Erich Fromm suggests that it is the insecurity which modern society has bred, that characterizes the compensatory craving for fame and success in our culture.

Some historians like Griselda Pollock, have begun to question how art history has worked to exclude history, class, and ideology from its discourse. The purpose of such a removal is to create an ideologically pure space for 'Art' which she says is 'sealed off from and impenetrable to any attempt to

locate art practice within a history of production and social relations'. She quotes Frederik Antal from his paper on Remarks on the method of art history, 1949.

Although lately it has become fashionable to introduce a few historical facts, these may only enter the art historical picture when confined to hackneyed political history, in a diluted form, which give as little indications as possible of the existing structure of society and does not disturb the romantic twilight atmosphere. The last redoubt which will be held as long as possible is, of course, the most deep rooted nineteenth century belief..... of the incalculable nature of genius in art. ¹⁰ (Pollock, 1988, p76)

She (Pollock) sites this 'nature of genius' as the nucleus of the problem in attempting to find or write a social history of art. The detachment of the artist from real history and his placement in pure space is accomplished through art historical research and writing. Pollock calls the two main forms the 'monograph', a study of the artist's life and work; and the 'catalogue raisonne', the collection of the complete oeuvre of the artist. This falsely creates a form of coherence of an individual creator, whose work has been gathered in an 'expressive totality'.

The preoccupation with the individual artist is symptomatic of the work accomplished in art history – the production of an artistic subject for works of art. The subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning – ie of art, and the effect of this is to remove art from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the "expression" of the creative personality of the artist. ¹¹ (Pollock, 1988, p.76)

Another aspect of the relationship between postmodernism and the social history of art is that, should postmodernism fail to establish potency, it will degenerate into a state of

pluralist futility. If as Foster says, pluralism seems to dismiss the need of critical art, it also seems to dismiss 'old avatars like the original artist and the authentic masterwork'.

But this is not so: as pluralism is without criteria of its own, old values are revived, values necessary to a market based on taste and connoisseurship. These notions are backed up by an art history concerned mainly with style, attribution, dating, authenticity, rarity, reconstruction, the detection of forgery, the rediscovery of forgotten artists and the meanings of pictures. This type of art history explains and classifies art but does not question it. So if postmodernism degenerates into pluralism, then it is the 'old' art history which will serve the needs of the market.

In short postmodernism will, like the social historians of art, have to see their art as intimately linked with the society which produces and consumes it, rather than something mysterious which happens as a result of artistic genius. It is such a lapse into pluralism which must be avoided. For the postmodernists and the social historians of art, the prevention of this necessitates a look at the problems in their practices which may become obstacles to the achievement of their aims.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

PROBLEMATICS OF NEW ART HISTORY AND POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism as a matrix for the social history of art

Lack of radicality in the theories of the social history of art

Danger of nihilist approach to deconstruction

Pretentious theorizing arising from the potential impotence of criticism since modernism

Three postmodern interpretations:

- uncritical exhumation and pillage of past art forms
- aimless parodying
- decoration and ornament as sign and symbol

Formulation of a new theory of socialistic criticality to answer the question of whom to serve

I have already discussed the problems of the title of 'New Art History?'. With or without the question mark it can be very misleading. The idea of a social history of art has been partially tackled before. Antal, Hauser and Klingender all used historical materialism as their conceptual tool. Antal and other commentators on bourgeois art history recognised, as mentioned in chapter two, the 'incalculable nature of genius in art.' In 1947 Klingender wrote Art and the Industrial Revolution. However this generation of art historians were ignored and impacted little on the art of the day.

The new social history of art differs from that of Antal, Hauser or Klingender in that it has absorbed, or at least taken note of, structuralism and semiotics at a theoretical level, and feminism at a pragmatic level. Thus the new art history is more sophisticated methodologically than that of the 1930's and 1940's which is not, of course, to say that it is better. ¹ (Overy,1986,p.136)

Overy is sceptical as to whether the present generation have made or will ever make a difference. The present situation is, however, different to that of the 1930's and 1940's. I believe authentic postmodern questioning of society's integrity fits very well with the aims of those new social historians of art who would question the integrity of art. As a result the questioning of postmodern artists and the social historians of art may impact both on each other, and on society.

However, based on my own experiences of gallery tours, the fact that some gallery's guides are already taking on board the approach of social historians of art, in my opinion,

points to a danger, namely, that any element of criticality that social historians of art have is being significantly reduced already.

When an article analyzes the images of women in paintings rather than the qualities of the brush work, or when a gallery lecturer ignores the sheen of the Virgin Mary's robe for the Church's use of religious art in the Counter-Reformation, the new art history is casting its shadow.
²(Rees, Borzello, 1986, p.2)

Similarly, the fact that Open University has had a course on Modernism and Modern art written by new art historians, does not, in my view, point to the success of the new art historians. Rather, they may not be radical enough in their approach to their subject, if such doors are opening so easily. In effect, it seems rather pointless to go to so much effort and in the end only dish up a different set of truths acceptable to the establishment. Overy, in his criticism of the new art historians, cites the reliance on critics such as Greenberg who has made a number of personal appearances in the Open University course. He (Overy) regards this as being inappropriate to the genuine renewal of art history. He also suggests that the tradition of Antal, and Klingender needs to be looked at critically again as the means of progression.

Rees and Borzello refer to two distinctive trends in new art history: the interest in the social aspects of art and the stress on theory. They point out a difference of approach in the new art historians to the strand in mainstream art history which tried to place art in its social context. The mainstream tactic started from art and worked outwardly; the new form

reverses this procedure, looking from the social fabric to the art it produces. The theoretical trend applies the feminist critique of patriarchy, psychoanalytic theories, and literary theory to art history. There is however, a danger of pushing both approaches to the extreme. In reducing art completely to social realities and regarding any belief in an autonomous or independent art as a subterfuge, they risk overlooking the art they are analyzing. In an attempt to break it down into examples of sexual repression, class distinctions, or any other aim, they may ignore whatever qualities make it art.

Any extreme de-construction, whether in the social history of art or postmodernism, can easily break down into a form of nihilism. This excessive approach, of destruction for destruction's sake would, I believe, be unsuitable to any artistic endeavour. The essence of art is to create not destroy.

The problems of postmodernism are complex, and the implications for the future serious. In their rejection of modernist ideals, postmodernism intimates that the achievement of the core self is not only difficult, but impossible. The fragmented and discontinuous approach may be a device intended to prevent the easy understanding of postmodern intentions by society. However, I think, it seems to have led to confusion among the postmodernists instead. Some like Kuspit, say it may be interpreted as the promoter of cultural schizophrenia. Also I find it noteworthy that the confusion has not prevented the acceptance of postmodern productions by the art market.

In particular, with regard to the return to history, this return\swing has in fact been greeted and encouraged by the art market whose appetite for commodities\objects had been starved in recent times by transitory styles of conceptual, process, and site-specific art. If the postmodernists intend such a return as a critical device, it is clearly failing.

The importance of postmodern ideology is at present being protected by mystique. Kuspit suggests that this may be due to a crisis in the belief and power of criticism. He also suggests that present theorizing may be a pretentious displaying of critical power rather than an accurate reflection of contemporary society. If this is a true representation of the current situation, then it is to be regretted.

Postmodernism is more of a program developed by theorists than the common reality of contemporary society and culture. Postmodernism is a rhapsodic, elusive, exhilarating concept, used with licence, because the hopes and fears – anxious ambitions? – of theorists are riding on it. I suggest that the term 'postmodernism' is deliberately kept flexible and enchanting – so rich with connotations that it dissolves on direct contact with reality – as a pretentious, pseudo autonomous display of theory's critical power in its bourgeois situation of social impotence.

³(Kuspit,1990,p.54)

The result of this overkill of theorizing has importance for postmodern producers. Kuspit has said that the theories dissolve on contact with reality. This calls into question the attempted productions of postmodernists. The confusion of theories has led to an 'inflationary and often contradictory use of the term postmodernism'(Schulte-Sasse). Schulte-Sasse

says that as long as postmodernism is understood to refer to 'qualitative changes' then its contradictory use does not have to concern us. I, like Kuspit, believe this attitude makes it difficult to assess whether such changes are qualitative or not, and the contradictoriness of its use intensifies the crisis situation.

The internal division may lead to a conquering of a sort, and to the predicament of pluralism, in which, although all forms of art could be produced, pluralism renders them all equally (un)important. Thus art and criticism are rendered impotent.

The main contradiction revolves around the return to history by the postmodernists such as that in the painting of Julian Schnabel or the recent architecture of Charles Moore.

It is interpreted by critics in three different ways:

- It may be simply a pillaging of past styles without comment or criticism, in which conflictual forms of art are falsely resolved in pastiche;
- It may be that the return to the past is done in a parodic way, so that the art retains a critical distance from the recycled images and styles;
- Or it may be that the purpose of the return is to find symbolic significance for a criticism of the present.

If it is that the return to the past is uncritical, then I believe the status, position, and future of art would all be in doubt. The function of art in such a postmodern society would be reduced to providing 'decor for junk bond capitalism'. The questions (re commodification, audience,

criticality) which were raised at the start of this essay would become inconsequential. Such supposed criticality and questioning of postmodernism would be a false subterfuge - a sales ploy aimed at the inflation of the egos of artists and consumers.

Foster believes that uncritical artistic pillage is indeed taking place, and describes the present from this point of view:

The present in art has a strange form, at once full and empty, and a strange tense, a sort of neo-now moment of "arriere-avant-gardism." Many artists borrow promiscuously from both historical and modern art. But these references rarely engage the source - let alone the present - deeply. And the typical artist is often "foot-loose in time, culture and metaphor": a dilettante because he thinks that, as he entertains the past, he is beyond the exigency of the present; a dunce because he assumes a delusion; and a dangling man because historical moment - our present problematic - is lost. ⁴(Foster, 1985, p.16)

If it is that the return to the past is parodic, it should be seen as a reversal of modernist orientation. This approach would consist of two parts - the return, and the twist. In this case parody would be seen as a way of avoiding nostalgia or sentimentality, the more common motivation for such returns in mass culture.

Kuspit asks why should there be a return to the past. It would not really be appropriate to the present if the motivation was parody. Such ironic and parodic references would then seem to serve no other purpose than a showy display, a verification of differences between postmodernist and modernist productions. Whether in painting, architecture,

or other modes of art, the validity of this strategy is in doubt.

Kuspit contrasts the parodic approach of cultural theorist, Linda Hutcheon with his own theory which is based on the approach of architectural historians such as Heinrich Klotz.

For her, there is a double aspect to postmodernist criticality in general: the return to the past (presumably the passive element in it), and the return to it in a parodic way (where the parodic is a way of avoiding sentimentality or directionless and speechless nostalgia, and is thus presumably the active element in it). The postmodernist return to the past is generally critical of modernism, with its presumed repudiation of the past. And the parodic relation to the past is particularly critical, for the return does not mean that one is taken in by the past, but rather that one remains a "critical" distance from it. " (Kuspit,1990,p.62)

Kuspit sees this approach as a giant step towards history and only a small parodic step away from it. He believes that the recuperation of the past must have significance to the present.

If the return to the past is to find symbolic significance for a criticism of the present, then an empathetic relationship to the art historical past would expand the potentiality of the past for postmodernism. Such a form of postmodernism, without denying the presence of technology, would aim to restore humanity to predominance.

In fact, hidden behind the self-importance of the parodic return to the past, there is an attempt to achieve some kind of intimate relationship to it. Postmodernist architecture attempts to appropriate the past not as a dead, over-esthetized form but as a living, symbolic substance, charged with contemporary significance - which is the only way the past can remain

viable. The return to the past is in effect a criticism of the present's lack of integrity, and is in purpose motivated by an effort to recover that integrity as a symbolic form.
⁶(Kuspit,1990,p.64)

For me the symbolic use of the past is the more preferable of the three. Nevertheless, it has its own inherent problems. Such an empathetic relationship may miss the full realities of the past. Appropriating elements as signs possibly exaggerates the importance of them. Thus, postmodernism may begin to glorify the productions of modernism or pre-modernism instead of de-constructing them. Postmodernists may also be at cross purposes with social historians of art if they appropriate, and thus solidify, the bourgeois-type mentality that rendered such signs impotent in previous eras.

In postmodernist architecture, which most agree is the most advanced postmodernist art form, the new buildings are filled once again with pictorial, imaginative and other sensory stimuli. Decoration and ornament are again permitted as symbol and sign. Kuspit deals with this shift in emphasis from the severity of modernist architecture to the *joie de vivre* of postmodernism.

Where the modernist building was the metaphor for the modern ideal of robotic man, the postmodernist building is an attempt to make buildings once again like essentially organic human beings, however integrated with the machine. ⁷(Kuspit,1990,p.67)

This results in a rapprochement which literally re-establishes friendly relationships between people, their environment, and technology. It is fitting that the most visible of the arts,

architecture, is serving human needs once again. Yet with the overabundance of decoration and ornament, postmodern architects run the risk of creating chaos and confusion and of losing the significance of their signs or symbols. In such a situation the risk of misinterpretation is increased, and the detection of what is intended as critical as opposed to what is merely decorative is increasingly difficult. 'A line needs to be drawn between astute and conscious bricolage as a practice and a merely stylistic melange.' ⁶(Bode,1988,p.68)

The necessary ingredient for a living art appears to be criticality. Without it, artistic integrity is impossible. If one is to believe that postmodernism is lacking in criticality then the art it produces will be redundant as an effective means of progression. In a pluralistic world artistic production, even that which attempted to be critical, would inevitably be reduced to craft. As Greenberg warned earlier, the productions of a pluralistic postmodernism would be indistinguishable from mass culture, and as such would be regarded in terms of financial worth and entertainment value alone.

If the use of the past as a signifier of the deficient integrity of the present is not intelligible from the abuse of it for various ulterior motives, then the consequent reduction in status will be similar in either case.

The interpretation which suggests that the postmodern return to the past is a parody of the past, is lacking validity due to the insignificance of such parodying. Kuspit is particularly critical of this postmodern theory. He says that the refusal of postmodern theorists to recognise the

obsolescence of such 'old' criticality is actively frustrating the formulation of a 'new' criticality.

....the theory of postmodernism absolutizes a bankrupt vision of the critical as parodic irony.....This is criticality in acceptable bourgeois form. Parodic irony is criticality without its poisonous sting, the empty shell of criticality, criticality that has been castrated.
°(Kuspit,1990,p.56)

The formulation of the theory of this new criticality is of vital importance to both postmodernists and social historians of art.

Activist criticality seems to be able to exist paranoically only as a rage because it unconsciously experiences itself as peculiarly illegitimate or impossible - threatened in its very existence - in contemporary bourgeois society. It is lost in a kind of no-man's-land; more precisely, it has become peculiarly irrelevant in bourgeois society, so that activist criticality has no clear side or revolutionary cause to serve. Paradoxically, this is just because social differences have become perversely irreconcilable: class conflict has become hypostatized. Philosophically, this can be regarded as the collapse of dialectic, the much acknowledged inability to achieve totality, or rather the recognition of a perverse totalization of society through the principle of permanent contradiction. ¹⁶(Kuspit,1990,p.58)

The criticism of modernism was firmly based in Marxian socialism which was seen as the antithesis to capitalism. However, with the failure of modernism, many socialists are reviewing the effectiveness of Marxian theories to achieve socialist aims. For Marx, it was the worker in opposition to capital. However, a variety of factors such as the effectiveness of mass culture, the partial recuperation of

Marxist philosophies by corporate industries and the lack of cohesion within international divisions of labour has meant only minor modifications of capitalist society. The emphasis may have to change from the worker to new social forces such as women, blacks, gay movements, ecological groups, the third world and other minorities. In effect this change would be from economic identity to social difference. In essence, Marxism seems, like modernism, to have dead ended.

Therefore the most important element of a new actively critical postmodern theory must deal effectively and urgently with the question of whom to serve.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER THREE

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CONCLUSION

A healthy part of postmodernism is its attitude of rapprochement, whereby it becomes less intimidating to ordinary people. However, this is only healthy on condition that it still retains a high level of integrity.

I do believe that the modernist ethos is no longer relevant and that postmodernism contains potential for progression. Modernist criticism of society became ineffective and irrelevant, but though there is potential for progression in postmodern thinking, it is too early yet to assess that potentiality.

I can see an attempt by postmodernists to evaluate both their own attitudes and those of society. However, I am concerned that the strength of their efforts to be critical is being diluted by disagreement and confused thinking.

Any new criticality will presuppose that marginalized people will change their perspective, and come to see their condition as tending towards positive rather than negative. It will also include artists seeing themselves as marginalized people in an equally positive fashion. A partnership of marginalized people would release hidden strengths while still retaining individual identities. If such a partnership does not evolve the current confusion and disagreement will continue with its attendant impotence.

Whether postmodernism alone can resist degenerating into pluralism it is too early to say. Without the valuable asset of hindsight, to draw conclusions now would be premature.

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