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A New Modernity

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“Twentieth-century art has done a very, very good job. What job? To open people’s eyes, to open people’s ears. What better things could have been done? We must turn our attention now I think to other things, and these things are social.”

—John Cage; cited by Victor Burgin in *Between*, London, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986

Modern art was once considered dangerous. One thinks of Goya; of David and Delacroix; of the scandals surrounding Courbet, Manet and the Impressionists; of the initial hostility to Cubism; of the reception of the 1913 Armory Show; of Dada and Surrealist provocations; and of the Nazi and Stalinist repressions, for different but parallel reasons, of “decadent” or “bourgeois” modernism. Since the 1950’s in the Western democracies, however, modern art has been fully assimilated into the mechanisms of public bureaucracies and the private commercial market. The only notable exceptions to this assimilation have been artists such as Beuys, during a brief period at the end of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, and Hans Haacke and other politically and socially oriented figures. The danger posed by these tendencies, which until recently were considered marginal, is that they transgress the ideologically imposed limitations erected around what Peter Bürger has correctly called the institution of contemporary art. Such transgressions liberate art from an academicized pseudo-modernity which appears to extend the previous achievements of aesthetic modernity, but which in fact only codifies them within narrowly defined limits. The consequence of these transgressions is to illuminate previously unnoticed myths, be they aesthetic, theoretical, or social, and to confront the instrumentalisms of thought and social practice which inevitably accompany these myths. The growing number of artists who pursue these goals, many of whom are included in Documenta 8, is creating a new modernity which is comparable to earlier phases of the modern tradition.

At the center of this new modernity is a rediscovery of, and a return to, the original *critical* and *emancipatory* functions of modern art. During the nineteenth century the critical power of modernity, when it was not swamped by a triumphant myth of Progress, as opposed to the real human progress achieved in medicine, communication and general well-being—remained for the most part implicit or latent, whereby a creatively alienated minority depicted the exterior imperfections of society, or, later, discovered the subjective epistemologies underlying modern life. Thus a Goya or a Géricault offered a visual bearing of witness, using isolation, displacement and dramatic presentation; while artists of the generation of Manet and Cézanne, although still presenting the external world, uncovered and rendered in visual terms those mental structures and conventions which would otherwise have remained hidden.

The critical potential of modernity was both intensified and narrowed during the era of classic modernism and its canonic sequence of movements from the 1880's to the 1930's. Despite the abundant evidence pointing to the social radicalism of Seurat and Pissarro, the anarchist sympathies of Picasso, or the anti-rationalist, anti-bourgeois intentions of the Dadaists and Surrealists, the predominant achievement of the classic modernisms was a subjective, critical reflexivity: the demonstration of the substantive, epistemological structures of cognitive consciousness within a given cultural tradition, most notably that of French cartesian dualism. The same critical reflexivity appeared elsewhere, often through the catalytic effect of the reflexively transformed classicism of Cubism, as in the anti-transcendent yet unworldly icons of Malevich or in Tatlin's even more secularized constructions, or in Mondrian's cubist-inspired transformations of the Protestant landscape into a mental universe of quasi-mystic harmonies. A similar catalytic effect occurred a generation later, when the Surrealist subversion of a priori rationality through dream, eroticism, and especially the automatist exploration of the Freudian subconscious, precipitated the grand critical reflexivity of an indigenous American epistemological tradition in the works of Pollock, David Smith and their Abstract Expressionist contemporaries. Cubism and Surrealism thus engendered a reflexive modernism within diverse cultural traditions which shared with France only the general Western commitment to the classically derived mimesis of academic representation. To summarize: within the overall history of modernity, the term "modernism" should be understood as a condition of critical reflexivity, by which the epistemological traditions of a culture were isolated and restated in such a way that they became evident to the members of that culture, thus providing the basis for a subjective, individual and emancipatory (even if often unhappy) self-awareness. It is of the greatest importance that this critical reflexivity of modernism be separated from the misreading of modernism which emerged during the later 1950's and early 1960's in the circle around the American critic Greenberg, at a time when the critical reflexivity of Abstract Expressionist modernism was fading and was in need of an ideological extension of its life span. This misreading, which gained international acceptance, did grasp the reflexive character of modernism but shifted its locus from the epistemological to the categorical: a "modernist" work

would seek to remain within the specific characteristics of its medium and would develop those elements unique to that medium. This materialist version of a revived Kantian aesthetic autonomy owes more than a little to the disillusionment of Greenberg and his intellectual contemporaries with Stalinism at the end of the 1930's, and the resulting shift of energies and aspirations from the political to the cultural/aesthetic domain as a refuge. Greenberg's shift, which is somewhat comparable to Adorno's defense of an endangered European high culture in his mature writings, is understandable in the context of the later 1930's and the 1940's. In the 1950's and 1960's, however, this "modernist" position was, implicitly, no longer modern in its rejection of any critical role for art other than that of self-definition, in its plea for specialized expertise, and in its encouragement of an institutionalization of aesthetic autonomy within society as a whole.

In a well known essay of 1980, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," Jürgen Habermas raises important issues concerning Surrealism in particular but applicable to other modern movements as well: "When the containers of an autonomously developed sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow." Habermas raises a second, equally important point, that the emancipatory effect of the aesthetic, even if realized, would not pass into other autonomous spheres of modern life. These two issues require careful analysis in the context of reflexive modernisms and their sequels. What Habermas implies, but does not state specifically in his essay, is that any emancipatory effect which modernism might achieve is the result of its challenges to the aesthetic equivalents of cultural norms within a bourgeois, individualist society. These challenges, as has been suggested above, arose from the unveiling of epistemological and cognitive traditions; and those traditions themselves were "saving remnants" surviving from a pre-modern, theological and metaphysical era in secularized (*pace* Blumenberg) but still substantive versions. Thus any emancipatory effect of modernism is limited, as Habermas stated, to an aesthetic, subjective (and Adornesque) dimension; it is a preaching to already predisposed if not converted individuals. In this specific case, cultural modernism has fulfilled a role as an unofficial and secularized personal religion, an opiate for the educated middle classes. For art to have an emancipatory role beyond the realm of the aesthetic and the personal, it would have to open to the life-world; but to the extent that aesthetic modernism enters the world, as in Dada and Surrealist actions, it loses its identity as art. Conversely, to the extent that the unaltered life-world enters art, it is identifiable as art only by an art context; without that context, which functions as a version of Habermas' "containers of an autonomously developed sphere," an emancipatory, anti-instrumental effect is lost. Thus the Duchampian Ready Mades, as well as their 1960's offspring—ordinary objects and materials, photographs, words, numbers—cease to exist as art when they re-enter the life-world. The only solution to this dilemma, which in essence is that of transforming modernism from the personal to the public, has been for artists to turn either to the iconography of pre-modern myths and metaphors, as with Beckmann or the Picasso of the later 1930's and 1940's; or to the

utopian imposition of the distilled forms and principles of modernism upon the world, as in Esprit Nouveau, Constructivism, de Stijl, or the Bauhaus. All such utopias, with their accompanying aestheticized instrumentalisms and social engineering, have long ago collapsed into academicism and bureaucratic orthodoxy, with the loss of any emancipatory effect.

The most recent translation of a modernism into a version of aesthetic utopia is postmodernity, a primarily but not exclusively American phenomenon. Postmodern artists have grown to maturity with American modernism (American Abstract Expressionism of the late 1940's and 1950's) and its sequels (Pop art, minimalism and the conceptual art of the 1960's and 1970's) as their tradition, rather than with the larger and longer traditions from which modernism itself developed in its various guises. These artists have devised an eclectic vocabulary of references to modern and pre-modern art, to popular and media culture, and to diverse images from all times and places. This postmodern vocabulary of images has the potential for cultural discourse; but it is an academic discourse at best, or, more typically, the journalistic discourse of entertainment, television and the newspapers, reflecting the temporary interests and diversions of the moment. It is also a discourse from within the specialized milieu of the visual arts, rather than an interaction with other sectors of human society; and it occurs at a time when the ascendancy of images and visual phenomenon over all other communicative media has turned much of human experience into Baudrillard's world of the spectacle. This specialization of the aesthetic/visual is given deadly reinforcement by a misreading, beginning with Greenberg, of previous modernisms, which are collapsed into a single monolithic academy under the sign of lowest common denominator styles and formal structures; to which are then assigned the task of organizing the postmodern vocabulary of images. The result is an uncoupling of the postmodern work both from the subjective emancipation of reflexive modernism and also from any *critical* relationship to contemporary life. The postmodern has the same dependent and sterile relationship to modernism as does an era of mannerism to a prior moment of classical self-realization. It is an impasse that maintains the external self-definition of previous cultural values long after those values have given birth to new issues and problems for which no adequate means of expression as yet exist. The postmodern relation to its preceding modernism is tinged with irony and cynical bad faith; for the old means are redeployed with full knowledge of their present inadequacy even as they are also infiltrated with the eclectic results of a seemingly lighthearted but in fact desperate search for substitutes. The postmodern also implies an eternal present, an endpoint to history: for any closed system, drawing parasitically on its abundant surroundings, has ample sustenance for a long and unproductive existence.

The model for all these utopias is Marx's schema, in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere, of a traditional society, unaware of itself and its possibilities; followed by a bourgeois era of development, striving and alienation; leading to a historical endpoint of the socialist society, in which alienation and class conflict are ended and in which, among other consequences, everyone

would be able to become a (part-time) artist. While one should never forget the overwhelmingly emancipatory power of Marx's thought despite its subsequent distortions and misuse, nor its grounding in historical events as well as in a secularization of Hegel's idealist dialectics, Marx's schema nevertheless corresponds rather closely to the sequence of pre-modernity, modernity and the postmodern. But the current utopia of the postmodern is an anti-utopia, in which any evolving dialectics of emancipatory consciousness has been forcibly restrained by market forces and entrenched interests in support of a limited, formalist and aestheticizing ideology—both inside the art world and also outside, where the restriction of art to aesthetic autonomy and its involuntary role as a fetishized store of wealth together remove any possible threat to an ongoing instrumentalization of society. The postmodern today, rooted in the corruption of American democracy and the collapse of American modernism, is the capitalist Social Realism of the age of Reagan. In addition to its more immediate Stalinist precedents, there is another strong historical parallel to the postmodern in the Counter-Reformation, with its links both to the papacy and to a monarchical-aristocratic status quo: a situation which, paradoxically but not surprisingly, led to a brilliant flowering of Baroque art. But the Catholic Baroque, with its recycling of Renaissance and antique forms, and above all its appropriation of authentic experience into the closed universe of a crystallized ideology, is among the most perfect historical analogies for many recent aspects of the postmodern, including notably but not uniquely the belated appreciation of Caravaggio by so completely formalist an artist as Frank Stella. Neo-baroque also in the same Counter-Reformation sense is the proliferation in much recent art of certain kinds of all-encompassing environments or installations which are designed to create an aesthetic or psychological/subjective *effect*, rather than an extra-aesthetic critical awareness of the life-world.

The questions raised by Habermas thus remain unanswerable in the framework of both autonomous modernism and its postmodern sequel. But the very posing of such questions, and the seriousness with which they have been received, are the consequence of a major shift in the contemporary world: the post-World War II era of American hegemony, culturally as well as politically and economically, has come to an end. The decline of that hegemony during the 1970's provided an opportunity for European art and thought to regain a world audience. The result was that the American situation, including the fact of its still enormous influence on the rest of the world, was offered a means by which it could be saved from itself and its incipient regression toward an unconscious and uncritical provincialism. The first such transatlantic encounter, between America and French structuralism and post-structuralism, quickly dwindled into a stillborn academicism, both because its basis in France, particularly that of the post-structuralists, was a quasi-academic extension of Surrealism's perturbed cartesianism and also because its American reception rapidly transmuted it into a new verbal-intellectual version of aesthetic formalism. Far more important was the collapse of the traditional Marxist Left in the wake of the disastrous utopianism of the anarchic young during the later 1960's. These failures nevertheless had positive consequences: the

permanent residue of a now tempered social idealism among the members of that generation; and a re-examination by the Left of its own Marxist heritage, especially the Stalinist perversion of that heritage. The most important consequence of that re-examination was the belated international rediscovery of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, including Habermas himself, as one of the only surviving, rigorous and viable points of departure for addressing the problems of modernity, culture and society.

The two common denominators between the crisis of the postmodern and the rebirth of Critical Theory are the interrelated problems of myth and of means-end instrumental rationality. The mythic character of that rationality was already addressed by Adorno and Horkheimer in older Critical Theory. What is now evident 40 years later, in a contemporary situation which is less dramatically desperate than that at the end of the 1930's but which is nevertheless insidiously permeated with threats to freedom, is that the communicative distortions arising from myth and instrumentalism are vulnerable if recognized and isolated before it is too late. The human use of myths is unavoidable, because they protect mankind against the unknown and provide a structure for the otherwise inexplicable until a clearer, demythified understanding has been achieved; after which myths enter a twilight zone of symbolic reference. But the modern use of myths, including not only those of Oedipus, the Minotaur, Prometheus, or Faustus, but also their more abstract successors—Progress, Utopia, and the original Enlightenment enthronement of Reason—is always accompanied by the danger that such myths may regress into an uncritical acceptance. One of the most difficult tasks of modernity is the containment of myth within the demythified limits of description and metaphor. But myths are in fact vulnerable: a myth of any sort, including the myth of autonomy for any sphere of human activity, aesthetic or not, along with any accompanying latent absolutism or transcendence, can be turned against itself, reflectively and contextually, by substitution or contrast with elements outside the myth structure itself. Thus, what was once an accepted, enveloping mythic structure can be forced to recede into an explanatory metaphor; and this process may be repeated so that each new demythification can in turn be forced to surrender its residual mythic components. Similarly, instrumental rationality can be turned against itself and be made to surrender its transparency, revealing the differences between the mythic, overdetermined rationality of the domination of man and nature, and the praxis and discourse within the evolution of a free society. This transformation of myth and instrumentalism depends in turn upon the continuous emergence of new contexts which, unlike the static, ahistorical or retrospective practice of deconstruction, themselves provide the unresolvable contrasts between paradigm and life-world. Beyond these immediate concerns linking Critical Theory and the crisis of the postmodern, however, there is only one real issue, which is whether or not modernity is worth saving and renewing. If it is worth saving, it cannot be reinstated as a revival but must be remade and transformed from its very roots; for the only other choice at hand is the loss of freedom and of the very identity of the Western tradition itself. In this sense, Habermas' call for a continuation of

the project of Enlightenment modernity marks not only the emergence of a new/old context for the present situation, but is also based on an act of will, a commitment to the historical traditions from which both modernity and Critical Theory emerged, and the lack of any acceptable alternative.

The artists who are creating a new modernity in the late 1980's have two strategies suitable for their task. These are, at the most general level, *contextual shift* and *critical re-representation*; and they are inter-related. Contextual shift makes use of any change of references, be they explicit or implicit, juxtaposed, framing or enframed. Critical re-presentation includes the appropriation of images, processes, forms, metaphors and iconography, and their subsequent reordered re-presentation. The first and simplest problem confronting the new modernity is the mythology of aesthetic autonomy and formalism. Formal, abstract or non-objective painting and sculpture are accompanied by a mythology and ideology of autonomous freedom, which was an authentic and integral aspect of Abstract Expressionism and its immediate offspring among the abstract painters and minimalist sculptors of the 1960's in America and Europe. But abstraction as practiced by later artists and movements has been accompanied by the reality of an extreme, escapist aestheticism which has also retroactively distorted the reflexive modernism of Abstract Expressionism itself. These distortions have been maintained only by being sheltered within a hermetically isolated high art milieu. With a change of context, postmodern abstract art reverts to being objects or decorative panels. The role of context in the validation of formal abstraction was exposed definitively by Daniel Buren in the early 1970's, but contextual shift continues to be the focus of a wide range of recent art, including Artschwager's deliberately ambiguous and ironic sculpture/furniture/architecture and Scott Burton's demythologizing of minimal sculpture by turning it into chairs and benches. Context is also a central issue in the environment in which it is exhibited and to which it can be returned. Similar concerns with architectural contexts and references are now widespread among younger European sculptors. Contextual shift is also essential to the recent outdoor, urban sculptures of Richard Serra, in which his earlier focus on phenomenological reflexivity, based on the viewer's bodily self awareness in situations of latent physical danger, has now been expanded to a large, public scale that generates a possibly intentional critique of the social repression of the individual.

Contextual shift is more effective in demythologizing sculptural rather than pictorial abstraction which, if it is forced to reenter the world, must accept the role of applied or decorative design, as was demonstrated by Buren. A second approach is the use of internal imagery which is simultaneously abstract and referential, a method used by Stella. The greatest practitioner of this demythologizing ambiguity, however, has been Gerhard Richter, whose gestural parodies in the later 1960's concealed aerial views of bombed cities, whose giant color charts of the 1970's demythologized hard edge modular painting, and whose large scale, apparently spontaneously gestural abstractions of the later 1970's were based on photographic enlargements of small sketches. Similarly ambiguous imagery is now used by many young painters, including Halley and

many neo-geometrical artists, but the resolution of their ambiguities has an unfortunately limited and immediate consequence. These limitations also undermine the works of such artists as Steinbach and Sherrie Levine.

A far more emancipatory effect is achieved when ambiguous or contradictory imagery is used for the critical re-representation of the extra-aesthetic, socially mediated world. But this critical re-representation does not rely simply on appropriation or on versions of the Ready Made, even though it does make use of such methods in order to enter into situations of mythical and instrumental distortion. Critical re-representation is in fact the most general condition of the new modernity, and it includes contextual shift; for a shift in context is nothing other than a re-representation of an aesthetics which is implicitly dependent on a given ideology of presentation. By contrast, the critical achievements of earlier 20th century modernisms were based on the reflexivity generated by the re-presentation of reductive versions of subjective epistemologies; and the most emancipatory aspects of 19th century art, from Goya to Courbet to the socially conscious members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, relied on a mimetic representation of subjects chosen by critical motivations. But the new modernity fuses the wide sweep of 19th century critical mimesis with the reflexive heritage of 20th century modernisms; and it must necessarily move outward from an aesthetic domain into the world, above all the social world, if that world is to be critically and reflexively re-represented to itself in terms that the extra-aesthetic world can understand. Conversely, an art which apparently addresses the world, but only through an uncritical re-representation of appropriated imagery, must rely on stylistic and contextual support to function critically and therefore runs the very great risk of remaining narrowly and aesthetically subjective. This is the difficulty with Salle and much of Schnabel as compared to Fischl or Longo, of Baselitz or Lupertz compared to Polke or Kiefer.

The appearance at the beginning of the 1970's of a new generation of artists in America and Germany, and the simultaneous rebirth of Critical Theory, have together created a new context for contemporary art. This contextual shift in the ideology of the institution of art, although strongly resisted by the defenders of the old aesthetic autonomy of modernism, has resulted in the decline of abstraction and the rise to prominence of previously marginalized artists. The pioneer figures in these changes have been artists such as Haacke in America, Victor Burgin in England, and Claus Staeck in Germany. These artists have invented means of intervening in social systems in such a way as to demonstrate those systems and their mythic/instrumental underpinnings. This general approach has now spread to a wide range of artists who have developed separate yet comparable strategies, currently prominent among which are Kruger's infiltration of advertising imagery; Holzer's signs and inscriptions; Les Levine's billboards; Dennis Adam's bus stops; I. H. Finlay's romantic-classical monuments and fragments; Morris' Abstract Expressionist depictions of nuclear and geocidal holocaust, Komar and Melamid's eclectic parodies of Stalinist/Hitlerian megalomania; Golub's ice-hot quattrocento scenes of racial injustice and military imperialism in Vietnam and

Central America; Wodiczko's subversion of public monuments through projected imagery; Lemieux's unveiling of nostalgic chauvinism; Lawler's exposure of the fetishizing of art by dealers, collectors, museums and academic art history; or Group Material's turning of consumption ideology and media manipulations against themselves. In every instance of this incomplete list, an artist, working from within a recognizable artistic tradition, employs a Trojan Horse strategy of entering into a situation of the social life-world so as to discover its mythic and instrumental distortions and then to cause them to become visible.

And what of the subjective dimensions of traditional humanism and even of earlier 20th century modernisms? The intensely subjective core of those modernisms, in contrast to the wider and more public dimensions of 19th century modernity, has shown itself as vulnerable to a subsequent shift to the narcissistic and aestheticized focus of the postmodern. But subjectivity is capable of performing a limited emancipatory role today to the degree that it overrides aesthetics and awakens its public, as do the works of Fischl and a very few of his contemporaries, to the unhappy consciousness of unfreedom in a postmodern world. A subjective dimension, even if it is no longer primarily Freudian or Adornoesque, is also implicitly present in the confrontations of the new modernity with those material and ideological structures which shape and deform subjectivity itself.

There is an extreme version of postmodern unfreedom, which is that of the apocalypse. In a world without metaphysics, death remains the only absolute: an anti-transcendent version of transcendence beckons as a resolution of all problems, a *Götterdämmerung* which delivers man from history. Apocalyptic references flicker throughout much of the best art of the new modernity like the lightening of an approaching storm. But these are warnings, both of the seductiveness of death as deliverance and of its mythic falsity as a solution to the problems of human society. For these artists, whether Morris or Holzer, Longo or Finlay, Golub or Jaar, death is a reminder that a truly human transcendence in our world is found not in myth nor in the follies of grandeur, but only in a certain idea of freedom, community and responsibility: an idea which can survive death and be passed on to future generations of mankind. That idea is the heart of the new modernity.

The emerging cultural situation may be best understood as a rupture in the stasis both of the Stalinist version of a Marxist-materialist post-history and of the self-reinforcing, narcissistic closure of the capitalist postmodern. In the currently discredited, meta-narrative tradition of a possible historical dialectics, the Marxist triad of traditional/bourgeois/socialist, or pre-modern/modern/postmodern, or, in terms of individual subjectivity, consciousness/critical self-consciousness/self-consciousness, may be restated in the general concepts of cultural history as pre-classic/classic/mannerist. The new modernity is thus a breaking outward, a transgression, a dialectical resolution of a mannerist impasse into a new baroque of inter-subjective critical self-consciousness. But there are two possible new baroques: if the breaking outward is only formal or phenomenological or a version of spectacle, in which the social and the extra-aesthetic are

acknowledged but then immediately absorbed into an existing order, it is a false resolution into a new postmodern version of the Counter-Reformation. A real, emancipatory, baroque modernity has as yet only a direction in which to move, and must make use of its present strategies until new communicative means are invented which will be both adequate to their task and resistant to the threat of an eventual academicizing orthodoxy.

A new modernity: it is a return to the old/new emancipatory project of modernity by way of the critical reflexivity of modernism itself, expanded beyond autonomous subjectivity into a no longer tightly compartmentalized world; it is the ongoing struggle with myth and instrumentality, by means of inner contradictions and outer confrontations with new contexts and new experience. It is also a leap of faith, in the same way that a sick man, lost in pain and delirium, hopes for the return of a health and sanity which he can hardly remember save for the fact that they must once have been part of his very being. The new modernity is neither utopia nor anti-utopia, but a condition of responsible freedom defended by eternal vigilance.