**Postmodernism** is a term used promiscuously in art criticism, often as a mere sign for not-modernism or a synonym for pluralism. As such, it means little—only, perhaps, that we are in a transitional period in which modernism seems distant and revivification all too near. On the one hand, this distance is the very precondition of postmodernism; on the other, this revivification signals the need to conceive it as other than mere antimonodermism.

What postmodernism is, of course, depends largely on what modernism is, i.e., how it is defined. As a chronological term, it is often restricted to the period 1860-1930 or thereabouts, though many extend it to postwar art or “late” modernism. As an epistemological term, modernism is harder to specify (e.g., ought one to accept the break between classicism and modernity as defined by Michel Foucault? Ought one to refer to Kantian self-criticism as Clement Greenberg did?). In any case, postmodernism, articulated in relation to modernism, tends to reduce it. Is there a modernism that can be so delimited? If so, what would constitute a break with it?

(Tacitly, theorists of postmodernism in art tend to contain modernism in late-modernism, the ideology of which is extracted from the critical writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. On this position, modernism is the pursuit of “purity”; it holds that “the concept of art . . . [is] meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts,” and that “the art object itself can be substituted metaphorically for its referent.” It is said to prescribe “specific areas of competence” and to foster, in the artist, a self-critical formalism in which the inherited “code” of the medium is manipulated and, in the critic, a historicism that “works on the new and the different to diminish the weight of the thing in favor of the thing that is not that thing.”)

Re: Post

HAL FOSTER

Reprinted from *October* 20 (Spring 1982): 11-15 with slight changes, and a postscript by the author.
2. [Craig Owens], “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodern Art,” *October*, no. 13 (Summer 1980): 29. [Reprinted in this volume, see p. 262.]
newness and unique difference. 4 Painting, sculpture, and architecture thus distinct, and art exists only within them; each art has a nature, and art proceeds as the code is revealed, the nature pursued.

Such (simplified) is the postmodern reading of modernism, distinct from the term purity. Once, this will-to-purity was subversive; in its new conventions—social ones encoded in the aesthetic—were enunciated if not expressed, and the artist, immersed in artistic practice, his or her time was rendered anonymous, transcendentially critical. However, seen dialectically in retrospect, such a strategy seems deceptive and politically ironic. "Purity" offers a division of labor within culture which, as a result, contains the potential of both the special professionalism of the academy and the common commodity production of industry. 5 It also affirms the idea of art as a utopian experience, engendered from a special history: this is indeed how art historically presented: as a line of works, a lineage of artists, in the horticultural terms (garden, eden) of influence and continuity.

Though historical interventions can be recuperative (as the work of Walter Benjamin attests), they can also be recuperative—and are no less equal measures in the avant-garde, defined by Roman Poggioli as "the artistic equivalent of transcendental historicism." 6 The term "transcendental historicism" is a contradiction, but it is one basic to modernism: no matter how "transcendental" or radically new the art, it is usually recuperated, rendered familiar by historicism. Late modernism only reworks the contradic- tion: art is avant-garde, insofar as it is radically historicist—the artist delves into art-historical conventions in order to break out of them. Such historicism (the New as its own Tradition) is both an origin and an end for the avant-garde, and one aim of postmodernism is to retain its valence but rid it of its historicism. 7 For, as the discourse of the continuous historicism reverts inherently, it conveys time as a totality (whereby "revelations are never more than moments of consciousness") and man as the sole subject. Human consciousness is at once presented and revealed as sovereign, and discontinuity is resisted, as is any decentering of the subject (whether by class, family, or language). In art, of course, the subject of this historicism is the artist and his space is the museum; here, history is presented as a narrative—continuous, homogenous, and anthropocentric—of great men and masterworks.

Purity as an end and decorum as an effect. Historicism as an operation and the museum as the context: the artist as original and the art work as unique—these are the terms which modernism privileges and against which postmodernism is articulated. In postmodernism, they form a practice now exhausted, whose conventionality can no longer be inflected. Pledged to purity, the medium of radio—hence, postmodernism art exists between, across, or outside them, or in new or neglected mediums (like video or photography). Histories by the museum, commodified by the gallery, the art object is neutralized—hence postmodernism occurs in alternative spaces and in many forms, often dispersed, residual, or ephemeral. As the place of art is re-formed, so too is the role of the artist, and the values that heretofore authenticated art are questioned, in short, the cultural field is transformed, aesthetic signification opened up.

The field transformed is the first condition of postmodernism. In "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss sketches how modern sculpture passed from a leg of history where the monument or statue—to one of autonomous form—the pure, single object. Indeed, she argues, by the time of minimalism modern sculpture had entered a condition of "pure negativity: the conjunction of exclusions . . . [it] was now the category that resulted from the addition of the not-language to the not-architecture." "These terms are simply the terms "architecture" and "landscape" inverted, set with others, they form a "spatial field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it. . . . It is in this "logically expanded field," suspended between these terms, that the postmodernist forms—"site-structures," "axiomatic structures," and "marked sites"—exist with sculpture. To Krauss, they break with modernist practice, and so cannot be thought of in terms of historicism. Here, art-historical context will not suffice as meaning, for postmodernism is articulated not within the modules but in relation to cultural terms. These forms are conceived logically, not derived historically, and so must be regarded in terms of structure.

To be seen as such, postmodernism must posit a break; this can, with the medium and with historicism, be crucial—it seals modernism and opens the cultural space of postmodernism. Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens also posit such a rupture, though, focused on other artists, they detail its advent somewhat differently. For Krauss, the signal of postmodernism is an expanded field of art. For Crimp it is a return of "theater" (taught by late modernism), and for Owens an "eruption of language" (also "expressed") and, more importantly, a new postmodernist impulse, "allegorical" or deconstructive in nature.
Again, these critics first pose postmodernism against late modernism, whose classic text is seen as the essay “Art and Objecthood” by Michael Fried. Therein, Fried objects to the implicit “theater” of minimalist sculpture: “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater,” runs the oft-quoted line, with “theater” defined as “what lies between the arts.” To Crimp, this intuition signals modernism’s demise: the important work of the seventies exists precisely between the arts; moreover, such work—especially video and performance—exploits the very “theater” (or “procreation with time—more precisely, with the duration of experience”) that Fried deemed degenerate. In effect, minimalism’s implicit “theater” becomes explicit. Much contemporary art can be derived by this extrapolation, or so Crimp asserts in the essay “Pictures”:

If many of these artists can be said to have been apprenticed in the field of performance as it issued from minimalism, they have nevertheless begun to reverse its priorities, making of the literal situation and duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality are utterly psychological: performance becomes just one of a number of ways of “staging a picture.”

Owen also cites the Fried dictum as late modernist law, which he relates, as a “belief in the absolute difference of verbal and visual art,” to the mechanical order (i.e., the temporal arts, poetry, etc., over the spatial arts, painting, etc.). Such a hierarchy is based on a “linguistic criterion,” one which the modernist visual arts repudiated. The emergence of time, hinted at by Fried, is then marked by an “emergence of discourse”:

11. This essay was and is of prime importance—a catalyst. For Smithson’s reaction, see Lee, “Letter to the Editor,” Artforum 6, no. 2 (October 1967). Reprinted in Robert Smithson, The Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 33. Fried objected to the “perversity” of minimalism—in its deviation from the late-modernist will to “purity.” Other less perspicacious critics regard minimalism as the as yet after of modernist reduction. That it should entail such a contradiction—the modernist impetus to the thing-in-itself and the postmodernist impulse toward “deconstruction”—or “perversity”—might in fact make minimalism the source of a shift in sensibility, the very banishment of post modernism. See also Michael Fried, “Deception and Truthfulness: Painting and Behavior in the Age of Effusion,” Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

12. Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” October, no. 9 (Spring 1979), 77. Reprinted in this volume, see p. 171. Here, Crimp retains an (admittedly) historicist, though the passage shows that it need not be encoded on any one medium.

13. Craig Owens, “Earthworks,” October, no. 10 (Fall 1979), 125–26. And yet modernism is over, at least originally, as a revolt against the mechanical order as encoded in the academy. Romantic confusion of genres, symbolist evasion, surrealism . . . Granted these are episodes, they nevertheless project an alternative characterization of modernism as a doctrine of discontinuity. Indeed, the “critique of representation” is originally a modernist imperative.
but it must also “shake” the sign itself. (The picture-underneath-the-painting thus has more to do with Derrida’s grammatology: the notion that there is always already articulated by another sign.)

To change the object itself: this, in other terms, is the mandate of postmodernist art. Contingent, this art exists in (or as) a web of references, not really located in any one form, medium, or site. As the object is destructured, the subject (viewer) dislocated, and the modernist order of the arts shattered. Such art is thus “allegorical” in nature. Temporal and spatial at once, it dissolves the old order: so too, it opposes the “pure sign” of late-modernist art and plays, instead, on the “distance which separates signifier from signified, sign from meaning.” But to what does such allegorical art finally tend? To a dispersal of the subject and a melancholic resignation in the face of fragmented and related history?

Figures and Fields

Postmodernism is thus posed as a rupture with the aesthetic order of modernism. And yet the concept of the field remains—even if only as a term to denote its own dispersal. That is, postmodernism is seen within a given problematic of representation—in terms of terms and codes, rhetorical figures and cultural fields. As a discourse, as a space, its very “allegorization” is “allegorical,” its very “schizophrenia is strategic. Is it necessary to think in terms of fields and figures of representation? No doubt; and yet criticism thereby remains recuperated. As a textual practice, postmodernist art cannot be translated: criticism, then, would not be its supplement. But then what would be its place? What does criticism do vis-à-vis such art? Does it enter as another code in the text of the art? Or does it initiate the very play of signs that is the text? My question, finally, is simple: Do critics today engage postmodernist art as its textual nature would seem to demand? “As soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way,” Derrida writes, “that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification heretofore has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word ‘sign’ itself—which is precisely what cannot be done.” (Should one add: “even the concept and critique itself?”) But this is precisely what cannot be done—such is the epistemological bind of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Clearly, this “catastrophe” is marked in theory too.

Now, postmodernist art is often termed “deconstructive,” which is to say that it fulfills a contradiction: it must use, as methodological tools at least, the very concepts that it calls into question. It may be too much to assert that such complicity is a conspiracy, but a convention, form, tradition, etc., is only deconstructed from within. Deconstruction thus becomes reinsertion, for there is no “outside” (except in the positivist sense of “outside the medium”—a transgression that reasserts the limit). That is, there is no way not to be in a field of cultural terms, for these terms inform us presumptively.

If postmodernist art is referential, it refers only to “to problematize the activity of reference.” For example, it may “steal” types and images in an “appropriation” that is seen as critical—both of a culture in which images are commodities and of an aesthetic practice that holds (nostalgically) to an art of originary. And yet, can a critique be articulated within the very forms under critique? Again, yes: how else could it be articulated? Such a critique, however, cannot hope to displace these forms: at best, it indicts them as “mythological” and stresses the need to think and represent otherwise. Another question is not so obvious: are the given mediums not mediated? That is to say, is a medium such as painting given as a site and not as an object into which one can intervene, as in the very form that it mediates?

Appropriation, textuality . . . these tactics seem to preclude mediums whose logic is based on authenticity and originality. Painting per se is regarded by many critics as problematic, and even photography is seen to hold a vestige of aura—an aura that is elaborated or enjoyed by many artists today. (Indeed, a certain aura or evocation of authenticity is active today; the perfunctory image is now the law.) Such denials, when extreme, are of more interest to analysts than artists and critics. However, it remains true that the mediums are informed by historically specific logics of production, say, or expressionism (the first of which may be compatible with a superficialized political economy, the second now with a post-psychology of the most ideological sort).

Recently, of course, we have witnessed a resurgence in painting, not only a revival of old modes as if they were new, but also a retreat to old values as if they were necessary. Much of it is regressive—or rather, defensive. In the midst of society suffused with “information,” many seem to regard painting—in its specificity—as critical. Old avatars (creative artists, authentic art) are returned, precisely because they are quaintly, as forces to resist complete mediation (which is to say, complete absorption in the consumerist program of mass media).

27. Of Strinths, Owens writes: “Une-ni-cliche at close range, the spiral form of the nytcr is completely inaudible from a distance, and that distance is most often achieved by employing a text between viewer and work. Strinths thus accomplishes a radical dilation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of the mode [photographic, cinematic, textual] of confrontation with the work of art” (“Earth's words,” p. 128).

28. It is not, of course, the allegory of the levels of reading (factual, allegorical, moral, associative) ordered by a logos, Christian or otherwise. That transcendental significance is precisely what is lacking. As a result, the levels, collapse, no total reading is possible. In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another: however fragmentary, intertextual, or chaotic they relationship may be . . . the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest,” Owens, “Allegorical Impulse (Part 1),” p. 60. [Reprinted in this volume, see pp. 204–205.]

29. Owens, “Allegorical Impulse (Part 2),” p. 619. [Reprinted in this volume, see p. 222.] It is textual, as it is foreordained to be: an “allegorical” postmodernist against a “symbolic” modernism. In practice, these modes are never so distinct, though the tendency of the middle-century art is toward a greater and greater inscrutability.


31. Owens, “Allegorical Impulse (Part 2),” p. 60. [Reprinted in this volume, see p. 225.]

exposes the "impurity" of meaning. And yet unlike self-reflexivity (which
it is often conflated), self-criticism does not enforce a closure. It
must be an issue of deconstruction (such is really the recent history of
critique) that if postmodernity is truly deconstructive of modernism, it
would be a discourse within it.

Certainly, to be regarded as an epistemological break and not an
epistemological or chronological term, postmodernity must be
based on a new knowledge--and thus on material conditions--substantially
different from modernism's. A new technique, for example, may enable--but not
instruct--a way of seeing. Perhaps such a form exists: to know it will require
Foucauldian archaeology: to posit it now, on the basis of aesthetic
seems preposterous. Recent practice has effectuated a defamiliarization, an
eminent (quintessentially modernist terms) that, in turn, stresses the basic
i.e., conditional, nature of art. And it is no doubt important to insist upon
the cultural specificity of modernism (for it is determinate). But again, to ask
it now in terms of an absolute break seems problematic.

And yet postmodernity is defined as a rupture. In this it is like modernism
which, despite historicism, often speaks of a rhetoric of discontinuity. For
modernism too, postmodernity is poised against a past perceived as inexorable.
Thus, in part, on the old imperative of the avant-garde and its loss of crisis
(in the sense of both judgment and separation). As noted, such an
art tend to be recouped institutionally (in the museum and in art history),
recovery which, along with pluralism, is the main theme of contemporary
art. Clearly, a revision of his historicist that reconsiders and reduces even
provokes the extreme is necessary, one in which the series of breaks, charac-
teristic of modernism, are "seen not as an avant-garde succession--in which
the evolution of discontinuity is substituted for the evolution of continuity--in
the form of a problematic constellation, whose systems set off the 20th
century as a deconstructive synchrony." 30

Propositions of postmodernism tend to be highly conscious of historicism.
In effect, they would displace modernism, which, pushed back, and
the book of culture, is poised in its own reduction, foreclosed more than decon-
structed. Rather than reduction, what is needed is a revision of modernism's
opening of its supposed closure. And perhaps postmodernism is this too.
Though it recovers late-modernist dogmatism, it also renders modernist discourses
(for example, artists like Duchamp and Klee are favored, as are critics
like Baudrillard and Benjamin). As such, it may be a break with modernism
than an advance in a dialectic in which modernism is re-formed. Certainly
any serious notion of postmodernism must be privileged on the conviction
that a system calling for corrections, translations, openings, and negations is more
useful than an unformulated absence of system--one may then avoid the
impossibility of truth and connect to the historical chain of discourses, the progress
(progression) of discursivity."


Hal Foster 200

Re: Post 201