

Modern Art: Its Very Idea and the Time/Space of the Collection

Modern art cannot be understood by looking at the individual paintings, sculptures, and objects that are conventionally said to exemplify it; one must consider them with a view to what unites them. Accordingly, modern art ought to be conceived as a peculiar narrative form that lends meaning and significance to this nexus. On the level of motivic detail, it abhors the narrative register; taken as a whole, however, it reveals itself to be defined by narrative form, and even a fairly simple one. The central motif of this narrative form is the overcoming of representation, of the picture constituted as likeness or reflection, on the way toward the assertion of the particular and autonomous reality of its picture-objects. Individual heroes paved this way, and even today scholars seek to trace the “prehistory of abstract art”¹ and assess historic forms of expression with regard to their “modernness” as measured by this narrative. Each individual work of art then reveals how far it has come on this path, becoming an indicator of progress toward an ideal, while the dubious pretensions of that ideal are rarely reflected upon. Even the avant-gardist critique of modern art at bottom continues in the same narrative vein precisely in its negative fixation on it, by searching for an autonomous reality beyond even the autonomous picture-objects or deriving said pretensions from the overcoming of these objects.

If we wish to take a contemporary stance vis-à-vis modern art, if we seek to assess it and place it in its historic context, then, it will be decisive that we avoid retelling this narrative as the “myth of an era”²; in other words, that we neither historicize it as different from “contemporary art”, as a concluded historic phenomenon, charging it with significance, nor simply invoke a “different modernity.” The goal must instead be to reconstruct the narrative form itself in its institutional and discursive conditions and its interconnections with other factors of modernization and to examine it in its uncanny presence. The point of this narrative form is that the intended agent of the overcoming of representation is the very same historical genealogy that conceives of itself as progress. My argument, by contrast, will be that both elements, representation and genealogy, can be thought not as opposites but only as closely tied in with, and hence utterly incapable of dissolving, each other. Both the narrative motif of representation and that of historical genealogy are rooted in the fundamental modes of the arrangement of pictures that first emerged in the depictions of collections since the seventeenth century. The collection itself can thus be defined as

the primary code in accordance with which the nexus uniting the pictures was able to manifest itself in a historically specific form and that made the elaboration of the questions of representation and genealogy possible in the first place. The spatiotemporal coordinates of these modes of arrangement have not only decisively informed the genesis of the phenomenon known as modern art; to this day, they partly frame the ways in which we can think about it.

In other words, the space of the collection that appears in seventeenth-century gallery paintings represents not just the prince’s treasures and the prince himself, but most importantly the pictures, as special objects of representation. The path from the cabinets of curiosities of the Renaissance to the gallery in the modern sense indicates the changing status of the pictures. That a prince would have a “forest” of pictures represent him makes sense only if these pictures and the mode of their arrangement could be held capable of accomplishing something special with regard to representation itself. The picture as the depiction of a scene capturing something of the “world”, whatever its nature, the picture as a tableau, which is to say, as in individual and collectible picture-object, as well as the picture as an element in a series of pictures that increasingly refer to one another—these adumbrate the different levels on which the idea of representation unfolds. It would be insufficient, then, to describe the latter as the mere depiction of a reality of whatever kind, or as the representative of an idea. Rather, representation designates the process in which the picture is charged with a specific meaning, in which whatever is depicted is assigned special significance within the framework of the symbolic form of the tableau, the form, banal in and of itself, of a—usually rectangular—movable pictorial support medium.

The imaginative space of a nexus of pictures that emerges in the gallery paintings accordingly indicates not only the transition from the accumulation of curiosities to the taxonomical arrangement of pictures based on their sizes, themes, or genres or the schools of painting they exemplify, but also the emergence of a particular space composed of pictures. The “*theatrum pictorum*”³—coulisse-like picture-walls, superimpositions of pictures resembling collage, and sequences of picture-spaces folded in the manner of a house of cards—becomes the defining metaphor of this space. So René Magritte will not be the first to conceive this picture-space as the ineluctable horizon of thinking before which pictures always refer only to other pictures. Even in the seventeenth century, this special space of representation refers first and foremost to itself, the representation of representation. Yet in so doing it at once not merely depicts, self-referentially, itself, but always also includes specific forms of relations in its field of vision: relations between the concrete picture-space and the space of pictures, between the people who populate the picture-space (the painter and the prince, for example), between them and the spaces and pictures to which each is assigned, and finally between the picture-space/space of pictures and an exterior space, which is

in most instances only hinted at. The selection of the pictures and the way they are arranged increasingly also comes to define the volatile power of these relations on the level of substance. Starting in the eighteenth century, the growing historical dimension in particular bloats this space of the imagination to a phantasmatic magnitude into which reflections on the meaning of history, on processes of the formation of consciousness, and on psychological dispositions enter. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, notably, reinterprets the accumulation of historic remnants into pictures of the internalization of imperial space. A thread leads from there to the abysmal collection-spaces in John Soane, and finally to that peculiar collector, Sigmund Freud, who will translate the space of the collection into the topology of psychological functions.

The time of the collection accordingly appears primarily as a function of a particular mode of spatial arrangement. The nineteenth century witnesses the gradual ascent of historical forms of presentation that increasingly transform the space of pictures into the line of a sequential flow. The dynamisms governing this sequence, however, lend themselves to the most diverse interpretations—from progressive development to catastrophic demise. Heinrich Wölfflin finally sets this genealogical principle down as the transpersonal structural principle of art history. It ascribes to every work the internalized logic of a process, understood as obeying quasi-natural laws, that takes place between various polar principles, the “fundamental concepts of art history”. What emerges, based on photographic reproductions, is the time/space of an “Imaginary Museum” spanning all concrete times and spaces. Yet even here, progress and regression are in balance—in the sense of the eternal recurrence of the same forever unchanging sequences, of *corso* and *ricorso*, as Giambattista Vico had described them.

Now modern art does not simply take the side of progress. It instead seeks to internalize the principle of genealogy and precisely thereby to overcome once and for all the cycle of recurrence and, with it, representation. Each work conceives itself as standing at a particular moment in time and executing the logical consequence of the development of the historical “condition of the material” (Adorno). This aspiration must be read not simply as seeking progress over some tradition, whatever its nature, but as the innermost consequence of that tradition. In other words, forces from within the tradition urge the work to transcend it. Modern art accordingly embodies these forces of tradition itself, suspending its own ambition to transcend the tradition. Nor does modern art escape representation; to the contrary, enlisting the assistance of genealogy, it drives representation to its extreme. That becomes clear once we understand that representation, far from being the illusionistic depiction of a particular reality, is an expectation of significance brought to the symbolic form of the tableau. In this sense, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich mark not the cancellation of the representational regime but its essence in a heightened form in which the very over-coming of representation as depiction allows for the attainment of another, “representative” meaning: in the true

“Suprematism”, the picture is charged with an ultimate and universal worldliness. As regards the question of placement in the space of pictures, both positions remain torn between turning to a radical isolation of the picture, which will finally be realized in the form of presentation known as the White Cube, and transforming the “theater of pictures” into the endeavors toward a total work of art undertaken by De Stijl and the Constructivists.

Modern art, then, is by no means nothing but modern. It adopts the early modern idea of representation precisely where it seems to repudiate it. Nor does the idea of an inner genealogical principle help it escape history; to the contrary, it inscribes it only the more deeply in that history. Modern art thus is and remains firmly anchored in European history, even if it has found its temple in New York and has long become an available code that lends itself to a variety of global utilizations. Particularly indicative of this fact are the enlightenment myths of liberation and universality it has appropriated to itself. That appropriation should not lead us to forget, however, that these myths are also variants of a specific hegemonic narrative form that must even today be understood as a reflection of the same tradition it pretends to have overcome. That means that no end to the “representational regime” is in sight. The collection as a metaphor of the accumulation of wealth or capital, but also of symbolic worldliness and power, and its coordinates in time-space continue to define the specificity of a culture that, precisely as a European or more generally Western culture, seeks to enforce a dominant reading of globalization. So we need a critical revisionism that examines the mythical potential of the narrative form of modern art, tracing its criteria and categorizations and the inclusions and exclusions they give rise to as well as the representational and genealogical logics on which it is based. Such a revisionism would probably allow us to adopt a different perspective on the structural dynamisms concealed by one-dimensional logics of autonomous development, a perspective in which the interdependency between different processes of modernization would be the precondition for understanding the internal as well as external multiplicities⁴ that, we might come to realize, make up “modern art”; with all the tensions defining its contemporary manifestations, between the theater of pictures on billboards and social networks on the one hand, and on the other hand the theater of art the global art business stages.

Helmut Draxler, May 2011
(translated from German by Gerrit Jackson)

This text was commissioned by Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen on the occasion of Museum of Display (20.05–03.07.2011)

-
- 1 Otto Stelzer, *Die Vorgeschichte der abstrakten Kunst*, München 1964
 - 2 Paul Veyne, *Die Originalität des Unbekannten. Für eine andere Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt am Main 1988, S. 26
 - 3 Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen (Ed.), *David Teniers and the Theatre of Painting*, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery in Association with Paul Holberton Publishing, London 2006
 - 4 Im Sinne von Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Die Vielfalt der Moderne*, Velbrück 2000