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## **Modernism as the Mobilization and Critical Period of Secular Metaphysics. The Case of Fine/Plastic Art**

Whenever we are dealing with the “modern,” it is always interesting to know whether that which makes reference to its own contemporaneity and pleads for cohabitation with us is a transcending of the old with new means, or whether its novelty lies merely in preparing the terrain for the old to be suitably concluded. Such knowledge, however, cannot be obtained without analyzing concrete events and studying their consequences. And since the term “modernism” appeared as a theoretical reaction to the modernist “state of affairs” in the same way as sight appeared as an evolutionary reaction to the existence of sunlight and not vice versa, I shall attempt to explore the nature of the modernist “way of being” and evaluate it to a certain extent in the phenomenal field of fine/plastic art. In doing so I shall focus on the period between the mid-nineteenth century, when bourgeois art with its routine realist approaches drifted into a strange state of unresponsiveness to the world around it; on the 1960s, when the modernist model of aesthetic idealism found itself in a deep crisis; and on the 1970s and 1980s, when, owing to its inability to continue advancing in the same idealist direction, it became necessary to test the very “seismic stability” of modernist suppositions by demystifying the aesthetic and the sublime. As far as fine/plastic art is concerned, this was the time of a double shift of paradigms, one of which served to mobilize secular metaphysics, and the other of which aimed to verify its foundations in conditions of a globalizing culture. The first case involves the transition of the paradigm of fine art into the paradigm of “pure” plastic art, and the second focuses on the transition from the paradigm of “pure plastic art” to the paradigm of visual art, whose asset is “secondary semantization” of visual objects, events and contexts. For a precise discussion, a more than century-long time interval seems exaggerated, yet its selection was necessary because the paradigmatic shifts that I would like to coherently thematize are not visible in thinner temporal slices. Indeed, the consequences of such a decision undoubtedly call for obligatory conciseness in the verbalization of conceptual and articulatory transformations.

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## 1. Modernism as the mobilization of metaphysical background

### *In medias res*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, bourgeois art of the realist genre practically came to a standstill on the formative standards of naturalist iconography and mimetics. Yet this extensive situation no longer befitted social happenings, whose speed was then being set by the first industrial revolution, by primary accumulation of capital and by fierce market competitiveness, nor by the creative potentials of artists who, confronted with the emerging photography, attempted to surpass the attained mimetic-documentary standards and thereby pave the way for painting.

The flexibility and instability of modern society acquired the initial external expression in Impressionism. Impressionists abandoned their dark studios adorned with artificially arranged motifs and headed out into the *plein air*, into the air and light, where, through direct experience, they encountered a fast-moving and disarranged life. Their paintings were composed in a sketchy way, because they wanted to capture the fleeting moment of life. This gave them freshness. Their painting procedure involved the optical mixing of colors (divisionism), which at the time was simultaneously being discovered by science.<sup>1</sup> This brought color to Impressionist works, as well as “scientific validity.” Referring to science was also a sign of modern times. In doing so Impressionists strove to emphasize that their paintings were “more truthful” than those of Naturalist painters, since the Impressionist “truth” was supported by science, then considered the only solid and supreme authority.

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This Impressionist “scientific truth” *ipso facto* made two methodological moves that were of key importance for the further development of fine/plastic art in the twentieth century: (a) On the basis of scientific findings about the optical mixing of colors and the simultaneous contrast, Impressionism broke down the appearance of truth into its optical components, into dot formations of pure colors.<sup>2</sup> This pointed to a modernist interest in the “background” of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michel-Eugène Chevreul, *Du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés*, Paris: Pitois-Levrault, 1839, 1-16, 145-275 and 623-655 (quoted from: <http://goo.gl/nhvykL>; accessed in April 2014).

<sup>2</sup> This principle can be observed today with a magnifying glass in color rasters used in photo print reproduction.

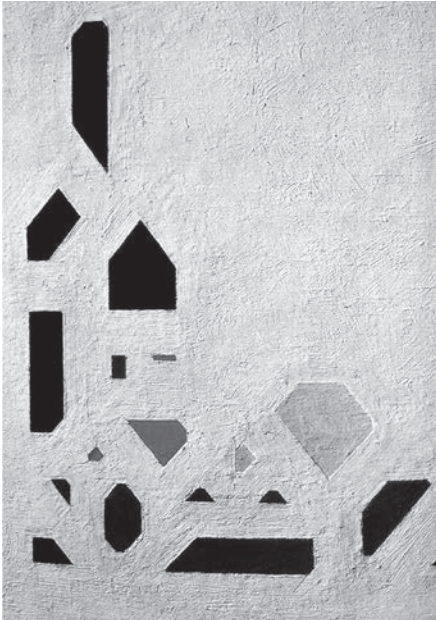
world, which later developed into a modernist axiom. (b) The second move involved redirecting attention from the imitative aspects of depiction to the free production or synthetization of the visual, which subsequently also developed into a modernist axiom and opened the path to non-figurative or abstract art. This transition was explicitly contextualized by the painter Fernand Léger in his essay, “The Origins of Painting and Its Representational Value,” in which he wrote:

The impressionists were the first to reject the *absolute value of the subject and to consider its value to be merely relative*. That is the tie that links and explains the entire modern evolution. The impressionists are the great originators of the present movement; they are its primitives in the sense that, wishing to free themselves from the imitative aspect, they considered painting for its color only, neglecting all form and all line almost entirely. [...] The imitation of the subject that their work still involves is thus, even then, no more than a pretext for variety, a theme and nothing more. For the impressionists a green apple on a red rug is no longer the relationship between two objects, but the relationship between two tones, a green and a red. When this truth became formulated in living works, the present movement was inevitable. I particularly stress this epoch of French painting, for I think it is at this precise moment that the two great pictorial concepts, visual realism and realism of conception, meet—the first completing its ascent, which includes all traditional painting down to the impressionists, and the second, realism of conception, beginning with them.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between “visual realism” and “realism of conception,” as well as the artistic preference for the latter, were adopted and applied in their own way by post-Impressionist movements such as Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism and Constructivism, all of which believed that the appearance of a thing is not the only reality, but that behind this appearance there exists an “invisible reality” which artists need to follow to a greater degree than the reality of appearance. Or, in the words of Wassily Kandinsky: Art has abandoned the skin of nature, but not its laws, its cosmic laws.<sup>4</sup> These laws were the laws of the plastic means of expression, that is, the laws of the visual perception and ontic analysis

<sup>3</sup> Fernand Léger, “Les origines de la peinture et sa valeur représentative” (1913), in Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Essays über Kunst und Künstler*, Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1963, 203.



**Figure 1:** Bart van der Leek, *Still life with a wine bottle*, 1922; Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum.

of space, which the painters of the first decade of the twentieth century passionately explored in order to find legitimation and solidity at least in the foundations of their art (see **Figure 1**), if such solidity and trust could not be offered to them by the unstable economic and strained political situation in Europe of that time, which was rapidly sliding into the First World War.

*“Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.”<sup>5</sup>*

Klee’s famous statement quoted above concisely summarizes the Impressionist discovery that art is not formed according to nature, it does not only reproduce its appearance (although it can), but also creates from its own elements (light-dark, color, point, line) and follows its own principles, in a manner analogous to nature. The realization that the artist may abandon the “united states of appearance” and independently create the appearance of the not-yet-visible opened new and promising paths of creative freedom to the artists of that time. They enthusiastically began to explore the new world that was simultaneously opening outwards, into the background of the world (into the objective), and inwards

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<sup>5</sup> “Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar,” Paul Klee, “Schöpferische Konfession” (1920), in *Paul Klee Kunst-Lehre. Aufsätze, Vorträge, Rezensionen und Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formenlehre*, ed. Günther Regel, Leipzig: Reclam, 1987, 60.

(into one's own subjectivity), while the *brave new world* of social life was becoming increasingly darkened in the shadow of the anticipated economic crisis. The artist, now pushed to the edge of society by the bourgeoisie and capital, was becoming a recluse, a meditator, and above all a seeker of experiential and life harmony which the current world of techno-politics was unable to provide. The abstract art appearing between 1909 and 1919 was an attempt by artists to capture, in a constructive way, a balance between the subjective and the objective that did not exist in the social conditions of that time. The assembly line, which degraded man to the level of an extension of a machine, was a production necessity, yet it implicitly caused great imbalance in man's creative identity and capacity. It needed to be compensated for, and artists spontaneously reacted to this imbalance. By articulating an abstract painting from pure plastic constructive elements in which forms began to live their own life in an orderly and logical composition, the artist created a symbolic image of what human life is supposed to be—that is, the image of man as the *creator of meaning*.

#### *From plastic art to pure plastic art*

Many artists of abstraction, particularly geometric abstraction, stepped onto this constructive and synthetic path; in these endeavors, the most in-depth and regulative course was taken by the movements of Suprematism and Neoplasticism and the artists associated with them, such as Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky and Piet Mondrian. These artists strove—either through “intuitive sensibility” (Suprematism) or through a kind of rationalized plastic Neoplatonism (Neoplasticism)—toward objective and universal beauty, and for this very reason attempted to break away from the spheres of singularity, particularity, randomness and subjective judgment. The artist of Suprematism and De Stijl subordinated himself entirely to the high idealism of pure, prototypical shapes and to the search for purified, objective and universal beauty (**Figure 2**). Or, as Piet Mondrian defined this endeavor in his essay “Plastic and Pure Plastic Art” (1937):

Precisely by its existence, non-figurative art shows that “art” *continues always on its true road*. It shows that “art” is *not the expression of the appearance of reality such as we see it, nor of the life which we live, but that it is the expression of true reality and true life [...] indefinable, but realizable through the plastic*. Thus, we must carefully distinguish between two kinds of reality; one which has an individual and one which has a universal appearance. In art, the former is the expression of space determined by particular things or forms, the latter establishes expansion



**Figure 2:** Piet Mondrian, *Composition C (no. III), with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 56,2 x 55,1 cm; private collection (on loan to Tate Gallery London, 2012).

and limitation—the creative factors of space—through neutral forms, free lines and pure colors. While universal reality arises from determinate relations, particular reality shows only veiled relations. The latter must obviously be confused in just that respect in which universal reality is bound to be clear.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Piet Mondrian, *Plastic and Pure Plastic Art (1937)*, in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, eds. H. Holtzmann and M. S. James, London: Thames and Hudson, 1986, 297.

Pure plastic art thus functions as an agent of “enlightenment,” with the help of which permanent spiritual light falls through fleeting appearances into “eternal structures.” Its goal is to transcend the world of appearance; to turn away from the intrusive, confusing and turbulent surface of things; to perceive with a spiritualized eye their “essence,” their “pure” formative values, structures and relations; and to reproduce them in a spirit and sense accessible form. And all of this was the work of artists who still believed in the values of classical European humanism and who were merely attempting to infuse non-figurative art with “Renaissance aesthetics” and all its faith in the lawfulness of the world and in science, in the immanent logic of artistic means of expression, in man’s creative and metaphysical potentials. The abstraction appearing in 1910 represented the disintegration of interest in the material world, but not its ontic background. The artists of abstraction attempted to return art to its former splendor and life potency. But the subsequent development of economic relations that culminated in the economic crisis of 1929 brutally crushed their expectations.

*From Europe to the USA, or: from the aesthetic background of the world to the sublime background of the subject*

A thorn of doubt had thus been planted in the flesh of Western culture regarding the possibility of its renewal on old, Antiquity-Renaissance foundations. Yet at that time its pressure was not strong enough to deter artistic explorations in the direction of mobilizing the metaphysical background of reality. Constructivist and Purist endeavors survived the economic crisis, the rise of Nazism, and the atrocities of the Second World War. But due to the pre-war (and also partly post-war) migrations of European artists to the USA and because of the specific circumstances existing in Europe after the Second World War (destruction, division by the Iron Curtain), these endeavors grew stronger branches in their new, American homeland.<sup>7</sup> This occurred in movements such as American geometric abstraction, abstract expressionism, color field painting, hard edge painting, etc. Modernism as an endeavor to transform the explicit into the implicit, and to pull the background into the foreground, modified the driving force in its American version. If Constructivism was—generally speaking—driven by endeavors, impregnated with mysticism and theosophy, to uncover the metaphysical background

<sup>7</sup> Willem de Kooning emigrated in 1926; Hans Hofmann in 1932; Josef Albers, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1933; Piet Mondrian in 1940; and others.



of the world and express itself with the pure forms and cosmic laws derived from it, then post-Second World War American abstract painting was characterized by post-metaphysical endeavors for the plastic uncovering of the background of human striving for the superlative, which is generally designated with the term “sublime.” In his essay “The Sublime Is Now” (1948), Barnett Newman revealed that in the procedures of this endeavor, the sublime was secularized:

Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or “life,” we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.<sup>8</sup>

The sublime as it appears in the works of the most prominent representatives of American post-war abstract art is metaphysical, transcendent—not by its (objectivist) attitude towards the world, but in its (subjectivist) attitude towards man as an agent of (self-)transcending desires, experiences and feelings. It generally has two modalities: that of minimalism, where the elementariness, primacy and “openness” of the result, i.e. its “here and now,” is esteemed as an intellectual virtue;<sup>9</sup> and that of abstract expression, which attempts to be man’s intimate partner in his striving for intensified sublime experiences and a personally motivated “empathy” (*Einfühlung*) with things, the spirit of the times, and artworks.<sup>10</sup> A typical example of the first modality is the work of Barnett Newman (*cf. Vir Heroicus Sublimis* from 1950-51; *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* from 1966, etc.), while a typical example of the second modality is the work of Mark Rothko (especially that from after 1948).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now” (1948), in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, eds. H. B. Chipp, P. Selz, and J. C. Taylor, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 553.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-François Lyotard wrote, with respect to Newman’s painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the following: “A canvas by Newman draws a contrast between stories and its plastic nudity. Everything is there—dimensions, colours, lines—but there are no allusions. So much so that it is a problem for the commentator. What can one say that is not given? [...] The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or of the exclamation ‘Ah’. Of surprise: ‘Look at that.’ So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is a feeling of ‘there’ (Voilà),” Lyotard, “Newman: The Instant,” in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, eds. Keith Crome and James Williams, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 331.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, München: Piper, 1907.

<sup>11</sup> “A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world. How often it must be permanently impaired by the eyes of the vulgar and



The question is, however, how long can such linear plastic self-transcending in the direction of minimalism and abstract expression last. It seemed that after 1950, by constantly appealing to the viewer's "sensitiveness" and "subtleness" (*cf. fn 11*), the secularly sublime was demanding, with each passing day, increasingly greater experiential, intellectual and volitional concessions.

## 2. Crisis of aesthetic idealism and the turn to secondary semantization<sup>12</sup>

In the 1960s, modernist art came to an obvious crisis that was reflected in an aversion to the constitutive modernist idea that, behind the appearance of things, there exists a self-dependent metaphysical world of "pure" formative values, structures and relations, i.e. a subtle, post-metaphysical "other world" of sublime experiences, and that leading to all of this was an abstract morphology transcending the appearance of the world with its purist geometry and *all-over* expression. Although a reaction to the not-too-convincing metaphysics of "purity" had already emerged in early modernism with Duchamp and the Dadaists, it disappeared in an "unripe time."<sup>13</sup> This demystifying gesture had been aroused from self-absorption in the late 1950s by Neo-Dadaism, which developed from the anti-idealist spirit of the New Left, and in particular from the auto-reflexive epicenter of American abstract painting, which, in exploring the formative foundations of painting, began to touch its extreme (physical, factual, material) boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

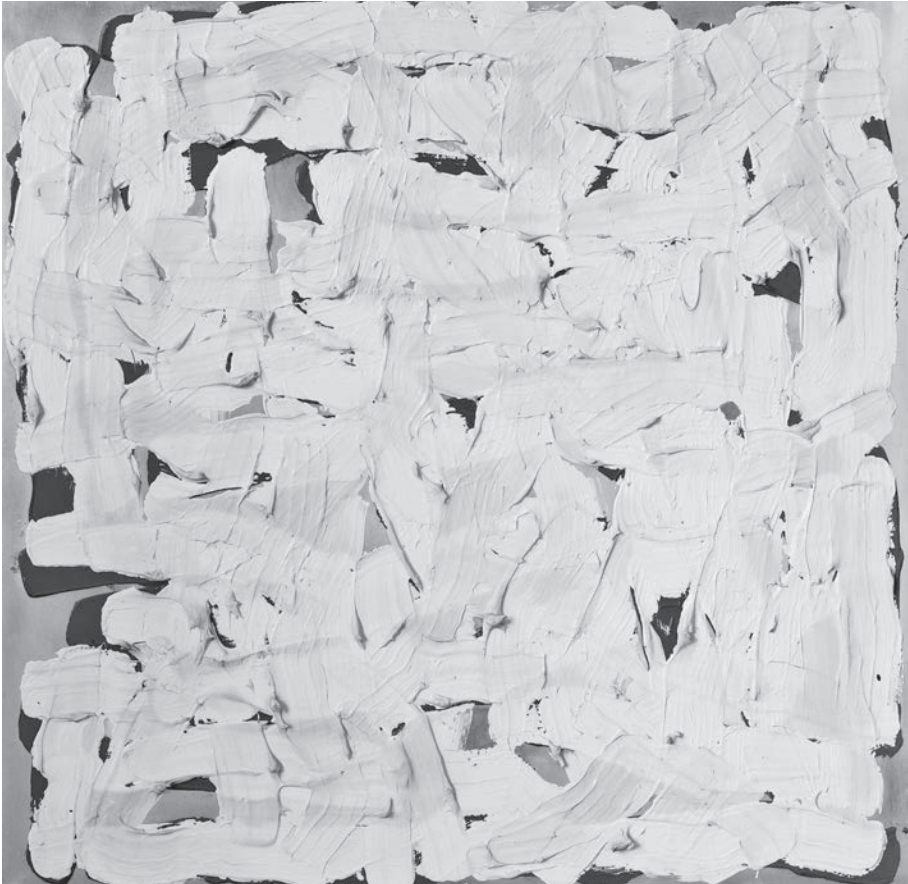
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the cruelty of the impotent who would extend the affliction universally."—Rothko, quoted in Barbara Hess, *Abstract Expressionism*, New York: Taschen, 2005, 42.

<sup>12</sup> For more detail, *cf.* Jožef Muhovič, "Über das Geistige in der Kunst heute oder: An den Wurzeln der Diskurs (ohn)mächte," in: Gorazd Kocijančič, Vid Snoj, Jožef Muhovič, *Über das Geistige in de Kunst—zum zweiten Mal*, LIT-Verlag, Münster—Wien—Berlin 2010, 51-102.

<sup>13</sup> Primarily because history has proven that the Duchampian *ready-mades* and the Dadaistic dismantlings of meaning do not hold ground as the *movens* of de-aestheticization, but spontaneously fall into a perpetuation of their own alternative—aestheticization. *Cf.* Duchamp's statement: "I threw the bottle dryer and urinal into their face as a challenge, and now they're admiring them as something aesthetically beautiful."—Duchamp, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada—Kunst und Antikunst*, Köln: DuMont, 1964, 212.

<sup>14</sup> Its protagonists were the American Neo-Dadaists (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg; earlier John Cage in music) and the French "new Realists" (Arman, Yves Klein, Daniel Spoerri).



**Figure 3:** Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1964, vinyl polymer paint on aluminum, 18 x 18 x 7/8 in. (45,7 x 45,7 x 2,2 cm); private collection.

### *Collapse of Aesthetic Difference*

When we say that a painting “presents” or “makes visible” something or other, this means that it actively shows the appearance—or disappearance—of the visibility (*Sichtbarkeit*) of something. In brief, such painting makes visibility a process that unwinds before the eyes and spirit of viewers.

What the material existence of the painting (*signifier*) shows and what the painting itself means (*signified*) differ. And precisely this inseparably linked discrepancy of signified and signifier is the simplest definition of such a painting. This “idealist”

transcendence of the signifier by the signified became increasingly more suspicious in the anti-representational paintings of the 1960s (Robert Morris, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt). The image, appearance and reference were denounced as illusionism and delusion, while minimalist painting (e.g. Frank Stella, Robert Ryman) was freely moving the weights on the scales of aesthetic relationships toward the objective, factual, material side (**Figure 3**). In other words: in an autoreflexive and reductionist fever, everything led to the breaking of ties between the pictorial signified and the signifier, i.e. to the collapse of *aesthetic difference*.

The principal norms of painting are the limiting conditions that need to be fulfilled by a “surface covered with colors distributed in a certain order” in order for it to be perceived and interpreted as a painting.<sup>15</sup> Modernism discovered that it was not only possible but also necessary to explore the irreducible essence of paintings. By now, wrote Clement Greenberg in his essay “Modernist Painting” in 1962, it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of painting consists in two constitutive norms—flatness and the delimitation of flatness—and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a “picture.” The question posed by art is no longer the question of what constitutes painting or art, but rather what constitutes irreducibly *good* art as such. Yet it was precisely at this point that things became complicated for Greenberg. A monochrome, flat surface seen as limited and different from the wall could, based on the minimal conditions of limitation and flatness, be declared a painting, or even art,<sup>16</sup> but the question was whether it could also be declared a “good” painting and therefore “true” art rather than just “good design.”<sup>17</sup> The material surface that fulfills the formal conditions for

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Maurice Denis’s famous statement dating from 1890: “Se rappeler qu’un tableau, avant d’être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue ou une quelconque anecdote, est essentiellement *une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées*.”—Maurice Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionalisme” (1890), reprinted in Maurice Denis, *Le ciel et l’Arcadie*, Paris: Hermann, 1993, 5.

<sup>16</sup> “A monochromatic flatness that could be seen as limited in extension and different from a wall henceforth automatically declared itself to be a picture, to be art”; Clement Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), in *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 181.

<sup>17</sup> In the same essay Greenberg suggests that the “aesthetic surprise” a viewer experiences on looking at “true” works of art is long lasting and important, while the novelty item provokes no more than a momentary surprise that is “superfluous.” For Greenberg a “true” work of art is a handmade expression of the artist’s feelings and thoughts. Minimalist art

a painting does not necessarily also produce aesthetic meaning. Greenberg often drew attention to the fact that a pictorial non-figurative surface, to which he gave absolute priority before the figurative pictorial surface, was something entirely different from the material surface of the painter's support, although the difference between the two was difficult to describe. Greenberg attempted to describe it as follows:

The flatness towards which modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. [...] The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye.<sup>18</sup>

In brief: for a flat surface to be “true” art, its status must—according to Greenberg—reveal the delicate presence of “aesthetic difference” between the signified and the signifier. Even more: it must designate their unfamiliarity and non-identity, which is a precondition for creating an aesthetic field, an aesthetic relationship, and thereby “artistry.”

It is not difficult to imagine that the self-reflexive and reductive impetus of late modernist painters could not, in its rush to the foundations of painting, permanently stop at this delicate, hair-thin barrier, but would sooner or later have to cross it. And, in the form of radical minimalism, they bid farewell to the transcending “idealism of the spirit” in favor of the “anti-idealism of bare objectivity.” The shift of attention from meaning to its material infrastructure, from artefact to fact, from the significance of aesthetic difference to the significance of non-difference between the signifier and the signified, was a small step for the

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with its deliberate production of artworks devoid of feeling, such as Donald Judd's factory produced objects, was in fact closer to furniture than to art, and should be viewed as nothing more than “Good Design”; *ibid.*, 185-186.

<sup>18</sup> Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Esthetics Contemporary*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1978, 202.

form-generating process, but a giant step for its artistic consequences. If painted pictures no longer belong to a different world than their materials, their process of creation, their environment, context, institutional framework, etc., then all aspects that spatially, temporally, contextually and institutionally surround a pictorial work of art can equally and freely enter art.

That is what has actually happened. Paintings that became mere objects, artifacts that shrunk into facts, and signifieds that sublimated into the bareness of the signifier not only turned away from the painting medium that had been continuously protected and preserved by the aesthetic idealism of abstract art,<sup>19</sup> but also turned towards a radically different way of communicating meanings. Because they do not symbolize anything, they are no longer symbols; since they do not depict or represent anything, they are no longer iconic signs; therefore, as facts which represent themselves in good and bad, they are entitled only to the status of traces, self-exhibitors, *indexes*.

Objects or phenomena perceived as indexes do not “communicate” or transmit messages in a usual way. They are not messengers of an authorially fixed thought, idea or language [...] but can, with their semantic openness, be inscribed into an indefinite set of interpretative contexts. Simply because they can allure or entice a subject to think about them and thus with their self-thematization or self-incontextualization make the subject arrive at their meaning on his own. For just as it is possible to secondarily aestheticize optional things if these are assessed, in line with the criteria of—more or less reflected—taste, to be aesthetic and are accordingly treated as such,<sup>20</sup> so too it is possible to secondarily *semanticize* optional things (objects, phenomena, contexts) if these are placed within the coordinates of the subjective interpretative and meaning-forming will. In the latter case, we perceive such objects as clues. The objects denote nothing (except themselves, of course), but they may nevertheless attach to themselves connotations that are dependent on their form, their spatial and cultural context, on their use in both contexts, and above all on the will and capabilities of the subject semantically exploiting these objects. By definition, connotative exertion always surpasses the indexical clue or denotation, usually

<sup>19</sup> Abstract paintings are, in a technical-technological sense, entirely analogous to Renaissance paintings (canvas stretched onto subframe, priming, etc.).

<sup>20</sup> Compare the aestheticized use of antiquities in modern apartments or the interest in making purchases at the flea market.



**Figure 4:** Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, installation; exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999 as one of the shortlisted works for the Turner Prize.

in the poetical or rhetorical direction. In brief: within the scope of a doubtful analogy, indexically used objects can always be interpreted in different ways in art. And since reflection and analytical work in this respect is no longer based on a specific aesthetic manner of perception that differs essentially from the functional one, but rather on functional identification, the two of them change profoundly. Late modernism is no longer familiar with aesthetic perception and experiencing in the narrow sense of the word, but has, on the basis of modern technical and functional perceptions, developed new methods of perception, reflection and analysis; particularly those of functional, cognitive, contextual and social-critical provenance (**Figure 4**).<sup>21</sup>

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As long as an artwork was the result of an author's aesthetic perception, the intention and production that he used to realize the form of his intentional "meaning" in the material medium, the most suitable manner of inquiring into artworks was hermeneutics—i.e., the reconstruction of the original meaning. In a period that does not operate with forms, but rather with indexically-applied objects that do not have "authorially fixed meaning," hermeneutics is off-track. Namely, objects that have no immanently fixed meaning, even though they have been assembled and set up by artists, have no "lost" or "darkened" original meaning (especially not the only one) that needs to be reconstructed. Here, the

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Meinhardt, "Das Verschwinden der ästhetischen Einstellung," in *Kunst und Form. Was heisst „Form“ in einer postmodernen Kunst*, ed. Jožef Muhovič, *Phainomena*, Ljubljana, XVII (66-67/2008; special issue), 82-85.

re-construction of denotative meaning must replace the authoritative de-construction of connotative reference, i.e., “eisegesis.”<sup>22</sup>

If we do not question their opacity, the indexically appearing objects are revealed to us as implications or as chains of implications about which we may draw conclusions on the basis of their choice, application, use, and even their own invention. Late modernism does not put references in brackets, nor does it suspend them, but is instead intensely engaged in problematizing the methods of creating references, which it does in a predominantly allegorical manner.<sup>23</sup> An allegorical thinker no longer believes in the intentional meaning of what is being offered for him to view, but realizes that the manner in which he poses questions will determine which insights he will gain in connection with certain objects and their constellations. He is also aware of the limitation, questionability and arbitrariness of these questions and the dogmaticalness of his replies. An allegorist, says Walter Benjamin, uses objects or things to a certain extent as indexes which do not speak for themselves, but do direct him to situations in reality, especially social reality. What he will do with these instructions depends on him alone. Most important of all: an allegorist asks the world, not intentionally fixed statements. The world is what encourages him to reflect; the objects are merely catalysts for his questioning.<sup>24</sup> In short: the allegorical impulse that marked late modernism is intensely re-directing our experience of art from aesthetic to functional perception and from hermeneutic to rhetorical, textual, *discursive* intercourse with things.<sup>25</sup>

If the model of aesthetic idealism in plastic art thus presupposed and favored authorially semanticized forms with explicit post-metaphysical features, i.e. forms which distanced themselves to the greatest possible degree from the *de-lusive* “physics” of objectivity and functional perception, then the model of late

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<sup>22</sup> To emphasize the difference between the “re-construction” of meaning, which is characteristic of exegesis and hermeneutics, and its de-construction, which is characteristic of the interpretation of indexically used objects, I have introduced the inverse expression “eisegesis” (Gr. *eisegesis*), which is normally described in dictionaries as the “subjective, dogmatic explanation of sources.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art New York & D. R. Godine Publisher Inc., 1984, 235.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V/1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, 466.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.



modernist indexical semantization turned precisely to what the idealist model wished to abandon, that is, to the singularity of the factual and to the functionality of perception. It did so, paradoxically, for the same reason: because of the *delusiveness* of plastically embodied aesthetic idealism. It could therefore be said that we are dealing here with the banishment of a too much mystified aesthetically-idealist Beelzebub by a demystifying Satan of secondary semantization. The moving force of this semantization, however, is no longer to function in the medium of a plastic art that is spontaneously calling for forming and trans-forming, for existential participation and creative *eros*; instead, it is to jump out of this medium into the medium of discourse, which is a synonym for distance and intellectual meta-position.

If the artefacts of old, “aesthetic art” (with all of their idealizations) were often not only “full of everything conceivable,” but also full of themselves (aesthetic autonomism), the (arte)FACTS (objects, events, contexts) of contemporary, “de-aestheticized art” are intentionally “empty” and thus “open” semantic potentials, and as such they are directly seeking an interpretative (*eisegetic*: see fn 22) impulse for discourse; practically any kind of discourse may be offered to—or imposed upon—them as the “most important surrogate of what is most important.” Over and over again, since the fluidity and—ultimately—transitoriness of discourses cannot prevent the discourses of other interpreters from appearing on the scene of semantic openness. And with the same entitlement.

### 3. Epi-logic:

#### *Modernist heartbeat in the rear-view mirror of art*

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To determine whether any conclusions can be drawn from the renewed observance of modernist strategies in the realm of fine/plastic art presented above with respect to the nature, scope and topicality or non-topicality of the term “modernism,” I shall attempt, in abbreviated form, to summarize the empirical “depths” and “reefs” of the modernist *model of aesthetic idealism* on the one side and the *model of secondary semantization* on the other side.

#### *Added value and the autonomist trap of the aesthetic idealism model*

In my opinion, the strong side of the metaphysical orientation of modernist art is in its artefactness, in the “drama of formativeness,” that is, in the intention to transcend the given, to aim for human self-transcendence, and to create real

forms that do not exist in nature but can be produced on the basis of a knowledge of natural laws (cf. footnote 5). Although this intention cannot be realized with the same potency in all spiritual-historical circumstances, it is nevertheless not possible to imagine human culture entirely without it. It is based on the endeavors to pull the background into the foreground and to show a complicated life the path to spiritual orderliness and cleanliness. In modernism, this metaphysical regime interested in background and cleanliness is bound to the superlative in all its phases. In this regime, to create what is relevant always means to express what is in man's conceptions most fundamental, supreme, the best, the most lasting, the most complete.

Yet in this optimized human endeavor also lies the greatest danger of the secularized idealist model. Namely, the more a plastic artist looks upwards or downwards to the "essential," the "fundamental" and the "pure," and on that basis attempts to produce "from himself" (cf. footnote 8) still unseen and non-existing forms, the deeper he is entering the autonomous realm in which he must determine not only the boundaries, but also the "laws" for his own articulation.<sup>26</sup> This is an exceptional task, within which many creators and even periods "lose their nerves" and end up in the blind alley of self-will, which sooner or later begins to send them bills of credibility in the form of the most perfidious self-deception, i.e. in the form of the conviction that whatever is satisfied with itself, the world and the times is also the most suitable.<sup>27</sup> Consequences of this are frequently fictions or pathetic phantoms of "superpersonal wisdom" which have an effect only as long as the viewer's conscious will is prepared to credit them in the form of a suitable quantum of mystification. When the credit is spent and the articulation demystified, the time comes for sobering strategies and the return to more realistic possibilities and values.

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#### *Added value and blind spots of the secondary semantization model*

Moving away from metaphysical phantoms and fictions understandably leads to their de-mystification, de-idealization, and de-universalization. All of this in line with Nietzsche's and Popper's criticism of teleological reason, which

<sup>26</sup> *Auto-nomos*, he who makes his own laws.

<sup>27</sup> Adapted from Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, 240: "In diesem Sinn ist politischer Moralismus [...] die tückischste Form von politischer Blindheit, weil er das, was meint, mit sich selbst zufrieden sein können, zugleich auch für weltgerecht halten will."

showed that all recognition is of a local nature and that no human observer can reach the stage where he actually transcends his own position. From this perspective the purpose of contemporary visual art (objects, installations, new media, activism, etc.) based on secondary semantization is not in absorbing oneself in visual objects, events and contexts, and transcending them in order to please this or that super-personal “wisdom”; its purpose is not to ignore such objects, events and contexts on a personal level, even though they may be “low” and ephemeral, but to find them (*ready-mades*), to put them into focus, to semantically seize them, and to socially exploit them.

The positive side of the turn to factuality, to the de-idealization of human metaphysical appetites, and to the pragmatization of artistic objects, processes and institutions is that contact with the daily routine is preserved, the disarranged world is integrated into the horizons of artistic interest, and idealized life goes back to being profane. The good side of this discursive meta-position, which is a “formatted place” for activating human interpretative, associative and connotative potentials, is the permanent semantic actualization of all aspects of the world, particularly those that reflect the ways in which social discursive powers and dominants manifest themselves through visibility and images.

Yet hanging over these two “positivities” is also a Damoclean sword of “two little wrong gestures” with significant consequences. This preservation of the contact with the directness of the world can easily slip into the blurring of boundaries between art and life, and if “art is life” and “life is art,” then we will very soon have neither the authentic form of the first nor the authentic form of the second. It may just as easily happen that the constant semantization and actualization of objects, facts and contexts, which are never verified in extra-discursive, plastic form, are deformed into a permanent entropic acquiescence with the automatic, fleeting and fatally unchangeable “current of the world.”

Discursive semantizations dispose with endless versions of being acquainted with things and informing about them, but due to the meta-positioned distance our human consciousness will remain immune to actual situations and their consequences. Without the contact with presence, without its resistance, correctiveness, suffering and pleasure, the nature of creative ideas and even creative intelligences may essentially change. At the end we thus face the question: What exactly do we gain if we turn away from the questionable exaggeration

referred to in the metaphysical model of aesthetic idealism as *escape into the permanent* and turn instead toward the equally questionable, though oppositely signed exaggeration which the indexed semantization model refers to as *escape into the fleeting?*

### Coda

Looking back on all that has been said in this essay on the more than century-long events that have shaped Western fine/plastic art, it is my opinion that it could be condensed not only into the classic, Apollonian-Dionysian binome, but also into the classic organic metaphor of vitality—the metaphor of the modernist “cardiac cycle.” Its expansive, systolic phase is aesthetic idealism, which strove to penetrate as deeply as possible into the visual and into the mystical-mysterious world behind it, while its correlative diastolic phase—currently still in progress—is *aesthetic anti-idealism*, which is linked to the factual and its secondary semantization. The first phase was directed from the everyday world into the epicenter of “spiritualized” plastic art, while the second was directed from exclusive and sometimes absolutist plastic spirituality towards life “in the first person singular.” On the one side, the cardiology of modernism reached an elevated metaphysics of purity and the sublime, which sees and grabs facts from their foundations, appearances from their essence, and structure from their functions; on the other side, after the break with the fictions of the metaphysical “apparition,” it called the creator and viewer back into the grounded, supple and confusing real world. In this respect it is clear that these two phenomena are not merely two links of historical succession, but rather that they, viewed in the long term, form a verifiable, complementary and functional whole.

Because this is how I see things, it is perhaps understandable that in my essay I do not speak of “postmodernism” as something that is in progress because something else (modernism) has passed.