

From: *Museums for a New Millenium. Concepts Projects Buildings*, curated by V. Magnago Lampugnani, A. Sachs, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 30 May - 26 August 2001), Prestel, Monaco-Londra-New York 2001, pp. 32-33.

Gerhard Merz

In 1992 Edgar Morin declared that modernism was running out of steam.¹ The world, he said, was once again that which the word *planet* had originally signified, a wandering star.

Essays on history are entitled "The End of History." The principles of rootedness in the past seem to have been lost. In the process, art becomes a subject for negotiation, its predominant principle being "indoor-outdoor." Placed in the protection of the museum space, objects readily recognized as trivial elsewhere unleash a discourse that leaves nothing intact: suddenly, there it is, the difference between wit and pretension to wit. Negotiation creates art in the context of the museum. Rudolf Carnap has written about spurious problems in philosophy, emphatic in his judgment of metaphysics. He reached the conclusion that traditional metaphysical theses were not only useless, they were devoid of meaningful and insightful content. He unmasked metaphysical statements as casuistic, albeit enormously useful to many in the art world, then and now. Giorgio Grassi mentions the superstition of modernism. This is justified. Upon reception, modernism realized is but a single chain of misconceptions with the "unintended image" at the end of the chain. It is easy to agree that art must promote knowledge and even be up-to-date in its arguments; that it should resist that which is commonly held to be true outside of art. How else might art presume to soar like a soprano above the humdrum tune of ordinary human activity? How else might the artist dare to steal even a second of the viewer's life as he contemplates a work? A mature artist surely does not count upon altruism or a friendly interpretation of private hieroglyphs. But just for the fun of it, draw a line between the artists of this century who think astronomically and those who argue astrologically. The century belongs to the occult, the absurd, the cosmic brew (T. S. Eliot). The real tactic of art has no intention to mystify, has no pretensions to being a seismograph of the soul, knows the difference between bricolage and construction, resists rumors and simulacra that is, staying with the established image: art that follows the astronomic line of thinking. This art disappoints, for it promises, reconciles, and consoles nothing and no one. Ad Reinhardt says it clearly: It is not the purpose of art to uplift relations with humans. Let's return to the cause: Cézanne. Using a logic of color, he realizes a pattern that runs parallel to nature, and, with stunning simplicity, states that a painting is primarily a construct of canvas and color. In his last letter to his son he wrote, "Compared to myself, all my compatriots are assholes."² He isn't being arrogant. On the contrary, he was always conscious of his own impoverishment as an artist; he knew what he had renounced. Yet today, the "unintended image" is present. In an exhibit of Cézanne's *The Bathers* in Basel, genitalia are counted, sorted into male and female, and studied as to obsession and secret illness. In 1918, Malevich wrote: "I have painted the naked icon of my time, as a symbol of separation from the entire history of culture"³ - a farewell whose tragic and radical nature was understood by few. A farewell to the visible world; we're not dealing here with diagrams of nature or geometry. Take Kandinsky, where three dots become a face and - after prolonged gazing reveal a horse or a cannon. The nonrepresentational rules and not abstraction - no insidious naturalism and no secret heartbeat. And the nonrepresentational no longer reveals itself in the act of looking, immersing oneself. Now the viewer must know as much as the author; the viewer is neither instructed nor consoled. The

black square is not complete art, it is a fragment of the greater knowledge, of a greater realization. Even today, the black square is not fully understood in its emptiness-emptiness in the true sense of the word - in its sparsity. Countless attempts have been made to soften the shock, to mediate. It has become an object for contemplation; sunk to the level of the devotional, our taste succumbs to it. It serves not to enlighten; instead, atavistic yearnings and philosophic kitsch deliver proof. And it's made easy; the means of modernism permit only a walk on the razor's edge, securing the meaning of a thing over premeditated sensibility, over connoisseurship, over secrets, rescuing us from the fall into the abyss. The secondary senses promote, as Konrad Fiedler warned us, "a blind reading of art."⁴ The realized artwork is not used to launch a clever discourse. The moment is felt only momentarily (Lyotard on Barnett Newman⁵) and only then if you're well prepared, like a diligent pilot who checks his engine before takeoff. Reaching the point of no return on the runway, he radios "Flight" to the control tower and completes the most critical part of his journey. This is the unveiling, the lightning bolt, epiphany. In Barnett Newman's language, it is the sublime. And now, the lightning bolt over, we continue. For this is no surprise attack on the retina. This is a dialogue between equals and I (the viewer) acknowledge not only that which I see but also that which has deliberately been omitted. Absence should not be taken amiss. There is no Jack of artistry here; this is not asceticism, design, or taste. This is absence willed to be legitimate art, born from factual pressure. For the nonrepresentational is a blind, empty ground, as Malevich said, and all of a sudden we've come full circle, back to Edgar Morin and his view of our world as a wandering star, deserted by the gods. Gottfried Benn comments that the gods were silent, having better things to do.⁶ So let's accept that while life is free, art is not; it reveals itself intuitively, but everyone can inch closer through knowledge and study. Or else, let's not worry about it and trust that the author, the artist, has pursued his chosen work in a precise and sober manner. I like the notion that great art is the smallest possible deviation from the norm. Trust, and thus ethos, is one way of coming to terms with the complexities outside of the *métier*, which is complex in itself; and it protects us from a false security and neofundamentalist morals - in short, from progressive reactionaries. This is no vindication of the Sprengers and the Sedlmayrs. On the contrary: this is modernism that makes no promises, that is cold and agnostic, a stranger to regionalism of any kind, remaining aloof, and, yet to be seen by anyone; a modernism whose first artifacts are decay in banal museum rooms, producing the lamented unintended image. Beckett's wonderful final text is entitled *Stirring Still*.⁷ This is not a threat; it is like it is.

"Every artist knows how far from any feeling of letting himself go his 'most natural' state is - the free ordering, placing, disposing, giving form in the moment of 'inspiration' - and how strictly and subtly he obeys thousandfold laws precisely then, laws that precisely on account of their hardness and determination defy all formulation through concepts.... What is essential 'in heaven and on earth' seems to be, to say it once more, that there should be *obedience* over a long period of time and in a *single* direction."⁸

Mies van der Rohe is said to have studied this paragraph from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* at length, and we should keep it in mind as we stand in front of Mies's *chef d'œuvre*, the National Gallery in Berlin. This is a building that reveals all, that illustrates how susceptible modernism is to disruption. It will never be a beautiful ruin; let's remember our walk on the razor's edge - a broken pane, and the fall into the abyss begins. Inside this building, many complain, one cannot exhibit. But shouldn't art withstand that which is known of art on the outside? As soon as we set our trust in Mies van der Rohe, the task presents itself differently. Perhaps he's handing us a kind of litmus test. I've often seen the test hit home and unmask a work of art on a more subtle level of thinking than we are capable of, revealing its atavistic side. As for myself, I dare say that anything that cannot be realized there, should not *be*. There is an imaginary museum and a high court of artists of the past,

allowing us to do what we do, for we have dignified as art only that which is most important and then only after much effort. Mies van der Rohe, and many others, feel that one need only continue that which has already been done *right*, refine it, and bring it up to date.

¹ Edgar Morin, *Einen neuen Anfang wagen* (Hamburg, 1992). 9f.

² Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, John Rewald, ed. (Zurich, 1926).

³ Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematism - die gegenstandslose Welt*, Werner Haftmann, ed. (Cologne, 1989).

⁴ Konrad Fiedler, *Vom Wesen der Kunst*, selected writings, Hans Eckstein, ed. (Munich, 1942).

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Philosophe und Malerei im Zeitalter ihres Experimentierens*, (Berlin, 1986).

⁶ Gottfried Benn, *Soll Dichtung das Leben bessern?* in *Collected Works, Vol. 4 (Speeches and Lectures)*, (Wiesbaden, 1969).

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Stirring Still - Immer noch nicht mehr*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1991).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Werke in zwei Bänden*, 4th edition (Munich, 1978), Vol. II, p. 51.