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The Moderns

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The term "Modern" - and all its derivatives such as "modernity" or "modernism" - has changed meanings so many times since its first usage in antiquity that it is impossible to define it accurately. Yet it is a term that continues to haunt us. It is above all an impulse, and an intention.

This exhibition explores the different ways in which contemporary artists around the world have recently been engaging with modernism and/or modernity. Rarely ironic, their works do not simply quote the modern, nor do they merely critique it. These artists have come to maturity in art schools where post modernism is the rule, and where post-Conceptual deconstructive practice has become academic. And they are tired of it. They are curious about a time now felt to be so far in the past that they can gaze upon it without anxiety, and without fear of being overwhelmed by it. Whether in Western circles or in post-colonial contexts, more and more artists are becoming interested in exploring modernism, rather than demolishing it.

This growing number of international artists is both referring to modernism - the primary cultural expression or critique of modern life - and using icons of modernity as narratives and fictions in their artworks. Although these artists are certainly aware of the failures of modernity their work also looks at its utopian and constructive aspects.

A new appreciation of experimentation with form and composition, and a sense of agency (and urgency) reminiscent of similar modernist impulses, seems to have emerged. In contrast to this renewed sense of involvement, postmodernist thoughts on the impossibility of originality and authenticity in a media and spectacle-saturated world seem old and pale. The currency of those ideas, dominant for almost three decades, now seems utterly lost.

Referring to software artists - but the comment could be extended to our purposes here, and thinking of the work of artists such as Carsten Nicolai, Arturo Herrera and others - new media theorist Lev Manovic recently commented: "Of course we don't want to simply replay Mondrian and Klee on computer screens. The task of the new generation is to integrate the two paradigms of the twentieth century: (1) belief in science and rationality, emphasis on efficiency, basic forms, idealism and heroic spirit of modernism; (2) scepticism, interest in 'marginality' and 'complexity', deconstructive strategies, baroque opaqueness and excess of postmodernism (1960s-). At this point all the features of the second paradigm have become tired clichés. Therefore a return to modernism is not a bad first step, as long as it is just a first step towards developing the new aesthetics for the new age."¹

When the term "modern" was first used, it indicated the "contemporary" and the "new", as opposed to the "ancient". It was coined in the late fifth century in order to distinguish Christianity - the "present" - from the pagan past of Rome. Later it was employed to indicate the age running approximately from the Renaissance to the twentieth century - the age beginning with the birth of nation-states and a wealth of scientific discoveries. The art historian Giorgio Vasari refers to the art of his period, the sixteenth century, as "modern". Later, in its formulation as "modernity", it came to indicate the project of the Enlightenment, begun in the eighteenth century, during which science,

morality and art were separated into different and autonomous spheres of knowledge and experience. Finally, "modernity" became synonymous with "modern times", the age of industrialization and urbanization - with all the socio-political and cultural consequences of "modernization" (this last term being its most recent post-World War II variant), beginning roughly around 1860, when aesthetic modernity also took shape.

Historically, the term "modern" was repeatedly used whenever there was a consciousness of a new epoch being formed. Yet during the twentieth century it slowly became synonymous with a historical period that was part of our past, an optimistic period that was shattered by the horrors of war and destruction. The term "modernism", too, has meant many things. It has meant the Art Nouveau style in design and architecture at the turn of the twentieth century; it has indicated the functionally based architecture of the twentieth century, with its Constructivist, rationalist and Bauhaus declensions; it was associated with the hermeneutic phase of Modern art - with purity, flatness and abstraction - and with the search for an "ultimate" painting in its post-World War II Greenbergian sense. Mostly, however, in literature and the visual arts, it was associated with the avant-garde, with a cult of the new, of overturning conventions, of radical breakthroughs in style and form, associated with revolutionary impulses according to which art could contribute to shaping a better society. As such, it has been a form of testing modernity, a cultural reaction and opposition to the modernity of bourgeois society and its norms, either embracing its notions of progress and productivity or, on the contrary, radically questioning those notions by asserting its own autonomy from them.

Over the last thirty years, roughly since the late 1960s and 1970s, modernism and modernity have become increasingly out-moded, with the emergence of books such as Suzi Gablik's *Has Modernism Failed?* of 1984². There were of course debates in the 1980s between theoreticians over the validity of the notion of postmodernism and some philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas, posited theories about the "incomplete" project of modernity. But overall, by the 1990s it seemed clear to all that we were living in an age where "pastiche", "repetition" and a sense of layered intertextuality had taken the place of modernist "collage" and "originality" as the primary metaphors of culture. Feminist thought, as well as psychoanalysis, relativist philosophy and postcolonial theory, also helped foster the need to negotiate "differences" in culture - and post modernism was all about "differences." Modernism became associated with Western art, patriarchal thought, excessive idealism, and with a limited and partial view of art history.

The semantic ambiguity of the term therefore derives both from its historical shifts and its various geographical declensions. If we were to try, instead of defining "modernism", simply to list what it evokes, we would find the following: the modernists were revolutionary optimists and/or they presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. They made some radical experiments with form and language. They were forward-looking and forged a new and diverse vocabulary. They ushered in a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities that began in the late nineteenth century and continued to evolve into the post-World War I period under which the ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world-view of the nineteenth century, grounded on historicism, was questioned, signaling a break with Victorian bourgeois morality. A quick definition of postmodernism would summarize that it was about the awareness of, and demise of modernism, and took the shape - by the late twentieth century - of an interest in multiple viewpoints, relativism, indeterminacy, doubt, shifts of location, an inability to fix roles, and the impossibility of resolution or closure.

So why the return of modernism, in our "postmodern" digital age? Why modernism if the Web is a primary metaphor for our complex and de-centered "postmodern" mind? First of all, it was the digital age itself that ushered in a new interest in modernity. This is an age defined by a

technological surge associated with notions of progress and innovation, comparable to the late nineteenth-century world of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Manet, when aesthetic modernism was shaped. In the digital world, great attention is paid to networks and communities; both signal a renewed interest in the visionary models of modernist utopian vanguards. Furthermore, postmodernist relativism paved the way for an appreciation of 'difference' and diverse notions of cultural practice around the world. What this new cultural interchange brought to the fore, however, was the urgency felt in many postcolonial contexts of the need to reassess other forms of modernism, and to negotiate modernization and globalization through the culture of modernity. Finally, the international economic and political situation today reveals tensions that were unexpected even ten years ago. A sense of the inadequacy of postmodernist relativistic models to harness this new landscape suggests a new urgency in the work of cultural practitioners, a need for engagement similar to other dramatic historical moments when modern movements emerged.

The digital world is internationalist, as were the modernists; the digital world aims to go beyond the local/global dichotomy while at the same time achieving a reach broader than anything the modernists achieved. The digital mind is a project-based mind, encouraging a sense of agency, an ability to make choices and to act, to have a point of view and a hyper-perspectival gaze, even with in contemporary notions of multiplicity.

Memory and Modernity are intertwined (the "future" is a notion belonging to the past), and in some instances this idea takes form in the use of the history of film as a medium and subject. After all, film, evolving from photography, has been the most outstanding innovative cultural practice of the Modern Age. In other instances, it is to the formalism of "high modernist" art in painting and sculpture that artists are looking. For such artists, issues of form, color, composition and linguistic experimentation are topical. Science, absurd or useless science, as well as its fantastic variant science fiction, are also sources for many current artists, and are amongst the primary metaphors being used.

Frederic Jameson, in his recent book *A Singular Modernity* (2002), analyzes the return of interest in modernity and modernism from the perspective of a staunch postmodernist. He sees this current shift as a form of cultural regression. The recent usage of the term "modernity" is an expression of the global market, he suggests, an attempt to legitimize free-market positions in global capitalism: "Modernity has simply become a word for the conformity to such economic constraints ... If free-market positions can be systematically identified with modernity and habitually grasped as representing what is modern, then the free market people have won a fundamental victory."³ He finds analogous ambiguities in the aesthetic sphere of modernism. Yet his might be a partial view, and one could just as easily argue that it was in fact postmodernist relativism that ushered in a vacuum of values - both ethical and political - in which all that remained were free-market positions. Similarly, the return to "beauty" advocated by some art critics in recent years, and that Jameson associates with contemporary neo-modernist artistic practice, might not represent aesthetic modernism at all but could be the consequence of a vacuum of aesthetic theory during the postmodernist period, a period during which theory became almost solely contextual - focusing on *how* art is talked about, rather than the art itself.

During the postmodernist era, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the anti-traditional nature of modernism, its progressive and revolutionary ideals, were declared naive or, worse, dangerous, because they were said to be filled with the seeds of authoritarianism. But is this not a highly reductive view of the wealth of modernity and modernism? And was modernism ever really over? Can post-modernism be read simply as an aspect, or period, of modernism, as an expression of the radical self-doubt that has truly traversed all of modernism since its inception? As the art historian T.J. Clark points out, "Modernism was already characterized by a deep, truly undecidable

doubleness of mind in the face of the main forms of modernity. And that doubleness was *constitutive* ... For every Ozenfant there seems to me to be a Picabia; for every Schroeder House an Einstein Tower; for every *Monument to the Third International* a *Merzbau* enfolding its Cathedral of Erotic Misery - or indeed, directly answering Tatlin's *Monument*, Hausmann's sardonic-domestic *Tatlin at Home*. That is to say, for every sweet dream of rationality, a nightmare vision of the iron cage ... For every De Stijl a Dada."⁴

The artist Tacita Dean recently wrote, "For me, obsolescence is a state of normality. Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time. The one thing I have noticed is that so often I am attracted to things conceived in the decade of my birth. I court anachronism - things that were once futuristic but are now out of date - and I wonder if the objects and buildings I seek were ever, in fact, content in their own time, as if obsolescence was invited at their conception."⁵ To be interested in modernism and modernity today is thus to appreciate something obsolete.

If postmodernism developed a strategy of parody, mimesis and deceit as a way of reacting against the alienation of a society of spectacle, thus furthering the legacy of Pop art, artists such as Dean, Susan Philipsz, Simon Starling, Daria Martin or Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba adopt a different attitude: one of sincerity and melancholic belief in the utopian ideals of modernity. They are looking with a cinematic gaze for a sense of authenticity, as did the modern artist; and their awe on the revolutionary and utopian ideals of the modernists is distanced but not negative. Starling's hand-crafted objects are paradoxes that pay homage to high modernist utopian and functionalist design - the design of an age that was enthralled with automation and the machine-made - while at the same time being uniquely hand crafted. Philipsz continues in the spirit of the radical revolutionary avant-garde, but believes that it is possible to bring about change only by influencing individuals through intimate one-to-one communication as opposed to collective action. Nguyen-Hatsushiba creates dream-like documentary films to reveal erased histories and encourage change. These artists, like archaeologists, retrieve the structures and narratives of modernism. For the anthology of this catalogue, each artist was asked to select a text from the past that resonated in terms of the exhibition concept. Nguyen-Hatsushiba picked Ho Chi Minh's 1945 *Declaration of Independence*. This text is an exercise in understanding modernity, an exercise in applying the thoughts of the Enlightenment to the contemporary world.

Liam Gillick's platforms and provisional structures are reminiscent of the collective spaces envisioned by the revolutionary modernists, and are a metaphor for an awareness of the values of actual production in a postindustrial age. Using a vocabulary that recalls stylistic precedents from modernist architecture and design, Jorge Pardo tries instead to come to grips with the relationship between design and art. His delight in experimentation leads him to take ever new exploratory trips into the realms of design, architecture, painting and graphics, on which he questions apparently self-evident distinctions between art and the everyday, sculpture and utility goods, two and three-dimensionality, or private and public space.

It is in the field of sculpture that a sense of formalist experimentation is most evident today. A number of artists have recently been exploring materiality and the ability to create forms that are open and ambivalent, somewhere between assemblages and newly-created shapes, between representation and abstraction. These mutate and hover in a real and mental space that is also neither representational nor abstract. This new sculpture blurs the boundary between raw materials and produced goods, since it treats objects as part of a continuum of materials and no longer as signifiers of a consumer landscape. While Tom Friedman conceptually refers to high modernism's search for the absolute - both furthering this search and deflating its importance through the use of simple objects and materials from daily life - other artists explore the space between abstraction and representation in a less focused manner. Being out of focus, and a synaesthetic visualization of

electronic music - of the space and experience of electronic music, characterizes, for instance, the psychedelic abstraction and freedom of experimentation in Jim Lambie's art. This is a field in which improvisation has expanded to the point where what is being dj-ed is less important than the formal play made by the artist. An artist like Lambie, or Piotr Uklanski for that matter, does not return to the idea of "authenticity" the way others do. Both engage in Pop culture, and accept artifice. Yet within Uklanski's world of photographs, installations, architectural interventions and "paintings" made with pencil shavings, there is also space - within artifice - for a sense of emotion, and for a search for the romantic sublime that contradicts his ironic nature. A search for the Romantic sublime also characterizes Elisabetta Benassi's, videos and video/sculptures where she allows herself to engage personally, and directly, with iconic characters, architecture and events from our past. Similarly, John Pilson does not portray the alienation of the corporate environment in his videos (which would be a postmodernist critique of modernist functional architecture); he suggests the way in which life, vitality, emotion irresistibly rush into that environment. Evan Holloway's acute awareness of the body of the viewer in relation to the perception of his sculpture reveals an interest in the phenomenology of experience and grounding the "digital" viewer in space⁶. Similarly, with his tree-sculptures made out of painted branches, he takes literally the abstract notion of "branches" and "trees" used in making maps and diagrams. His is a Neo-Futurist, tactilist, outlook.

"When you first come across a sculpture by Brian Jungen, specifically the 'Prototypes for New Understanding', you first sense that you are perceiving something completely fabricated by the artist out of untransformed materials. Only after an instant do you see the Nike shoes used to make the 'mask'. It is important to recognize these objects as materials, but more important is the time that elapses before you do so - a time filled with the optimistic sense of one's ability to construct and shape - to make things. Although recalling in some ways the art of the 1980s, this is actually very different from the experience of viewing, say, a sculpture by Meyer Vaisman or Haim Steinbach. It is not the consumer good that is important, but the ability to transcend it as an important 'sign', and to treat it as one might treat raw wool, or a piece of marble. These are artists who have grown up in the 1990s, who feel they can impact on globalization; these are artists of the 'no logo' generation, of the internet generation, who create their own agendas in a 'grass roots', 'desk-top' fashion. They shape their own spaces of communication autonomously and independently."

In some cases, as in the art of Gary Webb, sculpture can even stutter and gurgle in a sphere where the materiality of the work also implies the materiality of sound. The vernacular is joined with abstraction in an apparently seamless manner. J.J. Charlesworth has recently written about these sculptures, pointing out a "persistent interest in disrupting the conventional distinction between representation and non-representation, creating in the process fertile syntheses of formal sensation, sign, and allusion which resist turning the object either into the mere vehicle for an easily recognizable image, or the space in which to rehearse the simplistic rhetoric of a defunct formalism."⁷

A major aspect of modernism was the challenge it posed to traditional methods of representing three-dimensional space. It went from traditional perspective to the flat surface. Today, again, the representation of space becomes important. What this space might be is yet unclear; what is clear, however, is that these artists are exploring ways of representing today's consciousness through art. And this new form of consciousness has a strong spatial dimension. Our minds negotiate the physical and the virtual; we navigate through a hyper-dimensional space on the World Wide Web, and this experience inevitably shapes the way in which we move and construct knowledge in the "real" world. - This is similar to the way in which the machine and speed modified the Futurists' experience of space/emotion/time in the early twentieth century.

The spaces we inhabit today are mysterious - they expand abruptly, they contract, they morph

continuously, they open up onto different universes at the same time, suggesting not ubiquity but a seamless passage from place to place, moment to moment, emotion to emotion. Sarah Sze has been experimenting with forms that represent this sense of space for some years now, and her works hover above or below the surface of spaces in a way both reminiscent of Naum Gabo's art and of the "push and pull" theories of Hans Hofmann. This morphing universe of the mind is what Haluk Akakçe "paints" in his abstract digital animations, and it is the same hyperspace that Ricci Albenda shapes in his installations called *Portals to Another Dimension*. The artist's off-kilter corridors, *trompe l'œil* rooms and perspectively skewed wall fissures are models of what Albenda imagines are alternative worlds with alternative forms of measurement and other ways of seeing. Not by chance, Albenda selected for this catalogue an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka. A Prose poem* - an essay of the high Modern period that explores the limits of the mind's workings and of our concept of the universe. Alternate worlds and their experience form the basis of Massimo Bartolini's experiments with space and perception, where the futuristic impulses of specialism join an aesthetics of potentiality and a love of nature. It is the space of the mind that Paul Pfeiffer suggests with his micro-surgical digital editing, where he subtly alters video snippets from well-known entertainment films or sports events. In parallel with the work of biologists, who aim to dissect DNA sequences into their smallest component parts and reassemble them in different combinations to invent artificial life forms, Pfeiffer creates artificial film loops by dissecting film material into its smallest units and reconstructing it. Julie Mehretu also explores this space in her layered maps of the mind. Arising from the intuitive gestures of abstraction, Mehretu's paintings combine graphic plans of public space and architecture with narratives and historical signs. Engaged with formal concerns of color and line, her work suggests urban development on a sprawling global scale through the layering of personal markings. It is mental space, too, that Arturo Herrera evokes in his Conceptual collages, wall paintings, cut-felt works, sculpture and installation. His work is grounded on a belief in the possibilities of exploring perception, the unconscious and the control of consciousness, the fluidity of the digital and our ability to create and mutate forms. Herrera combines craft with an experimental nature to achieve a new form of art. It is a pleasure - and a relief - to see this kind of work come into the world today.

¹ Lev Manovic, *Generation Flash*, www.rhizome.org, 2002.

² Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?*, Thames & Hudson, New York and London, 1984.

³ Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology for the Present*, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p. 9.

⁴ T.J. Clark, "Origins of the Present Crisis", *New Left Review* 2, London, March/April, 2000, pp. 85-96.

⁵ Tacita Dean, untitled statement in *October*, New York, 100, Spring 2002, p. 26.

⁶ See Bruce Hainley, "Towards a Funner Laocoön", *Artforum*, New York, pp. 166-173.

⁷ J.J. Charlesworth, Mute Matter and Stuttering Machines. Sign and Substance in Recent Sculpture, *Artext*, Los Angeles, Fall 2002, n.p.