

AVANT-GARDE AND TRADITION: TOWARDS A POST-MODERNIST HISTORY
OF MODERN ART

The central issue to be discussed in my presentation of today is the concept of art history itself, in particular the concept underlying the history of modern art. Obviously, art history cannot be written once and for all. This holds true in particular for the history of modern art which has been written mainly by the faithful of modernism themselves. Almost every piece of writing on modernist art so far is drenched in self-satisfaction and is rather a part of source-material than of its commentaries. The literature on modern art is still totally mesmerized by the completely a-historical concept of history which belongs to the spiritual corner-stones of modernism itself. Hence only in the last few years did modernism become finally a subject of historiography. To see modernism in its historical context becomes only possible once the faith in modernism and its a-historical relevance in history is fading. Once the spell which modernism cast over the past and the future is broken, it can be fully evaluated as a period in history - amongst others.

Historiography is unable to elude history; it is part of history itself and has its own tradition. Even in retrospect there is no such thing as "objective" historiography; however, there is the disappearance of ideas and historical concepts and the birth of new ideas and new concepts. The shifting historical viewpoints provide new meridians of interest, such as e.g. a revived interest either in a personality who has been banned or looked down upon or in neglected and repressed correlations as well as in undisclosed and apparently insignificant facts.

If I maintain that there is no objective historiography, I certainly do not wish to advocate the falsifications of history. Quite to the contrary: I consider historiography as a process of permanent enlightenment, i.e. as a perpetual effort to adjust the prevailing image of history according to historical truths. To objectively ascertain concealed or repressed facts is part of this process. Most of the time in historiography however, this process is not the point of departure for new concepts, but their conclusion. Only the critique of values which have lost their legitimation opens the mind for the discovery of misrepresentations and for the disclosure of clichés, mystifications and mythologies. Only then the proscriptions on banned or untouchable personalities can be lifted.

A more skeptical attitude towards modern art - or modernism as such - develops only haltingly, as long as the more and more questionable hype still prevails. It is rather a

paradoxical byproduct of the glorified retrospectives lavished upon the "modern masters" that they - often unconsciously - provide the opportunity for a critical perusal as well.

However, the myth of the avant-garde is still well and alive. Only a small minority dares to question the basic belief in the modern fiction of an "autonomous" development of art, i.e. an evolution of art totally independent from its political and social environment.

Nevertheless, a new post-modernist history of modern art is emerging, even if its outlines are not quite apparent yet. This critical history of modern art, devoid of constricting myths and taboos is the issue at stake in the following discourse. My remarks are far from being the final conclusion of a well seasoned research, but rather a "pre-concetto" for the upcoming issue of our "AICARC-Bulletin" dedicated to this very subject. As most of you know, the AICARC-Bulletin - I am its editor - is the official news-letter of our association, the AICA. The bulletin appears - at least theoretically - twice a year.

Each issue of the AICARC-bulletin is dedicated to one specific topic. One of the two issues a year concentrates on modern and contemporary art in the host country where the annual IAAC conference is being held. This year we succeeded thanks to our Russian colleagues, in putting together an issue on the topic of "New Realities in Soviet Art and Art History". The russian issue should by now be in front of you. An english edition of the magazine is now being printed and will be distributed to our subscribers in the usual way. So much for the art-geographical issue.

The second issue of this year is dedicated to a topic of international concern, dealing with modern and contemporary art. It seems to me that the question I raised in the above could provide for an interesting issue: indeed its preliminary heading is: "Towards a post-modern history of modern art".

I believe that I shall be most successful in finding qualified authors for the issue in first formulating my own theories on the subject and presenting them to my colleagues. Yes, I am looking for authors...- and I have been quite successful so far. I gave a similar lecture to the scholars at the Getty Centre in Sta. Monica, California, and indeed was able to get some most valuable suggestions and informations.

I am fully aware that the concerns relating to the post-modernist history of modern art has a completely different significance for a soviet audience; a revision of the history of 20th century soviet art - as we tried to show in the AICARC- issue I mentioned earlier - must have different objectives than the revision of the history of modern art in the west. If I am not mistaken, it is the foremost aim of

soviet art critics today to uncover art which has been disallowed by the regime for years and has been produced in partial or total obscurity, outside the mainstream of art-history in any case. This art has to be brought to light, and has to be reassessed, along with the influence and the power of an official art and art-historiography.

However, it is a different kind of revision we are engaged in in our western countries, at least what post world-war II art is concerned. Here, the critical historiographers must challenge the power of some of the modernist doctrinaires who claim to know the only true art of our period and to possess the only true criteria for its judgement. We have to abandon the myth which is at the centre of avantgarde and which persists despite all the post-modernist disputes. In doing so, we nevertheless have to take the social interests and needs into account which called for these mystifications and which sustain them still today.

To what extent the modernist theory claims artistic supremacy became evident to me for the first time at the AICA conference in Dublin in 1980 - through a statement made by Clement Greenberg during a panel-discussion on the subject of "International Influence on local art communities". The illustrious american critic declared: "I don't know Islam, but international art right now means western art. The Western tradition of visual art is the only one that's still alive and moving, and it is a unique situation, and where western art goes, it meets a vacuum in terms of life. In Japan the people who teach traditional procedure of painting are despondent, they tell you themselves it has become irrelevant, painting on silk with the old tempera or distemper method: the young artists in Japan, and not so young, the ambitious ones, are all westernized...Some of it, the art that comes out of the fold, happens to be pretty good; just the same prevails in South America...you meet young, ambitious artists in Japan and there is no hot air about Japanese soul or anything like that; they know where the best art is being made right now, whether it's Paris or New York." (AICA-Papers Dublin, pg. 135).

So much for Greenberg. I was indignant by this attitude - without being able to voice my indignation at the time. After all, Greenberg was right: the countries he mentioned were permeated by western influence, not only in the arts, - there too - but also in production-methods as well as in lifestyle. Much more than at his statement I was furious at Greenberg's supercilious undertone: his words bore a kind of neo-colonialist arrogance. Imbued with the strivings of enlightenment represented by the historical avantgardists, I never thought of modernism in these terms - until then. Meanwhile I came to realize that pure-bred post-war modernism itself - and Greenberg belonged certainly to its most

influential theoreticians - defined the criteria for "best art", i.e. for artistic quality. A quality which fit exactly the characteristics of art produced in the western industrialist nations.

The underlying concept of modernism focusses on the concept of "avant-garde" - the famous red thread which the british marines used to secure their sails with: if you pull it out, the entire rigging collapses.

The concept of avantgarde rests on a basic conjecture concerning the relation of the present to the past which could be termed as "tabula-rasa" or "clean-slate" idea. This notion of the past determines as well the avantgardist utopia which promised a completely undefiled future without traditional constraints. All the various and very different concepts and tendencies of avantgarde struggled for the creation of totally new art, severed from the past: to clean the slate from all artistic notions of the past, to produce a totally new kind of art.

To clean the slate means of course - in analogy to the "tabula rasa" - to start anew, to erase all former markings from the slate. The "clean slate" idea which perceives the notions of the past as dead traditions, devoid of any value for the present, is a precondition for modernism, especially in the arts.

But, whoever sacrifices the past - we could almost say, whoever represses the experiences belonging to the past - must necessarily promise progress for the future; progress which is not only technical, but mainly humanitarian and which eventually leads towards an ideal society.

On a political level we are quite familiar with the utopias resulting from the "clean slate"-idea - as well as with their total failure due to adverse realities. Conditions on the creative level are not quite as easily assessed. The theory of an autonomous evolution in the arts has created some monumental mystifications which still obstruct our view. Apparently, the theory of "art for art's sake" has liberated art from the ideology of progress. At least since WW2, artistic avantgarde can no longer be considered part of the political avantgarde and therefore is no longer committed to its ideals of progress. Presumably the artistic avantgarde adheres to its own purposes only which culminate in the perpetual renewal of art itself. "Avantgarde art is art which has never existed before" is the famous definition coined by Harold Rosenberg.

However his words call for an interpretation. Art which has never existed before has always been in existence. Each innovation in style produces an art which has never existed before. What was truly new was that avantgarde art tried to emancipate itself completely from all tradition, because it believed itself confronted by entirely new problems to which

no previous solution could apply. The final vision of modernism culminated in the idea of an art no longer indebted to the past. Such was the utopian promise.

Historical predictions may be verified. If they do not materialize in due time, the prophet has to justify his claim. Modernism, over the last hundred years, tried to justify innumerable times its claim for an art without tradition. It never succeeded because the past cannot be erased, it can at best be repelled. Today we recognize modernism as an attempt to jump over its own shadow. Instead of creating a "tradition of the new" it created a "tradition of the modern" which is linked in so many ways to the antecedent traditions. Sometimes it looks to me as if modernism conceived with increasing speed new codes for the old basic problems. Even primitivism, the tapping of apparently other, non-european sources has its own european tradition, going back at least to the age of enlightenment.

I conclude from the above that not only the modernist view of modern art has become obsolete but also its affirmation that avantgarde art has been the only true and legitimate artistic expression of its period. Obviously it has been typical for its epoch - but the same applies for the "pompiers" as well. The title to exclusivity is shattered: if some works by early modernists are retaining their power, it is because they transcend by far the constraints of the "clean slate"-ideology. Donald Kuspit established clearly - for the sake of art criticism as well as for art history - where the real reasons for a lasting significance may be found. In his essay "Art criticism: Where's the Depth?" he writes: "It is its's complex, often slowly revealed intentionality which gives the work its staying power, and the critic can grasp the intentionality only by becoming a participant observer..." (Kuspit, *The Critic is Artist*; pg. 81)

The post-modernist revision of modernist art history leads therefore away from a "work-immanent interpretation" and away from a history of styles and "-isms". It rather situates the work back into its social, spiritual and existential context where it was conceived - in short, it restores the historical continuation which reaches far back into past centuries.

If avantgarde cannot maintain its claim to exclusivity and hence defaults on its historical justification, the entire modern non-avantgarde and half-avantgarde art reappears from its historical oblivion to where the theoreticians and historiographers of avantgardism tried to confine it. Of course this does not mean that all non-avantgarde art is of historical relevance. It only implies that such art needs not be ipso facto inconsequential nor that absolute historical ingenuity needs to be the only binding standard for evaluation. The dismantling of the "clean slate"-concept opens in my

eyes also a new perspective towards the peripheries of the avantgardist world. Radical modernism was the art of metropolis and of international bearing, in as much as it claimed to set world standards. The international prominence of avantgardism was legitimized by the essence of the "clean slate"-theory itself. And since the avantgardists were convinced of the futility of their own traditions, it was easy for them to disregard the traditions of other nations and continents as well.

In abandoning the idea of the tabula rasa being the epitome of philosophical and historical discernment, the view is freed for an altogether new perspective of modern and contemporary art produced on the edges of the (old) avantgardist horizon. Up to now art was only considered of historical relevance if it could be interpreted as a contribution to mainstream avantgardism, i.e. if it was removed as far as possible from vernacular expressions and traditions. Today, we witness a total reversal: the centre of our attention belongs to those artists who seek to integrate tradition and avantgarde, or who have always ventured to do so. Each country has its "regional" artists - even the avantgardist capitals themselves - who tried to combine vernacular traditions and avantgarde.

The apparent reassessment of the peripheral artistic production leads up to an enormous expansion of our art-historical concern, in space as well as in time. Everybody found himself at one time on the shifting borders of the avantgardist movement: not only Japan, India an South America, but as well the US before WW2, Germany between 1933 and 1960, the french provinces perpetually and Paris since 1965, the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1985, and so on. What wealth of research objects opens before our eyes, once the avantgardist ban has been lifted from these areas: how many new insights may be gained! Who on earth could ever seek to keep the circle of important artists as restricted as possible, to narrow it down to an international avantgarde, to figure out the "worlds best" - as if artists were to compete for a trophy at world championship!

Modernism as a theory of art and art-historiography is based on the assumption that it is possible to break with any artistic past and to start anew in producing radically new art. This idea of creating a "clean slate" belongs to the myths of progress, which by now we have grown quite wary of. Modernist art, supposedly utterly autonomous, has paid a heavy tribute to our faith in progress.

The current de-mystification has its own repercussions: the avantgardist historiography is rapidly losing ground and step by step has to relinquish its dominating position: it will

remain merely one of the many possible, equally justified histories of modern art.

Karl Popper showed us already the way in his "Poverty of Historicism", a book published as early as 1975. He suggests: "...consciously to introduce a preconceived selective point of view into one's own history: that is, to write that history which interests us. this does not mean that we may twist the facts until they fit into a framework of preconceived ideas, or that we may neglect facts that do not fit in. On the contrary, all available evidence which has a bearing on our point of view should be considered carefully and objectively (...). But it means that we need not worry about all those facts and aspects which have no bearing upon our point of view and which therefore do not interest us." (Popper, Reader Modernism, pg. 12f).

To transfer Popper's concept of a post-historicist historiography unto our own topic results in the following message: art-history of the 20th century will no longer be confined to the history of avantgardism; avantgarde art will no longer be the one and only true, legitimate art of this century. Art histories of the different countries and continents will regain a new significance, because post-modern historians of previously "marginal" areas will no longer ask which compatriot left in time, in order to join one of the latest avantgarde movements in Paris, New York or Berlin. They no longer will draw a grading list of artists according to who has contributed to the success of modernism when and to what extent. They may very well consider in the first place those artists and works of art who never broke completely with their own cultural past in order to instate a "clean slate", but who, in the contrary, tried to reconcile their own traditions with modernism. Today the actual cultural predicament facing artists, critics and art historians alike is to re-discover their own past and their own cultural traditions, in other words, to finally overcome modernism and its illusion of the "clean slate".

Once the value of the past is restored - which means of course, to restore our faith in learning from the past - a fact which was artfully concealed by modernist rhetoric becomes quite clear: each region, each country and each continent has its own historical and cultural environment which determines their genuine predicaments. Not only contemporary art critics, but art historians as well must be aware of these factors.

Historiography is a process of finding an individual and collective identity. Alienation may only be avoided by getting to know one's own past. This holds true for the individual as well as for nations and continents, as Socio- and Ethno-Psychology have readily demonstrated.

Art-historians and critics on the so-called periphery of avantgardism must immerse themselves into their own cultural

environment in order to assess "marginal" art. They will be misled if they still accept the dominating position of an international avantgardism and continue to apply its criteria tel quel. What is considered art in New York is not necessarily a role-model or standard for the validity of artistic expressions in India, Japan or South America. Of course, nobody can escape intercontinental information processing and the "global network". The so-called second, third and fourth worlds are certainly not able to rescind the existence and influence of the so-called first world: but they are able to toss the tabula-rasa idea over board. And they are able to remember - just as the capitals of modernism themselves - that there is a lot to be learned from tradition, mainly from their very own one.

I believe that this kind of reflective process is a worldwide phenomenon. It is most evident in those areas where the european-american supremacy is challenged, where new cultural conditions emerge and where exciting solutions are produced which are far beyond any provincial emulations. Certainly Clement Greenberg has to admit just how "alive and moving" peripheral art has suddenly become, within the realm of western art as well as beyond it. The "vacuum in terms of life" will have definitely vanished, once peripheral art will no longer view itself in terms of a modernist avantgarde.