

On the presumed opposition between the regional and the universal, between the traditional and the modern in the light of today's postmodernism.

The problem of the balance and relationships between folklore and vernacular culture on the one hand, and modern art with its characteristic peer group of the avant-garde on the other hand, has now arrived in another stage. Quite recently, philosophers as well as theoreticians of art have developed the concept of post-modernism to denote a new era, which, according to most of them, would be characterized by the irrelevance of the concept of the avantgarde and by a renewed interest in tradition, the vernacular, the folkloristic. Of course, one could not deal with this most complex and far-reaching of issues in this very paper. Thus, I only intend to mention certain remarks relative to these new theoretical models, which could afterwards be developed and extended in discussions, or eventually in a dissertation of a more substantial nature.

To start with, I wish to express my serious doubts whether one can really state that the avant-garde, or for that matter, modernism, could be assumed to be dead. All of you will know that art, painting and so many other things have repeatedly been declared "dead" in the course of the last decenniums, only to make astonishing revivals immediately after having been burried by philosophers of culture.

More subtle writers have refined the concept of "death of modernism" by stating that, where modernism always considered history as a progressive evolution in time, in which each new phase implies a certain degree of "progress" in relation to the former on the way to a hypothetic goal, the new "post-modern" trend is supposed to have broken with this conception. As a result of the horrors of the second World War and comparable phenomena, Man would have abandoned all hopes he once invested in technical evolution - and, by extension, in modernization - as an emancipatory, liberating force, and would prefer to return to the "proven" certainties of the past, of the traditional, of the original, etc..

Art-historians quote the resurrection of painting - considered to be a backward, obsolete form of artistic research by minimalists, post-minimalists and conceptuels alike - as an outstanding example of such a "traditionalizing" revival. They point out that this phenomenon was also strictly regional : the painters in question identified themselves for instance with a national tradition of expressionism, which they wanted to continue in the case of the German "Neue Wilden" : they even organized themselves around specific locations (e.g. Muellerheimer Freiheit, Berliner Gruppe). A comparable "regionalizing" self-identification occurred in the rather mythological Italian "Transavanguardia". These groups are considered to be eminently, outstandingly post-modern, while previous movements would then be modernist.

Because, dear colleagues, we cannot afford to be totally manipulated by the art-market and its dictates. It is not because it is in the interest of commerce that new styles and developments emerge, that we actually also should welcome them with open arms and closed eyes ; putting aside all lessons that the study of the history of art has taught us and that we should approve of any new trend, without first thoroughly scrutinizing it.

In the very case of modernism - postmodernism, such a largely arteficial and exaggerated categorization is apparent. I shall be the last one to deny that some quite basic differentiations and evolutions have occurred over the last ten years, but I shall also be the first one to warn historians to throw away their sense of historical continuity and welcome time and again any "Emperor's New Clothes" as if these were an unprecedented and fundamental novelty. The more so since, at a closer analysis, the regional and traditional are not the opposites of the modern or of modernity. There has been an ongoing, constant exchange between these notions, which I would consider as complimentary, rather than as opposites.

Moreover, modernity clearly is - or rather, has become - a tradition, and even as it claims or presupposes a certain degree of internationality and universality, it always has evolved and developed in precise locations, with marked differences between separate centres, which have largely determined modern art's fascinating, pluralistic outlook.

I do must confess to be appalled by such a lack of historical insight. After all, the "Arte Povera" also was a phaenomenon linked to the Italian scene only; and such conceptual, hyperintellectual endeavours as for instance "Support-Surface" and "Situationism" were clearly limited to France. Then again, are not the two most important and exemplary schools of modern art named after a specific city, namely the "École de Paris" and "the New York School", even though most of their adherents stem from other places ? Of course, one could mention countless other examples, for it is evident that no evolution is able to develop without a centre of gravity, which is usually geographic, or - if you prefer - regional.

The point I wanted to make, however, can largely be summarized as follows : how is it possible that after all lessons History has taught us, we still can make rigid compartmentalizations and try to make ourselves believe in their validity ? Is not precaution and circumspection rather indicated than ruthlessness when it comes to inventing new categories, drawing radical lines ? Isn't the gift of discrimination and a certain ability to bring things down to their true proportions more useful to the art-critic and art-historian than the fury of crazed ideologists ?

In my quality of President of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Antwerp, Belgium. I have noticed that the most insular, isolated tradition within 20 century sculpture, namely British sculpture, appears to be the most relevant current to contemporary art. On the other hand, the "individual mythologies" of artists such as Panamarenko, or when it comes to that matter : Joseph Beuys, James Lee Byars, etc.... seem to have universal cultural implications, precisely because of their isolated character.

As you can see, a lot of research still needs to be done on this particular field : the exchanges between the regional and the universal, the traditional and the avant-garde. I wish to close this short paper by inviting all fellow art-critics who feel interested to engage in the study of this most passionating of subjects to keep in mind that internal complexity is modernism's foremost and outstanding feature . and warn them not to reduce this complexity by dividing it in couples of Manichean opposites.

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