Open University Course A316:- Modern Art: Practices & Debates, 1995

'It quickly emerged that the proper and unique area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purify' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity' meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition, with a vengeance.'
(Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', *Art in Theory*, p.755)

'Greenberg's aesthetics are the terminal point of [an] historical trajectory. There is another history of art, however, a history of *representations* ... for me, and some other erstwhile conceptualists, conceptual art opened onto that *other* history, a history which opens onto history. Art practice was no longer to be defined as an artisanal activity, a process of crafting fine objects in a given medium, it was rather to be seen as a set of operations performed in a *field* of signifying practices, perhaps centred on a medium but certainly not bounded by it'.
(Victor Burgin, 'The absence of presence', *Art in Theory*, pp. 1098-9)

Discuss the merits of Burgin's statement as a basis on which to distinguish postmodernism from Modernism in the practice of art. In your answer you should make reference to at least four works which you consider to be of particular relevance to an argument between these two positions.

This question highlights one of the themes central to the account of modem art offered in this course: the tension between the theoretical perspectives of, on the one hand, Modernist criticism and, on the other, an approach focused on the relationship of the art of any given period to its social, political and historical context. The two quotations given above may be interpreted as representing these polarities. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that to accept a Modernist account of modem art must imply rejection of a socio-historical view, or vice-versa (the discussion between TJ Clark and Michael Fried about Pollock (TV21) suggests that there is room for negotiation, if not for compromise). It is, however, arguable that a definition of postmodernism should take into consideration both the close interrelationship between Modernist criticism and mid-twentieth century abstract art, which together constituted the dominant hegemony in art from the late 1940s to the early 1960s (and hence the artistic context against which postmodernism in the visual arts evolved), and the social, historical and political context within which art characterised as postmodern has developed.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to start by attempting to clarify the critical positions represented by Greenberg and Burgin. Greenberg, in 'Modernist Painting' (1961) and other writings, sets the development of modem art, specifically painting, in the context of the ideas of the Enlightenment philosopher Kant, who 'used logic to establish the limits of logic' (*Art in Theory* p.755.) Kant thereby established a precedent for using the techniques of a particular medium to define and refine that medium, a process referred to by Greenberg as 'self-criticism'. This implies that painting, rather than 'using art to conceal art' (ibid) by creating illusionistic space and depth, should rather use art 'to call attention to art' (ibid), that is, to emphasise the unique characteristics of the medium; 'the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment' (ibid). Greenberg states that such a process would render art

'pure', that is, autonomous, free of any extraneous elements deriving from other arts, such as theatricality or narrative. The impact of a painting should thus derive from those technical aspects characteristic of painting, such as colour, form and composition. An example of the sort of painting Greenberg was advocating at the time may clarify this. Morris Louis's painting *Alpha-Phi* (pl.D10) is exactly contemporary with the publication of 'Modernist Painting'. It consists of bold, ragged, diagonal streaks of pure colour against an off-white ground; Louis's use of acrylic paints, which soak into the canvas, means that the colours appear integrated with the ground and hence do not disrupt the flatness of the picture plane. Its effect depends upon the arrangement of colours and the large scale of the painting which makes it occupy 'so much of one's visual field that it loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby become that much more purely a picture, a strictly visual entity' (Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', p.28). It is apparently devoid of references to anything ot her than the intrinsic qualities of forms and colours. Louis's painting, and the contemporary work of Kenneth Noland (e.g. *Bloom*, pl 141) and Jules Olitski (e.g. *(Twice) Disarmed* pl.D11) were seen by Greenberg as being how paintings should look if they are to continue 'the intelligible continuity of taste and tradition' (*Art in Theory* p.760) and offer the viewer 'a sufficient degree of aesthetic power' (*Modernism in Dispute* p. 173) in the 1960s.

Burgin, however, sees Greenberg's approach and hence, by implication, paintings such as *Alpha-Phi*, as 'the terminal point of [an] historical trajectory'. It is arguable that paintings such as those of Louis represent a point beyond which art could not be further refined, and must therefore be reassessed or stagnate. Furthermore, in the context of the major social and political upheavals of the late 1960s and thereafter, such work might appear increasingly irrelevant. From Burgin's viewpoint, Greenberg's privileging of aesthetic and technical issues marginalises those types of art which can be validated by reference to their relationship with their historical context, to the way in which they represent their times. Thus Dada would be of little importance in a Greenbergian art history, but significant in the context of 'a history [i.e. an art history] which opens onto history' and which deals with representations. Following from this, if the most important thing about art is that it should connect with the conceptual framework of its socio-historical context, then technical issues can be subordinated to ideas, and new means of representation, such as photography and installation, which do not fit easily within a Modernist aesthetic, are legitimated. Burgin's statement expands the concept of art beyond the relatively narrow bounds set by Greenbergian Modernism, and thereby allows the consideration as art of a range of new conceptual works such as Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* (pl. 175) which 'plays upon the irony that language is both a medium supposedly distinct from art *and* the source of information about art's content and meaning' (*Modernism in Dispute*, p.205). Burgin provides a basis for identifying work as postmodernist rather than Modernist, and also sets postmodernism in the context of its antecedents in, for instance, Heartfield's photomontages and Duchamp's readymades.

The concept of postmodernism seems to have become current from the early 1980s onwards, when it began to appear in the work of writers such as Lyotard and Jameson. These writers were not specifically discussing art but more general cultural tendencies. However, Burgin's challenge to the dominance of Greenbergian criticism can be connected with Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives', in this case the metanarrative of technical development in painting .

Early attempts to define postmodernism in the visual arts by writers such as Krauss and Owens, 'started from an assumption that the stylistic diversity of art after Modernism ... conceals from view some underlying unifying principle:' (*Modernism in Dispute*, p.237). However, it is arguably easier to say that a specific work, or the work of a specific artist, is postmodernist than to define what, precisely, constitutes postmodernism. The range of concepts associated with postmodernism are, as Harrison and Wood admit, complex and prone to a degree of vagueness and instability. There are, however, a number of recurrent issues associated with postmodernism which can be related to Burgin's views on the importance of representations, historical context and signifying practice. These include critiques of: gender and ethnic difference; the supposed importance of originality, authorial status and allied issues; and historical narratives.

Cindy Sherman's work provides relevant examples of these critiques. Her series of self-portraits showing her in different roles use photography rather than the more 'artisanal' medium of painting. Some of her pictures take their images from cinema, pointing to the stereotyped representation of women in that medium (e.g. *No.13*, pl.74). Others use images from 'old master' paintings: *No.228* (pl.72) shows her in the role of Judith with the head of Holofernes, and draws attention to a complex series of ideas, including feminist interest in masquerade and the exploitation of male desire, and (by means of the obviously fake, humorously grotesque severed head) the constructed artificiality of representation. Her use of numbers rather than titles may be an ironic reference to the similar practice of canonically Modernist painters such as Pollock. Sherman 'wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it' (*Modernism in Dispute*, p,82) Her work thus connects with and critiques the 'history of representations' of women, the nature of art as a medium and, by using a replicable method, photography, together with a reworking of existing images, ideas about originality. It can be seen as an example of art 'centred on a medium but certainly not bounded by it'.

A similar range of issues is raised by artists whose work, by its use of consumer durables, spans the boundaries between avant garde art and kitsch, thereby transgressing one of the fundamental tenets of Greenbergian modernism, the clear distinction between 'high art' and 'mass culture'. Although the work of Jeff Koons, which includes displaying vacuum cleaners in a perspex showcase (pl.202) can be seen as postmodernist, it could be connected both with the work of pop artists such as Richard Hamilton (e.g. *$he*, pl. 149) and the 'readymades' of Duchamp. Koons' work, however, fits with Burgin's view of art as 'a set of operations in a field of signifying practices'. His use of consumer durables as art relates to Baudrillard's ideas about living in 'a world of representations, of consumption, of media images, of shifting surfaces and styles' (*Modernism in Dispute*, p,241) (where individuals are defined by the types of commodities they possess). By appropriating objects and displaying them as art, Koons critiques the Modernist idea of art as essentially original. His use of commodities as art is also interesting in relation to the commodification of Abstract Expressionist paintings, which were advocated as a sound financial investment in the early 1950s. The variety of work produced by Koons raises an issue not explicitly mentioned by Burgin, the eclecticism often associated with postmodernism. This, and its occasionally ephemeral nature (as in the case of *Puppy*, made of flowers) relates more closely to Jameson's sense of the postmodern as involving 'superficiality' and 'deathlessness' (*Art in Theory*, p.1077). There are other issues relevant to

postmodernism to which Burgin does not directly refer, such as: a critical approach to the exhibitions and museums system, which has lead to alternative ways of presenting works of art; a tendency to pastiche or parody of earlier works of art; and, in some instances, the necessity of active involvement by the viewer.

While Burgin's statement does not emphasise these points, they are illustrated by his own work. *What does Possession mean to you* (pl. 189) uses a glossy advertising-style photograph which is placed in the context of a caption about the ownership of wealth to put a different, socio-political perspective on the image, calling into question issues of gender dominance and property ownership and thus critiquing social norms. It was exhibited not as a single 'artwork' in a gallery, but in a set of '500 copies posted in the streets of the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne'. The replication of the image and its display on the streets can be seen as critical both of the idea of the importance of orginality and of the exhibitions and museums system. A decoupling of art from the established methods of presenting it to the public seems to be characteristic of postmodernism, and is also exemplified by developments such as the Land Art of Richard Long and Robert Smithson, and the public projections of Krystof Wodiczko. These images, for instance his projection of hands holding prison bars onto a courthouse (pl.D71), function, like Burgin's poster, as socio-political commentary and also share with it the ephemeral quality mentioned in relation to Koons. Work by Burgin such as 'Any moment previous to the present moment' (pl.169), which consists of text from which the viewer/reader has to construct his/her own image, highlights both Burgin's view of the importance of concepts in postmodernist art, and the tendency within postmodernist art to invite the viewer to sustained active participation in the work of art. This is in direct opposition to the passive contemplation advocated by Modernist critics such as Fried who, in *Art and Objecthood*, claims that good art should be 'instantaneously present'. This idea of the importance of 'presentness' is contradicted by the title of Burgin's article, 'The absence of presence'.

Taking Burgin's statement as a point of departure, it is possible to connect postmodern ideas to a diverse range of works of art, which are in turn associated with a series of contemporary concepts and concerns. While Burgin provides a means of distinguishing postmodernism from Modernism in art, there remains the problem of how to, or indeed whether, one ought to distinguish qualitatively between different postmodernist works. If social relevance is a characteristic of postmodernism, then degree or accuracy of social relevance may be used as an evaluative tool; however, as Harrison and Wood have pointed out (see *Modernism in Dispute*, p.240) radically critical work may become marginalised and lose its ability to challenge. Furthermore, if the main impact of a work depends on its contemporary relevance, it is likely to lose conceptual value with the passage of time; Haacke's *The Safety Net* (pl.D24) borrows its meaning from contemporary politics rather than conforming with Greenberg's idea of art as self-defining, and is hence now arguably of historic rather than artistic interest. The aesthetic of Greenbergian Modernism may never recover a dominant position within art history but, as Harrison and Wood have suggested, 'the contingency of the historical is only half the point of art'.

Bibliography

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