

The Modernist Vision

By Mark Daniel Cohen

Introduction

It is a truism that new ideas and those who devise them are not appreciated in their own time—and it is all too frequently true. Thought that is in advance of its contemporaries delivers itself as an opacity to all but those who are kin to it, to all but those who by their natures share in the spirit of the new vision. For the rest, it is a blank, a mirror, for they see in that which eludes them only what they project on it, only what they bring to it: they fill the gap of what they cannot comprehend with the quotidian and unreflective conceptions that spontaneously and inescapably constitute their habitual occupations. It is true in every field of inquiry with the single exception of science, for science has a reality check—its ideas are, as a matter of principle and procedure, put to the test, and what is legitimate and incisive is compelled in its acceptance. But in all other precincts of delving realization, where ideas are recommended only by an implicit and sympathetic recognition of their clarity and penetrative force—in the districts that may be called wisdom and insight—almost invariably conception arrives on ground that has not been prepared for it.

As true must be the corollary: new ideas are at constant risk of loss. For when new ideas are unappreciated, they lose currency. They are omitted from the general attention, ignored, and often become denizens of an intellectual underground, available only to those few whose curiosity, and thus their exposure, is as great as their sensitivity. But one instance: the worldview of Heraclitus, the Presocratic Greek philosopher—whose vision was of the world as a constant state of flux—had to wait more than two millennia, until the work of Nietzsche, to obtain its full appreciation.

This matters because ideas matter. We are not only the recipients of ideas. We are also their creators, and those we create are dependent on those that precede us, on those that are available to influence us. We build out of that which we have ready to build with, and lost ideas do not become the raw material for further thought, not until they are rediscovered. The time between is time lost, and to the degree we do not live in knowledge, we live in ignorance.

We are living in such a time now. An intellectual, imaginative breakthrough, so great in proportion that its advent constitutes a renaissance of thought, preceded our era and is now in danger of being lost in at least several of the fields in which it arose, and most particularly in art. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Modernism was devised: a conception of reality that constituted a distinct break with the worldview that came before it, a transformation of understanding so great, it overthrew all of our most basic comprehensions of the nature of the world. The Modernist conception developed, quickly and almost simultaneously, in the three fields of imaginative enterprise to which genius traditionally flocks: art, science, and philosophy—the three fields of thought capacious enough to contain and phrase the most high-temperature exploits of imagination. Although science is progressive—it practices

the means to demonstrate and thus force the retention of its revelations—in art and philosophy, the Modernist mode of thought has followed the life cycle of a fashion, and it is now being replaced with something recommended solely for its being new and, thus, salable. It is now being substituted, in the field of visual art most evidently, by the motley assortment of formulas referred to as Postmodern Art—a collection of modes rooted in art theories in part transposed from contemporary French cultural theory but largely devised circularly in response to the art’s devising and which arguably overturn every proposition characteristic of the Modernist idea. And now, the Modernist period is taken generally to be at an end, because new practitioners are more excitable than critically minded and the public taste is voracious, and rapacious, and is easily bored.

The Modernist idea can be seen most immediately in visual art, which is the topic of concern in this essay, and nowhere so cleanly as in the culminating achievement of the Modernist impulse: abstract art. The central proposition of Modernism, one that first arose in philosophy well over a century before the full accomplishment of abstract art, is that the world in its appearances is mere appearance. The truth of the world, what Einstein referred to as what’s going on when we’re not looking, is not what appears to us—we are the architects of the appearance of the world. The truth of things lies elsewhere, and is of some entirely other nature.

The authentic purpose of abstraction is to reveal a portion of the truth—not to practice art simply for its own sake but to seek an insight into the nature of reality itself, the nature of that which lies beyond art, of that which lies beyond the appearances that abstract art was devised to dispense with. Abstraction is, in essence, a manner of deep contemplation, a means of focusing the attention to a rumination on the very nature of the real, and to render what is realized in forms and compositions that arise with an inexplicable necessity and that possess an articulate visual vocabulary that itself withstands explanation. Authentic abstraction is an attempt to strike deep into the appearances of reality that surround us and to disclose, in a visual language that creates itself and that appears strangely translucent, mysteriously legible to the sensitive observing mind, some sense of the truth that those appearances conceal.

And so, Modernism is not a fashion; it is a vision. And despite its having been eclipsed by the vagaries of the art market and the tides of interest in the philosophy departments of the academies, it continues to be worked by adventurous artists and thinkers who are more interested in their callings than their careers. It is a vision, and it is an insight, and its loss is dangerous—not dangerous to the core idea, for what is of value will re-emerge eventually, but dangerous to us, for, by dint of nothing more than the time into which we were born, we risk missing a sense of the truth of things that cost numerous courageous individuals their life’s work to achieve. It is at our expense, were we to lose this knowledge. And so, it is valuable to us to study the authentic idea—it is requisite for those of honesty and curiosity—for something was *seen*; and it is worth it to us to devote the expense of the effort to study the art of the recent past, and to learn what was realized, and to appreciate what so many labored so hard to know.

The History of the Modernist Idea

The study of the development of Modernism in any one of its areas of concern would be properly the subject of many books. Here, even focusing on visual art, only a cursory look at the story of Modernism's devising can be ventured. This material must suffice to be but an introduction to the issue, and to those familiar with recent art history, what follows will be obvious and thoroughly familiar. Their indulgence is requested and appreciated.

Modernism, which constitutes the third renaissance in the Western tradition—along with Classical Greece and the Renaissance following the Middle Ages in Italy, Germany, and England primarily—had its beginnings in the 1870s and 1880s, a time in which the primary assumptions that underlie what had been the accepted worldview for centuries began to break down. The conception of reality that had come to maturity in the Enlightenment was one in which the universe was viewed as an organization of material objects and the forces that drive them, a coherent system of interacting material bodies that obeyed mathematical laws with complete clarity and ultimate predictability. The universe was a rational machine, and the human mind was capable of comprehending it with such precision that it was assumed, once all scientific laws had been worked through, that all future events could be foreseen.

Prior to the initiation of the Modernist era, this worldview had been under increasing assault for approximately 100 years. The Romantic Movement in the arts had begun to envision and attempted to see into an alternate reality, a truth that differed from the appearances of this world and that could be intuited by the immersion in unadulterated nature—an almost mystical vision could be obtained from the natural landscape, as distinct from the urban environment that was growing in the United States and through Europe. The full conception was, in English Romantic Poetry, perhaps the property of William Wordsworth alone. In his aesthetic, the insight, an openly Neo-Platonic idea, was far more an intuition, a feeling for the nature of the truth, than a direct, visualizable experience. In the right state—and poetry was to be capable of bringing on that state—one “knew” more than one could see, or know. And the poetry was thoroughly realistic, and frequently narrative. It painted experiences in which the sense of things came about spontaneously, intended, as a poetic experience, to bring about a similar state in the reader deliberately. The poetry remained on the ground; the world it literally depicted was normal, and its truth remained invisible.

At the same time, German Idealist philosophy, and particularly the ideas of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, propounded that the visible universe, the material world in which we believe we exist, was demonstrably an illusion—reality could be proved to be something other than what we see. Kant's ontological theories—his theories of the real—were propounded in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, one of the great books of the world, which he later claimed had created a “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy. He may have been right. Arguably, no one since has seriously disputed his core tenet: that our minds impose the structural principles of the world we experience, and that the world as it actually is, is organized in some other fashion, some fashion beyond our understanding. The world is beyond our *rational* understanding, for in his aesthetics, presented in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, it is only art that has the capability

of expanding our sentiments so as to give us some felt apprehension of the nature of the real we cannot otherwise comprehend.

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the beginnings of an artistic advance on the Romantic worldview began to emerge. The first gestures occurred in French poetry, particularly in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, who went beyond Wordsworth's sense of another reality to be intuited through the exposure to unsullied nature, and who posited, in thoughts that seem in retrospect to be astonishingly prescient, that the visible world could be seen through, that a presentiment of reality could be discovered and disclosed by the artist. They were followed by another French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, who developed a new aesthetic that rejected the reality of the visible world and asserted the sole purpose of art was the revelation of the hidden truth, a truth that could be revealed by no means other than artistic insight. His poems were authored so as to convey an authentic experience of the altered vision of the real, intended to provoke an aesthetic experience comparable to a direct perception of the reality of the world. It nearly goes without saying that he contributed as much to revised poetic technique as to aesthetic objectives, and many of his poems are among the most difficult, and the most difficult to translate, in the Western canon.

Mallarmé's new aesthetic spread throughout the Parisian art world and became the foundation of what we now recognize as the beginning of the Modernist movement. His thinking influenced not only the Symbolist poets but also the painters and composers of the time, including the Impressionist painters and such composers as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. The Impressionist painters are now recognized as attempting to observe and represent in their work the fleeting moment of reality—the split-second play of light and shadow that is momentary and never repeated, as if reality were ephemeral and nearly impossible to grasp. It can as easily be argued that the most advanced Impressionist painting, particularly the later work of Monet, was an attempt to conceive of a dissolving of the visible world, a dissipation of the veil of appearances behind which the truth of the world can begin to show through. The departure from immediate and faithful representation of observable reality was continued in the works of Post-Impressionism, most notably by Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh, however, the drift they took away from a literal fidelity to appearances was more psychological than philosophical, their “distortions” more reflective of psychological states than of an alternative worldview. In this orientation, Gauguin and van Gogh were followed by the Expressionist artists, among them Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, Franz Marc, Otto Dix, and many others.

At roughly this same time, the worldview of the Enlightenment began to break down in both science and philosophy. In the 1880s, the framework of Newtonian physics, which can be said to be the foundation of the entire philosophy of the Enlightenment, took a jolt from which it would not recover. The Michelson-Morley experiments, which were conducted repeatedly over the course of the decade, proved that the speed of light was a constant, unchanging in its measurement regardless of the viewpoint from which it is observed. Under Newtonian mechanics, this result is supposed to be impossible, for under Newtonian mechanics, everything is relative, including velocity. If one is moving swiftly in the same direction as something else one is observing, it will appear to move more slowly than it would appear to be were one standing still. (Think of being on a train traveling at 60 miles an hour alongside a train

traveling at 65 miles an hour. The other train will appear to be moving at 5 miles an hour.) Thus, the apparent speed of a beam of light should depend on how one is moving—how fast and in what direction, *relative* to the beam of light. But this proved not to be the case. The speed of light is not relative—it is absolute.

The experiments put physics into a crisis from which it would not recover until Einstein solved the mystery of the unchanging speed of light at the beginning of the twentieth century, and with his Special Theory of Relativity of 1905, the reliability of the solidity of the material world ended. To explain how the speed of light could be absolute, Einstein had to make everything else relative, including length, weight, and mass—all were changeable in accordance with the conditions of observation. The physical attributes of objects were no longer inherent within them, no longer intrinsic qualities whose real nature was not a matter of mere appearance, qualities that did not depend on how they were viewed. With Einstein, the stability of the visible, material world became unmoored.

Only shortly before this time, mathematics took a similar turn away from devotion to the structural principles of evident things. As early as 1828, the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss began to consider the possibility of a geometry of differential curvature, of curved rather than flat spaces. Over the course of the nineteenth century, other mathematicians further developed the ideas of curved spaces and n-dimensional geometry, of geometry of more than three dimensions. In the 1850s, Bernhard Riemann devised elliptic geometry—or Riemannian Geometry, or non-Euclidean geometry—which defied Euclid’s postulate that parallel lines do not meet—in short, that space is curved. As examined in great and admirable detail in Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s exceptional book *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, an enormous amount of popular literature on multi-dimensional geometry appeared in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and the general public, and artists in all fields of artistic creation, were at least superficially aware of the idea. (Everyone is aware of at least two of these books, two that remain popular: H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* and Edwin A. Abbott’s *Flatland*.) The idea that there was a fourth dimension, concealed from our senses, in which the truth of the world, a truth inconceivable to us, was to be found was the subject of much popular speculation.

And again, at the same time, during the 1870s and 1880s, philosophy changed in a similar manner. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was well aware of the developments in the science and art of his time, proposed a theory of reality in which the visible world was a product of human imagination and the truth that lay beyond what our senses could reveal to us was also beyond all conception, except as a function of a particular artistic vision: what he referred to as a tragic art, or a “Dionysian art.” Moving beyond the philosophical views he inherited from a preceding century of German philosophical thought, Nietzsche conceived a world that in truth was pure *potentia*—fluid, in a state of constant change (comparable to the vision of Heraclitus), merely potential, capable of realizing itself into fleetingly present material objects and flows of energy but being inherently neither, and ultimately unimaginable. For him, only art could provide us with images and forms of imagination that would convey something of its nature, for art, when done properly, when pursued for its original purpose, is not a matter of decoration or the communication of ideas but is specifically our method for seeing into the hidden recesses of the world, into a nature we are capable of intuiting because we ourselves are portions of it.

There is a common theme that can be located among the breakthroughs that occurred in all the principal fields of serious inquiry at this time—it is the central theme of Modernism. In art, science, and philosophy, it was discovered that the appearances of the world are not literally true, that the truth of the universe is essentially different from what we observe. The power of rationality, of reasoning out the truth, became qualified, to say the least—the world was no longer considered to be a perfectly rational construction, no longer the clockwork mechanism that it was understood to be during the Enlightenment and under the influence of Newtonian science, no longer a mechanism that the human mind eventually could completely comprehend. Physics had to struggle, and has continued to struggle, to devise rational theories that were and are accepted to be incomplete and can be held only tentatively—none can be literally true and every theory will eventually be overthrown by an improved theory. Philosophy moved away from the belief that the world beyond our perceptions is ultimately logically explicable, and art increasingly shifted away from the depiction of the world as the rational mind perceives it.

However, the most salient quality held in common among the changes of approach and ambition in all these fields of thought is the devising of altered protocols to govern the search for truth. With the recognition that the world is not what it appears to be, with the realization that the truth lies elsewhere, somewhere other than what we observe, there came the need to seek the truth of things anew. Physics adopted new tools of observation and new mathematical tools for the building of theories (Einstein's special and general theories of relativity are but two examples), philosophy took its lead increasingly from art rather than science, and art turned away from the representation of appearances and to a new set of dispensations—art moved to Expressionism, Surrealism, and most significantly in the search for a truth beyond us, abstraction. It is the devotion to the disclosure of the hidden depths of truth that has marked the progress of Modernist Art. In essence, the determining characteristic and the common element defining Modernism in the arts is the pursuit of the truth of the world.

Arguably, the next principal move away from the reproduction of appearances in art was Analytic Cubism—the first and better-known form of Cubist painting, which was devised simultaneously by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, beginning in 1907. The overlay of multi-dimensional planes—giving the impression of seeing an object or person, just barely perceptible, from many angles at the same time, as if all the possible angles of observation were equally properties of the thing observed—has its roots in Cézanne rather than the decades of popular literature concerning multi-dimensional geometry that preceded Cubism. Nevertheless, there is an evident alignment, even if Picasso and Braque knew nothing of it—there is in many ages a coordination of independently developed ideas that cannot be ignored, even if it cannot be explained. And, according to Henderson, many lesser Cubist painters spoke of the mathematics of the idea, to the degree they were able.

Not the breakdown of partial or even completely inaccurate perception but the revealing of the hidden reality of things directly was the core purpose behind the invention of abstract art, which occurred in 1911, just a few years after the publication of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, and that was no accident. With the scientific proposal that the world was not as it seemed, the visual arts initiated a complete break with the visual appearance of the world. Wassily Kandinsky, who created abstract

painting, wrote extensively about the intentions he felt must be accepted into art, and he is utterly clear about the purpose of non-representational painting. In his view, as he expressed in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, art is an intrinsically spiritual project, the method by which the spirit develops and grows—it “bears within it the seeds of the future and awakens the strings of the soul.” The growth of the soul is measured by its movement into ever increasing knowledge. The soul grows as a matter of spiritual insight: “The spiritual life, to which art belongs and in which it is one of the most powerful agents, is a complex but definite movement forward and upward—a progress, moreover, that can be translated into simple terms. This progress is the progress of knowledge.” That knowledge is clearly introspective—a knowledge of the inner self, of the depths of one’s own spirit—but for Kandinsky, it is more than that. Art also fosters the development of the soul into a greater knowledge of the world at large, of the outer truth. Abstract art dismisses reproduction of the appearances of the material world in order to bring about insight into the non-material nature of the truth. It points toward “the non-naturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature,” not the inner nature of the self but the inner truth of the world, the reality hidden within appearances. For art organizes not just the introspective attention but also our perceptions of the world. Speaking of the impressions of the world around us as “fortuitous sounds” that strike our senses, Kandinsky observed: “A force is required to put these fortuitous sounds of the universe into systematic combinations for systematic effect on the soul. This force is art.”

Kandinsky devised abstract art to be the art necessary to its time, the art needed at a moment in which the worldview of a material, rational, comprehensible universe was being superseded by a new vision of the external truth. (Kandinsky also wrote about the science of his time and about Nietzsche.) Just as the new worldview of science and philosophy has only advanced and grown more sophisticated over the course of the last 100 years, so too the artistic purpose of abstraction has become more pertinent and imperative: to take the impressions we receive of the world and organize and transform them into a comprehension of the nature of the world beyond what we merely observe—to change information into deep understanding. The forms that compose the abstract artwork are responsive to and, for the spirit, indicative of the nature of a truth that is not reflected by outward appearances, what Kandinsky called an “abstract” truth, a truth that must be realized in the mind—they take the place of false representations. They are forms devised to invoke realization.

A principal proposal in Kandinsky’s philosophy and artistic program is a departure from what he called “materialism.” In Kandinsky’s estimation, civilization, at least Western Civilization, had over the last several centuries passed through a period of “materialism,” a time which was then only beginning to pass. The period was marked by a faith in material reality, a belief in only the things of physical presence, as a result of which, the sense of “the inner meaning of life” had been lost. However, due to the shaking of “religion, science and morality,” the realization of inner meaning had just begun to return. “Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness.” To respond to the renewed need and to spur the return to a sense of inner meaning, an abstract art must be developed, one that

would evoke subtler, more refined emotions than had been elicited by the realistic painting of the past. As painting developed the means for initiating increasingly finer, subtler emotional responses, it would gain the strength to convey the experience of “the spiritual life,” the life “to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements.” The majority of Kandinsky’s book makes clear that his new art, the art of pure abstraction, was devised to be just such an art, an art to evoke his “spiritual life.”

The rejection of the foundational nature of material reality, of the status of physically hard objects as essentially real, was also taken up by artists who turned to force rather than materiality for the fundamental principle of the truth of things, although their approaches fell short of seeking or achieving complete abstraction. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a young sculptor who died on the battlefield in World War I, was the principal figure in the Vorticist movement, which was defined by the poet Ezra Pound as heralding an art that depended on an image more determined by an intrinsic dynamism than by a stabilized and static meaning, an image that “is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.” The Futurists, among whom Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo are exemplary instances, sought to create between the two world wars an art that celebrated the rush and sheer force of the new machine age, an art of the future in their sense of what was to come. In the new Constructivist art movement, based on the Suprematist movement of Kasimir Malevich, Naum Gabo sought to explore and reveal the new conceptions of space and time that “are reborn to us today,” as he explained in his statement of artistic purpose, *The Realistic Manifesto*, written in 1920. To do so, Gabo observed that the artist must recognize that all things are “entire worlds with their own rhythms, their own orbits,” and to reveal them in their true nature, the artist must work so as to leave “only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces in them.”

However, it was complete, non-representational abstraction that was the chief innovation and the culminating achievement of Modernism in the arts, and since the initial flourish of Modernism, instances of the mode can be located in literature and in music—such as the books of James Joyce and the poems of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and the atonal music of Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern—as much as in painting and sculpture. In the visual arts, the orientation on spiritual insight and on uncovering the truth of the world clearly continued in the works, and was indicated in the writings, of many of the principal innovators of abstract modes who followed Kandinsky. Mondrian was a devotee of theosophy, creating his art to demonstrate the underlying structural truth of the world, as was the Transcendental Painting Group, a collection of artists in the southwestern United States who created abstract paintings and maintained the authentic dedication to abstract art during the 1930s.

The orientation on abstraction remained in place right through to Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s. Jackson Pollock famously remarked once that “I am nature,” by which it is now generally recognized that he felt his work was not divorced from the natural world but that it was as closely tied to nature as is representational painting, responding to nature and portraying its reality by means that merely differed from those of representation, through a visual language that had a content and that required a visual literacy on the part of the viewer to be properly understood. In a joint statement published in 1943, the Abstract Expressionist painters Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman argued that this new art, for them, “is an

adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks,” and that they painted “flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.” They also overtly asserted that abstract art has content, has a meaning: “There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial . . . That is why we profess a spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.” In another essay, “The Sublime is Now,” published in 1948, Newman goes so far as to raise the issue of “the desire for sublimity” in the new art, opposes it to beauty, and claims that the objectives of the sublime are being reasserted: “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.”

Their point, in short, is that painting of any kind, and from any period in history, has to participate in the great themes of all art, which are invariably the great themes of individual revelation, the great themes of spiritual insight, in order to qualify as something great. There is no great art without taking on the questions that have driven high-temperature thought throughout the ages.

The Dimming of the Vision

However, Abstract Expressionism was, to date, the last general and recognized movement of overt Modernist Art. Following its time, the heat of the idea dissipated, the temperature of creation cooled, and interest turned to something other than the pursuit of insights into the truth of the world, something more immediate, something smaller, more personal, and more remunerative.

Once the initial phase of Abstract Expressionism had achieved its fullest success, new forms of art developed that had little in common with the means or serious-mindedness of Modern Art. By the early 1960s, the attention of many gallery owners, museum curators, and members of the art public, as well as the academicians who direct university art programs and write contemporary art history, was captured by Pop Art, Conceptual Art, New Media Art, Installation Art, and a wide array of other novel and deliberately anomalous methods for the creation of art. These are the varieties of Postmodern Art, which is distinguished from the Modernist work that preceded it for close to a century by more than just methods and materials. Postmodern Art is, at best, loosely based on a body of largely French philosophical theory, which, transposed from the field of general cultural criticism and Continental Philosophy, has served as the justification, and to a great extent a simple excuse, for works of art that have been essentially market driven.

Up through the time of Abstract Expressionism, little money was to be had by creating art—the price structures for contemporary art bore no resemblance to those of Old Masters sales, a situation that has now changed completely. After the emergence of the first instances of Postmodern Art—the first works that were neither traditional sculpture nor painting—a deliberate effort was made to create a broad art market, one that would be lucrative in the way that serious sculpture and painting had, on the whole, never been. The fodder for the market were works of art that often were and are devised to wear their innovation on their sleeves, frequently to the exclusion of all other aesthetic virtues—they advertise themselves as something unusual and intriguing. They have been

created to be essentially attractive—work that are prepossessing, decoratively magnetic, and stylistically becoming. (Warhol is the prime example of this.) Above all, they are in no manner threatening or disconcerting. Art was made friendly in order to make money, and serious-mindedness may be imaginatively and intellectually thrilling, but it is never blandly agreeable.

In short, an art market was made by making works of art into pure commodities, works intended to appeal to a superficial interest in mere innovation, to create mass interest by becoming a tourist attraction, to appeal to a tourist's mild thirst to observe what has made itself current, what is momentarily absorbing for being unusual—a tourist's interest in seeing the artistic "sites," and the interest of those in the market to own the "product." Young artists who feel the ambition to pursue their creativity have been trained in little more than the currently successful (marketable) modes of art and have been left by their art educations unfamiliar with the imaginative and intellectual rigor that serious work requires, not to speak of the sheer mastery of craft necessary to accomplish sculpture or painting. The great adventure of discovering the truth of the real has been replaced by the complacency and cynicism of setting and meeting market expectations for the sake of nothing beyond profit. The value of the creation of art that is capable of inspiring future generations of artists to pursue the grandest aesthetic ambitions, that is capable of instigating through its influence future art of the highest order, has been replaced by sheer commercial worth. Whereas these motives are not characteristic of all work that is now considered Postmodern, this is the logic that continues to drive the ongoing art market.

The theories that serve as the intellectual substance of Postmodern works are often little more than the theoretical polish that creates the veneer of intentions as opaque and, therefore, superficially and futilely intriguing as are many of these works themselves. However, even in the case of Postmodern Art in which a theoretical foundation actually is being employed to direct the underlying act of imagination—and although they are the minority, there are a number of Postmodern artists who do illustrate intellectual ambition—the theoretical structure demonstrates a complete departure from the tenets, and the courage, of Modernist thought and practice.

Postmodern Theory is a loosely related body of philosophical work that argues the impossibility of determining truth in any regard. According the general drift of Postmodern thought, our beliefs about reality are culturally determined—the social environment in which we live determines how we see the world, how we respond to it, and what we think of it. Of what lies beyond our perceptions, nothing can be determined. All we know is what we experience, and what we experience is what we are driven to formulate for ourselves. To attempt to go further is mere pretension. To attempt to go further is to engage in mere "metaphysics": a term employed in reference to any proposition regarding what is supposed to be true, to any proposal that is the inescapable element of explanation, inescapable because it is taken to be true. (It goes without saying that this constitutes an abuse of the word.) And so, for philosophy, or science, or art to attempt to locate truth—what really is the case beyond our culturally specific perceptions and ideas—is hopeless. The only serious study for any of these fields of inquiry is the cultural codes that determine what we see and believe—the study of the intellectual environment in which we function and by which we are, it may be said, deluded.

Of course, it is implicit that all cultural environments make the same claim to truthfulness, which is not much of a claim at all but is all that is possible under this dispensation of thought, and so a general relativism of values subsequently holds. All visions of truth are as “truthful” as all others, for all visions of truth are as deluded as all others. But the authentic enterprise of truth-telling, not the report and analysis of systems of culturally determined belief but the search for the truth of things itself, is to be forsaken. Put more simply, under the auspices of Postmodernism, Modernism must be seen as a preening arrogance, and a foolhardy project.

And here, again, the cynicism shows through. The rejection of the search for truth amounts to a mocking of the highest ambitions of the human spirit, to a supercilious dismissal of high-mindedness, sheer curiosity, and all desire for authenticity. In no other field of serious inquiry would this attitude be found to be acceptable. From the vantage point of the Postmodern, not just art but civilization itself becomes a frivolous engagement.

Conclusion

From the point of view of the art market and the art writing that follows popularity as if it were a judgment of intrinsic worth, it would seem that Postmodern Art is the trend of our time and that Modernism has been abandoned by all artists. But this is not and can hardly be true. Art history is inevitably a process of vast over-simplification, creating the impression that, period by period, all practicing artists change their manner to conform to the prevailing modes of the time. Obviously, this cannot be true, and it is not the case that abstraction was relegated to the scrap heap of history when Postmodern Art became the dominant artistic practice. Many artists have continued to practice abstract art. The ambitions of abstraction, and with it the ambitions of Modernism, have not been forsaken—the most adventurous art of our era is still being undertaken, and the possibility of art that pursues an investigation of the truth of the world remains available.

Which is to say that Modernism remains an idea whose time has yet to come, but that it is coming. The Modernist Vision is still a rarefied thing, a refined and difficult conception that makes itself felt only to the most sensitive and courageous intellectual and imaginative adventurers of this moment in history. The attempt to *see* what the world looks like “when we’re not looking” is the great ambition of civilization, in all cultures, everywhere on the earth. And the search for truth is the great temperer of our natures. It is the one unassailable standard to which we can hold ourselves, and it steels our inner beings, disciplines our impulses, and gives us the deepest understanding that to live well, there must be something that we strive to live up to. To seek the truth is to learn to live well. But far more important, seeking the truth is of value because it is *truth*—not because to do so does us good, but because through that enterprise, we come to realize that what is done for us is not the issue. The highest matters, the highest callings, always teach us that there is, there must be, something greater than ourselves to which we devote our energies, to which we devote our lives. This is the true expense in the loss of ideas. In losing them, when they matter enough, we may lose ourselves.