"Postmodernism" is a term used promiscuously in art criticism, often as a vague sign for "not-modernism" or a synonym for pluralism. As such, it means little—only, perhaps, that we are in a reactionary period in which modernism seems distant and revivalism all too near. On the one hand, this distance is the very precondition of postmodernism: on the other, this revivalism signals the need to conceive it as other than mere antimodernism.

What postmodernism is, of course, depends largely on what modernism is, i.e., how it is defined. As a chronological term, it is often restricted to the period 1860-1930 or thereabouts, though many extend it to postwar art or "late" modernism. As an epistemological term, modernism is harder to specify (e.g., Ought one to accept the break between classical and modernity as defined by Michel Foucault? Ought one to refer to Kantian self-criticism as Clement Greenberg does?). In any case, postmodernism, articulated in relation to modernism, tends to reduce it. Is there a modernism that can be so delimited? If so, what would constitute a break with it?

Tactically, theories of postmodernism in art tend to contain modernism in late modernism, the ideology of which is extracted from the critical writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. On this position, modernism is the pursuit of "purity": it holds that "the concept of art... [is] meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts," and that "the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent." It is said to prescribe "specific areas of competence" and to foster, in the artist, a self-critical formalism in which the inherited "code" of the medium is manipulated and, in the critic, a historicism that "works on the new and the different to diminish..."
newness and unique difference.” 4 Painting, sculpture, and architecture thus distinct, and art exists properly only within them; each art has a nature, and art proceeds as the code is revealed, the nature purges-extrinsic.

Such (simplified) is the postmodern reading of modernism, death of the term purity. Once, this will-to-purity was subversive: in its moral conventions—social ones encoded in the aesthetic—were defined if not negated, and the artist, immersed in artistic practice, his or her true self revealed autonomous, transcendentally critical. However, seen dialectically in retrospect, such a strategy seems decorous and politically retrograde: “Purity” refers to a division of labor within culture which, as a result, contributed to both the special professionalism of the academy and the commodification production of industry. 5 It also affirms the idea of art as a noble, engendered from a special history; this is indeed how art historically has presented itself, as a line of works, a lineage of artists; in the latter terms (pant hou, erga propter hou) of influence and continuity.

Though historical interventions can be recuperative (as the work of Walter Benjamin attests), they can also be recuperative—and are so, in equal measure, in the avant-garde, defined by Renato Poggioli as “the artistic equivalent of transcendental historicism.” 6 The term “transcendent history” is a contradiction, but it is one basic to modernism—no matter how “transcendent” or radically new the art is, it is usually recouped, rendered familiar by historicism. 7 Thus, modernism reworks the contradiction: art is avant-garde insofar as it is radically historicist—the artist delves into art-historical conventions in order to break out of them. Such historicism (the New as its own Tradition) is both an origin and end for the avant-garde, and one aim of postmodernism is to retain its radicality but rid of its historicism. 8 For, as the discourse of the continuous historicism remains inherently, it pervades time as a totality (whereby “revisions are never more than moments of consciousness”) 9 and man as the subiect. Human consciousness is at once postulated and revealed as sovereign, and discontinuity is resisted, as is any decentering of the subject (whether by class, family, or language). In art, of course, the subject of the historicism is the artist and his space is the museum; here, history is presented as a narrative—continuous, homogenous, and anthropocentric—of great men and masterworks.

Purity as an end and decorum as an effect. Historicism as an operation and the museum as the context: the artist as original and the work as unique—these are the terms which modernism privileges and against which postmodernism is articulated. In postmodernism, they form a practice now exhausted, whose consecration can no longer be inflicted. Pledged to purity, the medium has relented—hence, postmodernism now is between, across, or outside them, or in new or neglected mediums (like video or photography). Historicized by the museum, commodified by the gallery, the art object is neutralized—hence, postmodernism occurs in alternative and in many forms, often dispersed, serial, or ephemeral. As the place of art is re-formed, so too is the role of the artist, and the values that herebefore authenticated art are questioned. In short, the cultural field is transformed, aesthetic signification opened up.

The field transformed is the first condition of postmodernism. In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Rosalind Krauss sketches how modern sculpture passed from a logo of historic place—the monument or statue—to one of autonomous form—the pure, self-subsisting object. Indeed, she argues, by the time of minimalism modern sculpture had entered a condition of “pure negativity: the combination of exclusions . . . [it] was now the category that resulted from the exclusion of the not-landscape to the not-architecture.” 10 These terms are simply the terms “architecture” and “landscape” inverted; set with others, they form a “quaternion field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it.” 11 It is in this “logically expanded field,” suspended between these terms, that the postmodernist forms—“site-construction,” “axiomatic structures,” and “marked sites”—exist with sculpture. To Krauss, they break with modernist practice, and so cannot be thought of in terms of historicism. Here, art-historical context will not suffice as meaning, for postmodernism is articulated not within the medium but in relation to cultural terms. These terms are conceived logically, not derived historically, and so must be regarded in terms of structure.

To be seen as such, postmodernism must posit a break; this one, with the medium and with historicism, is crucial—it seals modernism and opens the cultural space of postmodernism. Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens also posit such a rupture, though, focused on other artists, they detail its advent somewhat differently. For Krauss, the signal of postmodernism is an expanded field of art, and for Crimp it is a return of “theory” (tamed by late modernism), and for Owens an “erosion of language” (also “expressed”) and, more importantly, a new postmodernist impulse, “allegorical” or deconstructive in nature.
Again, these critics first propose postmodernism against late modernism, whose classic text is seen as the essay "Art and Objecthood" by Michael Fried.14 Therein, Fried objects to the implicit "theory" of minimalist sculpture: "art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater," runs the oft-quoted line, with "theater" defined as "what lies between the arts." To Crimp, this intuition signals modernism's demise: the important work of the seventies exists precisely between the arts; moreover, such work—especially video and performance—exploits the very "theater" (or "preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the duration of experience") that Fried deemed degenerate. In effect, minimalism's implicit "theater" becomes explicit. Much contemporary art can be derived from this extrapolation, or so Crimp asserts in the essay "Pictures":

If many of these artists can be said to have been apprenticed in the field of performance as it issued from minimalism, they have nevertheless begun to reverse its priorities, making of the literal situation and duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality were utterly psychological: performance becomes just one of a number of ways of "staging" a picture.15

Owens also cites the Fried dictum as late-modernist law, which he relates, as a "belief in the absolute difference of verbal and visual art," to the neoclassical order (i.e., the temporal arts, poetry, etc., over the spatial arts, painting, etc.).16 Such a hierarchy is based on a "linguistic criterion," one which the modernist visual arts repudiated. The emergence of time, muted by Fried, is then marked by an "emergence of discourse":

11. This essay was also of prime importance—a catalyst. For Smithson's reaction, see his "Letter to the Editor," Artforum 6, no. 2 (October 1967). Reprinted in Robert Smithson, The Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 33. Fried objected to the "perversity" of minimalism—its deviation from the late-modernist will to "purity." Other less-persuasive, critical-esthetic rationalizations of the ne plus ultra of modernism reduction. That it should entail such a contradiction—"the modernist impulse to thing-in-itself and the postmodernist impulse toward "decontextuality," or "perversity"—might in fact make minimalism the scene of a shift in sensibility, the very basis of postmodernism. See also Michael Fried, "Deception and Truthfulness: Painting and Behavior in the Age of Elision," Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

12. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," October, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 67. Reprinted in this volume, see p. 177. Here, Crimp retains an "objective" historicalism, though the passage shows that it need not be revealed on any one medium.

13. Craig Owens, "Earthworks," October, no. 10 (Fall 1979): 125-26. And yet modernism is over, at least originally, to a revolt against the neoclassical order as enshrined in the academy. Romantically confused of genres, symbolically contextless, surrealism... Granted these are episodes, they nevertheless pose a new characterization of modernism as a doctrine of discourse above. Indeed, the "critique of representation" is originally a modernist imperative.
but it must also "shake" the sign itself. (The picture-underneath-the picture thus has more to do with Derrida's grammatology: the notion that there is "always already" articulated by another sign.)

To change the object itself, this, in other terms, is the mandate of postmodernist art. Contingent, art exists in (or as) a web of references, not rooted in any one form, medium, or site. As the object is destructured, the subject (viewer) dislocated, and the modernist order of the arts shattered. Such art is thus "allegorical" in nature. Temporal and spatial at once, it dissolves the old order; so too, it opposes the "pure sign" of late-modern art and plays, instead, on "distance which separates signifier from signified, from meaning." But to what does such allegorical art finally lead us to a dispersal of the subject and a melancholic resignation in the face of fragmented and reliquified history?

Figures and Fields

Postmodernism is thus posed as a rupture with the aesthetic order of modernism. And yet the concept of the field remains—even if only as a term to denote its own dispersal. That is, postmodernism is seen within a given problematic of representation—in terms of types and codes, rhetorical figures and cultural fields. As a discourse, as a space, its very "allegory," its "allegorical." its very self-reflexive is strategic. Is it necessary to think in terms of fields and figures of representation? No doubt; and yet criticism therefore remains recuperated. As a textual practice, postmodernist art cannot be translated; criticism, then, would not be its supplement. But then why would it be? What does criticism do vis-à-vis such art? Does it enter as another code in the text of the art? Or does it initiate the very play of signs that is the text? My question, finally, is simple: Do critics today engage postmodernist art as its textual nature would seem to demand? "As soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way," Derrida writes, "that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification heretofore has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word "sign" itself— which is precisely what cannot be done." (Should one add: "even the concept and critique itself"?) But this is precisely what cannot be done—such is the epistemological bind of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Clearly, this "catastrophe" is marked in theory too.

Now, postmodernist art is often termed "deconstructive," which is to say that it endeavors a contradiction: it must use, as methodological tools at least, the very concepts that it calls into question. It may be too much to assert that such complicity is a conspiracy, but a convention, form, tradition, etc., is only deconstructed from within. Deconstruction thus becomes reinscription: for there is no "outside" (except in the positivist sense of "outside the means")—a transgression that reasserts the limit. That is, there is no way not to be in a field of cultural terms, for these terms inform us presumptively. So if postmodernist art is referential, it refers only "to problematize the activity of reference." For example, it may "steal" and "steal" and images in an "appropriation" that is seen as critical—both of a culture in which images are commodities and of an aesthetic practice that holds (nostalgically) to an art of originality. And yet, can a critique be articulated within the very forms under critique? Again: yes: how else could it be articulated? Such a critique, however, cannot hope to displace these forms; at best, it indicts them as "mythological" and stresses the need to think and represent otherwise. Another question is not so obvious: are the given mediums not mediated? That is to say, is a medium such as painting given as static and neutral, or is it in fact re-formed, re-presented, in and by the very forms that it mediates?

Appropriation, textuality, these terms seem to preclude mediums whose logic is based on authenticity and originality. Painting per se is regarded by many critics as problematic, and even photography is seen to hold a vestige of aura—an aura that is elaborated or expropriated by many artists today. (Indeed, a certain aura or even cult of inauthenticity is active today; the photobomb image is now the law.) Such denials, when extreme, are of more interest to analysts than artists and critics. However, it remains true that the mediums are informed by historically specific logics—of productivity, say, or expressionism (the first of which may be complicit with a superseded political economy, the second now with a pop psychology of the most ideological sort).

Recently, of course, we have witnessed a resurgence in painting, not only a revival of old modes as if they were new, but also a retreat to old values as if they were necessary. Much of it is regressive—just as, in the midst of society suffused with "information," many seem to regard painting—in its specificity—as critical. Old avatars (creative artists, authentic art) are returned precisely because they are animate, as forces to resist complete mediation (which is to say, complete absorption in the consumerist program of mass

27. Of Struthian: Owens writes: "It is too early to say that the spiral form of the jetty is completely immutable for a given distance; that distance is in itself a conceptual construction of the picture, not a matter of spatial position. There is a psychological, semiotic, textual relationship between picture and text."

28. Postmodern art, one type is oriented toward the concept and word "sign" itself—which is precisely what cannot be done. (Should one add: "even the concept and critique itself"?) But this is precisely what cannot be done—such is the epistemological bind of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Clearly, this "catastrophe" is marked in theory too.


30. "Allegorical Impasse: (Part 1)," p. 199. (Reprinted in this volume, see p. 194-207.)

31. Owens, "Allegorical Impasse (Part 2)," p. 163. (Reprinted in this volume, see p. 162.)

exposes the “impurity” of meaning. And yet unlike self-reflexivity (with which it is often conflated), self-criticism does not elude a closure. It may be true that the issue of deconstruction (such as really the recent history of critical theory) that if postmodernism is truly deconstructive of modernism, it would be a discursivity within it.

Certainly, to be regarded as an epistemological break and as a stylistic or chronological term, postmodernism must be based on a body of knowledge—and thus on material conditions—substantially different from modernism. A new technique, for example, or one not minimally of the way of seeing. Perhaps such a form does exist: to know it will require Foucauldian archeology: to posit it now, on the basis of aesthetic form, seems preposterous. Recent practice has affected defamiliarization, an event (quintessentially modernist terms) that, in turn, stresses the historicity of the art, i.e., conditional, nature of art. And it is no doubt important to insist upon the cultural specificity of modernism (for it is determinant). But again, it is not in terms of an absolute break seems problematic.

And yet postmodernism is defined as a rupture. In this it is like modernism which, despite historicism, often speaks a rhetoric of discontinuity. In modernism too, postmodernism is posed against a past perceived as inert—thus relies, in part, on the old imperative of the avant-garde and its politics of crisis (in the sense of both judgment and separation). As noted, such a postmodernist re-education in art tend to be recurrent, institutional (in the museum and in art history as recuperation), along with pluralism, is the main problem of contemporary art. Clearly, revision of the historicism that recasts and reduces every provocative extreme necessary, one in which the series breaks, characteristic of modernism, are seen not as an avant-garde succession—in which evolution of discontinuity is substituted for the evolution of continuity, for in the form of a problematic constellation, whose systems set off the 20th century as a deconstructive synchrony.”

Propositions of postmodernism tend to be highly conscious of historicism, the effect, they would displace modernism, which, pushed back on the book of culture, begins in its own reduction, foreclosed more than constructed. Rather than reduction, what is needed is a revision of modernism’s opening of its supposed closure. And perhaps postmodernism is this too. Though it recreates late-modernist dogmas, it also renders modernist discourses (for example, artists like Duchamp and Klee are favored, as are critics like Blum). As such, it may be considered a break with modernism, which is an advance in a dialectic in which modernism is re-formed. Certainly, any serious notion of postmodernism must be suffused on the conviction that “an system calling for corrections, translations, openings, and negations is more useful than an unformulated absence of system—one may then avoid the immobility of stylized and connect to the historical chain of discourses, the progression of discursivity.”

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