MODERN FINE ART:
A VEHICLE FOR UNDERSTANDING WESTERN MODERNITY
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While art curricula are not without reference to twentieth century fine art, the social significance of modern fine art has been a neglected area of study. The purpose of this paper is to survey and review the modal characteristics of modern society and modern fine art. Striking similarities are revealed in such a review which strongly suggest that a study of modern fine art in art education could serve to problematize both the social origins of modern fine art and the values of Western modernity.

Art Education Literature Review

A review of art education literature indicates that modern fine art is often neither an integral part of proposed art programs nor a specific area of study considered to be of value in understanding modern society. This may be due to a general reluctance to deal with the social functions of art. However, more specifically, neglecting the social significance of modern fine art may be due to an inability to consider modern fine art—which is often abstract and separate from overt social functions—as having meaning beyond its presentational aspects. In many of those instances in which modern fine art is specifically included in curricular planning, its social significance is essentially ignored or is limited to examples in which social content is derived from fairly obvious socio-political subject matter expressed in a representational style. The work of Beckmann, Grosz, the Mexican muralists and, of course, Picasso's Guernica are invariably cited as instances of social consciousness in modern fine art (Feinstein, 1982; Feldman, 1971; Myers, 1957). The operative assumption appears to be that social meaning in art is limited to subject matter, rather than also being embedded within artistic assumptions, working procedures, audience attitudes, and the overall institutional configuration of art production and response in a given society.

A formalist approach is often accorded the study of modern fine art, wherein abstract perceptual qualities are assumed to constitute its meaning. The influential Guidelines (1970), compiled under the auspices of CERMEL, serves to indicate how the endorsement of a strictly formalistic interpretation of modern art can sever abstract form from any type of meaning beyond the perceptual experience of design element relationships. For example, a painting by Albers is discussed as a work
in which the sensuous surface has been exploited in order
to produce certain tensions and vague feelings in the
viewer. Since this is a non-objective painting, the
experience should come to a close, there being no other
kinds of meaning or significance to be found. To seek
further would be fallacious. (p. 52)

Modern fine art study appears to be primarily art historical and art
critical, with an emphasis on aesthetic qualities.

Among those art educators who are concerned that students under-
derstand art in its social and environmental context, the idea that
modern fine art might warrant specific study receives uncertain
responses. For example, while Schellin (1973) implies that modern
fine art may be indicative of social ills, he prefers that a broader
spectrum of art be studied. In a similar vein, Chalmers (1978) ob-
erves that historically, art educators, by studying primarily fine
art, have promulgated a restricted definition of art that needs to
be broadened to include the popular, environmental, folk, and com-
mercial arts. Modern fine art is often considered to have little social
import beyond the heady world of the artist and his/her moneyed
clientele. Gowans (1971), for example, dismisses modern fine art
on the basis that it is elitist and self-referent, i.e., art for
art's sake, art about itself, art about the material means of art, etc.
(Also see Collins, 1977.)

The Characteristics of Modernity

Paradoxically, it is the asocial, self-referent character of
much modern fine art that makes it very much part of a society which
gives legitimation to decontextualized experiences. From sociology
of knowledge literature, values of Western modernity have been iden-
tified that, as will be shown, often have their parallel in modern
fine art. Bell (1978), Berger, Berger and Kellner (1974), Berger and
Luckmann (1966), Bowers (1980), and Gouldner (1979) have cited the
following as dominant values of modernity: a temporal orientation
toward the future (rather than past or present), the activity modal-
ity of doing (rather than being or becoming), human relationships
that are individualistic (rather than communal or lineal), and the
human subjugation of nature (rather than coexistence or subservience).
(Also see Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961.)

Bell specifically identifies change as the most pervasive value
of modernity, wherein change is often equated with progress, and human
purpose and action are the means by which perfection will be ulti-
mately attained. At the extreme, it is believed that there are no
restraints upon what can be humanly accomplished -- anything that can
be formulated can be done, and should be done. The individual, by
dint of possessing purposive rationality, gives legitimation to human
action by creating the reality in which those actions are judged.
As Foucault (1970) has noted, prior to the nineteenth century, the
individual, per se, did not exist; the shift from the external world
as a frame of reference to that of internal mental constructs places the individual stage center in a society of change, improvement, and decontextualized experiences.

Foucault traces the inception of modernity to the turn of the eighteenth century when systems of knowledge became self-referent, with each discipline folded over upon itself, seeking the source of its own episteme. In structure, operating procedures, and terminology, disciplines became increasingly self-contained, self-conscious, and self-reflective. This opened the way for artificial language systems of formalized codes, wherein signs are what they are, without connections or meanings beyond their self-evident existence. Foucault dates the all-important break with Classicism to when signs ceased to represent, to when they lost their metaphorical as if dimensions. In the twentieth century world of metaknowledge and metacriticism, language codes have become their own object. Consistent with this development, the possession of abstract, theoretical knowledge is given the highest plaudits in modern society, resulting in what Gouldner has termed the "culture of critical discourse." In modern society, there is a so-called knowledge industry which establishes and maintains disciplinary and intellectual integrity through theoretical justifications, specialization, and self-referenced terminology which define parameters and exclude all but the trained expert.

**Modern Aesthetic Theory and Artistic Self-Reference**

Significantly, the historical inception of modernity — that is, of individualism, futurism, the separation of work from leisure, disciplinary self-reference, theoretical legitimations, and bureaucratic specialization — coincides with the development of aesthetic theories emphasizing the noninstrumental, intrinsic value of art. From Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, through Schopenhauer in the nineteenth century, to Bullough, Stolnitz and Kaelin in the twentieth century, many aestheticians have proposed that art be valued for its own sake and that the value of art eschew all interests extraneous to the aesthetic response, per se (see Dickie, 1971; Osborne, 1970). This bracketing of the object is accomplished by what has been variously described as imaginative reduction, aesthetic disinterest, aesthetic interest, the aesthetic attitude, the aesthetic point of view, and psychic distancing. According to Bosanquet (1915), "In the aesthetic attitude, the object which embodies the feeling is valued solely for what it is in itself" (p. 9). One instigates the aesthetic by "putting the phenomenon . . . out of gear with our practical, actual self. . . by looking at it 'objectively'" (Bullough, 1913/1935, p. 317). Without risk of hyperbole, one may state that the intrinsic value of art constitutes the very cornerstone of modern aesthetic theory. The idea that "art is responded to on the basis of its intrinsic qualities, isolated from societal life experiences, has become thoroughly embedded and taken for granted in the operational tenets of most art theory and in much art creation and instruction" (Hamblen & Jones, 1982, p.51).
The analogy of a painting to a window with a view of a garden is often used to explain how the viewer is to be concerned only with what is intrinsic to art. Prior to the twentieth century, the viewer of art might look into the window/painting, to the garden beyond, recognizing the types of vegetation there, the configuration of the landscape, perhaps identifying people in the garden and noting their attire and activities. In other words, the painting offered a view to representations with functions and associations related to one's life experience and memories. In the twentieth century, however, often aided by nonrepresentationalism, the aesthetician urges the viewer to look only at the flat surface of the window/-pane/canvas itself on which the lines, colors, textures, and shapes of the garden form abstract relationships (Redfield, 1971). The artist and, by implication, the viewer of art in his/her noninstrumental responses to art, is dealing with the synthetic language of the material means of art, which has its own internal logic and meaning. That is, art is self-referenced; it is about itself.

Maurice Denis, a nineteenth century artist, was one of the first to be aware of the implications of disciplinary integrity for artistic creation.

One should remember that a painting—before being a warhorse, a nude woman or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order. (Quoted by Jaffé, 1965, p. 139)

To continue within the idiom of the garden/painting analogy, Denis "established the credo of the new spirit, saying, 'We must close the shutters.' A painting was not to be an illusion" (Bell, p. 111). Langer (1971) echoes the beliefs of many aestheticians when she denies to the art experience metaphoric as if dimensions, thereby decontextualizing art from the everyday flux of experiential associations and resemblances. "A work of art differs from a genuine symbol—that is, a symbol in the full and usual sense—in that it does not point beyond itself to something else" (p. 91). Within the formalistic aesthetic, the artist creates what Nakov (1979, p. 30) calls a self-contained "pictorial culture," in which a metaformal dialogue is acted out upon the flat surface of the canvas. In many cases, modern fine art is a visual treatise on its own epistemology.

The Historical-Institutional Character of Modern Fine Art

The history of why modern fine art has come to be separated from everyday life and why artistic creation has come to be considered as occurring outside societal norms can only be suggested here. The creation of art which exhibits varying degrees of abstraction, art ensconced in the museum setting, and the changing role of the artist from anonymous craftsman to that of individualistic creator have contributed significantly to art being defined and evaluated on the basis of how greatly it differs from common experience. As other contributing factors to artistic decontextualization one might also cite developments such as the Renaissance separation of crafts from the so-called higher
arts, the artists' loss of religious patronage and the replacement of handicrafts by industrially produced goods.

**Individualism and Change**

Commensurate with disciplinary self-reference and the societal cult of individualism, in the nineteenth century there arose a belief in the artist as the interpreter, creator, and prophet of reality. To the artist was imputed the ability to reveal subconscious truths, to be ever-critical of "what is," to be at the very cutting edge of social change. As the creative individual par excellence, the artist has ostensibly not only the right but the duty to give expression to all manner of artistic creation. "Aesthetic imagination was regarded as the sacred fount of a spirit which would transfigure the world" (Alder, 1976b, p. 420). Mondrian, for example, envisioned a world based on pure design, without recourse to the natural environment or the clutter of everyday sentiments. In her book aptly titled *Progress in Art*, Gablik (1977) proposes that nonobjective art epitomizes the pinnacle of cognitive operations; in such art, human purpose and ingenuity have created a world untainted by material exigencies and utilitarianism. That is, nonobjective art is a humanly created synthetic language, sufficient unto itself.

A veritable kaleidoscope of change and human invention characterizes twentieth century life, i.e., rapidly changing technologies of exponential complexity; the proliferation of information that quickly becomes outdated; and a plethoric, ever-increasing production of goods that are designed to be discarded. Needless to say, there has been a commensurate loss of cultural traditions and stabilizing belief systems. As part of the modernity mandate for progress and change, art in this century has also been marked by a bewildering number of artistic styles, movements and isms. By mid-century, the carte blanche afforded human purpose and creativity often took on a farcical, if not pathological, cast. Existential angst in the larger society found expression in the institution of fine art which readily embraced anti-art movements, anti-anti-art movements, self-disintegrating art, body mutilation art, and art which remained a thought process. While much twentieth century art is often referred to as being "revolutionary", essentially modern artists have been concerned with the radical manipulation of the material means of art, rather than direct social involvement, let alone a confrontation with established social institutions. In actuality, avant-gardism has been socially programmatic, inasmuch as change, novelty, and invention are part of, rather than counter to, modernity (see Bell; Rosenberg, 1966).

**The Reliance on Expert Knowledge**

While modern fine art developed, in part, out of a reaction to excessive literary meanings in Victorian art, the modern artist, ironically, has created art forms highly dependent upon the literature of art criticism and theory for understanding and appreciation. Rapid stylistic changes, abstraction, and artistic self-reference have resulted in art that often requires extensive art study and expert interpretation (see Battecock, 1973).
He who depends, as his grandfather might have done, on the normal processes of his social environment to introduce him to the paintings and sculptures that form part of his culture will end with neither art nor knowledge. (Rosenberg, p. 198)

As a synthetic, self-referenced language system, modern fine art is part of the larger information society. Much as the understanding and use of computer languages is not a birthright or acquired through informal learning, the understanding of modern fine art requires expert knowledge. One might suggest that modern fine art reveals class distinctions based on knowledge acquisition, or, more correctly, based on whether or not the individual is part of, or has access to, the official value system created by modernity. In essence, art knowledge is a commodity; its possession is an indication of having shares in the "cultural knowledge bank," enabling one to participate in, to paraphrase Gouldner, the culture of aesthetic discourse (Schwartz, p. 31). In modern fine art, the values of modernity are writ large. If modern fine art is alienating and confusing to much of the public, it is perhaps the modernity values of society which are actually being rejected or which are inaccessible (Hamblen, 1982).

Summary and Recommendations

The study of modern fine art can provide valuable insights into the defining character and underlying assumptions of Western modernity. In fact, modern art should be studied for some of the very reasons it is dismissed as being of limited social consequence. Disciplinary specialization, the isolation of experience from context, the credence given to discipline-specific language codes, an emphasis on innovation and individual freedom, etc., are all part of the legitimating structure of modern society. These and other values of modernity constitute the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions of modern life upon which many institutional attitudes, ideas and actions are based. Not surprisingly, as one of the institutions of modern society, modern fine art also exhibits characteristics of modernity specialization and self-reference. It is modern art's autonomy, its lack of contact with everyday life, its continual change, and the artist's search for novelty and claim of freedom from social restraint which make modern fine art very much about modern society. Modern fine art is an integral part of modern society specifically because it exhibits characteristics unique to itself.
References


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