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Post-Critical

Neo-Modern

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To any practitioner or critic informed by the critique of modernism, its recent revival in artistic practice offers a bewildering puzzle. Repealing established taboos and turning back the clock, the last few years have seen a renewed interest in abstraction, materiality, and process in ways that, on the surface, recall the formal strategies of modernist art and its Minimalist offshoots. In the United States alone, the New Museum's *Unmonumental* (2008), the Kitchen's *Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture* (2009–10), the Sculpture Center's *Knight's Move* (2010), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977* (2010), the Museum of Modern Art's *Abstract Expressionist New York* (2010–11), and a host of gallery shows have all registered this seachange, showcasing a resurgent concern with abstraction from a variety of perspectives.

While many of these artistic practices and curatorial projects demonstrate complex and critical relationships to modernism, abstraction, and autonomy, there is nevertheless a slow gravitational pull, in both production and reception, toward a less reflexive and more nostalgic attitude. Indeed, any visit to Chelsea, the Lower East Side or an MFA program will yield a peppering of objects that mimic the formal moves of some modernist art. Why now? My conjecture is that this revival is a return to foundations not unlike similar returns during periods of great anxiety and upheaval. But whereas the *rappel à l'ordre* of the 1920s, for instance, gazed toward an antique figurative tradition, the current turn to the classical grasps at more recent bedrock.

A perfect storm of timing and influence, this embrace of modernist styles is a convergence of several developments. It is, in equal parts, a generational fatigue with theory; a growing split between hand-made artistic production and social practice; and a legitimate and thrifty attempt to "keep it real" in the face of an ever-expansive image culture and the slick "commodity art" of Koons, Murakami, and others. But, it also represents a nostalgic retrenchment on the part of an art world threatened by technological transformation and economic uncertainty that now undermine its hierarchies and claims of cultural precedence. At the same time, today's appropriation of modernist abstraction is far too eclectic to be associated with the medium-specific, teleological formalism of Clement Greenberg. Neo-formalism can draw on a range of influences spanning Constructivism to Arte

Povera, but it most closely resembles Action Painting in its emphasis on performative production (read process) and abstract form. Inoculated with a dose of the everyday, however, neo-formalism traffics in hybridized materials that afford it a referential base and so insulate it against charges of pure abstraction. Its décor, too, often carries a payload of gritty materialism that deflects any accusation of strictly aesthetic claims. Thus a work by Josh Smith, Daniel Hesidence, Alex Hubbard, Thomas Haseago, Richard Aldrich, or Gedi Sibony, just to name a few, might juxtapose a modernist look with a material process, counterbalancing aesthetic delectation with ascetic denial.

Negating pictorial depth with surface, and conventional representation with materiality, such practices attempt to circumvent a fundamentally unreliable and theoretically foreclosed image-world. But if this resurrected interest in material experimentation and anti-pictorial opacity is admirable as a resistance to a perfected illusionism, it also turns a blind eye to its own conservative tendencies. Incorporating the received values of materialism and context-sensitivity, today's neo-formalism nevertheless pursues an art of intuitive, aesthetic arrangement that satisfies the need for formal continuities and simple answers during a particularly complex time.

While it propounds a discourse of quotidian modesty—"an alchemy of the everyday"—neo-formalism in fact nullifies the specificity and discursive potential of its own materials and subsumes them in a familiar modernist idiom.¹ Unlike the critical appropriation art of the 1980s, it advances a reverential manual re-crafting of modernism that filters its sources through the individual sensibility of the artist. Less simulation than emulation, neo-formalism is in fact a restorative project that may "test the limits of your faith in art," but only in order to "renew it" more resolutely.² Acting like a modern-day Arcimboldo, the artist shapes the ordinary matter of today into the formal echoes of yesterday, thus validating the modern "visual tradition as an intrinsic and enduring value."³ In so doing, neo-formalism retreats to a solipsism that, while guaranteeing improvisatory freedom, also shelters the artist and the collector alike in an echo chamber of art-historical reference and formal free-play. At once shielded and entombed, neo-formalism remains a pictorially but not operationally resistant gesture that is characterized by aesthetic withdrawal and ratified by an all-too-willing market.

Rhetorically supported as a shift to concreteness and aided by current the-

1. "An alchemist of the everyday, Sibony makes stripped-down sculptures that may test the limits of your faith in art, but they'll also renew it." "Gedi Sibony," *The New Yorker* (May 26, 2008), p. 16.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See Saatchi Gallery's artists profile for Gedi Sibony, n. p.: "In *That's Tall's Tale*, Sibony configures a 'painting' from plastic sheeting and packing tape, with the irregular shape of the 'canvas' drawing reference to artists such as Ellsworth Kelley and Frank Stella. By exposing exactly how the work was made, Sibony instigates a performative role for the artistic process, focusing attention on the subtle tensions within the composition and its very considered and sophisticated balance of form, materiality, and space. Through this intense scrutiny, Sibony affirms the authenticity of artistic integrity, positing a refined connoisseurship of, and heightened sensitivity to, visual tradition as an intrinsic and enduring value" (saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/gedi_sibony.htm? section_name=shape_of_things, accessed January 16, 2012).

ory's frayed relation to practice, neo-formalism also reanimates well-worn tropes of emotive expression and cathartic gesture. One sees this especially in the return of Expressionist painting, replete with a discourse of ineffable and unfettered "creation" and an equally transcendental subject who "does not rely on nostalgia [or] visual culture" but forms "an elusive space that takes the viewer beyond a definable language."⁴ Here the artist once more assumes the mantle of an emancipated creator (and we that of emancipated spectators), allowing us to relive a myth of a "wild," unmediated subjectivity welded inextricably to the primal medium of paint—an image that is perhaps comforting but also nostalgic and mystified.

From a structural perspective, this shift in focus from discourse to subjectivity and from representation to thing counters more dematerialized practices such as conceptual and media-based work. Often evoking the modesty of everyday materials, neo-formalism appeals to the simplicities of artistic labor, a last bastion of humanity's endangered (yet "enduring") tactile engagement with matter. At the same time, neo-formalism constitutes a complement to the reinvigorated focus on performance; indeed, it is one part of a dyad in which the never-extinguished need for anthropomorphism and figuration finds its transitory place on the gallery and museum stage in performance art (witness the fanfare around Marina Abramović's recent retrospective *The Artist Is Present*). Such populist anthropomorphism thus offers up the body for voyeuristic scrutiny, while the commercial object is stripped down to a vague, formal vehicle, conventional enough to appeal to an equally broad audience.

To be fair, in this time of economic crisis and political uncertainty, modernism may offer the closest thing we have to a solid foundation—to a classical as well as a critical past. Yet, if today's run to the Rothkos imitates modernism's dialectical nature (its tactical call-and-response of one style to another) in order to contest the dominance of conceptual and image-based works, it also discards modernism's oppositional aspects. Instead, it plunders modernism's formal attributes for whatever charge they might still hold, trafficking equally in the shockingly outré and the canonically familiar.

A painting by Josh Smith, for instance, coyly plays with Expressionist tropes smuggled in under the rubric of reproducibility; each mark functions as both authentic gesture and copy, at once full of hyperbolic display and empty of sentiment. Yet, posed against no hegemonic realism and consumed for its aesthetic appeal, such work simply traffics in familiar clichés of artistic innocence. Such innocence, supported by Smith's own prosaic articulation of his practice, has long

4. Press release for Daniel Hesidence's *American Buffalo*, D'Amelio Terras Gallery, 2010, n. p.: "Hesidence's work does not rely on nostalgia, visual culture, nor pay ironic tribute to artists of admiration. Rather, Hesidence locates information through a concentrated process of creation, forming an elusive space that takes the viewer beyond a definable language. Like the highly improvisational and gestural European 'Art Informel,' his paintings are uncompromising, wild, and aggressive. Often evocative of moods both dark and elated in the same canvas, they are past description, unutterable in their fluidity and intricate logic. For both painter and viewer, these works embody a vitality that unabashedly consumes the senses."

been the stuff of modernism's embrace of the primitive, the infantile, and the savage. Small wonder, then, that his abstractions and paintings of fish, leaves, and his own endlessly and decorously rearranged name would find such a market in an era marked by anxious retrospection.

Such a project represents a cynical model for a contemporary practice that now searches for loopholes and blind spots in a constant hedging of bets. In effect, it allows the artist and the collector to have it both ways—the luxury of aesthetic pleasure and its simultaneous disavowal. Younger artists exploit this ambiguous terrain, too, acting as unwitting champions in today's version of “the return to the craft.”⁵ A process-based resin painting by Alex Hubbard, for instance, can echo de Kooning, Rothko, or Tapiès, all of whom are aggrandized in a youthful update. Meanwhile, a silver-dipped painting by Jacob Kassay reinvents the Constructivist and Minimalist monochrome as a product of the (now antiquated) photographic process, but also recasts it as a sumptuary wall hanging that vainly mirrors the likeness of its possessor.

In this way, neo-formalism exhumes and recombines formerly revolutionary models—Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, Minimalism, etc.—but in so doing fails to grasp new social and cultural configurations that call for different strategies altogether. In stark contrast, developments in technology, the Internet, and social media have helped to mobilize actual revolutions like the Arab Spring and now the Occupy Wall Street movement, while the art world is still trying to connect an emancipatory rhetoric to an economy of luxury goods. To obviate such impasses and vulgar concerns, neo-formalism retreats to the aura of the object and to its hallowed resting place in modernist abstraction.

However, unlike modernism's former champions, today's artists, critics, and salespeople often struggle for a language to discuss such practices. Instead they fall back on the old mantra of “process”—not because the work arrests language or transcends positivist conceptions, as is often claimed, but because, in the absence of the lofty (yet critical) discourse that fueled much of modernism, there is so little to discuss except process. This unmoored rhetoric finds itself reflected in art schools as well. A visit to an MFA program today will reveal a plethora of “slacker abstractions” that channel anyone and everyone from Richard Tuttle to Michael Krebber. When queried about the critical stakes or guiding principles of such a practice, the student repeats the language of the press releases: “Well, it's really intuitive, just thinking about materials and process.” Such myopia, born of

5. In “The Return to the Craft” (1920), Giorgio de Chirico urges a return to classical tradition after a state of avant-garde “hysteria”: “With the sunset of hysteria more than one painter will return to the craft, and those who have already done so can work with freer hands, and their work will be more adequately recognized and recompensed.” See Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 234–37. It is also interesting to note that de Chirico's emphasis on the reception by “freer hands” of commensurate compensation is echoed in today's emphasis on labor and process as an index of aesthetic (and perhaps monetary) value. Both returns mobilize the rhetoric of craft as essential to tradition. Today's coupling of process and abstraction is thus a literal “re-crafting” of the modernist past.

theoretical foreclosures and a general sense of defeatism (one student recently remarked, "How do you compete with *Avatar*?"), also signals a withdrawal, a back-to-basics mentality. In this retreat, modernism offers a proud, long-unclaimed history that can now be surfed, collaged, and artfully arranged into quasi-uncanny objects, critical in form yet complacent in spirit.

The danger here is less that this art promotes an illusory autonomy or cynically concedes to the market than that it reveals the discourse of art as now consisting of nothing but the market. Needless to say, the collecting class, largely unexposed to the critique of modernism and still driven by humanistic myths of creation, celebrates any return to the promise of an autonomous, self-possessed maker yielding highly aestheticized products through mostly intuitive means. For this generally older demographic, the return to modernism is perceived as combining the street cred of a younger generation with a vetted inoffensiveness that closely echoes the classics of the past century. So a Thomas Houseago sculpture may invoke the primitivist heroics of Picasso, while a "face painting" by Mark Grotjann can echo Klee or Poussette-Dart.

Lest one believe that a work's implicit criticality were sufficient to undo, convert, or contest this mentality, any visit to a collection will reveal the naiveté of such thinking. Still motivated by aesthetic appeal, market value, and the decorative place of a work in the home, most collectors in fact seem unmoved or impervious to a work's critical gestures, while artists are often torn between personal politics and commercial pressure. The two parties thus engage in an uneasy courtship around unspoken divisions and unacknowledged aspirations, where each seeks the perceived (and performed) freedoms of the other. Even when purchased for institutions, the work can still be vetted through a private home en route to a public forum. It is only logical that this circuit of exchange privileges a particular type of work, a particular type of practice, a particular type of discourse.

Understanding this implicitly, neo-formalism tacitly reveals an epistemic shift, a historical transformation, whereby, with the avant-garde now jettisoned as a naive fiction, the contemporary artwork is regarded as little more than an exclusive (exclusionary) *objet d'art*. If we consider the formal veneer of the works in question, the structure of today's art market, and the ornate passivity of its championed products, we see a return to a premodern condition, in which the artwork is limited largely to a propagandistic, affirmative, or decorative role, as was the case with eighteenth-century painting. Indeed, one only has to look at Nattier, Fragonard, and Boucher to see the operational horizon and destiny of much of today's production. Comparing these two epochs, defined by gross economic asymmetry and the alienation of its "enlightened" aristocratic class from an impoverished and flawed infrastructure, we see the logic of today's political and economic divisiveness, the "mobs" rioting in the streets, as well as the courtly properties of today's art.

Taken broadly, this shift is tied to the art world's becoming a peculiar form of niche industry, equal parts Hollywood and exotic market (Gagosian Gallery, for instance, now sells speedboats designed by Marc Newson). Witness, too, the ever-growing number of art fairs that scour the globe for new collectors, the

heightened fascination with celebrity (i.e., James Franco's newfound legitimacy as an artist), and the Oscar-inspired Art Awards that started as a gag by Rob Pruitt but have now been transformed into a legitimate award ceremony.

The neo-formalism crowding today's MFA programs, galleries, museums, and art fairs is both the ostensible antagonist of this development and its reaction formation. It may appear to deny a perfected spectacle, but it is tethered to it as by an umbilical cord.⁶ Lest one mistake it for the autonomous art once championed by Adorno, this work seldom aspires to address the generalized alienation that would result in a gesture of refusal, nor is it refused by a literalist audience in search of simpler things. Rather, it greets a pre-primed spectator, already indoctrinated into the codes and mythologies of the modern, who happily welcomes it as a return to old certainties—an echo of a lost golden age.

6. As Clement Greenberg famously wrote, "No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold." See "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, p. 533.