Modernity, Modernism and the Contemporary

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, artists responded to the changes in the modern city with a mix of awe and excitement. Modernity was ushered in by the power of new industrial technologies. The sweeping socio-economic changes pushed many earlier forms of culture and knowledge to the dustbins of history. The damage was often justified by the promise of increased liberation and understanding. As key players in the historical avant garde, artists saw themselves at the forefront of revolutionary ideas. New inventions and the destruction of barriers would open the way for a transformation of art. Modernism, as the cultural representation of modernity, promised to break from traditions that restricted creativity and embrace the spirit of progress.

While there have been multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives, two streams dominated the utopian visions of modernism. The formal innovations of abstraction were premised on the belief that these were the foundations of a new universal language. Experiments in colour, form and the fundamental contours of space – the cube, sphere and void – were considered as the pure expressions in a new universal language of art. Affiliation with social change was the other stream. The incorporation of direct political content was not just an effort to represent daily struggle, but also bring the function of art closer to everyday life. New technologies like the camera were used to build links across artforms and tell the stories of ordinary experiences. Modernism promised to reveal the fullness of human creativity, provide new insights into the perception of and links to the world. It was meant to strip away superstitions and create a form of knowledge that was broader, deeper and closer to reality.

However, it also opened new and unexpected possibilities for hybrid and collaborative art practices. In this essay I will draw from the diverse tendencies within modernism in order to highlight the sources that have inspired contemporary idea of identity and community.
The most enduring belief in modernism was premised on the assumption that aesthetic work could offer a distinctive representation of the real. This difference took numerous forms: in some cases it had a critical dimension that could be aligned to political ideologies; in others, the symbolic domain was abstracted to a level of universality. The common aim was to expand the parameters of consciousness and experience. What distinguished modernism from earlier historical cultural forms was its own role in understanding culture as the framework for a global dialogue, rather than as a local set of values, ideas and practices that in their own particular ways expressed an exclusive bond between place, people and cosmos.

To develop this open dialogue with others, to uncover the mind’s hidden secrets, to overcome social barriers, to find new forms to convey the energy of the time, to connect things that were overlooked or kept remote from each other, artists developed strategies of juxtaposition and fusion, finding rhythms in discontinuous beats, splicing contrary segments together, producing complex layering systems and reclassifying the order of things. The montage of art and everyday life was meant to shock our senses into wider, sharper and more vibrant perspectives. Wonder, awe and critical thinking were meant to occur in the midst of everyday life, not through separation and isolation. Many remained sceptical of such blind faith in progress, but even artists, who had been critical of capitalism’s social impacts, still believed the machine age could be harnessed to produce a new utopia. For instance, in the post war period, Constant constructed images, models and maps for his imaginary city ‘New Babylon’.

By the end of the twentieth century modernity’s glow was tarnished and contaminated. The promise of Le Corbusier and his followers to lift ordinary life sank. The gaze of the contemporary artist is no longer upwards and onwards, but lowered down to the ground to face the accumulated filth of waste and pollution. The artist’s radical task shifted from dreaming of a new utopia, to dealing with the dystopia surrounding urban life. Contemporary artists like Bargmann and Levy now begin their practice in a ‘clean-up’ operation. Yona Friedman also stresses that the artist’s task shifted from invention to re-
cycling, from expressing a new vision for the future to developing new ethical collaborations to deal with the legacies of the machine age. The dustbins of history have become the key sites for cultural renewal.

Place and Displacement: the City and Modernism

The city was the fulcrum for both modernity and modernism. Before the first avant garde manifesto was written, Baudelaire was expounding the ‘religious elation’ cities could produce. He saw the artist as a ragpicker, finding value in the remains of the day, collecting what is discarded, recording those experiences that the blasé approach to city life would silently bypass. The fascination with urban life’s neglected fragments and hidden forms, combined with a redemptive approach to the history and politics of modernity, has been evident in art movements from cubism to fluxus. The random walks across the city by the Dadaists, the Surrealists’ public tours of the city’s unconscious, the Situationist notion of the *derive*, which encourages both idle wandering and deliberate disruption of urban landscapes, all expand on Baudelaire’s definition of the flaneur’s only dwelling ambition: to feel as much ‘at home between the facades of the buildings as a citizen is in his four walls’.

After Duchamp’s famous inverted urinal, the material for art could be anything. In the 1960s artists fossicked in the remains of industrial landscapes to comment on the solitude and poverty underpinning the crowded and wealthy cities of the North. Michelangelo Pistoletto, like many artists in the Italian *Arte Povera* movement, made art from found materials. In one celebrated work Pistoletto mashed old newspapers into a large sphere and rolled it through the streets. Arman, the French Nouveau Realist, crushed cars into a shape resembling a domestic refrigerator, and inserted the result into the gallery. Old cans, scrap metal, chipped concrete, plastic flags, ripped posters – this radical expansion in the choice of art materials also marked a crucial shift in the relationship between the artist and their place in the city.
In the post war period, as the limits and dead spaces of urban planning became apparent, artists developed a more direct critique against architecture and the regulations of public space. Modernism’s founding principle of the autonomous language for art and architecture, and the reduction of surfaces to objective and neutral configurations, faced growing scepticism and resistance. Installation and public art works were initiated to contest the obliteration of prior historical and counter-cultural associations with space. Art was made to dialogue with forces that were outside the hermetic history of modernism and more directly connected to its specific urban location.

Competition amongst signs, promiscuous displays of wealth, compulsive attention-seeking buildings, and the clownish bent of new mod cons were, for the pop artists, not just the latest fads of hysteric capitalism, but the very material and subject for their own practice. The city, in all its garish and cumbersome forms, became the reservoir and the frame for art. Pop artists like Claes Oldenburg and architects like Robert Venturi looked to these complex and contradictory signs, not with pure lament and disgust, but as the materiality and parameters of their practice. Furthermore, the city, by its very nature of concentration and contradiction, could always furnish opportunities of surprise and wonder that could also provide a glimpse of alternative states of being and seeing. The city’s infinite semiotic collisions, against which the blasé attitude so assiduously guards us, represented a new field for encountering novelty and difference. However, the gap between the architectural theories of urban modern planning and the ethical uses of buildings reached its apotheosis in the dynamiting of the massive St Louis public housing project, which was breathtakingly portrayed in Godfrey Reggio’s film *Koyaanisquatsi*. A decade before this dramatic depiction of the city as imploding in a swirling vortex, Robert Smithson had already noted that ruins were part of modernism’s foundations.

Multiple Modernisms

The story of modernism can no longer be told exclusively as a historical survey of linear progress, or as the subsequent cultural effect of socio-economic changes. To try to
explain modernism in purely formal terms, or to assume that modernity is exclusively driven by the social and political agenda, is to miss the point. Modernism is always in a state of critical dialogue with modernity. With hindsight we can see that the dialogue shifted and oscillated between the different locales.

Parallel, and in some cases, counter forms of modernism, were developed by artists in places like Latin America and Australia. Japanese aesthetics were influential in shaping early modernist styles. Indian artists maintained the belief that an independent form of modernism could be developed to respond to specific national questions. In the 1960s, artists like the Brazilians Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clarke and Filipino David Medalla pioneered the use of new techniques for reaching new audiences and including their participation as part of the work’s construction and experience. The work therefore finds its completion in the active experience of the public. A distinctive feature of the modernist forms outside of the Euro-American axis was the more complex relation to tradition. In these instances, the articulation of modern cultural forms did not presuppose a clean break with the vernacular and traditional practices, but rather it proceeded by means of hybrid incorporation.

One of the most powerful examples of the way tradition is seen as vital resource, rather than as a barrier to representing contemporary identity, was the emergence of central Australia’s Papunya Tula artists. Their body of work raises complex questions about authorship, community involvement, historical retrieval and political affirmation. This art practice eschews the conventional vertical hierarchy of an individual artist orchestrating a given conceptual order, and allows a horizontal model of storytelling to emerge through the collaborative practice of a community. Hetti Perkins and Vivien Johnson have eloquently told the story of this remote community’s meteoric rise in the international artworld without resorting to the triumphant discovery of the noble savage, nor overstating the formal correspondence between dot painting and minimalism, but rather, through an account of how a rural community could negotiate the transitions of modernity. They argue that the artwork is testament to the vitality of indigenous culture,
as it interweaves an account of identity as it is being formed through moments of contact with modernity.

With the example of the Danish artist’s collective Superflex, who work intensively with local communities and global technical experts, curator Charles Esche has argued that a new model of artistic and political practice has emerged: that radical practice is now developed through the negotiation of different institutional and communal spaces. Artists are no longer concerned with eschewing the category of art, but in utilising the various spaces of art to permit new levels of exchange between different communities. In the absence of totalising regimes, and in the gaps of capital’s colonisation of the social, lies the hope of constituting new spheres of cultural, intellectual and scientific exchange. Esche sees these new collaborative models as indicative of a new pragmatic politics that are conscious of both the complicity with capital and the ambition to convert, co-opt and critique institutions from the inside, rather than from a distance. The emphasis is now on what Esche calls ‘modest proposals’, developed in a collaborative manner, rather than the individual as author of a monumental form of cultural production.

These ‘clusters’ of artists, activists, technicians and intellectuals are seeking to create new conditions in which information can flow and re-structure the institutions of everyday life. Rather than repeating the traditional separation between creative and technical production, the roles now intertwine on a series of lateral connections. This transformation in the field of cultural production creates new networks of communication and responsibility.

A more sensitive appreciation of the internationalist aspirations in the avant garde, the revised mapping of the cultural innovations that occurred throughout the world, and the new networks of collaborative practice have produced an expanded vision of the legacies and global futures of modernism. The narratives of place and displacement are now central to the definition of contemporary culture. The artist’s role is no longer to be the forefront of the engine of social change, but rather to be an activator in global and local networks of communication. The coda for the contemporary artist is now defined by the
desire for being *in* the contemporary, rather than producing a belated or elevated response to the everyday.

Modernity and Mobility: In Praise of Small Gestures

What happened to the link between art and the grand themes of the sublime and the sacred? From the modern to the contemporary, we see a steady revision of the scale and scope of creativity. For all the technical advances of modernity there has been a concomitant modesty in the utility of art. Art looked askance at the pinnacles of power. The seven wonders of the Ancient World were not just great engineering feats, they were also the aesthetic embodiment of a cosmic order. The tombs of the Pharoah and the Persian satrap were symbols of immortality, the statues of Olympia and Rhodes honoured Zeus and Helios, while the temple of Artemis and the garden of Babylon were places where sublime beauty met divinity. Only the lighthouse of Alexandria mixed the metaphysical with an instrumental function.

In the modern world beauty was put to work. The machine reigned supreme. According to a recent popular BBC documentary and bestselling historical account of the ‘Seven Wonders of the Industrial Age’, the objects of awe include: a massive steamship to transport emigrants to the antipodes without needing a port to refuel; a lighthouse to ensure safe passage for the new sea lanes; a bridge to unite the fastest growing city; a sewerage system to reduce disease in the dense metropolis; a railroad to unite a continent; a canal to shortcut the route around it; and a dam to hold water in its desert interior. Mobility is the spirit that runs through these modern wonders. The flow of people, goods, waste and water enabled the age to believe in its capacity to defy nature and re-set the parameters for expansion.

However, for all the records of progress and accomplishment, what happened to the feeling of wonder in modernity? Richard Sennett posed the question to the modern urban dweller: ‘Where would you go in your city if you wanted to experience the sublime?’ It
was, of course, a rhetorical question. It is presumed that the Ancients knew their sites of wonder and that, in comparison, we live in a state of mute loss.

It is fitting that the wonders of the modern age celebrate the powers of ‘man’ in control of the cosmos. In this secular age the eternal is buried in some secret corner of personal ambition. And the power of that greater force – God, Time, Nature – is reined in to fit into the calculating reason of modern knowledge. So when the steamship sank on its maiden voyage, or the walls of a dam collapsed under their own weight, these failures were not seen as signs of the limits of man’s power, but as mere scientific problems that could be solved by more, or better, science. Modernity was the age of the great escape and self realization. All external constraints were meant to fall away.

Mobility has sharpened our awareness of difference but also our need to live together. Cuban curator and critic Gerardo Mosquera stressed that while the early forms of modernism were limited by problems of exclusion and appropriation, the contemporary condition of pluralism in contemporary art is ‘a prison without walls’. He reminds us that the best labyrinth in the world is the desert. In its vast openness there is no escape. Dialogue does not depend on an ever-increasing range of choices, but in the slow process of learning to read the meaning of differences. If there is a place in the modern city where we can see the sublime, it is not before the great monuments, but in the flowing moments of exchange and the small gestures of conviviality.

References


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