



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, 1907, and Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967, MoMA, New York

MoMA Redux

Marjorie Wellish on MoMA's reconfiguration of Modernism, which goes some way towards incorporating non-European sources - Modernism's avatars - and demonstrating cross-current fluidity, but which falters in the face of art since the 1970s.

'There are as many descriptions as there are uses to which the pragmatist might be put.' - Richard Rorty

'It is possible to establish some limits beyond which it is possible to say that a given interpretation is a bad and far-fetched one. [...] it is not true that everything goes.' - Umberto Eco

'Because palimpsest histories ... mingling realism with the supernatural and history with the spiritual and philosophical interpretation, they could be said to float ...' - Christine Brooke-Rose

From *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*

Imagine a hypothetical retreat at which the Museum of Modern Art was subject to self-scrutiny, with a facilitator voicing the demand 'Stay close to your core values'. What would these then be? The relaunch of MoMA may be said to call attention to the fact that in some significant respects it has indeed adhered to its core values, if by this we mean a modernity cosmopolitan and experimental. Yet the relaunch also revealed some interpretive elasticity, emphasising thematic possibilities from a delta of contemporary tendencies, complicated further by unresolved questions of how to adequately represent an interpretive potential but critically. No wonder, then, there is weakness in guiding contemporary iterations salient to modernity. After all, inclusiveness, as vague a universal as freedom, defers commitment and evades the crucial question: is contemporary art modern?

The reconsidered permanent collection is an elastic construal of the cosmopolitan modernity fundamental

to MoMA's beginning. When founded in 1929, the Museum of Modern Art did not propound a univocal dogma, the Modernism of Paris. What critics of founding director Alfred Barr all too often disregard, perhaps, in ignorance, is that the origins of the museum braided together no fewer than three distinctly differing modernities: not only French but also Soviet Russian and the progressive tendencies of the recent world enemy, Germany. Have we really forgotten how controversially difficult it must have been for isolationists in the US to recognise the validity of the radical cultural experiments of a new society to be reconceived after the First World War? Were this ever in doubt, how could one account for the same Barr, having spent months in the USSR bringing back several dozen children's books for their graphic boldness and their social use in literacy campaigns, not to mention the trove of *Kino* film magazines (complete issues on the innovative cinema, not merely the covers)? Implications for the very definition of the cosmopolitan complexity that informed Barr's modernity have been under-esteemed.

The canon (as it has been somewhat derogatively called) was not simplistic, surely, but was rather constituted of a plurality of origins and narratives - as against the charge of parochialism aimed at Barr's famous diagram showing the genealogy of modern art. Now, however, the same permanent collection demonstrates considerably more cross-current fluidity incorporating non-European sources quite contingent in nature. Though the notorious diagram has been fixed in subsequent graphics, it remains a sketch, a thought form hypothetical in nature and subject to change. All of which is why the relaunch of the permanent collection seems organic with the original conception of the museum's mission.

Newly reinstalled, the permanent collection adheres to defining the mentality of its age, through the strongest ideology of isms - Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism - by which the term Modernism is collectively constituted. This is also espoused more broadly through

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Barr's legacy in notable current-day cultural histories: for example, those written by Matei Calinescu and Mary Ann Caws, to name two, who respect artistic collectives through systems of belief enacted through manifestos. For this the term Modernism is indispensable. Yet MoMA has redeployed these forces of Modernism: curatorial statements have become impressionistic topics, themes and methods. Proceeding through galleries that aggregate the permanent collection historically, from the 1880s through the 1940s, and from the 1940s through the 1970s, a supple account of Modernism is presented in constellations of art and design – interdisciplinary situations wherein film, photography and other arts refocus the *objet* such that they articulate the organisation of social forces. What this accomplishes, too, is that lesser-known artists participate in the cultural narratives.

When future generations reflect on the MoMA of 2019 they will note the rehabilitation of symbolist occult enfolded into the emergence of abstract art. Not so long ago this was an embarrassment to curatorial intentions; but here, in the gallery devoted to composition and its syntactical components of line and colour, planes are esoteric. Symbolist visions were not tolerated when US critics and curators Thomas Hess, Jack Burnham and Maurice Tuchman were excavating abstract contents, despite the demonstration of spirit religions through Native American sand-paintings and other sacred works when René d'Harnoncourt, then the museum's director, exhibited 'Indian Art of the United States' in 1941. (The wall labels at this uncomfortable juncture analyse the cultural genealogy with candour.)

In times to come, retrospective glances at MoMA now will discern the problematic condition of abstraction, with its contesting ideologies, and its emergence from mysticism in fits and starts. Noteworthy is the room devoted to Russian futurist books, given the significance they deserve through two of Russia's most talented creators, Olga Rozanova and Natalia Goncharova. The Judith Rothchild Collection amplifies the significance of Barr's initiative, wherein revolutionary form couples with revolution, the praxis of which depends on readily transmitted messages through the inexpensive technologies of woodcut on paper (and, yes, soon exclamatory all the more through film and telecommunication in radio), a driven polemic of literacy and collectivity stirred to reform society from the ground up.

Meanwhile, the simultaneity of dissimilar isms built into the mission of the museum from the start, is deliberately left unreconciled, especially given differing curatorial conceptions from room to room. Dadaism is downplayed as the mischievous Marcel Duchamp is circumscribed. If intellectual renovation is to be truly taken seriously, what needs to be done here is to invite guest curators who know the 'minor' languages of Romania and Bohemia and wherever shtetls erupted in charivari, though street theatre and in-jokes that taunted the powerful, through the dialects and argot of the powerless. Dadaism

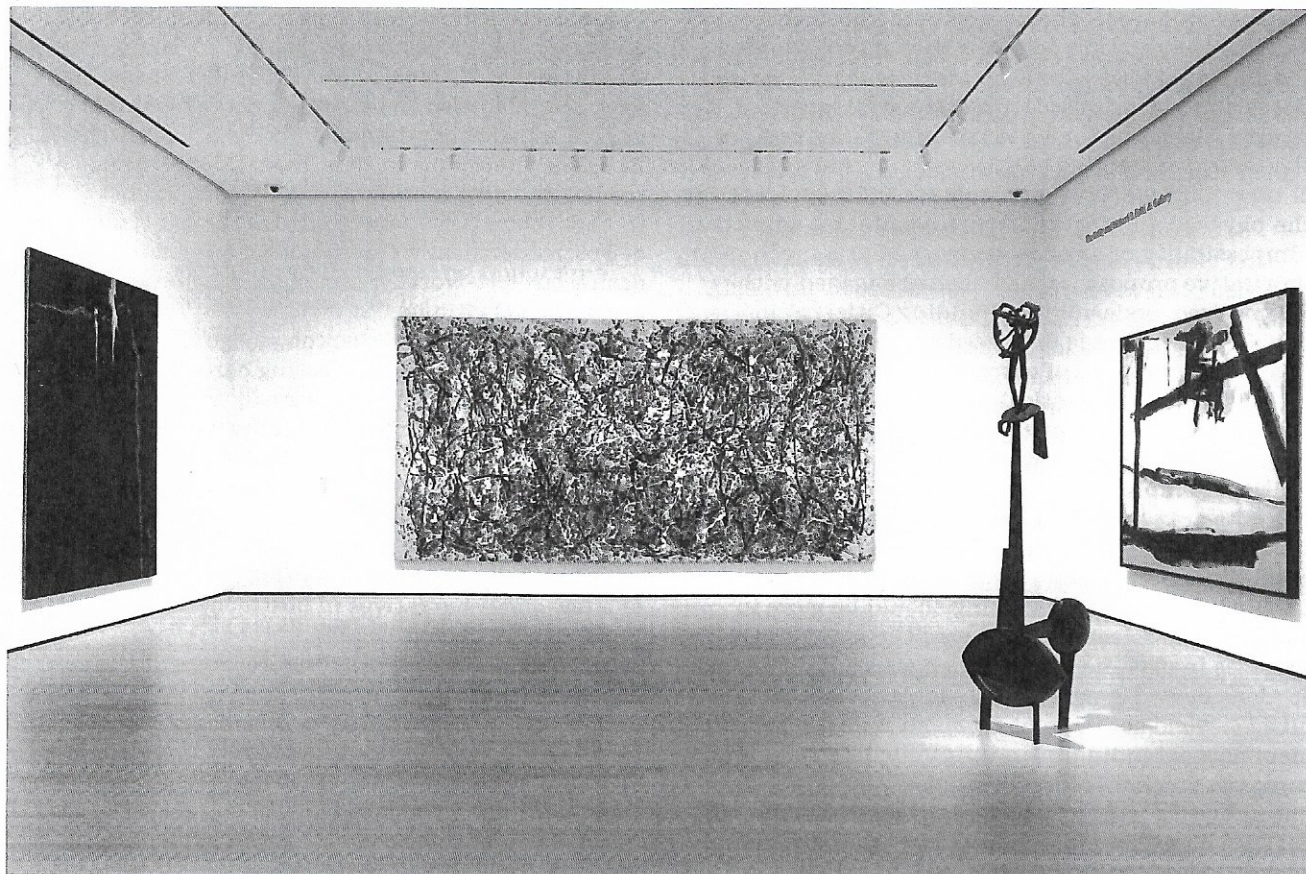
is linguistic through and through, and to understand it, a specialist in this field tells me, is to learn its subterfuge at the source, not as exported – but this remains beyond the mission of MoMA.

Galleries are devoted to synchronic antithetical narratives, most conspicuously where Surrealism marks the close of the 1940s. It was introduced decades ago, but under duress because its programmatic pictorialism reverted to illustration or subject matter rather than form. But Surrealism's contrarian spiritualistic stance with respect to the reality of form in Cubism is here more prominent than ever. (Perennially subject to scrutiny and debate, work by Jasper Johns remains the test case, later, for postmodern parsing of illustration. In this regard, work by Alma Thomas, with its roots in Henri Matisse, transmitted through Washington School of colour painting and folk idioms, is more canonical.)

Apart from the new emphasis on spiritualism and pictorialism, there is an increased integration in all the galleries of arts and design. This is already underway in much current museological theory, and for MoMA this nexus of art and engineering is especially valid, as its origins demonstrate time and time again. Through the Russian futurist revolution, yet also through German collectivities in the Bauhaus laboratory of design between the wars, modernity was brought together with modernisation. Modernisation is an avatar of modernity, a praxis keen to further industrial knowledge through technologies that show cooperation, not competition, between and among social groups and more equitable relations between fine and applied arts. Once deemed controversial, the focus on design is these days taken for granted; but it should not be so: the core identity of the museum, its ideology and rhetoric, depend on it.

The permanent collection reconvenes as post-Second World War experimentation, and extremes of objectivity and subjectivity are given essential energy. Energy – not beauty. Abstract Expressionism is palpably authoritative in this synoptic rehang, but missing is the all-important Japanese Gutai, more radical in virtue of its anti-aesthetic social critique. And symptomatic here is the US identity, a coming-of-age such that its art can appear on the world stage without embarrassment – thanks to diasporic artists from elsewhere. (Let it be known that when Allan Kaprow's essay on Jackson Pollock's career – as both success and dead-end – was printed in *ArtNews* in 1958, the magazine also carried small marginal advertisements, including Martha Jackson Gallery's announcement of the Gutai. And, speaking of the relation of margins to the centre, the Kaprow essay was also a manifesto, a well-articulated manifesto for another ism – happenings.)

At long last, and in pride of place, the Patricia Cisneros collection of Neo-Concrete art from South America is manifestly excellent in specific works that embody concept well. US Minimalism is on view, featuring the indispensable Jo Baer, with her canvases constituted of visual tautness, economical to their outlined edge. The studio-as-situation is equipped for principled clarity, as exemplified through a scattered inventory of materials used for the work in making



installation view of the gallery 'Action Painting I' in the exhibition 'Collection 1940s-1970s', MoMA, New York

paintings in France's late-1960s 'Supports/Surfaces' movement where the collective effort was present. This grammatical reduction continues resourcefully into the 1970s, if one considers the ascendancy of method. Method as generative of indeterminate and informal orders is so discretely understated in the museum that the post-minimal artistic intentions important to real actions in the world remain in need of a stronger heuristic to prove its valuable point.

That the reinstallation of the permanent collection sets a porous boundary at the 1970s is one of the few indications of an argument that constrains modern art at MoMA. The here and now take over to do what the museum's cultural framing of modernity cannot articulate so well as yet. Is the term postmodern evoked to call the question of definitions and limits, even in hypothesis? Art's self-reflexive practices and critique of Modernism's assumptions has produced some masterly work, reaching an epitome of self-consciousness in certain works of Conceptual Art. What about putting Lucy Lippard's *Six Years* anthology on display in a vitrine? A metalinguistic object if there ever were one, this artefact could demonstrate the canonical moment of conjoined information, the linguistic turn, and documentary yet historicising archives all at once. How in the 1970s might this awareness have been inscribed in modern art's condition? What the decade's proposals address is not aesthetic art so much as cultural politics for which art is instrumental. Here, then, is

contemporary art as postmodernity, by which is meant recuperation of past, and/or self-conscious mediation of methods and/or an effect of discursive practices.

May art objects then be passive, instrumental to the theory that creates the threshold for what comes after in vaguer belief systems? These formulations begin to disturb the treasury, the stockpile, in the galleries installed with art since the 1970s. The conditions of the here and now under the aegis of an elastic construal of modernity become so complicated that what occurs is, again, a delta of implications of unequal potential and tendencies awaiting clarification. What to do? At MoMA, poetic gallery titles suggestive of thematic clusters provide the non-binding affiliations, temporary and provisional, yet are also evasive. For the real crisis, take note; to the provisional congeries of the current moment comes the challenge: is contemporary art modern?

Put this way, the question exposes a common occurrence: the confounding of a historical present tense with a value judgement through which to affiliate. Furthermore, defining the name and nature of modernity is difficult, and yet it calls for a workable hypothesis such that the very plurality with which MoMA found its mission does not become an infinite regress of relativism. The Museum of Everything is too weakly inclusive. So, criteria that begin to articulate the significant problematics of modern art - such as whether or not these have the imprimatur of well-

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