

THE HISTORY OF MODERN ART IN WESTERN SOCIETY

Professor Roman J. Verostko

Spring Term, 1985.

Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

This survey is designed as an introduction of modern art for faculty and graduate students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in the People's Republic of China. Based on the **Introduction to Modern Art** taught by Professor Verostko at the **Minneapolis College of Art and Design** in the United States, this course provides an overview of the central issues surrounding modern western art "movements".

Rationale

By the middle of the 19th century the industrial revolution, the enlightenment, and modern political revolutions had brought radical change to western europe. Artists also experienced radical changes in the way they conceived of making art. By the end of the century the impressionists, post-impressionists and symbolists had already forged the groundwork for the twentieth century movements. These movements radically altered our western arts institutions.

The western vanguard artist proceeded from questioning alternatives on "how to" represent the horse to prior questions such as "why" or even "whether" to represent it. Intense experimentation included the search for alternative pictorial and spatial conceptions, the probing of inner consciousness as a resource for the artist, and the use of new materials and technologies for generating art. Consequently modern western art has shown a multitude of faces which may be bewildering to non-western societies. Marked sometimes with bizarre individuality, shocking and provoking newness, and everchanging manifestations, modern western art does not appear to "make sense".

This course will guide us through the maze of these artistic manifestations providing a critical vantage point for the non-western artist and art educator.

Finally we must ask how these movements affected the art schools. Following World War II the effects of the modern movements were felt in the education of the artist and designer. Most art departments and art academies came to foster the spirit of inquiry and independence which characterized the avant-garde art community. Studios on "how to do it" became more experimental encouraging the use of innovative techniques, materials and forms. But the students were also given heavy doses of theory and modern art history. Often the very history and artistic concerns of the movements became the subject matter for the artist. Thus artists have become very conscious of art history. and have drawn on this history as a source for their art.

These notes suggest a few salient features of modern western art activity. Our course will attempt to mark some guideposts as a basis for continuing study.

SUMMARY OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

Introduction. By way of introduction we will examine the nature and context of "movements" and how they contrast with older traditions. We will identify the main features of modern consciousness and how it has been manifest in the avant-garde art movements.

We will then present a brief summary of five major tendencies or clusters of artistic activity. These are manifested in movements which span the twentieth century. This summary will be an overview of the entire course.

The Movements In Five Faces. Following our introductory summary we will proceed to identify the principal contexts, intentions and examples for the major movements. For each movement we will indicate what kinds of questions or issues the artists have addressed and some of the means they have used. We will identify and show slides of specific works and specific examples to illustrate our points.

Our Near Future. In the last part we will summarize the current milieu with a view to the future. This will include discussion of the current cultural transition which has received many labels such as the "information age", "post-industrial revolution", "post-christian", "post-marxist" etc. We will include an outline of the central issues of paramount concern as we approach the year 2000. What are the implications in the arts for the artist and designer? What are the implications for the education of the artist and designer?

INTRODUCTION

SESSIONS 1. THE MILIEU OF "MODERN" WESTERN ART.

Subject. The birth of "movements". The context and milieu which nurtured "movements". The nature of "movement". Movement versus school. This session will focus on the dynamics of the "avant-garde" which fostered vigorous change. The artist as "innovator" (one who introduces something new) grows in importance.

Modern - Review of the term "modern" both as a style word and as a way of viewing one's world, "modern consciousness". Modern consciousness in the arts will be viewed by contrasting the values emphasized by the "Ancients" and the "Moderns" in

western cultural traditions. These tendencies will be illustrated in terms of the following contrasting trends:

ANCIENTS

explaining
answering
defining (absolutes)
knowing
stable (unchanging law)
noun (flower)

MODERNS

discovering
questioning
relating (indeterminates)
not knowing
dynamic (process)
verb (blooming)

SCHOOL

master and authority
model, exemplars
traditions (subjects, media)
refinement

MOVEMENT

innovator and revolt
the new, alternatives
experiments
change

In this presentation modernity will be viewed as a struggle for futurity which was imbedded in the idea of **progress**. Terms to be defined or discussed include political and literary terms such as: conservative, liberal, bourgeois, radical, and revolution.

SESSIONS 2,3.

FIVE "MODERN" FACES, A SUMMARY: EXPRESSION, STRUCTURE, ANTI-ART, DREAM, MIMESIS.

Subject.

In two sessions we will summarize the five principal tendencies which have been present in the modern movements. These two sessions will serve as an introduction to the rest of the course.

Explanation.

Avant-garde artists of the 19th century explored alternatives to traditional sources for subject matter. The everyday world, the experience of seeing, and the experience of life became valid subjects. They studied the formal means of representation experimenting with color and their own interior experiences. Their artistic interests came to include: concern for integrity of painted surface; "honest" use of materials; expressive power of pictorial elements independent of symbol and representation; interest in dream, fantasy, and interior psychological life.

Continuing into the 20th century the modern movements manifested these modes of exploring the possibilities and processes of making art. Our overview shows five clusters of experimentation that course through the movements. The five groupings are those which have emphasized - (1) expressive means, (2) structure, (3) radical questioning, (4) dream and the

fantastic (imagination), (5) mimesis (illusion, mime, imitation). These tendencies have dominated modern artistic activity in one form or another and can be seen in very recent work. An example of the expressionist tendency would be the neo-expressionist exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in the Fall of 1984.

None of these tendencies can be taken in an absolute sense. Every artistic intention is colored with many complex experiences. These tendencies are used as guideposts - not absolute categories. Every artist and every movement, indeed every specific work, must necessarily result from a unique coalescence of events. We recognize, for example, that a constructivist works with feeling for and use of the "expressive" power of his medium just as surely as an expressionist employs the "power" of structure. Even so a major artistic tendency is usually discernible within a movement and within the works of specific artists. We have identified these tendencies as a useful way of organizing our material. Still there are artists whose works appear to integrate several of our categories to such a degree that the tendencies we speak of do not easily apply. These nuances will be attended to in the lectures.

In this session we will present one example for each of the clusters.

THE MOVEMENTS IN FIVE FACES

SESSIONS 4,5,6.

FACE I. EXPERIENCE AS CONTENT: THE FACES OF EXPRESSIONISM.

Fauvism.

German Expressionism.

Abstract Expressionism (Action Painting), Assemblage.

Neo-expressionism

Explanation.

Those artists who have placed an emphasis on the expressive or evocative power of the medium are often viewed as "expressionists". Early in this century the "fauves" and the German expressionists leaned heavily on color or pictorial arrangement to carry an intended feeling or meaning. Their artistic intentions were married to the expressive power of the pictorial means. We find similar artistic intentions in the

abstract expressionists after WWII and in the work of recent "neo-expressionists".

Notes & terms.

Works less inclined to exposition and explanation more to evocation. Intense feeling often present. Uses pictorial elements to create "expressive" work. The work evokes response from viewer. Works strive to show, manifest, or reveal a feeling or an experience. Thus often an emphasis on the self as "experiencing". Usually non analytical with emphasis on the intuitive, mystical or religious experience. Sensitive and deliberate use of media as vehicle for content. Pictorial or structural means employed for expressive power.

SESSIONS 7,8,9.

FACE II. STRUCTURE AS CONTENT: THE FACES OF STRUCTURALISM

Suprematism. Constructivism.

De Stijl. Purism.

Optical Art. Field. Light and Motion.

Hard Edge. Minimal (ABC, Primary Structures).

Computer Art

Explanation.

One of the strong recurrent modern ideas has been to assert the value of creating a work which stands on its own without reference to other reality, a non-referential work. Early in this century a work that did not "represent" something (idea, object, feeling) appeared vacuous or "merely decorative" to many. Few artists were able to work without some semblance of "subject". However, by the end of World War I the idea of doing so had been fairly well established by artists like Mondrian, Malevich and the Pevsner brothers. Their ideas were the forerunners of post WWII developments from op and minimal to the environmental, conceptual and earth works of the late 60's and 70's.

Notes & terms:

"All elements have their own reality" (Realist Manifesto), Pevsner/Gabo, August 5, 1920. Structure, medium or relationship as a "reality". Artist may use any means to clarify, point to, frame, or document a physical phenomenon, relationship or an event. Gravity, light, movement, color, any physical or mathematical relationship. Examples: "op" art plays with optical phenomena. Generally does not use "descriptive" functions of line, color, space, or mass. Some manifestations attempt to eliminate human feeling. Cool objectivity. Artist makes plans or programs - technicians execute.

SESSIONS 10,11.

FACE III. ANTI-ART "ART": THE FACE OF ART AS A "QUESTION".

Futurism.
Dada.
Neo-dada. Happening. Event. Pop.
Conceptual Art.

Explanation.

One aspect of "modern" consciousness has been the deliberate "questioning" of one's assumptions. Modern consciousness has tended to challenge established ideas in all fields - philosophy, science and religion. Practically every sanctuary has been battered by some new and ruthless quest for "truth". So also in the arts there have been recurrent artistic activities which have brought radical pressure on our traditional ideas about how to make art. Both individuals and groups (dadaists) have generated "non-sense" activities either bearing the banner of art or proclaiming their activity as "non-art". Much of this activity has been clearly nihilistic, proposing nothing (nihil) or acting in the posture of "non" - "sense". Still these activities by the way they focused our attention have, more often than not, brought us to revise our point of view.

Dada, neo-dada and pop art all contain features of nihilistic artistic activity which has changed the way we look at our world and the way we think about making our art.

In this survey we will look at this "nihilistic" cluster beginning with the futurists. While the futurists were not strictly nihilistic they did represent an early and very strong rebellion against established ideas and institutions. Both Italian and Russian futurists share a lot with the radical questions of the Dada-ists whose proposed or acted out "non-sense" activities foreshadowed the rebellious non-sense that took place in New York in the 1960's. To some extent, "dada" activity has been present throughout the modern movements.

Conceptual art is addressed in this cluster because of its tendency to pose radical questions about the nature of art.

Notes & terms:

Emphasis on change, nature of change. Thus traditional institutions, ideas, religion and political views were challenged (must change). Often nihilistic and anarchistic. Marcel Duchamp's "visual indifference". Stress irrational means such as automatism, chance, spontaneity, random and non-sense. Sometimes uses situational structures involving spectators. Radical aspects may be anti-art; reject aesthetics (traditional values like "beauty"); use means to "shock" others by displacements, unexpected juxtapositions, provocative but non-sensical arrangements.

SESSIONS 12,13.

FACE IV. DREAM, FANTASY, IMAGINATION: THE FACE OF INNER VISIONS.

Metaphysical Art.
Surrealism.
Fantastic Art.
Autobiography and Personal Symbolism.

Explanation.

Following the activity of the dadaists under the leadership of Andre Breton surrealism grew as a literary and artistic movement. Artists explored the non-rational world of dreams; stream of consciousness writing emerged. Automatism both in generating artistic and literary imagery was cultivated. Between the wars artists created works based on an interior world that sought to "unlock the marvelous", the inner reality touched in dream and imagination. Sometimes called the magic reality this world promised a new and strangely awesome imagery, a kind of magic world in which to wonder.

This movement drew some artists closer to their inner world as a source for their art. Its influence was felt by the abstract expressionists after the war and continues to be an important ingredient in the work of artists who stress the autobiographical, personal dream worlds, or draw on the experience of the fantastic.

Notes & terms:

Seeks a reality underneath conscious and rational understanding - a reality known in the dream. Cultivates "...thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic and moral preoccupations...". Techniques are derived from pure psychic automatism. Evocative words, pictures, poems to "...unlock the marvelous". The "marvelous" cannot be explained as it is outside the "rational" domain. Dream, fantasy, hallucination. Free (automatic or uncontrolled) association of words, ideas, objects, pictorial elements. Reconstruct an image of a dream, a recurring unconscious image, an inward experience (interior models). Hypnotic means - half awake, half asleep.

SESSIONS 13,14.

FACE V. MIMESIS, SUPER REALISM: THE FACE OF ILLUSION.

Selected representational artists

Social realism.

Photo-realism

Documentary.

Explanation.

This cluster of activity draws on visual representation or some aspect of illusion-making to generate art. This includes those works where the "illusion", or the "subject as a representation" bears a special interest for the artist. This use of representation might focus on any phenomena associated with appearances: imitation of appearances, pictures, or even

imitations of imitations; simulation of illusions or of their reproductions etc.

Mimesis itself or the process of illusion making may become the subject matter of this art. The artist might mime the depth-of-field of the camera lens, the qualities of a snap-shot, or the texture of an imitation surface. Such works show us how the lens media have conditioned our own perceiving selves.

The sculptural illusionism and photo-realism of the 70's in the U.S. has often been coupled with social commentary. Social realism and various forms of regionalism have necessarily employed degrees of emphasis on mimesis and some have been included in this part.

Another, and perhaps the most important manifestation, which is not treated in this course, is found in the "lens" media. Film, photography and video have been used to create outstanding works of art as well as to document the outstanding events of our century.

Notes & terms:

The perceiving self representing some aspect or part of the visual world. Representations may celebrate, exaggerate, modify, distill, elaborate, ritualize, typify, idealize or document.

Simulation and the process of perception. Photo-realism (photo is the model), sharp focus realism, sculptural illusionism. Sometimes cool, impersonal observation leads to awareness of the "alien otherness" of objects in daily world. Artistic play with: counterfeit, trompe l'oeil (fool the eye), fiction, duplicates. Experiences of deception, illusion, fake, forgery, fiction. Synecdoche (part for the whole), analogies and confusions between real world and artificial world.

OUR NEAR FUTURE

SESSION 15.

THE FUTURE OF ART AND ARTIST

As we enter what some call the "information age" we see our worlds draw closer together - we become more conscious of our essential interconnectedness. On the human level futurologists speak of "global sharing", "inter-action" and

"co-creation". Wholeness and quality of life, merging, synthesis and interdependence are "buzz" words among futurists. Are we heading towards a world community?

The issues identified as paramount as we approach the year 2000 are:

Resources

- * land
- * water
- * waste
- * energy
- * bio-options
- * clean air

The ecological ethic, which we must share in common, demands that we learn about and practice preservation and conservation of the world's natural resources. What effects do these perspectives have on the arts?

Are our aesthetic perceptions of the design of a package or of our homes affected by these perceptions and how? What are potential roles for the artist in preservation and conservation. What conceptions of the relation of "art" to "nature" will dominate our aesthetic values in the near future. (Near future means that within our lifetime). What are desirable models against which we might shape our aesthetic canons (rules)?

In this session we will explore emerging alternatives to "modern" along with some thoughts on the ecological ethic which may have long range effects on the way we design our habitat.

**Postmodern - a style word; Postmodern - a possibility?
Post Industrial Revolution
Ecology, Restoration and Preservation.**

SESSION 16

"ACADEMY" VERSUS "MOVEMENT": DILEMMAS IN MODERN ART EDUCATION.

Must the lotus grow a blossom we have not seen before?
Gaining perspective on the value of the new. Curriculum structure in the "modern" art school: by medium, intentionality, or both?

explanation.

The academy which grew from the traditions of master and apprentice promoted the value of technique and skill applied to traditional subject matter. Curricula, structured around the mastery of media and refinement of traditional conventions prevailed. While this assured a certain degree of cultural refinement and a common basis for critical judgement it also

cultivated a stifling academicism.

We have seen how modern movements grew from rebellion against the aesthetic restrictions of the academies. Critical literature came to stress innovation and "the shock of the new" contrasted sharply with the former academicism. The formal procedures in art-making and even definitions of art underwent radical scrutiny. Innovation and radical "question asking" achieved status and came to be valued for its own sake.

The value of the "new" was often promoted at the expense of skill, technique, and refinement. Indeed "newness" assumed status in criticism. Art schools shifted curricula to problem centered learning while some traditional media classes underwent revision. Alternatives have included mixed media, inter-media, multi-media, experimental studio, performance studios, and independent study.

In the course of the past generation the avant-garde art community has developed arts centers, publications, and limited government support for a vigorous art activity. People in the arts are generally heavily committed to their work and have lower incomes than professionals like doctors, engineers and businessmen. Many artists, out of a kind of religious commitment to their work, live on the fringe of society without any substantial income, making great sacrifices to continue practicing their art. This is true for artists in most of the arts. Usually they are very idealistic and serve a valuable cultural function within the community.

Ironically they have also become an artistic elite with a language and understanding of the arts that is hardly known on the popular level. To a greater or lesser extent most art centers in the west are dominated by an artistic elite who live and work in a world of art that is unfamiliar to the general population. With a kind of elitist tyranny the avant garde has replaced the academy against which it rebelled over a century ago.

Procedure.

We will make a brief presentation on this artistic milieu. Then we will be open for discussion of our mutual problems as art educators and artists in the present context.