
Preface

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Paul Cézanne – an Impressionist from the early days of the movement, in the 1870s – used a word which showed that he had an idea of his own place in an art-historical process. The word was ‘primitive’. ‘I shall always’, he said, ‘be the primitive of the path I discovered.’ Renaissance painting, in the account given by its sixteenth-century chronicler Giorgio Vasari, evolved as a technique of representing bodies in a structured context of space and light, from the work of a group of pioneers or ‘primitives’. Cézanne’s hypothesis, a plausible one, was that an analogous process took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the course of a massive swing away from what was left of the Renaissance tradition. The pioneers of that process, proud to be called primitives, could hardly realize that Vasari’s beautifully simple evolutionary model was not going to apply, and that the modern era in art was to consist of one wave of ‘primitives’ after another. Six years after Cézanne’s death a group of very different artists, the Futurists, were calling themselves ‘the primitives of a completely renovated sensibility’. The ten words ending in ‘ism’ in the titles of the eight essays in this book are ten out of hundreds that have succeeded each other since the birth of Impressionism.

If art from the third quarter of the nineteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth is an ‘era’, corresponding in some way to the era inaugurated by the Renaissance, then this modern era is one that contains a confusing multiplicity of visual styles. The affinities between Fragonard and David are visible to us (if not, necessarily, to the artists concerned); but the affinities between Umberto Boccioni and Gilbert and George are not in any sense apparent to the eye. The link in this case is through the idea of ‘Modernism’ itself, the name of a dimly understood, but manifestly real, historical shift.

Parts of the picture are already clear. The Impressionists gave great offence by showing what was perceived, rather than what the artist knew ought to be there. Seurat and his successors, who included the Fauves and the Futurists, used this vital freedom to show a new kind of *perceived* image: hieratic, dynamic, or transcendental, but always expanding the possible versions of the world of perception. The quasi-scientific idea of a solid world ‘out there’ – atoms like billiard balls – was something that artists were the first to modify; and the last century and a quarter shows them constantly striving to alter the perceptions of the rest of us. The bafflement that has greeted many of their efforts has much to do with the infinity of alternative universes that they present. ‘An object has not one

absolute form’, said the Cubists Gleizes and Metzinger, ‘. . . it has as many as there are planes in the domain of meaning.’ Modernism is a single phenomenon, because of and not in spite of its multiple versions of reality. For every ‘plane of meaning’, Modernism has a movement. Its multiplicity is its message, and the source of its excitement.

This is a state of affairs that one finds either exhilarating or disturbing; now as in 1874 there are those who are profoundly upset by Modernism in one or all of its forms. There are also those who subscribe to a (rather un-Modernist) linear model, according to which the achievements of the Impressionists and of Cézanne led through a kind of apostolic succession to Cubism and eventually to Abstract Expressionism. Any other ‘isms’ are marginal, according to this model; if we apply Alastair Mackintosh’s entertaining metaphor of a railway station (p. 66) to Modernism as a whole, the ‘apostolic’ view tends to replace the clatter of trains, passing through a complex junction, with the roar of a six-lane superhighway.

People have been burying Modernism, or describing it as being in a ‘late’ phase, for at least twenty years; and now, enjoying the ghost of a paradox, they often speak of something called Post-Modernism. Modernism has certainly evolved much faster than its Renaissance predecessor. Marcel Duchamp proved that a work of art was no more than an idea expressed through an object, and that this object might be dispensable, renewable, or even known only by report. As a result, the twentieth century is studded with what look like attempts to produce the ultimate (or last) work of art: from Duchamp’s own notorious urinal, through Malevich’s black square, to Kosuth’s deadpan dictionary. Of course, none of these was the end at all. Modernism is so protean that a new revolution could only replace it with nothing at all; and nothing will come of nothing.

The problem may be sidestepped by turning to pluralism – which is a more convincing way of describing Post-Modernism. From a present-day perspective, the possibilities seem more varied than ever. Figuration is not dead; abstract art is not dead either; Conceptual art and Minimalism are still with us. What does happen next is anybody’s guess; but a clue may lie in a wider historical context. The revolutions of which this book speaks have been associated with vast and amazing phases of economic and technological expansion. Western art, in its own way, has reflected that pattern, from the Impressionist response to nineteenth-century urban euphoria, all the way to the postwar psychic brinkmanship of the Abstract Expressionists – or indeed to the affluent understatement of much Minimal art. However, in terms of human society, that expansion now seems to be approaching its end. Sooner or later the growth of consumption will have to be abandoned in favour of a way of life that will depend on renewable resources. What often sounds like a terminal pessimism in much contemporary Modernist work may well be a sign that art – as always – is responding first to a great historical shift. This pessimism, in fact, may not be entirely what it seems. Here and there artists like Anselm Kiefer, who present death in all its horror, are already implying a message of regeneration.