THE LOGIC OF MODERNISM*

By Adrian Piper

There are four interrelated properties of Euroethnic art that are central to understanding the development of modernism, and in particular the development of contemporary art in the United States within the last few decades: 1) its appropriative character; 2) its formalism; 3) its self-awareness; and 4) its commitment to social content. These four properties furnish strong conceptual and strategic continuities between the history of European art—modernism in particular—and recent developments in American art with explicitly political subject matter. Relative to these lines of continuity, the peculiarly American variety of modernism known as Greenbergian formalism is an aberration. Characterized by its repudiation of content in general and explicitly political subject matter in particular, Greenbergian formalism gained currency as an opportunistic ideological evasion of the threat of cold war McCarthyite censorship and red-baiting in the fifties. To the extent that this ideological repudiation of political subject matter has prevailed in the international art context, American imperialism has succeeded in supplanting the longstanding European tradition of art as a medium of social engagement with a peculiarly pharmaceutical conception of art as soporific and analgesic.

By the appropriative character of Euroethnic art, I mean its tendency to draw on the art of non-Euroethnic cultures for inspiration. This may originate in the early Italian Renaissance experience of drawing on the art of an alien, temporarily remote culture—that of Hellenic Greece—for revitalization. The real lesson of the Renaissance, on this account, is not the rediscovery of perspective but rather the discovery of difference as a source of inspiration. Other early examples of the Euroethnic appetite for appropriation include the influence of Byzantine religious art in the paintings of Duccio or Cimabue; the Islamic and Hindu influences on the art of Giotto or Fra Angelico; more recently, the influences of Japanese art on Van Gogh, of Tahitian art on Gauguin, and of African art on Picasso; and more recently still, the influences of African-American jazz on Mondrian and Stuart Davis, and of African-American graffiti art on Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz. It is natural that a society dependent on colonized non-Euroethnic cultures for its land, labor, and natural resources should be so for its aesthetic and cultural resources as well. But the impetus in the latter case is not necessarily imperialistic or exploitive. It may instead be a drive to self-transcendence of the limits of the socially prescribed Euroethnic self, by striving to incorporate the idiolects of the enigmatic Other within them. Here the aim of appropriation would not be to exploit deliberately the Other’s aesthetic language, but to confound oneself by incorporating into works of art an aesthetic language one recognizes as largely opaque; as having a significance one recognizes as beyond one’s

* This essay originally appeared in Flashart 168 (January/February 1993). It is reprinted here with the permission of Flashart and the author.

Callaloo 16.3 (1993) 574-578
sion. Viewed in this way, exploitation is an unintended side-effect—the consequence of ignorance and insensitivity—of a project whose main intention is to escape those very cognitive limitations.

The formalism of Euroethnic art is a direct consequence of its appropriative character, since it is only where the content of a work is enigmatic, obscure, or disregarded that its formal properties outcompete it for salience. This reasoning presupposes that our primary cognitive concern as human beings, regardless of cultural context, is to discern meaning, and only secondarily to discern form; form itself is of interest only where it illuminates or enhances meaning. If this is so, then artists must first look at the art of an alien culture and acknowledge their failure to grasp its contextual meaning before its formal properties can heighten their self-awareness of the formal properties of their own culture’s art. So, for example, the treatment of space and structure by such artists as the Master of the Osservanza certainly could have occurred without an awareness of the similar treatment of space and structure in classical Hindu painting. But without this awareness it could not have been deliberately isolated and refined as a unique style, since in that case there would have been no external source of salience by which to highlight and differentiate it. Formalism as an aesthetic requires the cognitive deflection of content. And this, in turn, presupposes a prior encounter with work whose content was impervious to cognitive penetration. That is, in order to learn to abstract from the content of a work, one must have previously experienced it as cognitively inaccessible. Whereas Euroethnic social scientists evade this experience by constructing and projecting expected utility-maximizing explanations for the visual symbologies of non-Euroethnic cultures, Euroethnic artists self-consciously embrace it in formal appropriation.

The appropriative character and formalism of Euroethnic art is, then, intrinsically connected with its self-awareness (or self-consciousness). To recognize an alien cultural practice as different from one’s own, and as inaccessible to understanding with respect to content, is implicitly to recognize one’s own cultural practice as a cultural practice, with its own rules and constraints. This just is the awareness that one’s own cultural practice is merely one among many. And the recognition that alternative cultural practices are cognitively inaccessible just is the awareness that one’s own furnish the only available conduit for interpretation of formal anomaly. So the cross-cultural appropriation of alien formal devices is a reminder of one’s own subjectivity. Self-consciousness of this kind is a necessary condition of innovation.

The appropriateness, formalism, and self-consciousness of European art functions to cast its social content into high relief. By rendering familiar and socially pregnant subject matter in new, unusual, or nontraditional ways, European art imbues it with added significance beyond the commonplace and with historical or cultural perspective. Indeed, it is the rendering of familiar social content in a form that inspires, exalts, instructs, or galvanizes one to action that makes the art of David, Delacroix, Gericault, Goya, or Picasso such a transformative experience. The formalism of Euroethnic art has been traditionally interconnected with its social content, in that the challenge of European art has been to use formal devices in expressive and innovative ways that reawaken the viewer to the significance of the subject matter. Here the project of appropriation is essential, since a precondition of perceiving or conceptualizing given subject matter differently is that the visual forms actually are different, in some respect, than those one is accustomed to. That these visual forms must diverge from the traditions of one’s visual culture in order to
perform their expected social function requires that an artist self-consciously seek those outside familiar traditions, and import difference back into them. So the drive to innovation is embedded in the social function of Euroethnic art, and pre-dates its emergence as a market-driven commodity. And since the sources of innovation have traditionally been found in non-Euroethnic cultures whose visual content is cognitively opaque to Euroethnic eyes, innovation in Euroethnic art has usually meant self-conscious innovation of form.

In these ways, European modernism is wholly consistent with the prior history of European art. Innovations of form do not dictate the sacrifice of social content in Picasso’s Guernica any more than they did in Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe, or Goya’s Desastres de la Guerra. If formal innovation in Euroethnic art is indeed rooted in cross-cultural appropriation, then the combination of formal innovation with social or political content can be read as an emblem of the artist’s self-conscious cultural or affectional distance from her or his subject matter. By “distance” I mean not “emotional detachment” but rather “alienation”: an artist who depicts social content in a nontraditional way expresses a self-consciously critical rather than unselfconsciously participatory or involved evaluational perspective toward it, whether positive or negative. In his depiction of Marat, David expresses a self-consciously distanced evaluational view of the French Revolution, as Matisse does of his spouse in his depictions of her, and Giacometti and de Kooning do of women in their depiction of them. It is because of this connection between formal innovation and self-conscious cultural alienation from one’s subject matter that Euroethnic art has nourished the tradition of the visionary artist as culturally and socially marginal, as someone who not only is something of a social outcast, but self-consciously chooses to be one. The root of this tradition lies in the prior European tradition of cross-cultural appropriation.

Relative to this long tradition of combining social content with innovative form, European modernism’s American equivalent, Greenbergian formalism, constituted a radical departure. From its status as the lynchpin of a work, social content—particularly explicitly political matter—was demoted by Greenbergian formalism to irrelevance, as sullying the “purity” or impeding the “transcendence” of a work. If a “pure” work of art could have no content, then the artist could not express formally the self-consciously distanced critical stance toward content—issues, events, concepts, conditions—that had characterized earlier Eurothetic art. So the only stance an artist could legitimately take was an unselfconsciously involved, participatory one. In this scheme of things, the artist’s role was to “engage” or “grapple” wordlessly with the formal and material properties of his (almost always a “his”) medium, while the critic’s role was to articulate the aesthetic rationale of the work thereby created. In abandoning content and abdicating the self-conscious stance to the critic, artists abandoned the responsibilities of conscious control over their creative efforts and their meaning. “Action painting,” live from the Freudian unconscious, was all that was left to them.

How could the thematic fulcrum of European modernism become so inessential in American modernism? If the centrality of social content is a constant up through Picasso, Giacometti, and de Kooning, as I have suggested, then “postmodernist” claims that an innate tendency to reductivism of content characterized the development of modernism are defective. Such a radical shift in priorities cannot be explained as part of the internal logic of modernism itself. Instead it is necessary to look at the external social and political conditions to which American formalists were responding.
The ideological use of American art for cold war propaganda in the fifties has been charted frequently. But the reaction to recent U.S. government attempts to censor “politically sensitive” subject matter in contemporary American art naturally invites comparison specifically with Senator Joseph McCarthy’s successful campaign of intimidation of left wing artists and intellectuals as communist sympathizers in the fifties. In such a climate, the rationalization that political content was incompatible with the “higher purpose” of art functioned as a form of self-censorship among art professionals just as effectively then as it does now. As it does for us, it gave art professionals in the fifties readymade reason not to become politically engaged, not to fight back; not to notice the infiltration of the “white cube” by complex social and political realities, and not to try to come to terms with them in their creative work—i.e., not to work creatively with them as artists always had in the past. And it gave them a reason to relegate whatever political convictions and involvements they may have had to a corner of their lives in which they would not threaten anyone’s professional opportunities. In short, the ideology of Greenbergian formalism undergirded the threat of McCarthyism to render politically and socially impotent a powerful instrument of social change—visual culture—whose potential government censors have always seen far more clearly than artists do, and rationalized that impotence to the castrati. The postwar American strategy of importing back to Europe the artistic embodiment of unselfconscious social ineffectuality under the guise of an extracted essence of critically sophisticated formal appropriation was perfectly suited to its Marshall Plan agenda of cultural and political imperialism.

Since the McCarthy era and the heyday of Greenbergian formalism, American art has been restoring its social content through the back door. Minimalism’s geometrical simplicity and formal reductiveness was an explicit repudiation of the abstract aesthetic theorizing projected onto art by formalist critics in the Greenbergian camp. Emphasizing the concrete, unique particularity of the specific object, its spatio-temporal immediacy and imperviousness to abstract critical speculation, minimalism mounted an individualist attack on aesthetic stereotyping that echoed analogous attacks on race and gender stereotyping that first surfaced in the white American mainstream in the early sixties. In doing so, minimalism reasserted the primacy of the object itself as content of the work.

In the mid-sixties, Sol LeWitt further developed this notion of self-reflective content: by insisting on the primacy of the idea of the work over its medium of realization, LeWitt created the context in which the cognitive content of a work could have priority over its perceptual form. And by using the permutation of selected formal properties of an object—its sides, dimensions, or geometrical shape—as a decisional procedure for generating the final form of the work as a permutational system, LeWitt moved that system itself, and the idea of that system, into the foreground of the work as its self-reflexive subject matter. Here, it is not only the object as a unique particular that has primacy, but that object as the locus and origin of the conceptual system it self-reflexively generates.

From there it was only a short step to conceptual art’s insistence in the late sixties on the self-reflexive investigation of concepts and language themselves as the primary subject matter of art. And since self-consciousness is a special case of self-reflexivity, it was then an even shorter step to the self-conscious investigation of those very language users and art producers themselves as embedded participants in the social context. For Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group, this natural progression was from linguistic analysis of the concept of art to discursive Marxist critique of the means of art production;
for Hans Haacke, it was from self-sustaining material systems to self-sustaining political systems; in my own work, it was from my body as a conceptually and spatio-temporally immediate art object to my person as a gendered and ethnically stereotyped art commodity. The re-emergence of self-consciously distanced, critical art with explicit social content in the early seventies, then, was a natural outgrowth of the reaffirmation of content latent in minimalism and the self-reflexive subject matter explicit in conceptual art. The cognitive and formal strategies of minimalism, and their evolution in the work of Sol LeWitt and first generation conceptualists, re-established the link with European modernism by restoring distanced self-awareness as a central value of artistic production—a self-awareness that is inevitably as social, cultural, and political as it is formal in its purview.

Meanwhile, the repressive McCarthyite ideology of Greenbergian formalism continues to gain adherents in post-Cold War Europe, where many thoughtful and intelligent art professionals are alarmingly eager to discard Europe’s variegated social and historical traditions as sources of continuity and cultural memory, in favor of the American substitute. This substitute is, of course, willful amnesia: i.e. simply to deny that there is anything to remember or grasp that can’t be resolved in a 22-minute sitcom or merchandised in a 30-second commercial. The erasure of content—particularly political content—was a Madison Avenue inspiration long before it was a gleam in Clement Greenberg’s eye. The continuing European susceptibility to fifties American cultural imperialism is particularly regrettable in a historical period in which Europe’s turbulent social, political, and demographic changes offer such fertile conditions for artistic social engagement. Europe is now undergoing the same sustained assault from outside on its entrenched mythologies, conventions, and social arrangements that mainstream white America did from the civil rights movement, the counter-culture, feminism, and anti-Vietnam protestors in the sixties. As the United States has, Europe will need a period of sustained cultural processing of these events by its artistic communities in order to learn how best to represent these changes to itself. It would be unfortunate if European art professionals chose to follow America’s lead again in ideologically blindfolding the visual arts in this undertaking. The American habit of somnambulism about its criminal past is such that it took the American art world decades to reawaken the aesthetic vocabulary of social resistance and engagement narcotized by Greenbergian formalism. In Europe, by contrast, this vocabulary is more deeply rooted in the artistic tradition of self-conscious criticality and more firmly buttressed by well-preserved artifacts of cultural memory. Let us hope this will be a sufficient antidote against renewed American attempts to export yet one more “New World Order” for cross-cultural consumption.2

Notes


2. In thinking about these issues I have benefited from conversations with Laura Cottingham, Bart de Baere, Charles Esche, Michael Lingner, and Pier Luigi Tazzi.