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Imre Bak: Post-modern squares, or the topicality of metaphysics

—2002

> *"If there is an end point it is death. And the big difference I see between American art and European art is that European art has remained Heideggerian in some fundamental sense. It's an existential exploration of living in terms of its relationship to death. But in American culture if there is no real it is because of the disappearance of death. Death is no longer a socially recognized category. It is pushed aside as unmentionable. As Warhol used to say people don't die anymore, they just disappear."*
> Peter Halley, 1999

Peter Halley contrasts the post-modern square with the modern square. Not only with the modern square but also with the European square. In his essay entitled The crisis of geometry (1984) he compares the mystic geometrics (Mondrian, Malevic, Rothko, Newman) and the neutral geometry of the minimalists with the geometry described by Foucault and Baudrillard, which shows how our everyday life is forced inside the limits of geometric systems. Instead of an abstract geometry, he analyses the geometry of the social environment and regards it as symbolic. In this, he relies on the theories of structuralist and post-structuralist authors and philosophers. He considers minimalists with their 'neutral' geometry as formalists and transcendentalists, and he derives the crisis of geometry from there. They are exceeded by the new generation (Ewig, Koons, Levine and Halley himself), the members of which use 'hard' geometry (hospital, prison, factories), as well as 'soft' geometry (highway, computer, consumer electronics) as radical expressions of the social condition. When used in this manner, the objects they use (eg. the vacuum cleaners in fibreglass boxes) are not ready-mades but only 'hyper-real' social symbols, if not simulacra. **As Baudrillard formulated it:** the simulacrum is the place "where the real is mixed with the model." This is the "total universe of norms", "digital space", the "shining field of codes". In Halley's case this means that as a pictogram made on a computer, the square, this geometric form becomes a sing of a social condition. The titles of Halley's works also indicate this: cells and wires. The prison and the concrete bloc of the housing state (as hardware), and the connection between them, public

utilities, telephone lines and the computer (as software) are symbols of Halley's geometry. All this is painted in the colour-field and hard-edge style of the 1960s. Although Halley uses the theories of Foucault and Baudrillard in a very concrete manner—perhaps even too didactically—, it is obvious that his thinking is post-structuralist and post-modern also in a broader sense of these terms. This holds true even if we consider that he deals with only one circle of problems—according to his own personal interest and way of thinking—from among the numerous social issues and phenomena that have become subjects of scientific study in recent times. All these studies (cultural studies, virtual studies, gender studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies etc.) approach the current political and social issues with a broad scope, in a post-structuralist fashion. In these sciences, there is an obvious break away from the linear approach of history characteristic of modernist thinking, from the 'great narratives,' from the attempt to formulate the one and only truth. Those pursuing such studies, consider the linear approach not only modernist but also Eurocentric and colonialist. Instead of a centralist approach to culture, they propose pluralism, a 'collage' of cultures of equal value. However some problems (of interpretation) of 'global' post-modernism arise here. The question is not only whether the 'project of modernism' was completed, as Habermas asks, or whether the new way of thinking should rather be called 'new modern' or 'late modern', but also whether post-modern and post-structuralist thinking takes different forms in different cultures, and whether this means, basically, a return to modernism or a kind of 'being stuck' in it. Can we approach the changing and globalising world, its various characteristic features and phenomena (the information boom, knowledge factories, relativity of values, collage of cultures etc.) without forcing on it a 'global uniform'? Can we do it without extending the cultural standards of a new centre (a new power), but instead, can we attempt to safeguard and maintain the local features of the 'peripheries', and even to express their quality.

Surprisingly, American art—whose cultural position in the world and identity have long been clearly defined—again and again becomes a subject of analysis by American artists and theoreticians. The subject matter of their study is the difference between American art and European art (eg. Clement Greenberg's 'American type painting' or the essay by Peter Halley quoted above). Meanwhile, European artists, who, since the mid-1960s have had to face the fast expansion of American art—and the underlying 'Duchampian' and then post-structuralist way of thinking—, do not attempt to define their own manner of 'after-modern' thinking. Consequently, European art has, for decades, been a 'follower'. It is a mistake to believe that European local themes and motifs can compensate the absence of spiritual and intellectual character, a characteristic manner of thinking and—since we are taking about visual art here—visually manifested differences. In the 1970s trans-avant-garde, heftige Malerei, nouvelle peinture etc. these European attempts to re-conquer some positions in the international world of art, were only ephemeral phenomena and turned out to be failures very soon. Strangely, it was an American artist, Peter Halley, who described the basis of European artistic and spiritual-intellectual identity

precisely and succinctly as ‘Heideggerian.’ It would be pointless here to join the ongoing debate among philosophers about whether Heidegger could—the metaphysical theories of the history of philosophy. (Derrida considers that he could not, Mihály Vajda wrote a book on Heidegger post-modernism, while others refer to Heidegger as the philosopher who attempted a metaphysical deconstruction of metaphysics). A great many of Europeans philosophers—is it due to the influence of American thinking?—declare roundly that the notions and categories of the metaphysical, transcendental, spiritual or sacral are irrelevant in the discourse and approach of contemporary art. They do not believe that Heidegger’s definition of art still holds (‘the essence of art is to set the truth of being to work’), but consider that the ‘changing definition of art’ is not related to ‘Being’ but to ‘life’, that is, to everyday phenomena in society. This is to say that here in Europe we would also have to accept that, as Halley formulated and Warhol declared it, man does not die anymore he only ‘disappear’. The question arises: Can man’s social identity be separated from his psychological presence? In other words: Is ‘man in society’ at the same time the rejection of ‘finite man,’ (infinite) man, who considers his own perishing as a problem? At any rate, for thousands of years, the subject matter of European art has been the latter. Why do we presume that the fact that we are finite is no longer a problem, that we know the answer to László Földényi’s dilemma “we get life without asking for it, and then it is taken away from us, again without our being asked”? Amid the process of the globe getting global, do not we need attempts at giving post-modern answers? Is art really only about one moment? This can be true only if only the moment has importance. Artistic thought survives only if beyond the momentary topicality it loses, something remains in it that is ‘eternally topical’ and ‘eternally human,’ the essence that is independent of cultures, social and political conditions: the eternal circle of life ever being born and even falling back into ‘nothing’. Of course, it is metaphysics and transcendence—but has it lost is topicality? It is doubtful that there has ever existed an art that was immanent and autonomous in the absolute sense of these words, even if several times in the 20th century it was considered to be so. Art as such has always contained something beyond itself—it has been transcendental. Deuve says that there are transcendences, one ‘vertical’ one ‘horizontal.’ One is concerned with ‘Being’ (existence), while the other with Life (a political and social being there). After metaphysics, philosophical theory lost its status of existing outside the everyday world. “The explosive empirical content of the non-everyday have been taken over by art, which has become autonomous,” Habermas says. After the failure of the movements against the metaphysical (materialism, empirism, positivism)—which, despite their rejection, remained within the horizon of metaphysical thought—it was post-modern philosophy that could get beyond metaphysics—vertical metaphysics. The price to be paid for this was to reject this role in Europe too? Or it is only some artists and theoreticians who reject it? Undoubtedly, Halley’s social criticism, the reflexion on the role in our life or urban reality and communication systems is justified. Defined by Jameson, ‘Hyperspace,’ this global, multi-national and decentralised field of communication is present in our life even if we do not leave our room. Beside Foucault’s ‘prison-like’ isolation, the pressure based on communicational ‘misleading.’ On

this basis, it becomes possible to make pictures, wallpapers and diagrams. And indeed, Halley's art is an example of how to make an art that places the social aspect in its centre, within the framework of post-modern thinking, in the styles of hard-edge and colour-field—a little closer to the European type of art—using transcendental spaces. **Transcendental contents in art**, the artistic meaning are not necessary identical with the idea of 'beautiful' (especially if by experiencing the 'beautiful' we mean the situation of the retina, something pleasant). If theoreticians of art thought so they were wrong. It should be understood and accepted that it depends on the character of the artist and the curator whether they place the emphasis on questions of 'Being' or 'Life'—even in our globalising world. The question may arise: Is there an understanding of the post-modern other than the post-Marxist post-modern of a political character? If we take a closer look at some of the characteristic features of the post-modern, we see that there are several possible answers to this question. Because the post-modern involves the doubt regarding a world centred around man (God is dead, Nietzsche said, and Foucault went on saying that Man is dead). It involves the pluralism and relativity of cultures and values, as opposed to the 'great narratives,' the linear concept of history. The interest in the past, art history and the history of culture as subjects of manieristic and eclectic reflexion is also a characteristically post-modern phenomenon. "Under every painting there is another painting, one of art history or medial one," as Weibel said. A sense of otherness, a tolerance towards cultures outside Europe are there in post-modern—these features are not new in European art. In post-modern art we can witness layers of meaning, where the different meanings do not pretend to be final and exclusive. Post-modern works have several meanings, they offer several readings. There is usually an overgrowth of images, it is clearly felt that they are manipulated, which is an attempt to empty them.

We could enumerate many more circles of thought raised by post-modern and post-structuralism, which, beyond the concretely social and political can become subjects of artistic reflexion, and constitute the framework of artistic activity in a world becoming globalised and entangled in a network of communication channels. However, these social and political frameworks and conditions of life do not preclude artist from dealing with such problems of mankind that "fall outside the everyday world." And these problems too, can be approached on post-modern grounds, using post-modern techniques, especially here, in Europe, relying on traditions that are several thousand years old.

—courtesy of Imre Bak

Peter Halley: Against Postmodernism: Reconsidering Ortega

—1981

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest on the part of many critics in the idea of Postmodernism. These writers define Postmodernism in various ways, but they share in common the belief that the age of Modernist art is over and that a new set of theories is needed to describe art today.

No writer, however, seems to have entertained the idea that what is today thought of as Modernism is not really outdated, but merely badly formulated in the first place. Critics today seem to universally equate Modernism with the formalist ideas developed by Clement Greenberg in the 1950s. But Greenberg's definition of Modernism has never been adequate to define the full range of twentieth-century Modernist art. This formalist Modernism was no better suited to define the past than it is the present. An alternative definition of Modernism, outlined by the Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset in his 1925 essay, "The Dehumanization of Art," is both possible and more useful.

Any attempt to define the extent and character of Modernist art is both a descriptive and a prescriptive exercise, since no definition of the characteristics of a society's artistic production can be free of the author's aspirations for that society. Greenberg's Modernism sought to provide an artistic equivalent for America's postwar aspirations for leadership of the Western and developing nations. Today, with those aspirations in shambles, it is not surprising that the ideas behind the equivalent aesthetic movement seem irrelevant and distant.

Greenberg also sought to provide a theory of Modernism for a country that, unlike its European counterparts, was not yet post-industrial, but still completing its initial state of industrial growth. The art of postwar America, Abstract Expressionism, was transcendentalist, expressionistic, and confident, like European art of the nineteenth century, when Europe was still an industrializing culture. Greenberg's Modernism provided a positivist, determinist theory to support American art that was tied, ironically, to the values of both nineteenth-century capitalism (with its emphasis on "taste" and "quality") and nineteenth-century Marxism. In order to form such a theory, Greenberg was forced to ignore a great deal of twentieth-century European art. Dada, Surrealism, Duchamp had no place in his system. He was forced to label even Analytic Cubism a "counter-revolution"*1* against Modernism and to push back the beginning of the Modernist era to the middle of the nineteenth century to include the Impressionists (especially Monet), who were paradigmatic to his theory.

This strategy blurred important distinctions between this century and the last. In Greenberg's formalist Modernism, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are treated as a unified historical epoch. The essential differences between the industrial nineteenth century and the post-industrial twentieth century are ignored.

But, in fact, the nineteenth century was the era of industrialization in the Western world, of mechanism, empiricism, and of popular art (both Romanticism and Realism). It was characteristically confident and passionate. The twentieth century, on the other hand, is the age of relativity and doubt: Einsteinian physics replaces Newtonian mechanism as Freudian subjectivity succeeds Victorian absolutism. In philosophy, Marxist positivism is replaced by existential and phenomenological doubt. Automation, electronics, and the welfare state halt the ascendancy of the worker in heavy industry. To create a theory of Modernism that bestrides these very different periods, as Greenberg attempted to do, is bound to create difficulties. In Ortega, we find instead a theory of Modernism that confines itself to the art of the twentieth century.

Like Greenberg, Ortega has a prescriptive role for Modernist art. He sees Modernism as the characteristic art of the twentieth century and of liberal society, which he extols. For Ortega, the primary intellectual force in the twentieth century is relativism. This relativism is produced by individuals with a profound capacity for doubt, and necessitates the invention of a tolerant political system that can encompass such doubt. For Ortega, that political system is liberalism, "the noblest cry that has ever resounded in this planet."*2* In 1930, at a time when fascism was on the rise throughout Europe and the Russian revolution had degenerated into the horrors of Stalinism, he wrote:

> Liberalism is that system of political rights, according to which the public authority, in spite of being all powerful, limits itself and attempts, even at its own expense, to leave room in the state over which it rules for those to live who neither think nor feel as it does…

At the root of Ortega's liberalism is his belief that the positive technological and political advances in society are caused by the unusual individual who is separated from the mass of humanity by his "interior necessity…to appeal from himself to some standard beyond himself, superior to himself, whose service he freely accepts." Such individuals, by force of their unusual effort, bring about the characteristic institutions that define our civilization, although their work more often than not remains unacknowledged. Advances like municipal water systems, the protection of law, or automobiles are seen by the "mass" as natural rights instead of the result of the struggles of committed individuals.

In contrast to the unusual individual, Ortega defines the "mass man." The mass man is not synonymous with the common man. He is not a member of any particular socio-economic class, but rather is an individual who "regards himself as perfect." The mass man "feels the lack of nothing outside himself." He feels no compulsion to follow principles of legality when they are not in his self-interest. He regards the benefits of civilization as his natural right rather than as the result of a complex chain of social interactions. The mass man believes in "direct action." When he rules (as in Nazi Germany or in Stalinist Russia), "the homogeneous mass weighs down on the public authority and crashes down, annihilates every opposing group," because the mass "has a deadly hatred of all that is not itself."

Ortega's liberalism is at odds with the populist aspirations that have shadowed artistic thought in this country throughout the twentieth century. In part, the aspiration to populism is due to a belief in majority opinion, which is so much at the basis of the American democratic approach. It is also the result of the humanistic aspirations of the American intellectuals of the postwar era. From the Marxist flirtations of Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro to the socialist populism of Gregory Battock and Kim Levin, to such recent rightist enfants terribles as Jedd Garet, there has been a recurring discomfort with liberalism by writers on art and a consequent desire to make Modernist art somehow conform to the populist mold. Ortega, in contrast, maintains that Modernist art is not only by nature unpopular but anti-popular, since the ideals it embodies are antithetical to the opinions of the mass man.

According to Ortega, Modernism is essentially art that is premised on doubt. In "The Dehumanization of Art," he sets out the characteristics of such an art. The "new style" tends

1) to dehumanize art
2) to avoid living forms
3) to see the work of art as nothing but a work of art
4) to consider art as play and nothing else
5) to be essentially ironic
6) to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization
7) to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence

In each of these points, he seeks to differentiate the doubting art of the twentieth century from the passionate, positivist, confident art that characterized the nineteenth. Fifty years later, the legacy of nineteenth-century art is perhaps no less with us, and it is worthwhile to retrace Ortega's reasoning.

In his first point, Ortega claims that Modernist art is "dehumanized." Here, he attempts to separate the effect of art, "a seeing pleasure," from the autobiographical emotionalism that dominated nineteenth-century art. By dehumanization, Ortega means to "de-emotionalize." Modernist, doubting art must be aloof from the "contagion" of "personal feelings." Ortega traces this phenomenon in music:

> From Beethoven to Wagner, music was primarily concerned with expressing personal feelings. The composer erected great structures of sound to accommodate his autobiography…. Wagner poured into Tristan and Isolde his adultery with Mathilde Wesdendonck, and if we want to enjoy this work, we must, for a few hours, turn vaguely adulterous ourselves.

But "lived" realities are too overpowering not to evoke sympathy, which prevents us from perceiving aesthetic relationships in their "objective purity," and so should be avoided as the content of Modernist art:

> Music had to be relieved of private sentiments. This was the deed of Debussy. Owing to him, it became possible to listen to music serenely, without swoons and tears.

The contrast between these two attitudes is explicitly evident in the cinema today, where Modernist and popular art exist side by side. In the popular cinema, we are wrenched by coercive illusionist techniques into experiencing fear and joy almost beyond our will. In the Modernist cinema of Brackage, Frampton, or Goddard, on the other hand, we are treated to an "algebra of metaphors" that allows us to "be surprised, to wonder," those facilities which "lead the intellectual through life in the perpetual ecstasy of the visionary."

Ortega claims that "art ought to be full clarity, high noon of the intellect. Tears and laughter are aesthetically frauds. The gesture of beauty never passes beyond smiles, melancholy or delighted." Only in such an atmosphere is doubt and reflection possible. And in Ortegan Modernism, such reflection has a high purpose which relates it to the mainstream of twentieth-century phenomenological thought:

> We use our ideas in a "human" way when we employ them for thinking things. Thinking of Napoleon, for example, we are normally concerned with the great man of that name. A psychologist, on the other hand, adopts an unusual "inhuman" attitude when he forgets about Napoleon and, prying his own mind, tries to analyze his idea of Napoleon as such idea. His perspective is the opposite of that prevailing in spontaneous life. The idea, instead of functioning as the means to think an object with, is itself made the object and the aim of thinking.

In this way, Ortega ties this Modernism to the attitude of twentieth-century Husserlian phenomenology rather than to the positivism and determinism of nineteenth-century Marxism. Ortega emphasizes the limitations of human ideation: "We possess of reality, strictly speaking, nothing but the ideas we have succeeded in forming about it." But for Ortega this process is unnoticed. "By means of ideas we see the world, but in a natural attitude of mind we do not see the ideas…the spontaneous movement of mind goes from concepts to the world." He points out that traditional art was content to accept ideas as synonymous with reality; reality was "idealized, although this was a candid falsification." The Modernist, aspiring to "scrupulous realization," inverts this process:

> …if turning our back on alleged reality, we take the ideas for what they are—mere subjective patterns—and make them live as such, lean and angular, but pure and transparent; in short, if we deliberately propose to "realize" our ideas—then we have dehumanized and, as it were, derealized them.

The Modernist artist reverses the "spontaneous" movement from world to mind. "We give three-dimensional being to mere patterns, we objectify the subjective, we 'worldify' the imminent." Writing in the 1920s, Ortega finds this tendency "in varying degrees" in both Expressionism and Cubism, reconciling approaches

that formalists consider antithetical. “From painting things, the painter has turned to painting ideas. He concentrates on the subjective images in his own mind.”

From this derealized view of art follow the other characteristics of Ortega’s definition. The Modernist avoids “the round and soft forms of living bodies” because of their strong associations with both “lived realities” and with traditional Western art and its aspirations to “the salvation of mankind” that had been so strong in the transcendentalist atmosphere of the nineteenth century.

Ortega claims that, steeped in Husserlian doubt, the Modernist is “ironic,” that “whatever its content, the art itself is jesting. To look for fiction as fiction…is a proposition that cannot be executed except with one’s tongue in one’s cheek…. Being an artist means ceasing to take seriously that very serious person we are when we are not an artist.” Modernist art functions as “a system of mirrors which indefinitely reflect one another [in which] no shape is ultimate, all are eventually ridiculed and revealed as pure images.”

Similarly, he views art as a thing of “no transcending consequence,” of no pretenses. “The kingdom of art commences where the air feels lighter and things, free from formal fetters, begin to cut whimsical capers.” Ortega connects the Modernist impulse with playfulness and youthfulness. In fact, Modernism has been characteristically the stance of young artists who, as they grow older, often lapse into a condition of solemnity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century artist hero.

In order to establish the value of Ortega’s definition of Modernism, we must demonstrate its applicability to the past art of the twentieth century as well as to artistic events occurring today. An Ortegan Modernist pantheon is very different from that of formalists like Greenberg. In contrast to a Greenbergian canon, the Modernists chosen here demonstrate no unity of formal concerns. Instead, a like mechanism of meaning unifies their work.

As Ortegan Modernism is a theory of the behavior of all the arts, it applies equally well to music and writing. Quintessential Modernist musicians are figures like Erik Satie and John Cage; Modernist writers are playwrights like Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Becket, and Bertolt Brecht, or novelists like James Joyce, Alain Robbe-Grillet, or Thomas Pynchon.

Concentrating on the visual arts, one can point to Picasso (between 1907 and 1914), Duchamp, Jasper Johns (between 1955 and 1960), Ad Reinhardt, and Andy Warhol. All are unmistakably committed to creating art based on twentieth-century relativism rather than on the “psychic contagion” of romanticism or the mechanism of nineteenth-century empiricism.

In the visual arts, of course, Picasso initiates Modernism. Analytic Cubism is a complete negation of previous assumptions about visual art. In Cubism, we first see the artist concentrating completely on the patterns in

his mind and "realizing" them on canvas. It is in Cubism that we first find the artist content to regard his work as a "thing of no transcending consequence," an essentially ironic and playful undertaking. (Note the frequent puns on the letters J-O-U in which the reality of the nineteenth-century journal is transformed into pictorial play.)

In Duchamp, this Modernist point of view is equally well-defined. The ready-made is an attempt at "scrupulous realization" in which the re-presentation of the object is exactly equated with the (presumed) presence of the object itself. Similarly, The Large Glass is, as Duchamp himself describes it, "the apparition of an appearance." Duchamp was, as well, largely occupied with play (note his fascination with games, with roulette and chess). One of his later pieces is a plaster relief with the entirely Ortegan title of With My Tongue in My Cheek, Torture-Morte (1959).

In Jasper Johns, we also observe this concern with "scrupulous realization." In his early work, he abandoned the attempt to represent three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane, preferring either to scrupulously confine his representations to two-dimensional motifs (such as flags, targets, or numbers) or to render three-dimensional objects by making casts of them (in the case of body parts and flashlights, etc.). Overlapping objects are only rendered by overlapping canvases (as in Three Flags, 1958). Through all this, Johns maintains his ironic stance (he has even made an imprint with a clothes iron in some of his recent paintings). Play is specifically evoked in his work by the target (equipment in a game of marksmanship), his use of newspaper cartoons (in Alley Oop, 1958) and rubber balls in Painting with Two Balls, 1960. By making signs the subject of his art, Johns has "given three-dimensional reality to mere patterns" as Ortega suggests. Johns himself states that he painted "things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels."*3*

In the work of Ad Reinhardt, we see represented an Ortegan approach to abstraction. In his essay, "Art-as-Art Dogma," he states, "Art-as-art is a concentration on art's essential nature." Reinhardt claimed:

> The next revolution in art will sound the farewell of the old favorite songs of "art and life" that the old favorite artist-ducks love to sing along with the old bower birds and the new, good, rich swallow audience.*4*

How closely Reinhardt's statement reflects Ortega's ideas:

> Not only is grieving and rejoicing at such destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very different thing from true artistic pleasure, but preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper.

To achieve this end, Reinhardt wishes to radically free his art from any subject other than mental pattern and intellectual process. In another diatribe, he writes:

> …no representations, no associations, no distortions, no paint-caricaturing, no cream pictures or drippings, no delirium trippings, no sadism or slashing, no therapy, no kicking-the-effigy…no impasto, no plasticity, no relationships, no experiments…

Instead, he advocates "painting as absolute symmetry, pure reason, rightness…. Painting as central, frontal, regular, repetitive…. Color as black, empty…. Verticality and horizontality, rectilinearity, parallelism, stasis." Reinhardt exemplifies Ortega's claim that Modernist "art must not proceed by psychic contagion, for psychic contagion is an unconscious phenomenon, and art ought to be full clarity, high noon of the intellect."

We also find that Reinhardt's aesthetic was shaped by the decision to take an ironic stance in his work:

> Everything that the [abstract] artists were called that was bad I've picked up and I've made them not bad words. Words like inhuman, sterile, cold—they became cool…. And the others—academic, dogmatic, absolute—I picked them up and said, "Well, why not academic?"

But it is perhaps Warhol who takes the premises of Ortegan Modernism to their furthest limit. Warhol applies the "inversion" of Modernist dehumanization not only to his art but to his life. He is not content simply to accomplish the "realization" of his ideas in his art, but, to a greater extent than even Duchamp, he realizes his ideas in his day-to-day life, as well. He abandons his "human" life not only in his art but also in his daily existence. As Warhol himself states: "I think that once you see emotions from a certain angle you can never think of them as real again. That's what more or less has happened to me."*5* With the help of electronic recording devices, Warhol abandoned "lived realities" to concentrate on the "pane of glass" of perception:

> The acquisition of my tape recorder really finished whatever emotional life I might have had, but I was glad to see it go. Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem just meant a good tape, and when a problem transforms itself into a good tape, it's not a problem anymore.

This echoes Ortega's description of the artist:

> The painter, in fine, completely unconcerned, does nothing but keep his eyes open. What is happening here is none of his business; he is, as it were, a hundred miles removed from it. His attitude is a purely perceptive attitude; indeed, he fails to perceive the event in its entirety. The entire inner meaning escapes his attention which is directed exclusively toward the visual part…. In the painter we find a maximum of distance and a minimum of feeling intervention.

Warhol was fascinated with figures in the media whose lives had been "dehumanized"— movie stars, celebrities, transvestites. To Warhol, the movies provided the most vivid example of this inversion: "The best atmosphere I can think of is film, because it's three-dimensional physically and two-dimensional emotionally." At the same time, Warhol shares with Ortega an appreciation of the playfulness of the whole Modernist endeavor. Again, Ortega states:

> To the present-day artist the kingdom of art commences where the air feels lighter and things, free from formal fetters, begin to cut whimsical capers.… The symbol of art is seen again in the Great God Pan which makes the young goats frisk at the edge of the grove.

Warhol echoes this view:

> In some circles where very heavy people think they have very heavy brains, words like "charming" and "clever" and "pretty" are all putdowns, and all the lighter things in life, which are the most important, are put down.

Today, the Postmodernist critics claim younger artists are no longer working within the parameters of Modernism. This is true—and has been for a long time—if we define Modernism as Greenbergian formalist Modernism. However, if we adopt the assumptions of Ortegan Modernism, we find that a good many younger artists, especially among those supported by Postmodernist critics, are working within the assumptions of this fifty-year-old theory. R.M. Fischer, Steven Keister, Cindy Sherman, and Richard Prince come to mind as artists who aspire to the kind of Modernism that Ortega advocates.

On the other hand, a variety of art being produced today truly is something other than Modernist. However, to call this art Postmodernist is probably a mistake, since it exhibits all the signs of being, in fact, pre-Modernist. The return to perspective techniques, the unique art object, human expression, "sensibility"—these are simply a retreat into nineteenth-century strategies by retrograde artists, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has pointed out in his recent essay on Neo-Expressionist painting.*6*

There has always been retrogressive art in our culture, but the unusual phenomenon today is that such work has gained the status of major art. This is the result of the changes in our society that have occurred with the last decade. From the 1950s to the 1970s, it was the entrepreneurial class, buoyed by economic prosperity, that supported Modernism, in the medium characteristically associated with that class—the visual arts. Today that class has largely retreated in a fog of fear and paranoia from its interest in the Modernist point of view (just as it has retreated from its aspirations to liberalism). Instead, it seeks to reassure itself by withdrawing into commodity fetishism, historicism, and a kind of parodic individualism.

Today, Modernism has largely moved to a different arena where it is supported by a different class. Modernism is as alive in music as it is under attack in the visual arts. Groups with such names as the Talking Heads, the Clash, the Gang of Four, and Public Image Limited, have all moved to an essentially Modernist position. David Byrne, of the Talking Heads, for example, sings that "facts are useless in emergencies," that:

> Facts are simple and facts are straight
> Facts are lazy and facts are late
> Facts all come with points of view
> Facts don't do what I want them to
> Facts just twist the truth around
> Facts are living turned inside out…*7*

The Clash sing about a cartoon confrontation between "G.I. Joe" and "Ivan," a "Ruskie Bear," ironically turning jingoistic labels in upon themselves. The Gang of Four sing:

> The problem of leisure
> What to do for pleasure
> Ideal love a new purchase
> A market of the senses *8*

They are turning the attitude of advertising into an "algebra of metaphors" and neutralizing the "contagion" of popular culture. Similarly, the leader of the band the Dead Kennedys uses the nom de plume of Jello Biafra (running for mayor of San Francisco on the slogan, "There's always room for Jello").

In their instrumentation, these bands constantly parody phrasing of earlier, unselfconscious pop music. Their playfulness allows the B-52's to transform the mindless drone of '60s instrumental music into something else. Many of these musicians have also adopted a clearly Modernist attitude toward their own public personas. John Lydon of Public Image Limited said in an interview in the Canadian magazine, Maclean's: "I'm tired of the past and even the future's beginning to seem repetitive. I don't really know what to say. I talk crap all the time. I'm a liar, a hypocrite, and a bastard. I shouldn't be tolerated…."

The Modernism of these musicians is particularly significant because it is assaulting one of the most important strongholds of popular art in the nineteenth-century mold—electronically reproduced music. Because they apply Modernist attitudes of irony and doubt to political and social issues, their work comes to serve the very purpose that was advocated by Ortega as the aim of Modernism—the preservation of the possibility of liberal democracy. Their willingness to deal with the major events of our culture singles out these musicians as important successors to the daring Modernists of the past.

In time of economic adversity and uncertainty, like the present, it is characteristic of the wealthy to retreat into a position of fear and reaction. On the other hand, during these adverse periods, there are also likely to be small groups among those without a large investment in the status quo who will be moved by adversity to a position of intense thought and doubt. These musicians are not supported by a wealthy entrepreneurial class (as have been Modernist artists), but by this minority: those thinking, doubting individuals with the few dollars available necessary to purchase a record album.

This market-structure has allowed Modernism to flourish today in music. It could provide the necessary impetus for a Modernist resurgence in the visual arts.

—courtesy of Peter Halley

1
Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in The New Art, edited by Gregory Battock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. 72.

2
All quotations from Ortega are from two sources: The Dehumanization of Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) and The Revolt of the Masses (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1932).

3
Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria (Oxford University Press, 1975).

4
Quotations from Ad Reinhardt are from Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt, edited by Barbara Rose (New York: Viking Press, 1975).

5
Andy Warhol, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975).

6
Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," in October, No. 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 39-68.

7

Talking Heads, "Crosseyed and Painless," in Remain in Light (Sire Records, New York, 1980).

8

Gang of Four, "Natural's Not in It," in Solid Gold (Warner Brothers Records, New York, 1981).