

History of Western Art
Part Five – Modernism to Post-Modernism

Assignment Five – Exercise 1

Notes on Chapter 21 – Post-War to Post-Modern

Following WWII artists moved from Europe to USA. Purist-abstract (Mondrian, Leger, Bauhaus) and Surrealists (Ernst, Dali, Breton, Duchamp) both embraced by US artists. (pp 832-33)

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Principal US artists of 40s and 50s stylistically very disparate. Critics coined term 'Abstract Expressionists' or 'Action Painters'. Features were artists not creating representation of emotions and ideas but enacting them on the canvas. Act of putting paint on canvas led to abstraction. Hofmann art school influential, art both painterly and abstract, blending of mixed media techniques. Gorky straddles Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Paints 'not in front of nature, but from within nature'. (pp 833-34)

Pollock and de Kooning

Pollock's lack of traditional skills as artist, neuroses and inner demons led to fulfilment by taking painting off easel and working in large scale with canvases on floor. Being able to be 'in painting', working on all four sides and seeing no mistakes (painting has a life of its own) and inspiration of Indian sand painters, gave rise to his most popular works. Dripped, splashed, threw paint onto tacked down huge-scale canvas (portable murals) – spontaneous and expressive, abstract but not, according to Pollock, entirely uncontrolled. De Kooning, semi-abstract, some discernible figures in work. Style heavier, more linear, thick layers of paint, dense compositions. (pp 835-37)

Still, Rothko and Newman

Still; huge canvases, large areas of flat-plane solid colour, thickly painted and texturing; suggestive of large-scale American West landscapes. Flat, intense colours give feeling of density but little sense of space. Russian Rothko described paintings as spiritual, inspiring contemplation, expressing depths of emotion. Translucent, ghostly use of banks of colour, canvas texture visible (paint not thickly applied), create luminosity. Newman wanted art to speak for the inner feelings, not interpreted by myth, theme, history, allegory. Best expressed in sculpture eg Broken Obelisk; base stable, timeless pyramid, above broken pillar, man's flawed but perennial aspirations. Smith, inspired by background as welder, created open forms (per Picasso), also used heavy machinery/metal in sculptures. Some, eg; cubi, solid, heavy, yet open, balanced, almost delicate. Surfaces reworked to capture colours of surroundings without reflections. (pp 837-840)

EUROPEAN SURVIVORS

Abstract Expressionism does not extend outside USA. Matisse enters final phase of development of work, painting papers in gouache, cutting and assembling. Contributes to designs for books, stained glass. Giacometti turns to front-facing bronzes, later in his final phase, producing semi-abstract sculptures capturing the 'essence' of the subject, the nuclei of personality. (pp 840-841)

POST-PAINTERLY ABSTRACTION

Also known as colour-field painting, unsized canvases onto which pigment poured. Louis, Noland, Olitski main proponents. Paint allowed to sink into canvas, more like dye than paint. (pp 841-43)

JASPER JOHNS AND ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Johns challenged Abstract Expressionism with representational art; ordinary objects made extraordinary; statements on 'art' reminiscent of Duchamp's readymades.

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Rauschenberg incorporated real objects with paintings (eg. Bed), breaking away from illusionary space of Expressionists. Bridging gap between art and life. Used frottage and experimented with scientists to develop technology in arts. (pp843-45)

POP ART

Defined as 'making personality a style' (p843) using commercial, mass-market imagery. The Collage (Hamilton) arguably first work of Pop Art. Seen as attack on art, Hamilton disagreed; it made epic art from accessible, everyday objects. In USA Pop Art banal and commonplace. Oldenburg wanted to bring art back to normal people (Giant Hamburger). Warhol first to use silkscreen and had assistants produce works which he pronounced banal (p846). Repetitiveness of works reflected mass media. Arman replied to Klein's empty gallery by using rubbish to form artworks. Rubbish is unavoidable product of mass production. (pp 845-47)

PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

Photographic artists (Gilbert and George, Sherman, Kiefer et al) recorded the drama of the times, particularly in America. Arbus in particular recorded 'ordinary' events as, without photographs no one would remember them. Likewise, Winogrand captured the feelings of the epoch with photographs of public and everyday events, but with artistic style not 'snapshots'. Korda's photograph of Che Guevara to have enduring power even today. (pp 848-51)

MINIMAL ART

Per Stella (what you see is what you see) (p851), stripping art back to barest essentials. Role of artist reduced to a minimum. Like Warhol, Johns used 'fabricators' to create minimalist sculptures. 'If someone says his work is art, it is art' (Judd, p851). Andre's mechanically precise pieces using carefully arranged manufactured units (eg bricks) foreshadows later Conceptual Art. Moving from form and structure to place, Andre's work connects with environment (placed on floor). Ability of viewer to enjoy work from all sides, including in some cases, walking over it, adds dimension of 'time' to the work. 'Simplicity of shape not necessarily simplicity of experience' (Morris, p853).

CONCEPTUAL ART

Relationship between artist's ideas and facts of world explored in Conceptualism. Execution is secondary to fact that artist has 'completed' work in the planning stage. Kosuth's One and Three Chairs; is the chair the product of the definition, the photograph or the definition, the photograph the product of the chair. That art could be anywhere anything meant no art to sell. Photography important; carrier medium for ideas and cultural messages. For Conceptual artists, photography a tool for visual exploration/imagination. (pp 853-55)

ARTE POVERA

'Poor or impoverished art'; used everyday, cheap materials; art could not simply revisit past. It was a challenge to norms of art. Merz symbolises nomadic nature of humans using Fibonacci sequence and Golden Mean. Move into 3-d objects (eg wire/glass igloos). (pp -855-57)

BODY ART AND PROCESS ART

Artists develop art that shows process (Serra's ladles of solidifying lead). Development of video also saw creation of recorded/performance art. A reaction to constraints of buyers dictating what artists must do to make a living (eg. Nauman). Subverting art market's placing rarity/exclusivity value on art. (pp 857-58)

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EARTH AND LAND ART

Freed from galleries, landscape now becomes place for becoming art. De Maria's Lightning Field directly interacts with nature as rods are frequently struck by lightning. Christo's enormous works often remained conceptual, unrealised. Roden Crater evokes Stonehenge, aligning points with stars, sun's position on horizon. Matta-Clark interacted with urban landscape, working with garbage and urban leftovers. (pp 858-61)

PHOTO-REALISM AND NEW IMAGE PAINTING

Photo-realism; naturalistic imagery, illusionistic space presented as flat snapshots or coloured slides (Estes and Close). Bacon, working from existing images, had connections with developments in America. Crucifixion triptych conveys sense of obsessional guilt. Hockney moves to America, liberated by Californian scene. Guston develops 'New Deal' style, large public works; moves to softer abstract style then to brash and gross figurative work (eg. Menacing Ku Klux Klan figures). Golub's grotesque, life-size, skinless figures gain acceptability after Vietnam war. Large narrative scenes (Napalm, Vietnam) intended to shock. Lifesize and only viewable in galleries made them more powerful. How you see them (as monsters or noble) depends on your perspective. Twombly's seemingly unstated, crossed-out jotted lines, words and letters have spacing of Oriental art; zen-effect with spacing for contemplation. Apparently random scribbling scattered across surface. (pp 861-65)

MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM

Modernist architecture coming under fire from eg. Perrault, Jacobs. Appeal for less austere, more societal, diverse buildings and communities. Some prominent modernist buildings by, eg. van der Rohe, branded failures. Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier also subject of criticism for purism of constructions. Inspired Brutalist movement; rough, chunky buildings (Stirling, Rudolph, Tange). Post-modernism extension to Modernism but with view to integrating more democratically with surroundings. A melange of artistic and architectural styles, Art Deco with Classicism, Modernism with Art Nouveau, to create multiple layers of space, form and symbolism (eg. Graves). Themes from different eras juxtaposed to create new forms. (Bofill, Rossi). Japan most readily embraced Post-Modernism, blending traditional with themes from other cultures and eras. (Isozaki, Takeyama). Foster and the High Tech movement, take opposing approach to Post-Modernism, with pure lines, sleek construction and elegance. Developed in UK but principally adopted outside UK (exceptions including Lloyd's of London by Rogers).