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Still Modern After All These Years

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Still Modern after all these Years

The twentieth century has ended but its major artistic movement marches on

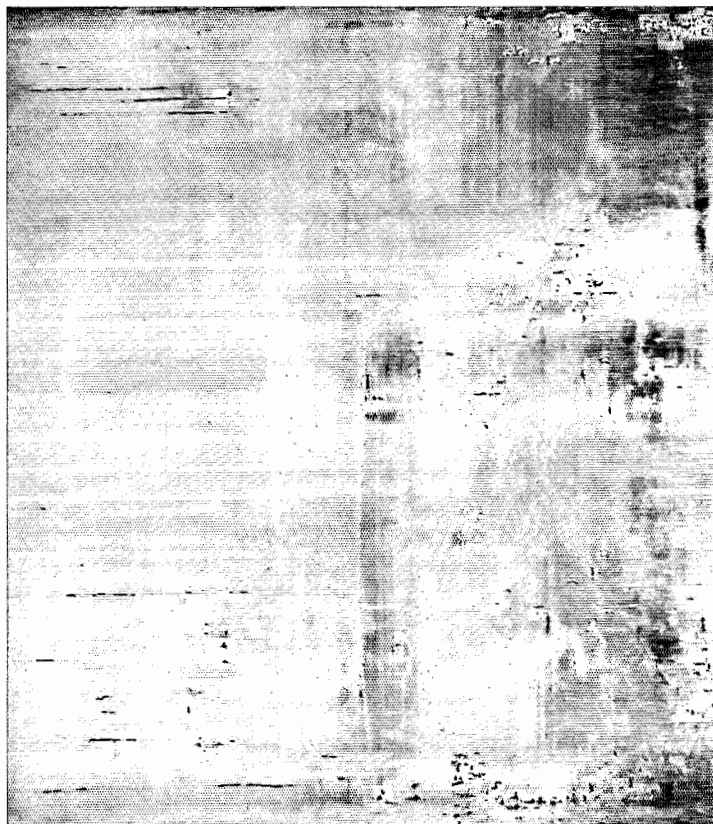
BY CHARLES REEVE

Despite its Monty Python-esque demise—protracted death throes, histrionics on all sides—the twentieth century’s major artistic movement turns out to be not quite dead yet. In fact, modernism—archaic name and all—already is experiencing resurgence, perhaps drawing strength from the perpetual disagreement over what it is. Continuing arguments notwithstanding, consensus allows this much: modernism dominated the twentieth century’s visual art; it emphasized a work’s appearance (rather than philosophical or thematic issues); and its foremost proponent—as well as one of western art’s most prominent figures between 1939 and 1969—was not an artist but a critic, Clement Greenberg.

Some of the blame for the confusion around modernism lies with Greenberg himself. For one thing, he often used words in novel or unexpected ways. Thus “modernism,” for him, meant not a break with the past, as you might expect, but rather a long-standing tradition connecting Giotto and Raphael to Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis. For another, Greenberg decried reading into or out of a painting, yet often saw what he wanted to see—fastening on the ambiguous depth created by the interplay between Pollock’s webs of color, for instance, but ignoring the cigarettes, insects and handfuls of nails that the artist wove into those skeins.

Most readers could have reached Greenberg’s meaning despite these obstacles had he not erected a third. By separating good art from bad with a decisiveness that smacked of arrogance, he provoked intense dislike. Wisps of this antipathy started forming in the 1950s. Developing into an acrimonious haze by the mid-1960s, they went on gathering into the 1980s until they created a fog of hostility so thick that seeing Greenberg’s argument at all—let alone clearly—became nearly impossible. Suzi Gablik’s *Has Modernism Failed?*, first published in 1984, exemplifies this blindness. Released in a revised edition this spring by Thames and Hudson—the revisions consisting mostly of a new preface and two new concluding chapters—this volume sets out to answer its title’s question affirmatively but instead catalogues the received misapprehensions of Greenberg’s arguments.

Gablik’s misfire is lamentable because her basic complaint has currency. The art market in our time emphasizes the market over the art, she argues, giving sales skill priority over artistic talent. I’m not sure the market hasn’t always had the upper hand, but certainly the artists who rise quickest today too often



Postmodernism’s differences from modernism are both decisive and subtle, as can be seen by comparing Richter’s recent painting about abstraction to Rothko’s straightforward abstract painting of 60 years ago. Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Picture (873-5)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 79 by 71 inches (collection High Museum of Art; purchase with High Museum of Art Endowment Fund).

are those with the most sales ability and the least to sell. However, Gablik wants to prove, not just assert, that the market dominates contemporary art, and to assign blame for it, and that’s when the trouble starts.

Our society is spiritually vacuous, Gablik believes, because it has lost its shared values. And, she says, modernism, with its deliberate moral purposelessness, is at least partly responsible. Common among cultural conservatives (even those like Gablik who would consider themselves anything but), this perspective makes little sense: when did revolution and revolt not regularly convulse Western societies?

Moreover, after invoking Greenberg as modernism’s spokesman, Gablik characterizes it as a break with tradition

though Greenberg argued the opposite. And Gablik's claim that modernism's focus on form lacked morality overlooks that its proponents withdrew into composition and color to resist the colonization of the imagination that they believed followed—or drove—industrialization.

Gablik wants art to have a purpose: to fill the spiritual vacuum at contemporary society's heart. But, as should be clear from the avalanche of bathetic interpretations of identity politics, good intentions don't equal good art. Indeed, spirituality's recent influence on visual art already has attracted an all-too-predictable parade of banality (evidenced by the images and essays in the catalogs for such exhibitions as "Cosmos + Chaos" and "Thresholds"). Obviously, identity politics didn't only generate bland art, and neither has nor will spirituality: Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* from the sixteenth century and Christian Jankowski's video *The Holy Artwork* of 2001 make that clear. But the poverty of *Has Modernism Failed?* and of the current spate of "spiritual" art shows how insipid program-driven aesthetics often are.

Difficulties aside, Gablik's book is interesting as a timely criticism of the art market's inverted values and as part of the first wave of scholarly interest in modernism. *Has Modernism Failed?* initially belonged to a small swell of similar publications that included Hans Belting's *The End of the History of Art?* (1987)—republished this spring by the University of Chicago as *Art History after Modernism*. However, while Gablik essentially lets her argument stand, Belting changes his title, disavows his first version and opens with a self-conscious genealogy that explains his thesis and his discomfort: modernism is a lens through which we view history rather than a historical phenomenon, so modernism's implosion—if it is imploding—affects the discipline of art history rather than the making of art. This argument is familiar, but Belting gives it new weight by backing it with an impressive unraveling of his discipline's history and by guiding us through the intellectual significance of such (unjustly) discarded works as Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* (1915) and Erwin Panofsky's mid-twentieth century essays on iconography. By doing so, Belting demonstrates that modernism has several faces. For example, while Europeans think of modernism as a fairly broad artistic tendency extending back as far as the mid-nineteenth century, North Americans like Greenberg see it as gaining momentum in the 1930s and clustering primarily around Picasso, the Abstract Expressionists



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1940–1941, oil on canvas, 36 by 30 inches (collection High Museum of Art; gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.).

and a handful of Color Field painters from the 1960s. By extension, postmodernism's much-discussed global pluralism (which Belting views skeptically) is not an event but a perspective of historians and critics, which is why Belting argues that the possibility of modernism's end affects art history more than art.

The first wave of scholarly interest in modernism generally and Greenberg specifically petered out around the early 1990s after (though not because) John O'Brian anthologized the bulk of Greenberg's writings. However, in 1999, the release of Greenberg's posthumous *Homemade Esthetics* and T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* portended a widespread sense that discussions of the twentieth century's cultural history—in any


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aspect—overlook Greenberg's influence at their peril.

A good example of how these ideas affect broader cultural analyses is Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (Verso, 2002), the title of which conveys its central paradox. The word "modernity" conjures up the period that we consider modern, characterized by the emergence and intensification of industrial economies, urban populations and liberal democracies. Opinions differ on whether we're in this era or beyond it, but agreement remains that modernity broke from everything before it and that this rupture informs where we are now.

By calling our modernity "singular," however, Jameson throws new light on the present. We characterize this era as modern to distinguish it as radically new: never before has so much changed so rapidly for so many. Yet this idea appears repeatedly over the last 1500 years: our modernity is just one among many.

A literature scholar by training and trade (and one of the most influential commentators on postmodern culture), Jameson grasps that being of the moment obsesses the arts community, so its theories inevitably address that obsession. Thus, having shown that our experience of our world as uniquely new is decidedly old hat, Jameson uses aesthetics to illustrate his point, focusing on Greenberg in order to unpack what is unique about the late twentieth century's modernity, namely the development of an aesthetic that cast withdrawal from a declining world as resistance to that world. It should be clear that Belting and Jameson share an interest in modernism's intellectual history, but there's a further affinity: the former was translated from German, the latter reads like he was. This stylistic quirk is unfortunate because Jameson's argument is elusive enough without "itself" and "as such" punctuating each paragraph ("modernism itself," "the narrative process as such" etc.) and important enough that it ought to be as readable as possible.

In some ways, it has to be said, modernism is in the past: Greenberg died a decade ago, and most of his heroes long predeceased him. Yet the renewal in which these books participate shows that, in other ways, modernism and its questions remain directly relevant: what is painting? what is a photograph? how does good art differ from bad? 

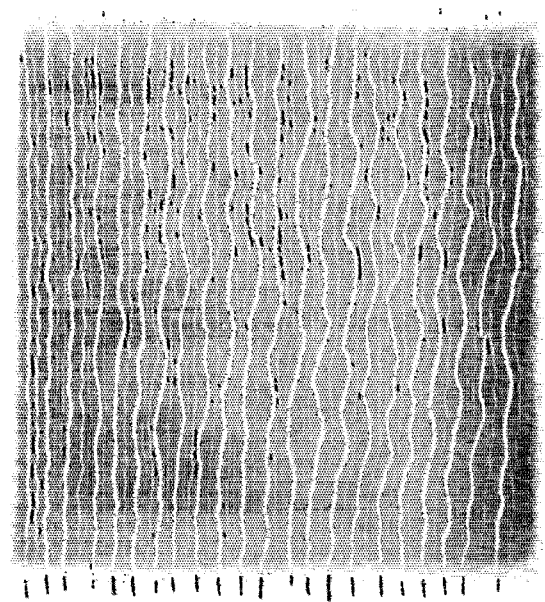
CHARLES REEVE is editor-in-chief at Art Papers.

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