

The Universal or Global Style, Past and Present

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Histories of art present us with a profusion of diverse and evolving artistic styles. But from time to time there have been candidates for a stable, universal style, for example the classic style of the Italian High Renaissance; the neoclassical or revived antique style of circa 1800; the modes of abstract painting developed in Europe in the early twentieth century; or the rationalist and functionalist International Style in architecture. The program of an international, global, or universal artistic style has traditionally exploited the formal dimension of art. Form has seemed to offer the best opportunities to overcome the obvious fact that content—the themes and arguments taken up by art—as well as the functions assigned to art differ from place to place and epoch to epoch. Some modes of Western Modernism, for example, sought to liberate art from the tasks of delivering messages or illustrating narrative content by adopting artistic form itself as a content. An art-making practice which thematizes its own conditions of possibility, its own internal laws and principles, and its mediums and formats, aspires to transcend and outlive local, transitory content, including political and other identities, and so invites the participation of any artist from any place. Classicism, for its part, cultivated artistic form governed by supposedly ideal, suprahuman principles such as geometry or divinity.

Today, we actually have a universal style, known as global contemporary art. To speak of the universalism of global contemporary art is not to suggest that art has become homogeneous or bland. The data sets and experiences processed by contemporary art are too diverse. Difference is pervasive. And yet there is definitely a shared idiom which we all recognize. This idiom professes an aspiration to exert an (edifying, dislocating) impact in the world; employs virtual or material framing devices or "quotation marks" to signal a knowing, non-duped stance; is offhand about the purity or specificity of the artistic medium; does not appear to consider curatorial supplements (wall labels, flyers) to the artwork to be a distraction or encroachment, and does not appear to resent art-world handlers or influencers; projects indifference about saleability; and is well aware (like all art since 1800) of its place within a history of art. All the artworks populating the global contemporary paradigm "understand" each other, no translation necessary. Despite local differences, the infinite plurality of personal and collective histories, and the multiplicity of centers, indeed the breakdown of the once-basic distinction between center and periphery—despite all this, global contemporary art is synchronized, convergent, and universally intelligible. Local content may require some explanation, but the styles or the strategies rarely do. Global contemporary art, in only a few decades, has achieved a universality more complete than any of the previous aspirants to stylistic universalism.

The paradox here is that the global contemporary paradigm, unlike the older universalist projects, tends not to be preoccupied with artistic form. Nobody claims any more to have arrived at a stable or true style. Nobody says that artistic form is content enough. This essay asks the questions: How did this situation come about? What is the basis for contemporary global or universalist artmaking, if it is no longer a shared concept of form? And is global contemporary art really so universal?

To begin, let us ponder for a moment those premodern universalisms oriented toward form. Taking the long view, one might argue that the *secularization of art* in the European Renaissance created an opportunity to establish a global or universally valid artistic style. By “secularization” I mean the uncoupling of art from myth and ritual, and more specifically the disengagement of the evaluation of art from any considerations of its involvement with Christian theology and with public and private forms of worship. Many paintings in sixteenth-century Italy were still displayed in churches, even on altars. But the sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari evaluated the paintings of his time not on the basis of their effectiveness in expounding Christian doctrine, nor the contribution they made to public or private devotional exercises, but rather according to purely artistic criteria: mainly, their truth to the appearance of things, and their beauty or grace. If we can judge by his many descriptions of paintings, it did not matter to Vasari whether a work was located in a church or in a nobleman’s palace: the work of art had no purpose, it would seem, other than to be lifelike and beautiful.

Theorists of art in Renaissance Europe, including Vasari, proposed a new base for a universal concept of art, one that would transcend Christian or parochial European concerns and would be suitable for any possible content: an ideal beauty which recreated on earth the hidden structure of reality, the eternal proportions and harmonies. Form, in other words, that was itself a sufficient content. Vasari’s master term *disegno* supported a conception of beauty which makes sensible the desiderata of balance, harmony, and order. Normative form promised to overcome difference and perhaps even history, so enduring across space and time. And the success of the High Renaissance style, developed in Florence and Rome in the first decades of the sixteenth century and emulated immediately by artists all over Europe, gave Vasari reason to believe that the new forms had the power to transcend local difference.

Note that the idealism of the Renaissance was inextricable from its historicism. Historical perspective—the vista backwards, taking in ancient and medieval history—permitted Vasari to see artistic styles rising and falling in synchrony with civilizations. For Vasari, Greek and Roman art had simply been great, whereas in the chaotic middle ages the arts suffered.

Three centuries later, in the nineteenth century, aesthetics and art history were still intertwined. But the relation between them had altered completely. The perfect style praised by Vasari had not persisted even in Italy, but instead had been contested by a range of alternatives. Ideal or transcultural beauty was not so easy to define, it seems. Formal idealism, or the belief that form gave direct access to a principle of orderliness and completeness that came from beyond sensory experience and was not manmade, was abandoned or anyway not much voiced. Nineteenth-century European historians of art, meanwhile, aware that the ideal forms developed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

Europe could no longer serve as a fixed standard, developed a *relativist* approach to art. Relativism in art history held that any form of art, made in any place and at any time, could be admired on its own terms. The modern discipline of art history was born into the relativist attitude. Already by the middle of the nineteenth century there were textbooks covering “World Art,” albeit by today’s standards ill-informed about art beyond Europe and often condescending.¹ From this point of view, it is inconceivable that any particular style would ever be embraced by all nations.

Relativist art history, no longer defending any particular theory of art, tends finally to relativize art itself, in the sense that it declines to distinguish between artworks and other fabricated or designed things. Around the turn of the twentieth century the art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl proposed an historicization of seeing, acknowledging that every society and every epoch has its own peculiar way of perceiving and depicting the world. This “period eye”—as a later exponent of a contextual or “social” art history, Michael Baxandall, would call it—was the eye that governed not only art-making but also the making and shaping of everything else. If the entire fabricated environment has a common “style,” then the basis for any privileged treatment of artworks is no longer clear. The need for an independent discipline of “art history” is also no longer clear.

In practice, few art historians achieved such a self-effacing degree of neutrality. Hiding behind Riegl’s and Wölfflin’s historicism were strong preferences for some artistic forms over others. The analyses which identified the “period eye” did so by isolating the visible features of artworks from the works’ function, content, etc.). The form-oriented pseudo-relativism of Riegl and Wölfflin appealed to those twentieth-century theorists of art who wished to protect art from such menial tasks as illustration, the transcription of reality (a task best left to photography), or the communication of edifying content. Theories of modern art based on form were apparently opposed to, but in fact dialectically involved with, Riegl and Wölfflin’s relativist art histories.

The relativist attentiveness to previously neglected or depreciated forms, supposedly in the name of a non-aesthetic analysis, actually provided new tools and new language for an aesthetic vindication of those forms. An early example is the neo-Kantian aesthetician Konrad Fiedler’s formalist defense of the Romanesque style in architecture. One would think that architecture is bound to its practical function. But for a formalist, even a building can be grasped as pure form. Fiedler wrote in 1878: “we must conceive of that formative process as a kind of thinking whose content the architectonic forms themselves create.” Architecture is the effort “to liberate form, which until now always bore the traces of its dependency on the conditions of construction and the building materials, from those constraints.” At some point this emancipation of form is achieved: “Only when the building

¹ Dan Karlholm, “Reading the Virtual Museum of General Art History,” *Art History* 24 (2001): 552–577. Hubert Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750–1950* (Munich: Fink, 2001), pp. 203–297. Ulrich Pfisterer, “Origins and Principles of World Art History—1900 (and 2000),” in: Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).

has become the pure expression of form is the spiritual business of form-producing complete.”² This is the basis of Fiedler’s preference for the Romanesque style over all others.

One could define Fiedler’s formalism as an attentiveness to formal features of artworks *as if* form and form’s effects were isolated from all other features and functions of the work. Formalism always entails a certain exaggeration. This is not always recognized, and so formalism is often caricatured as a blindness to reality or an insensitivity to meaning. “Formalism” is often used as a term of reproach, even by formalists. Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, in the last sentence of his book *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* (1898) wrote: “We have no desire to advocate a formalist type of art criticism: it is indeed the function of light to make the diamond sparkle.”³ He means: his focus on the formal elements of Renaissance paintings is subservient to a higher goal, namely, the elucidation and praise of works of art, a task which would entail engagement not only with form but also with content, function, and conditions of viewing and display.

What Wölfflin meant by “formalist criticism” is not clear: perhaps he was thinking of the influential essay of 1890 by the painter Maurice Denis, which contained the dictum: “A picture is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Such formulations were the basis for a new artistic program, Modernism, the translation, as it were, of Fiedler’s abstract historical schemas and Wölfflin’s analyses of Renaissance paintings into the production of new art. According to the creed of aesthetic Modernism, artistic form externalizes ideas, emotions, and meanings. Externalizations transform these raw materials, and the path back from artwork to reality is not so easily retraced. Artistic metamorphoses are not reversible. For formalists and aesthetes, this is the key to the inflexibility, indirection, and untranslatability of art, all prized qualities. Artists communicate with one another in the medium of form; artistic forms gather in virtual communities; they drift away from reality.

Of course, Modernist art also has *content*: that is, it signifies, delivers meaning, is “about” something; either by manipulating symbols or by representing recognizable elements of experienced reality. But Modernist content, including commentary on modern social reality and expression of personal reality, is encoded in the reshaping, gathering, disposing, and staging of reality such that the artwork as a whole emerges as a form in its own right, something completely new added to the world. An artwork translates conflict, desire, emotion, thought, ideality, or any other imaginable content out of reality and into a language of form.

Was Heinrich Wölfflin playing a double game, pretending to be a simple historian—distancing himself, as we saw, from “formalist criticism”—even while affirming (in tune with Konrad Fiedler) that art’s most significant accomplishments happened in the plane of form? This duplicity would seem to be a common pattern; it is always someone else who is the formalist.

² Konrad Fiedler, “Bemerkungen über Wesen und Geschichte der Baukunst” (1878), in: Fiedler, *Schriften zur Kunst*, ed. Gottfried Boehm, 2 vols. (Munich: Fink, 1991), pp. 291–323, here pp. 301, 298, 300. Translation my own.

³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* (1898) (New York: Phaidon, 1952), p. 288.

According to David Summers, Wölfflin, embedding his anti-materialism in his historicism, believed in the end that the non-mimetic components of art point to another dimension of reality. Summers explicates Wölfflin as follows: "'Form,' as this nonmimetic component came to be called, rather than being incidental or superfluous, is essential; it is the expression of spirit, and, as such, it is also an expression of the essential freedom of the human spirit, opposed to nature, which is a realm of resistance and necessity."⁴ Wölfflin was not the only late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art historian to reactivate form as a principle of ideality in order to stabilize his true object, art, and to protect art against the reductionisms of historicism, materialism, naturalism, and technological reason.

Formalist Modernism, from today's perspective, appears to be a highly particular European project, and period-specific. Amazingly, though, Modernism was held up in the early twentieth century as a potentially universal mode. The focus on the expressive qualities of form seemed to transcend local differences in content (different religions, traditions, political ideologies) and instead to connect with basic, universally shared tendencies of human nature. Abstraction was a difficult style, admittedly, and it could not be said that anyone anywhere would immediately connect with an abstract painting. But the expressive, distorting style known as post-impressionism, expressionism, or Fauvism seemed to have a better chance. Grounded in the art of Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh, this style was greeted by some critics as the apex of art history. Post-impressionism was seen as the first style to have liberated itself from the pictorial conventions imposed in the art academies since the Renaissance (perspective, modelling), so allowing either for an unmediated registration of raw perceptions and feelings or for the externalization of personal mental images shaped by an inner spiritual life. For the English critic Roger Fry, post-impressionism "involved direct links between individual, named objects represented conceptually in the mind."⁵ Discoveries around 1900 in the fields of paleolithic art and children's drawings seemed to reinforce the idea that artmaking based on mental images rather than direct perception was the "natural" and thus preferred way. For the apostles of "high Modernist" formalism, according to Sam Rose, post-impressionism "revealed the individual's schematizing and synthesizing activity," and so "an artwork could at once be a testament to the (general human) inner workings of the mind and a window onto the vision of the individual creator."⁶

The "assumed discovery of the true nature of art" had implications for art instruction. The new method of encouraging the artist to work from "inner mental imagery" "claimed to transcend local circumstances of time and place."⁷ Where better to test this claim than in Britain's colonies? The post-impressionist style, "naturalized... as universally human,"⁸

⁴ David Summers, "'Form,' Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 372-406, here p. 374.

⁵ Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 131.

⁶ Rose, *Art and Form*, pp. 131-32.

⁷ Rose, *Art and Form*, p. 132.

⁸ Rose, *Art and Form*, p. 137.

furnished the program of art education programs sponsored by the Colonial Office in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nigeria, and East Africa (now Uganda).⁹ In this way African artists were offered the chance to join the most advanced Western developments and at the same time to remain true to an indigenous, timeless, and supposedly always already modern way of picture-making. The aim was finally to coordinate and synchronize Western and non-Western art. In the meantime, the Nigerian artist and educator Aina Onabolu was promoting an academic realist style with its own universalist, non-culturally specific aims.¹⁰ A broadly similar story can be told about attempts to introduce Modernist styles into South Asia.¹¹

As Sam Rose and David Joselit have shown, none of this worked out as planned. African or South Asian artists were instead placed in an impossible double-bind, expected to choose between an imposed Modernism which would place them into artistic “debt” to the West and a revived indigenous style which would lock them into a subordinate role in art history.¹²

Formalist, aestheticist Modernism had an anti-formalist doppelgänger: the avant-garde, a mode of modern art not very pious about form. The avant-garde artist attempts to catalyze progress not simply by reorienting us to the world but by breaking down the barriers between art and world, allowing the world and art to flow into one another. Avant-gardism, whose initial and still most powerful intervention was Dada, a kind of artistic anti-movement launched in 1916, is against artistic form because form interferes with action, diverts conviction, and confounds participation. Among early twentieth-century tendencies which can be described as avant-garde, besides Dada, are Cubism, Constructivism, and Surrealism. Thus many European and American artists throughout the twentieth century, skeptical of purist and absolutist ambitions, impatient with the deferral of meaning, not to mention the postponement of direct social efficacy, and troubled by the elitist, private forms of attention privileged by formalist Modernism, broke with such creeds. The first avant-gardes, ignited in the 1910s, were directed against the effete crypto-spiritualisms of Fiedler and Wölfflin.

Formalism, proving its adaptability, survived these first assaults. Two decades later, the American critic Clement Greenberg wrote that a Modernist painter “tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to

⁹ Rose, *Art and Form*, p. 135.

¹⁰ Rose, *Art and Form*, pp. 135-36.

¹¹ Rose, *Art and Form*, pp. 138-45.

¹² David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2020), pp. 33, 40-56. On the situation in Nigeria, both Joselit and Rose were guided by the research of Chika Okeke-Agulu.

anything not itself.”¹³ Painting, unlike a building, has this luxury. (Note that Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* had been translated into English in 1932.) Greenberg was a materialist, however, so he did not encourage the “forgetting” of material as Wölfflin and Fiedler had. For Greenberg, the content of the Modernist artist’s work is the material medium itself: his work emerges out of “pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors,” and so achieves an absolute closure and self-sufficiency. This retreat from the world is artistic form’s mute remonstrance against the instrumentalization of reason, technologized capital, the revolt of the masses, what you will.

In the wake of the second world war, Modernist non-realist and even abstract painting styles were once again promoted as universal and timeless. Sam Rose cites the critic Herbert Read, writing about the exhibition *40,000 Years of Modern Art* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1949): the history of world art reveals the “eternal recurrence” in art of qualities we now call “modern.”¹⁴ The Catholic philosopher Étienne Gilson, invited to give the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., in 1955, spoke confidently of the “recent rediscovery [rediscovery!] of the nonimitational character of painting qua painting.” One of the creators of UNESCO, Gilson presents the history of modern art as affirmative, convergent, and inevitable: the artists have “discovered the structure of possible objects, unknown to nature, but whose ultimate justification was to provide man with perfect objects of apprehension.”¹⁵ But the new formalist globalism proved as unconvincing as the claims made by British colonial educators for post-Impressionism. In the event, neither expressionism nor abstraction installed itself as the permanent style of humankind.

Starting in the 1970s and continuing to the present, the dialectic between art history and Modernism—initiated by Riegl and Fiedler, Wölfflin and Fry—has been replayed, this time with different, and surprising, results. The successors to the nineteenth-century relativists were a new breed of functionalist art historians, even more determinedly anti-formalist. Michael Baxandall, in his book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), set the program for a generation of scholars with his laconic formulation: “A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relation.” The metaphor of the “deposit” stripped away the prestige that had accrued to a painted altarpiece in the course of its migration from church to museum. A work of art, one might imagine, is valued for its power to *initiate*: to stage new ideas, to project a future, to rearrange the past, to introduce new forms into the world. The word “deposit,” by contrast, like its near-synonyms trace, index, and evidence, points only backwards. Baxandall also multiplied the source of the artwork, splitting the creative agent, the form-giver, into two, painter and patron: “Both parties worked within

¹³ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34–49; reprinted in Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 3–21; here p. 6.

¹⁴ Rose, *Art and Form*, p. 129.

¹⁵ Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), pp. 286, 278.

institutions and conventions—commercial, religious, perceptual—that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made.”¹⁶

Baxandall’s concept of the “period eye” was no different from Wölfflin’s or Riegl’s. What he added to their relativisms was a concern for function. Behind the painting on the museum’s wall Baxandall saw an artifact entangled in social life. The artifact’s modern re-framing as an artwork, according to Baxandall, screened the historical work’s complicity with class interests or hierarchies of power and authority. Artistic beauty, in this view, disguises the relations of images and other fabricated things to authority or wealth.

An historicization of art more extreme than Baxandall’s is the art history of the medievalist Hans Belting, his near-contemporary. Belting’s account of medieval art, which reinserts devotional icons and narrative murals into their original functional matrices in public and private life, effectively omits “art.” In later writings he abandoned all allegiance to art as an object of historical study, and to form.¹⁷

Functionalist, materialist art history attends to real relations between artworks and the rest of the world, mistrusting the picture of the world proposed by the artwork itself. The terms deposit, trace, evidence, and index, used by Baxandall, Norman Bryson, Whitney Davis, David Summers, and others, designate the real, referential relations that bind artifacts to reality.¹⁸

What is the relation of the functionalist art histories of recent decades to the ongoing project of artistic Modernism? Baxandall was silent on this topic. Not necessarily attuned to contemporary art, he saw perhaps only an infinite and meaningless differentiation. Perhaps, like many other contextualist scholars of premodern art, he didn’t care about the fate of an art whose function in the modern world seems trivial, dispensable. This sense of the homelessness of art was set in motion in the Renaissance, with secularization. The willingness of contextualist art history to cut itself off from art criticism is perhaps linked to a tacit willingness to let “art” recede into the historical past.

Belting and Summers are exceptions: each offers at least a sketch of the overall shape of art history. Belting, skeptical of the self-serving narratives of formalist Modernism, basically dismissed the whole sweep of Western art from the Renaissance to Modernism as a mere supplement to aristocratic and later bourgeois life, and a closed field for a sterile

¹⁶ Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 1.

¹⁷ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (1990) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Belting and Dieter Blume, *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit* (Munich: Hirmer, 1989); *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (2004) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003).

aestheticism. He placed his hopes for a renewal of art in the so-called Post-Modern art which emerged in the 1970s, and more recently global art.¹⁹

David Summers shares with Belting (and the nineteenth-century philosopher G.W.F. Hegel) the view that art found its highest vocation in its involvement with collective religious life, i.e., in the past. Summers, who is a historian of Renaissance art and art theory but is well-acquainted with the art of ancient Mesoamerica and other forms of art beyond Europe, values art when it produces “real metaphors,” that is, invites one object to stand in for another. The real metaphor takes on meanings not in a grammatical and syntactical context, like a verbal metaphor, but in a “social spatial context.”²⁰ In his magnum opus *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2003), Summers argues that any appreciative projection of visual coherence onto artifacts—in other words, aestheticism—is posterior to art’s more fundamental purposes, namely, placing and spacing, or the staging of social bodies in fields of power. The aesthetic for Summers is always supplementary to art, “literally ‘after the fact.’”²¹ For Summers, the very concept of art is an ethnocentric contrivance of technologized and capitalized Western modernity.

For Summers, the hallmark of Western art since the Renaissance has been the condition of the *double metaphor*, that is, the mere fiction of a metaphor, constructed out of real materials but never achieving that clinching substitution (of statues for gods, for example) that the ritually embedded art of past had done.²² This alienation of art from ritual set in motion a declension from the real to the virtual. He doubts the capacity of the Western concept and mode of artmaking ever to deal with the tensions that have arisen between the traditional (centered) and modern Western (centerless) conceptions of space.²³ Summers defines Modernism as a kind of counter-movement within Western art. Modernism tried to reject the virtuality of Western art and return to “real space, the space of construction.” Summers defines construction as “the artist acting among things as opposed to transforming them.”²⁴ But even this “return to the real” will not be sufficient, according to Summers, because Modernism is disengaged from real power. Its cyclical reprocessings of form propagate so rapidly and arbitrarily that it is meaningless any longer to speak of “style,” or the consideration of artistic form as proper to a given place or period or community. This is what Baxandall knew but did not bother saying. Today, artistic form is no longer indexically linked to anything. Modernism can never overcome its origins as an internal contestation of the West with itself. Summers does hold out hopes for some forms of contemporary art. *Karrku Jukurrpa* (1996), for example, an Australian Aboriginal “map-

¹⁹ Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece* (1998) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe: ZKM; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2013)

²⁰ Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 687.

²¹ Summers, *Real Spaces*, pp. 58, 73.

²² Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 340.

²³ Summers, *Real Spaces*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ Summers, *Real Spaces*, pp. 642, 622.

narrative” painted in acrylic on canvas by 34 people, is valued by Summers because it does “not make a clean break from ritual to ‘art.’”²⁵

Meanwhile, in the very decades of the new functionalist art history (1970s to the present), as if internalizing the avant-garde reproach of formalism, and as if to distinguish themselves once and for all from historicists, Modernism redefined itself as a commitment to an emancipatory mission, whether it is art itself which reveals the path, or the critical study of visual culture. Formalist Modernism, or the critical reflection on modernity carried out in the medium of artistic form, came to appear more and more like a closed project which flourished for roughly a century, from the 1860s to the 1960s.

The theorists of the second wave of avant-garde art, initiated in the late 1950s, were directed against the intellectualism and solipsism of Greenberg. Discontent with the formalist version of Modernism gathered over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, until it was impossible any longer to ignore the latent idealism in Greenberg’s theory of art, still widely influential in this period. Consider, for example, his struggles to define the “unity” of Cézanne’s paintings: “Any successful work of art,” Greenberg wrote, must achieve “an appropriate and satisfying unity.”

What Cézanne wanted was a different, more emphatic, and supposedly more ‘permanent’ kind of unity... Committed though he was to the motif in nature in all its givenness, he still felt that it could not of its own accord provide a sufficient basis of pictorial unity [as it had for the Impressionists]; that had to be read into it by a combination of thought and feeling—thought that was not a matter of extra-pictorial rules, but of consistency, and feeling that was not a matter of sentiment, but of sensation.²⁶

Unity, satisfaction, consistency, and sensation seemed, to many, concerns too ethical, too bourgeois, too private. Greenberg’s solemnity could not survive the mood of restless irony that came over the American and European art scenes in the 1970s. Suddenly all manipulations of form in art seemed to be happening at one degree of remove, in quotation marks, as it were. Meanwhile, the historical study of Modernism itself made it clear that there were many kinds of modern art not structured around form and so eluding the advances of formalist analysis. The photograph, for example, to an unprecedented extent draws its internal patterning from reality itself. There was photography that aspires to be treated formalistically, and there was formalist criticism of photography, but since the 1970s it is increasingly felt that this is to miss the point about the medium. It could be said that Erwin Panofsky was saying more or less the same thing about perspective, namely, that a formalist analysis of a perspectival painting would miss the point.²⁷ An increasingly conspicuous

²⁵ Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 661.

²⁶ Greenberg, “Cézanne and the Unity of Modern Art,” *Partisan Review*, May-June 1951; reprinted in Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 3: 82-91, here pp. 84-85.

²⁷ Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927) (New York: Zone, 1991).

lodestar for American and European artists since the 1960s was Dada, which as we saw already in 1916 redefined art as an *attitude*. There has never been a formalism adequate to Dada, and in the end that failure may be enough to relativize formalist criticism forever, that is, to locate it historically and to limit its use-value.

But overall, the tendencies of form to initiate unforeseen exchanges but also shut-downs of signification tend to stall, accelerate, divert, and block the feedback loops running between art and reality. Formalism exposes a discontinuity between artwork and world which can either be accepted as an end in itself (aestheticism) or become the basis for a grasp of that discontinuity as the *format* of the artwork's dynamic interpretation of the world. Formalism is a kind of disciplinary superego or conscience that compels recognition of the discontinuity between artworks and everything else. Formalism throughout the twentieth century and into our own pulls art historical writing or art criticism back to the work of art. Formalism censures two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, the will to "read" artworks as if they were messages or a kind of knowledge; and on the other hand, the desire to possess or savor artworks as if they were bodies or jewels.

The neo-formalist moment is already history—unfortunately, I would say. Once again, and perhaps for the last time, formalism has failed to hold its ground. The shape of Western art theory and art criticism and art history has been a series of sloughings-off of persistent formalist habits.

In the last decades the anti-formalist strategies of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes have been internalized by artists. Modernism in art has come to be understood not as the generation of forms so much as the borrowing, citation, parody, appropriation, editing, cropping, and reframing of forms. The global paradigm propagates, adapts, and re-purposes avant-garde techniques. These rejections of the formalist modes of Modernism laid the groundwork for today's global contemporary art. Global contemporary art is the recent synchronization and coordination of various versions of Modernism—including avant-gardism—practiced in various places over the course of the last century, and in particular it involves the relativization and de-privileging of the Modernism emanating from a few American and European cities.²⁸ The paradigm of global contemporary art is relatively easy to identify. It is the art of the international biennial exhibitions. Global contemporary art is not the entirety of artmaking on planet Earth right now. The participants in the project of global contemporary art are few in number: this is not a phenomenon of mass culture, even if mass culture is often a resource or a target of contemporary art. Like Modernism, global contemporary art is an elite phenomenon. Not all global contemporary art, however, is expensive, or fatally coupled to market imperatives. Global contemporary art is art involved with theoretical and critical discourses, both pre-production and post-production. Global contemporary art is true to the original progressivist calling of Modernism, namely, the aspiration to contribute, through art, to emancipation, equality, and other real-world goals.

At the start of this essay we suggested that the global and universalist character of the art of the international biennials—unlike previous universal styles—is not based on artistic form. In fact, no one speaks of the "style" of this art at all, or about formal norms of any kind.

²⁸ See Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, p. xxi and elsewhere.

What, then, is responsible for the universal character of the global contemporary paradigm? Possibly a shared *content*. A politically progressive program and a sense of urgency are almost universally shared. There is a strong sense that one must get with that program or be left behind. Perhaps it is our shared ecological destiny which calls for this collectivist, “state of emergency” approach.²⁹ The global contemporary paradigm encourages not so much the development of formal disciplines as *strategies*. Artists today quickly learn how to position themselves in art history, in a discursive field, in a commercial environment. The positioning, and the staying up to date, is everything; you can’t miss a beat. And this is why the matrix of the global contemporary paradigm, as David Joselit has convincingly shown, is the art of the 1970s characterized by irony and self-awareness, including relentless critique of the institutions sustaining art’s social privileges, and involving techniques of montage, appropriation, pastiche, and citation.³⁰ In the 1980s, Joselit argues, the varieties of modern art and Modernisms were synchronized, and this became the global contemporary paradigm.

Since irony is endlessly dynamic and self-consuming, an art shaped by strategic positioning never settles into an historical pattern. Progress can no longer be measured in the dimension of form. Instead, progress is measured entirely in the dimension of content, which is increasingly dominated by the themes of social justice and climate justice. In fact, progress is measured in the real world, where it should be, perhaps. Art has become a medium for political activism. For Wölfflin and all the other formalists of the past, artistic form was the medium of *ideality*. Today, ideality is recognized in a *form of thought*, or a *form of feeling*. The private viewer with the leisure to contemplate artistic form is no longer a favored addressee; artists’ traditional concerns with longevity and inscription into the annals of art history are (in principle) no longer paramount. Some artists have fought free of the entanglements and compromises entailed by a financialized concept of art.

Thus the key move which catalyzed global contemporary art was the yoking of progressivism to *content* rather than to *form*. One of the criteria of art used to be that it is difficult to tell form and content apart. That is not always the case today. Artists participating in the global contemporary paradigm are less likely to place their hopes in the promise of form, either because they are no longer willing to submit to the disciplined research and exercise required to sustain the older modes of form-centered art-making, or because they are less confident that artistic form can reorient people to reality—“make a difference”—swiftly or decisively enough. As Sam Rose puts it, the formalist Modernist narrative was so influential that by the 1980s the only way to move beyond “elitist conceptions of beauty” and towards a “repoliticized view of what visual culture and its study might involve” was to adopt an “‘anti-aesthetic’ stance.”³¹ This move seems irreversible. When a regime of artistic form is proclaimed, there will always be someone who rebels, who goes his own way. But when the program is social justice, who will dare to question it?

²⁹ Rose, *Art and Form*, p. 152.

³⁰ Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, pp. 24-28.

³¹ Rose, *Art as Form*, p. 8.

One might well be skeptical about all this. It remains to be seen whether the techniques of appropriation, montage, and recombination do not involve their own tropologies and transformations such as to support politically unreliable misrecognitions and retardations, of the sort that formalist Modernism was thought to be vulnerable to. One might also point out that the global contemporary paradigm is still in hidden ways protective of art's autonomy and privileges.³² But I don't wish to strike that cynical note here. Except to note briefly that the quality of being "in the know" has come to seem exceedingly important, if not indispensable. Contemporary art is tolerant of anything *except* kitsch, or naiveté, unless that naiveté is instantly quoted and so converted into camp, or faux naiveté; and this may amount to a new elitism, a hierarchy between insiders and outsiders.

Bruno Latour, in a reflection on the impossibility of religious expression in modernity, rejects the argument that religious feeling and thought somehow persist in art, especially painting and music. Art may raise this hope because it "turns our gaze towards the remote, towards the distant, towards the foreign," and yet unlike religion "never worries about exercising control over the places it allows us to reach." Art gives us what he calls an "accessless access." But in the end art is "too enigmatic, too innovative, too perverse as well to accompany religion long in its meanderings."³³ Sooner or later art goes its own way, as it did in the European Renaissance. This we once called "secularization": not, in fact, an overall societal loss of religious faith, but just *art striking out on its own*. Now the global contemporary art paradigm seems to resemble again an alliance between art and religion, if a roster of non-negotiable principles dedicated to redemption, salvation, freedom, and love can be described as a religion. The religion—a somewhat diminished form of religion, one might say—is the *confidence in art's progressivist mission*. "Progress" has sometimes been considered a myth, in particular a myth generated by peculiarly Western forms of "metaphysical optimism."³⁴ Today progress is less often described as a myth. Instead it is assumed to be an unquestionable desideratum. The global contemporary paradigm, insofar as it involves art's surrendering to its own political instrumentalization, risks being left behind by other types of art. Form was once considered the natural ally of art because form never "settles." Whereas content, in the end, despite all the worries about cultural relativism, did settle. Content has converged on the content of contents, moral clarity. Perhaps we await a second secularization of art, a self-emancipation from the noble but unfree tasks it has been set. How will we recognize that event?

³² Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 34, points out that while we (Westerners) may celebrate the fact that advanced art is now a common, shared pursuit across the globe, there is also "the less positive implication that when all is said and done everyone makes 'art' just as we have come to believe we do."

³³ Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing, or the Torments of Religious Speech* (2002) (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 105.

³⁴ Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 659.