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postmodernism in the pictorial arts

on the subversion of a subversive art

● The modernistic idea that an artist could be seen as an avant-gardist who would lead mankind to something better, and thus was, so to say, "most wanted" was negated by Duchamp in 1923 with a mischievous work. He put his own portrait in a classified ad, in which he incorporated the slogan, "Most Wanted." This attitude, which engenders scepticism or even cynicism in a subversive manner, is termed Post-modern today. Warhol then turned the tables: he honoured the criminal by arranging portraits of this very special kind of social "star" into a work entitled the "Thirteen Most Wanted Men" and hung it on the outer wall of the New York State pavilion at the world exhibition in 1964. He changed Duchamp's concept but playfully referred in the title to Duchamp in a manner similar to today's post-modern art quotations. At the time the organization of the fair noted with surprise that most of the portraits were leaders of the Italian Mafia. Italy could not be offended in any way so Warhol painted over his portraits in silver grey. The individuals portrayed in his work were present, everyone knew, but as usual they had gone underground. Warhol's work dealt with subversion using a subversive method - sabotage all the way.

In the examples just mentioned we can speak about a subversive method because both Duchamp and Warhol used the underground movement or, more appropriately expressed, the underworld as a metaphor for their method of undermining socially preferred ideas in order to conceal essential statements in the work itself about the task of art. What then does subversion have to do with the terms "avant-garde" and "Post-modernism"?

In Latin subversion means a coup d'état. Although the word has changed considerably in meaning over the centuries, the negative connotation has been retained. Subversive elements are what politicians like to call anonymous adversaries who fight covertly against the government. Revolutionaries, in contrast, espouse radical political change in public or meet initially in secret to prepare a coup. They see themselves as the vanguard of a military movement which will turn a corrupt and lethargic society into a better one. It was the French revolutionary and soldier Henri de Saint-Simon, who demilitarized the term vanguard and transferred it to the avant-garde work of intellectuals and artists.

According to Saint-Simon, it was their duty to fight against the traditionalists and lead the movement to change society for the better. If they were to prove their revolutionary spirit, they had two options: either an open declaration of war or subversion. Thus, subversion no longer carried a negative connotation for the intellectual and creative vanguard; it was now a sanctioned method and became one of the two inevitable strategies of the avant-garde.

Subversive attacks take on a different form than aggressive ones. André Breton, the main advocate of a Surrealistic art/religion seems to refer in his work, albeit in an indirect and subversive manner, to the power of desire and fantasy; he sees it as a creative, releasing power in mankind. For example, in his photograph, where he stands in front of bars, behind which a young girl seeks to seduce him. Separated from her like desire from bourgeois decency, he endeavours to use a microscope, from which small horses escape as a symbol of male energy, although they defy scientific analysis. At the time Breton received support from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who declared that desire was the most important subversive power. According to Breton, this subversion is self-imposed because we yearn to make the world our own via desire but instead encounter each other in the outer world only through our otherness.

Strangely one seldom finds the term subversion in encyclopaedias, hardly ever in philosophical dictionaries and in art-historical discussions about the avant-garde, although it is one of their strategies of renewal. Only Lacan spoke of subversion in his "Ecrit" of 1966 as a metaphor for a counter-movement against the paternalistic power of rational language. In the wake of the Surrealists he described the power of dream and fantasy as the creative driving force of associative language in contrast to the ordered language of rational syntax. To Descartes' dictum "I think therefore I am" he presented the equally logical but paradox sentence: "I think where I am not, therefore I am, where I do not think". Julia Kristeva followed Lacan's lead with her book *On the Revolution of Poetic Language* (Paris 1974), in which she praised the subversive qualities of irrational and associative language.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what role then does subversion play in Postmodernism?

The avant-garde of today certainly no longer believe in a better world in the future but rather want to expose grand words with subversive wit and contradiction. Immanuel Kant's views - sensation, for example, which he declared to be at best a preface to a rational, emancipated form of consciousness - are exposed as unreasonable by Bernhard Johannes Blume in his 1981 photo series entitled "Die reine Vernunft ist als reine Vernunft ungenießbar" ("Pure Reason is Unbearable as Pure Reason"). Lacan and Kristeva would certainly applaud this stance. As has become quite evident, the man on the street can no longer accept the props of an emancipated Constructivist art - geometric elements in monochrome colours. It was the Constructivism of a Mondrian, Max Bill or Viktor Vasarely that proclaimed on its banner of modernism that the geometrically clear elements would provide the viewer with the alphabet of emancipation. This was the declared utopia of the Constructivists. Blume objected, however, in an indirect way: he did exactly, in a seemingly earnest attempt, what the Constructivists demanded of him. But his shirt, styled à la Mondrian, could not cover his soft, full body the way it should.

Instead of glorifying the construction of concrete buildings - these heroic testimonials of modernist culture - Gordon Matta-Clark documented in a 1973 photo collage with the cynical title "Really Properties - Fake Estate" how nature can gain the upper hand over the mass of concrete. The blades of grass in his collage appear to be anarchists fighting against established order. His little narrative deals with the forces of underground movements. Instead of glorifying the advance of technology as Wladim, for example, once did, the Swiss artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss show in their so-called "Sewer Video" only underground sewage pipes. The irritated viewer ends up - if he doesn't give up beforehand - standing for an hour in front of the monitor literally looking into the tube. It is coppery and shiny and offers with its aesthetically pleasing central perspective a view of a never-ending tube. The video, however, seems to last forever. If a rat, caught by the automatic sewage-pipe monitor in its tour of the sewage system, hadn't suddenly appeared, there would not have been any surprises, only pure repetition. The strategy of artists to use serialism, which once was propagated by Constructivism as the quintessence of

technology, is subversively revealed in its overabundance as absurd. Furthermore, "subversion" itself is emblematically pointed to: sewage pipes are placed underground out of the public eye.

As in the work just described, the subversion found in Postmodernism is not only a theme dealing with contradiction, doubt, scepticism and cynicism but it is given form in a symbolic manner. It reveals what lies hidden, under the skin as it were. While Fische & Weiss take the viewer underground, other artists get under the skin.

Bruce Nauman was the first to bring forth powerful images of animal carousels. He made castings of animals that had actually been skinned. Methodologically, Nauman was using deconstruction, which according to Jacques Derrida precedes a new construction retaining visible elements of the original. The skinned animals are thus a symbol for subversive behaviour. Damien Hirst has shown in a much more violent manner what lies under the skin. He took a dead cow, pig and calf, cut them in half with skin and hide preserved and lay each in formaldehyde. Thus two halves of a pig are seen floating like valuable objects in a display case. The viewer is able to literally walk through the cow and study the innards, now turning white, with all its intertwining and convolutions of soft forms. Like walking through a forbidden passage, it takes on the character of a rite de passage. In so doing, Hirst has drawn the consequences of Fontana's cross section. This cut - executed in the 1950s already - was still considered a sacrilege in 1964. Visitors and art critics of the third documenta in Kassel were outraged. Deconstruction lets the viewer experience what lies under the skin of an entire body and thus also the entirety of the art work. Especially Hirst's approach allows the viewer to identify with the seemingly live physicality of art: the incisions cause pain.

It was Julia Kristeva, who in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980) once again drew upon these themes, making the deviant and absurd in the Existentialist's writing relevant today. Other artists can also be mentioned in this connections: Cindy Sherman's horror pictures and a photographic work by Inez von Lamsweerde. Both show the subversion of horror lying under the skin's surface. Gender has thus been recognized as a realm of freedom, constantly on the verge of collapsing, a sphere where disobedience reigns.

Deformation and mutilation, as they are presented by Nauman, van Lamsweerde, and others is in fact not a strategy that art has a monopoly on. Confronted with a monstrous body the viewer is reminded of what he seeks and what truly affects him: warmth, strength, hope and love. It is the frailty of mankind which appears to be put aside and mutilated and thus we are reminded of the whole individual, likewise ephemeral, who can't be admired but perhaps can be loved.

With these appeals to the desire for humane values, such as memory, sensitivity and depth of inner life, the supposed indifferent Post-modern art reveals its true commitment. Its subversive method reveals its roots in modernism, not in the avant-garde. Modernism also sought to create a renewal using subversive elements to fight well-meant resolutions and the belief in the impact of actions. In this respect, Postmodernism cannot easily assert itself as an independent cultural movement following modernism. ●

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