

The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center presents

THE MODERN | POSTMODERN DIALECTIC: AN ONLINE SYMPOSIUM

American Art and Culture, 1965 - 2000

10-02-2001

Maurice Berger

Welcome everyone. This forum discussion will be divided up into 2 day categories throughout the two week time period.

10-03-2001

Maurice Berger

Panelists, PLEASE POST IN THE NEW SESSION (Oct 3 - 4). This section is now archived for Oct 1 - 2.

Maurice Berger

Welcome to our virtual symposium. I ask that visitors as well as panelists please read the discussion overview (linked on the main page:<http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/center/onlinesymposium.php>) to get acquainted with the general issues of this discussion.

This is a difficult time for our nation. I live in New York City and can see, first hand, how difficult things have become. The other day, I was talking to an artist friend about this conference. She made the following remark: "Oh, postmodernism, it's so much about irony. I think it will be impossible for artists to be ironic for a while. Things are just too brutal and real out there. Irony feels too cynical and frivolous." At some point in this symposium, I'd like to examine this idea specifically. What interests me about this remark--in more general terms--is that it is built around a rather precise definition of postmodernism as an art of "irony," an art that self-consciously examines culture and its representations in critical, often highly-theoretical, and cynical ways.

In the early 1980s, as a young art critic, I used the term postmodern as if it were known to all and self-evident. By the late 1980s, I stopped using it. At the time, it seemed faddish, even inaccurate. Yet, many of my colleagues continued to use it. At a symposium held at the new Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center last July--Defining American Modernism (1890-Present)--some panelists used the term "postmodern" (Brian Wallis and Ann Gibson) while others argued strongly against it (Rob Storr). More than a decade after I lost confidence in the idea of a culture that was "post" modern, I'm now not sure how I feel.

And so my first question to the panelists of this virtual symposium: What do you think about the term "postmodern"? Do you use it in your writing and teaching? Do you reject it entirely? Are you not sure? And, finally: What is your working definition of postmodernism? Or, conversely, why do you believe the term is invalid or problematic?

Visitors should feel free to E-mail me with questions and comments (see link on the main page for E-mail form). Due to the large volume of E-mail, I will not be able to respond to every inquiry or to post all of them to the symposium.

John Carlin

I have often wondered why the term 'postmodern' is so loaded. It has always seemed a convenient marker, much like modernism itself. Both being arrogant gestures that assume that the present and the recent past represent the logical culmination of history. All things lead to us. Or something like that. I assumed they were terms that would have to be replaced at some point. So why not now?

It's a new century. The landscape of my hometown has been ripped apart in ways unimaginable a month ago. So why not invent new terminology?

Oh yeah, I know why. It isn't the term that is really at issue. It's the underlying meaning. In my sense of things, postmodernism had given way to the term 'post-industrial'. That seemed less loaded and more specific at the same time. The moment in the middle of the last century when the idea of the avant-garde began to wane was also when American culture transformed from one that made things to one that processed information. That change seems significant to me in ways that go beyond visual culture. And to me the value of visual culture is that provided a lens through which to see those changes before a language to describe them was invented and implemented.

But the larger picture for me is that living in a culture that is post- anything is something of a failure. Admitting we live in the mannerist phase of something created by others. I am waiting for the youth culture revolution that will take place sometime in the next decade or so and give this new century something new to talk about.

Donna DeSalvo

Maurice, to answer your question about the term, postmodern, I must say both a yes and a no. When I do use it, I do so self-consciously as the term has become so overused as to become meaningless. That said, it is impossible to dismiss simply out of hand. Its value may be in framing a discussion, a term that allows us to see what has changed, and what has remained the same, one outcome of this symposium.

Within the American context, I cannot help linking the term postmodern with much of the art produced during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially the pluralist experiments of the late 1970s when the grand narrative fractured into multiple narratives. There are some who may argue this as an expansion of modernist principles, and they may be right.

From a UK perspective, it is fascinating to see how certain movements--abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, continue to capture the public imagination as definitive statements of American art. Younger artists, however, are quick to acknowledge the art of the 1970s as a critical foundation for their work.

Maurice Berger

Well said, John.

I've always been somewhat troubled by the "post" in post modern. So much of modernism's most radical edge was about transgressing boundaries--I think of Duchamp or the photo-montages of Hannah Hoch, etc. I wonder how they're different from the most radical art of the past thirty years--art most often marked with the term postmodern. How, exactly, is Jeff Koons different from Duchamp or Barbara Kruger from Hoch?

Does "post" imply somehow that the modernist ethos has failed or has been exhausted? Are there threads of thinking and form that suggest a continuity with this ethos?

Let's hear from other panelists, re: their ideas about postmodernism. And, John: What is about the culture of the past 30 years that warrants a new term? Is it the technological changes in culture? The socio-political changes?

Maurice Berger

And, Donna. Thanks. Well said and provocative.

Your post suggests another question: when does postmodernism begin, if, indeed, we believe, it exists at all as a viable term?

Could Jackson Pollock's radical drip paintings be considered postmodern . . . or are they an endgame of post-cubist, modernist painting?

And, of course, more replies to my first question are most welcome.

John Carlin

To me Modernism begins with the conscious creation of art work for museums (and hence self-conscious art history) rather than for purposes that decorate, celebrate or illuminate functioning social power structures (church, state, capital).

I would peg the tremors in Courbet and the full blown in Manet with Baudelaire cheering them on by the side. By this way of thinking Picasso and Duchamp are already post-modern. Already using irony as the prime trope in the sense of making art that assumes the audience will get the inside jokes.

Modern is a relevant term because I believe these artists were conscious of time in a new way . I consider this the invention of another type of perspective - chronological rather than spatial. Which is why Modernism to me is a deliberate attempt to re-do the Renaissance in a way that it tried to re-do the Greeks.

So if Duchamp is already post-modern (and I think he certainly was trying to be) where does that leave us? Or at least the artists around us.

There are two ways of seeing this from my perspective. The first is depressing - we are stuck in a mannerist half-life of the modern paradigm. Echoes of ideas that still sell (viz. Koons) but lack the punch to breakthrough the historical canon in a big way.

The second is uplifting and it has two directions. The first is art that engages society. How can one go wrong there? Society changes and art much struggle to record that - better yet to find ways to represent changes as they are occurring. That is why I have always been drawn to so-called political art whether it be journalistic like Sue Coe or conceptual like Adrian Piper.

The other direction is still a bit of a pipe dream. It extrapolates the potential for a change based upon technological changes. I think that is why the cultural products of 20th century technology-- film, music and television--often seem more dynamic and significant than actual "fine art" production. But art does have this wonderful hook into history. And the added feature of controlling the means of production in ways that 20th century recorded media do not.

So that leads to my pipe dream. That the digital revolution that almost happened a few years ago is still waiting to happen. And that it will enable artist to create a new form of content--and then distribute it without the big budgets of corporate culture. Now, marketing is another issue. Perhaps that's where critics come in....

Now all of this will new a new name altogether. Maybe that the subject of another symposium

Dan Cameron

Thinking about Maurice's initial question, and John's and Donna's responses, I'm immediately torn by problems of language. On the one hand, I've never identified post-modernism as an art movement, but rather as a cultural era, in which a number of separate disciplines (art, film, literature, video, music) began to share certain underlying characteristics, one of them being a

deep skepticism regarding structures of authority and authenticity. In a literal sense, the dream of modernity was no longer seen as sustainable (or even desirable), and the culture packed up and moved to another place. I'd agree with Donna that this began in the art world with the advent of pluralistic modes of artistic practice in the late 1960s, but I would add that in the culture at large this moment corresponded roughly to the failure of the countercultural experiment to take root in the American psyche.

I feel that we are still living in that same post-modern era, but some of the premises underlying our original thinking about this age have shifted. For example, what John refers to as politically-defined art I would lump under a loose rubric of 'art of the real,' in which artists are increasingly addressing the terms by which we understand something as being real in the world. Art as a self-sufficient system is no longer as credible as it was during the modern and early postmodern phases, and artists want instead to produce tools that enable themselves and others to come to terms with this new, more contested, notion of reality.

Speaking in terms of artistic production, I believe that the most defining aspect of the art of our time is its global dimension. Just as we have never before had a system in which artists working in diverse corners of the world could share an equally international audience, so we have never had as great a need to think and act as global citizens. Much more than most other forms of cultural expressions today, contemporary art prepares us for a world in which we are all exchanging diverse viewpoints simultaneously. Since this seems to be the world into which we are now heading, my sense is that art, however much it seems to be drifting, is actually at the vanguard of the culture once again, without most of us working within its boundaries even being aware of it.

So I guess I would go on record to say that I'm comfortable thinking of the dominant tendency of our time, global art, as falling under the broader rubric of the postmodern.

Jennifer Gonzalez

I approach the term "postmodernism" as a historian. I examine the cultural context in which the term arises (theories of architecture) and attempt to offer my students a map of the semantic transformations of the term that take place in the domains of art criticism, literature and philosophy.

Unlike the well defined, if hotly debated, practices and collaborations of Dadaism or Surrealism, there is no clearly articulated postmodern manifesto. Instead, much like the networked systems of communication, becoming common in the early 1970's, there are what might be called postmodern "nodes" or "interchanges" between media and between intellectual or philosophical paradigms. I imagine a web of intellectual exchanges happening simultaneously between literature, philosophy and art practice in which new ideological territories are simultaneously and independently created, offering parallel and often contradictory definitions of the term "postmodern." Indeed, some may argue that, by definition, the term postmodernism precludes the very concept of stable definitions. Hence we arrive, not surprisingly, at the emptiness of the term.

While it is easy to say that there are many kinds of postmodernism, it is more difficult to assess how each "fiction of the term" has been made instrumental for a given discourse. For me, this is the more interesting question; not "What does it mean?" but "How has it been used, and why?" Such a study, of course, becomes particularly complicated if the term is asked to define innovations in aesthetic practice that are read as politically progressive (Foster), as well as to characterize the hegemonic logic of capitalist production (Jameson), etc.

I agree with Maurice that we (art critics, art theorists, literary theorists, historians, philosophers, journalists) do not know what we mean when we say "postmodernism." I might add that perhaps "we" never really did know what we meant (i.e. we never agreed upon a semantic ground for the term). Despite this fact, which, it must be said, is true of so much intellectual exchange, the term "postmodernism" has had a concrete effect on a number of fields of discourse and practice. To

examine this _effect_, I believe, remains a worthwhile project.

Two questions: Is it possible that postmodernism, as a concept, arrived at the moment when, due to the distribution of communication, and the speed of publication, it was simply no longer possible to produce a consensus, or even a clearly delineated debate, over the meaning of the term (or of any term)? Could its appearance mark a (last) effort to produce broad categorical terms in a world that we have come to recognize is no longer (if ever it was) amenable to broad categories?

Maurice Berger

Excellent post, John.

From the standpoint of history, is postmodernism analogous to the mannerism that followed the renaissance?

I wonder if the social/ideological orientation of some of the best recent art--Adrian Piper is an excellent example--places it well beyond the endless replaying of earlier styles and theories suggested by the word mannerism. But is this social engagement uniquely "postmodern"? I don't think so, given the social activism inherent to certain modernist practices, from German Expressionism to dada.

OK, the rest of you. Let's hear what's on your mind.

Maurice Berger

Dan's post raises important questions.

I've been thinking a great deal about the issue of globalism. Certainly, the cultural changes that have taken place because of globalism--changes enhanced by new technologies (such as the internet) and new ideologies (such as multiculturalism)--are immense. The nature of culture has greatly changed because of the increasing shift towards globalism. Though this paradigm shift doesn't always cut both ways: how much Islamic culture has trickled down into the United States? But are these changes "postmodern" or are they way too big to be covered by such a limiting term.

After all, modernism was not a global movement, and its reach was limited. (Its inherent elitism, for example, closed it off from the vast majority of the Western populations where it flourished.)

Maurice Berger

In other words, Jennifer, is the postmodern condition (to quote Jean-Francois Lyotard) about the dissolution or attenuation of categories?

Excellent question.

Let's hear from others, either in response to these posts or to the initial question at hand.

Ann Gibson

As John has suggested, the term "postmodern" began to be used in the late sixties to refer to art that, among (lots of) other things pointed to the work of artists, writers, musicians, actors, etc., who could no longer conceive of pursuing the universal as a positive activity or even a possible goal. It was "post" modern because many moderns had announced the achievement of universality one of their foremost concerns. Concerns such as those Donna and John mentioned began to cook as the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. gathered steam, the Women's movement became an issue for everyone, and gays and lesbians after Stonewall staked their right to positive public identities. As these issues bubbled to the surface, it also became evident that they had been beneath it for hundreds of years, and had surfaced increasingly earlier in the twentieth century as well--if Duchamp isn't "postmodern," who is? It became weird to define only the late

sixties and after as when "postmodernism" could occur, and the term became a misnomer before it even came into general use.

But it seems now as if (by when?) it was already too late to get rid of this self-defeating noun. "Postmodernism" became a term, if not the term, that refers not only to an awkward awareness of one's inadequacy to address everyone, but also a kind of smug second-guessing of one's every move that disavows responsibility for their consequences. Given these opposite affects, its tautological self-contradiction seems just right. It means that to use it in any sensible way, you have to not just the term, but your relation to it.

That it did come into general use and hasn't disappeared suggests that many of us who are the kind of folks that chat on the internet about things like this began to need a word in the late sixties for our perception of what we still hope was a general cultural upheaval, at least in some parts of the world. Even in its most inclusive moments, postmodern doesn't mean much of anything in many places.

As elements of "universality" seem to be reviving, maybe one thing "postmodern" signifies is the contingency of universality.

Barbara Lynes

I want to welcome all of you to the exciting and challenging online symposium, "The Modern/Postmodern Dialectic," moderated by Maurice Berger, that is taking place until 14 October on the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Website. It is a great pleasure to have you with us and to have your contributions and participation.

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Barbara. We're most grateful to the Georgia O'Keeffe Study Center for supporting this symposium. Not many museums would be willing to take on this kind of project.

Ann, excellent post. I have a question. You wrote: "Even in its most inclusive moments, postmodern doesn't mean much of anything in many places." Does the elitism and inside-the-beltway quality of the term make it inadequate for describing the broad-based cultural shifts that have taken place over the past thirty years? In other words, is it too narrow and limited a term? Your post would seem to suggest that it is.

Jonathan Weinberg

Hello. It seems like the symposium is already off to a great start.

As to using the term post-modernism in teaching, I don't see how we can avoid it, if only too complain about it. There are so many period terms that are vague and confusing. Modernism itself is one of them. It is certainly true of terms like Romanticism and Mannerism. Years ago, Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner made an excellent point about the term Romanticism during a seminar they ran which might apply to both Modernism and Post-Modernism. They claimed that it was in the nature of such terms to be fluid and flexible--that this was part of their power. If one thinks about the English language in general some of our most powerful words function in this way. Take the word "love" for instance. We say that we love our partners, but we also say that we love to eat french fries. Modernism/Post-Modernism may be useful terms precisely because they both seem to point to a specific period and certain types of art making activities, and yet at the same time they are not entirely defining of any particular work of art or style or artist. The very process of defining their meaning and fixing their uses is productive not because it establishes their parameters, but because it makes us think about shared characteristics and differences of the art of the period(s) in question.

Jonathan Weinberg

I do hope we will get to the issue of September 11 and irony that Maurice raised. I have already done some paintings that respond to the disaster. I am not sure that they are particularly ironic,

but in general I cannot imagine not be able to use irony in my work. It seems to me to be a basic coping mechanism of thinking individuals. Indeed, the ironic voice is sorely needed right now during this time of rampant patriotism. But perhaps I am getting ahead of the discussion...

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Jonathan. Well said.

As for the issue of art after the tragedy of 11 September: I'd like to wait a few days, until most of the panelists have posted in on the initial, somewhat more general questions I asked earlier today.

I've already received several comments from visitors to the symposium as to whether the artists will be motivated by new and shifting priorities, from "postmodern" irony, cynicism, self-consciousness to an art of humanism, emotion, and social relevance. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive, but let's discuss this all a bit later. I'll post these responses in a few days, as well.

Caroline Jones

Hello all. From my vantage point in soggy, splendid Berlin, "capital of the 21st century," globalism is unavoidable. And the pock-marked evidence of globalism's terror (version 2.0) is also everywhere. But true to emerging "glocalism," local specificity is all-important. At the least, it enforces time zones on one's consciousness -- I waited patiently until 12 E.S.T., but then of course I wanted to be asleep. Now the boat is well under steam.

The grey steely skies of Eastern Europe resonate well with the mood of the moment. These are depressing times, and it's hard to think about art at all (despite Rudi's injunction to the world to cry *and* laugh, [translate, it wouldn't hurt to spend a little money please]). Postmodernism, despite our embarrassment with the term, was never entirely frivolous, nor entirely ironic. I've always taught it as a deep shift in available positions -- the option of being "outside" looking in was no longer available. My favorite postmodern apercu is Smithson's (natürlich): "I'm interested in the apparatus I'm being threaded through." Modernist artists' experience of howling from the wilderness at a mass culture they were excluded from is no longer an option. Now more than ever we are participants in the spectacle, part and parcel of the apparatus we're being threaded through.

I've been haunted by the postmodern aspects of the "Anschlag," as I can't help but think of the terrorist attack. This is the intellectual's response, even as other parts of me cry a lot, especially for my niece and nephew, whose uncle called from the 105th floor before a death we've all been imagining over and over. The terror worked, of course, but it found its way to our reptilian brains by postmodern means -- the classic postmodern understandings of "spectacle" were surely part of the apparatus of terror, and they were mapped in countless Hollywood movies and smart bomb videos before real life could catch up. The entire operation on the 11th of September was a case of reverse engineering (indeed, most of the terrorists were trained as engineers). The concept of reverse engineering (footnoted thanks to historian of science Peter Galison here), is to enter the apparatus and take apart complex systems by being within them, strategically removing key components to engineer entropy. But although this sounds cool and clinical, the planners also had a clear media-savvy side. Without CNN, one suspects, the terrorism would have taken a very different form.

Deep (too deep) into a critical history of Greenberg, I am constantly nuancing the term "modern." Modernism, modernist, modernity, the modern -- perhaps we need to build this historical repertoire for what was postmodernism, too. Pollock in Greenberg's account made it possible for humans to function in the apparatus. Not that *Pollock* (or should I say Ed Harris) saw it this way, necessarily -- but the reading of that artist that got him into the MoMA was Greenberg's -- a reading that saw grids in the skeins. I've always resisted romanticizing the avant-garde, and one aspect of the "post" worth resisting is the secret conviction that we came after the party, after the

real radicals have gone home. I'm not sure that's really true, and certainly don't find it productive. I think until we get the next great term, we should try nuancing this one. So:

Posting on Post: postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism, po-mo, (no-mo po-mo? slo-mo po-mo?).... This one's for uncle Patrick.

Maurice Berger

Great post, Caroline.

As I read your post--taking account of my own emotional response to a tragedy I can't even begin to get my mind around--I realize that 11 September is weighing heavily on all our minds. Ironically (if I may be ironic), so many of the issues that have emerged in the past three weeks in the popular culture--the possibility for a truly "global" response to terrorism, the porosity of borders to the role of irony and humor at a time of great national loss and crisis--have real resonance in this symposium.

Caroline has firmly weighed in on the term "post"(po, etc) modern. She's inclined to keep it. I'm curious, are any of you willing to reject the term--and its possible definitions--outright? Anyone a staunch supporter of "postmodern" as an historical marker?

Dan Cameron

Maurice, I know you'd planned to wait a bit before plunging into the Sept 11 terrorist attacks, but since you mentioned the one-way nature of exported culture, I think it's pertinent to bring up the vast gulf that has opened up in our very community between those who have felt all along that it's essential for all cultural practitioners to be well-informed about international developments, whether political or artistic, and those who haven't. Although this is hardly the first time that most of us have pondered the threat of both the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, it is, for most, the first time it's become necessary to think long and hard about knotty subjects like democracy in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (neither practices it), about America's disproportionate consumption of the world's resources, or about the precise tenets of the Koran that make bin Laden's version of Islam such an obscene distortion. These may not be the front and center topics of the current crisis, but their position in the larger picture have undermined most Americans' tendency to regard what's happening in the rest of the world as an optional pursuit. Suddenly the luxury of thinking that way has vanished, and for the sake of democracy, if not national security, we all need to bone up on how the rest of the world feels about a lot of the things we do.

It may seem like a bit of a stretch from there to postmodernism, but I think the link exists. For years now, a sector of the art world has bemoaned the curatorial obsession with achieving geographical balance in group exhibitions, using various arguments to tacitly support the premise that only fleeting attention needs to be paid to art made outside the U.S. and two or three Western European countries. Perhaps, as you say, very little Islamic culture arrives in mainstream America, but quite a bit of it does move through the worlds of art, new music and independent film, and these fields end up influencing (albeit not as much as we'd like) how decisions about popular culture are made. This is the practice of global art, as opposed to globalization, which functions almost as a diametrically opposed cultural force.

So as I watch so many of my fellow Americans retreat into the unthinking safety of flag-waving jingoism, I have no hesitation in stating my belief that artists suddenly have had a more vital role in society handed to them than they have experienced in more than a generation. By thinking critically, deconstructing 'reality,' and promoting an artistic community in which all points of view are embraced, the art community can set an important example for the ways that responsible citizens will need to think about their place in the challenging new world that is taking shape from the ashes of this catastrophe.

Maurice Berger

Yes, Dan, I very much agree. I just got off the phone with a friend, a writer. He told me about a friend of his, a businessman, who has lost much of his income and assets over the past year. My

response: I wonder if artists (of all disciplines) will actually attain a stronger place in the United States, as humanistic figures who can help the rest of society feel, reason, and think through the implications of 11 September and its aftermath.

Perhaps the more open-ended, more porous concept of "postmodernism" has really left the door open for this possibility.

John Carlin

It has been a pleasure reading the various posts and getting a sense of community and intellect. Voices known and unknown circling in the pixel-dust of cyberspace. Comforting after the shattering events of the past month. Shows that there is no such thing as post-humanism. At least not yet. Thank the great spirits!

More and more I have come to see visual art as thread of individual expression through (and distorted by) the history of great events and powerful ideologies. Somehow this transhistorical dialogue is comforting. It makes me/us feel human. Both in the sense of great accomplishments and humble limits.

In other words, for me, art is always a social activity. It is always about understanding and making a shifting sense of the 'real.' (Hi Dan)

I think Dan's conflation of postM and the counterculture is quite interesting. But I disagree that the counterculture failed to be adopted into the American psyche. My problem is that was too adaptive. America the beautiful sponge--absorbing everything into its glorious homogeneous diversity.

In this sense, PostM is a kind of glossy housepaint covering the cracks, mold and infestation below into something shiny smooth and comforting. It is a miscellaneous section of the store that has grown to encompass the entire store itself. Forcing us, here, to decide whether to build a new store or to now subdivide the section into new sections (globalism, activism, realism, feminism, anti-intellectualism, etc.) to the point where it becomes meaningless again.

Wendy Ewald

I'm so pre-modern, it's taken me this long just to figure out how to navigate the site.

My work has almost always involved collaboration with young people. I suppose it's fair to say that my collaborators and I have relied for our effects on the tension between their presumed innocence, as children, and the intimations, in their words and pictures, of the infinite varieties of dread and exaltation experienced by adults.

From time to time I've noticed that this tension has been heightened -- and sheltered -- by notions coming under the rubric of postmodernism.

Postmodernism, I think, has become a shopping-cart generalization, and irony sticks out as one of the larger items in the basket -- bulky, verging on shapelessness.

The concept seems to have come about as a means of framing questions about the relevance of the fine arts -- at a time when popular arts were coming to be seen as vastly more persuasive and important. Postmodernism was useful in supporting a modest way of addressing the ambitions of the fine arts when they could no longer credibly lay claim to High Church status.

This new modesty (if that's what it was) often took the form of irony, or self-effacement, and the trouble with this kind of irony (it wasn't always troubling but it was troubling often enough to draw attention to itself, like a tic) was that it signified detachment, a methodical disengagement. Now irony finds itself looking like a particularly weak-kneed kind of innocence.

The top of postmodernism, like just about everything else post-September 11th, has taken a step back into the shadows. In the forefront is the question of engagement: what to do? The urgency of the question would seem to override strategies that offer the artist much room for self-conscious detachment.

Maurice Berger

Wow, thanks John & Wendy.

It's just so clear to me how the events of the past three weeks have stripped away the elegant veneer of unifying labels and myths.

Keep going.

Jonathan Weinberg

To get back to Maurice's question about whether or not anyone rejects the term post-modern outright. I realize that I don't use the term much in my writing. For example, when I wrote about Ray Johnson's extraordinary "mail art," I don't think I characterized them as post-modern, although I claimed that they were "queer." I suppose it is because that so many of the qualities that are identified with post-modernism: irony, discontinuity, disjunction, allegory etc. seem to be qualities that were always evident in modern art.

To put it another way, does it really make sense to say that Duchamp is post-modern? Doesn't this limit modernism to the Greenbergian analysis? I would rather see our conception of modernism enriched so that it can encompass not only artists like Picasso, and Duchamp, but also, dare I say it, O'Keeffe (an artist that Greenberg thought was a kind of false modernist).

Maurice Berger

I'm with Jonathan on this one. I don't use the term anymore and I can't exactly justify calling certain sensibilities postmodern when they were evident within the modernist ethos. This notion is especially true if you refuse to accept the narrow, proscribed, canonical view of modernism handed down to us by the canonical critics, art historians, and curators (from Alfred Barr & Clement Greenberg to most of the ARTFORUM circle of the 1960s).

Mason Klein

Hello. Glad to be a part of this robust forum.

The prefix ♦post♦ does not necessarily imply failure, as has been suggested, but an irrelevancy or the perhaps only temporary inadequacy of a particular framework of beliefs. While the co-option of modernism or the illusory position of the avant-garde precipitated much of the (postmodern) art of the past thirty years that attempted to deconstruct or strategize such dilemmas, it is certainly apt, after the 11th, to question how things have once again changed.

Despite the concept's extreme overuse and dilution, the term "postmodern" does serve a valuable function in its ♦contextual♦ application within particular critical discourses (post-colonial, for example) such as art and criticism have become enmeshed over the last decades. Yet in terms of the considerably less historicist art-making of today, which indeed seeks to stake its own precedents in a suddenly global-and-wired-but-balkanized world, historicism itself has to be rethought.

If, with the postmodernist Duchamp, we assumed the inefficacy of any one position and the dismantling of universals, the new crusades, now being launched from the East between religious zeal and Western decadence, may have stripped postmodern art of its post-spiritual conceits.

Aleta Ringlero

Greetings Maurice, from the middle of the Salt River Pima Indian Reservation in Arizona. This is a lively and problematic discussion indeed! For myself, postmodern is a convenient term that

reinforces the idea of the West's linear timeline, events and record keeping that mark transitions of subjects deemed important by segments of a social or cultural group. This is not to say it is unimportant to recognize passage, but for my purposes, it is a term of self-awareness and self-importance. PoMo (not the California tribal group, Pomo) is one of those labels which identify for a very select group an instance of before and after. Can it be said we recognized the moment or irony of a self-awareness as the instance of postmodernism beginning. It has always been for me, a term that initiates discussion by another set of voices made by Civil Rights and the ethnic power movement.

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Mason. A provocative post.

I think the subject of spirituality--especially at this moment--is very important. I wonder: do we believe that "post" modern implies an end to spirituality in art (something that was so much a part of the modernist ethos) in favor of irony, theory, criticality, etc. . . . Something to be considered as this robust discussion rolls along.

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Aleta. Another provocative post.

You write: "It has always been for me, a term that initiates discussion by another set of voices made by Civil Rights and the ethnic power movement." I think this is a CRUCIAL point--one I suggest in the discussion overview. These voices were rarely a part of modernism. Indeed, the shifting terrain of activism in the 1960s and 70s allowed voices usually ignored or silenced by the mainstream to be heard. What role did this new activism--and the shift towards a truly multicultural and pluralistic society--play in "post" modernism or, at least, the evolution of new sensibilities in Western and later global culture?

Maurice Berger

We've received a number of E-mails with questions and comments from visitors to the symposium. I will periodically post some of these to the symposium.

Here is an E-mail offering a definition of "postmodernism" from ALLAN CHASANOFF:

"Post Modernism has always been quite a definitive notion for me. In the social / information realm it means the ability for an individual to speak in the language or at least use the 'words' that he has been spoken to by culture, mass culture, mass media."

"We can see seeds of it before --in the collages of Picasso using bits of newspaper to Warhol and the soup can. But it is deeply related to the ability of members of the audience to utilize consumer media devices to express themselves using the content of the mass media expression. Though you have concentrated on the art scene, the artist was and is merely part of the overall movement.

"The tremendous cultural battle arrived and most definitely still maintains because there is an adversarial relationship between the mass powers that be and the activities of the listener/user. It is best seen in the area of copyright. And it also in this area that we find the artist trying to have it both ways. Yes, they want to use mass media materials but they also want their own works copyrighted."



"I do not feel copyright should be totally eliminated but rather reduced to a level so that the audience does not have to be subjected to a hieratic discourse. Democracy rests on speech and expression by all its citizens. And an informed citizenry has to be able to speak as well as listen."

Donna DeSalvo

Mason, I agree with what you have said about "post" not necessarily implying failure but simply

describing a condition. Modernism held out promise of a universal, of a shared set of beliefs that were communicated in numerous ways. If we are "post" that, I see that as a good thing. But it is also terribly confusing. Jonathan, I am glad you raised the work of Ray Johnson and agree with what you have said. Johnson's work spoke so eloquently to the notion of individual beliefs and perceptions but it never coalesced into an understandable whole.

Mason Klein

I agree, Donna and Dan, that Ray Johnson is a useful artist to think about at the moment, particularly in terms of his relationship to control, which he both tenaciously determined (through the creation of his own system, the mail, and vocabulary) and was able to let go of (by post). His brilliantly quirky use of repetition and global engagement and modification of popular culture at once spoke to an extremely personal, private world and one informed by the complex relationship of sameness and difference that informs postmodern issues of the hybridity of colonized culture today.

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Donna and Mason.

Panelists: please feel free to respond to each other in this way. Visitors: if you have any comments or questions about any of the posts thus far, please send them in.

Keep moving along . . .

David A. Ross

Hello all. Like Donna, I'm also in London as I login to this conference. I saw and spoke with Donna last night. We were standing in the midst of about two hundred people in the massive Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern attending a memorial to the Spanish artist Juan Munoz who died suddenly in late August. It was a strange evening for many reasons.

Tonight it is oddly comforting to find myself in the community constituted by this conference. The feeling of community often referred to as "virtual" in cyberspeak, seems quite real to me tonight. But does it feel as real as the sense of community that millions around the world experienced as together we stared in awestruck horror at the attack and collapse of the WTC?

You ask about our definition of the postmodern, Maurice, and my first response was that the question --indeed the concern that underlies the question-- has been rendered irrelevant. But I know you too have thought of this as the date for this online symposium approached, and know how you like the rest of the reader/writers in the conference, (as well as those restricted to read-only status) realize that the topic is perfect vehicle for thinking about and discussing in public the condition that now constitutes our still unnamed (and perhaps unnameable)moment.

For the last several years I worked in a museum of modern art. I know of no museum of postmodern art. In fact, the idea of a museum of postmodern art seems ridiculous. As oxymoronic as it may seem, a postmodern museum of modern art seems like a pretty reasonable way to describe something as indescribable as a Guggenheim in Las Vegas.

Postmodern describes a contemporary attitude towards the world, (detached, wary, ironic, a bit blank and cool) while modern still implies an ideal --a set of revolutionary impulses directed at the total transformation of social life.

What I mean here is that the issue seems to still revolve around the idea of modernism and modernity, and the ways in which they incite cultural transformation on a massive scale. To me, the postmodern is a kind of intellectual hedge against the sincere demands of the modern project.

I may not agree with everything that Thomas Friedman has written in the New York Times about the current conflict in which we today find ourselves, but I am interested in the assertion that we

are enmeshed in a conflict between the modern and medieval world -- a particularly brutal and irreconcilable conflict of values and ideas that extends way beyond the reach of art and literature.

So where does that leave us in this conference. Discussing what? An approaching war, the end of our innocence, the need to find comfort as we try to remember what the world felt like last summer? I'm not sure, but I'm grateful to take part.

Ian Berry

Thanks Maurice for the invitation to be part of this discussion. I feel similarly to your opening statement when you describe using the term postmodern as if it were common to all. I have the same experience. As someone new to the discourse of contemporary art, postmodernism seemed like a safe spot where many artists, forms, messages that have blurred definitions could find a home. It becomes irrelevant though, in a museum setting. Audiences of all sorts are not engaged or enticed by it and it doesn't help get ideas across. Although I will save my complete rejection because it is useful to catalyze discussion with students or this symposium for example. I agree with John Carlin's charge to us to find new terminology. Until that new terminology is found it still works for me as a reminder to define terms and search for better descriptions.

Maurice Berger

Welcome, David and Ian. And thank you for your wonderful posts.

I, too, feel comforted by this forum. When I was planning this symposium, more than a year ago, I could not have know that it would serve such an urgent function--as an outlet for discussion, debate, emotion, and opinion at a very difficult moment in our nation's history. Ironically, the ideas that appear to drive the concept of "postmodernism"--irony, humor, self-consciousness, criticality--are already being debated in the media, academia, and the culture at large, as deeply problematic notions at a time of such immense human devastation and carnage.

Over the past few days, I've received a number of E-mails from visitors to the conference. Not surprisingly, most of these have pondered the notion of a world changed by the tragic events of 11 September--a world that may no longer be able to put up with such "trivial" things as irony, cynicism, or "postmodernism." (Conversely, as one writer argues, such ways of thinking are even more necessary.) I will post some of these comments to the symposium over the next few days. I'm sure they will stimulate further debate.

As for Ian's crucial statement: perhaps we can, later in the symposium, consider words or concepts that might better name the cultural shifts and sensibilities of the past 40 years. Or, perhaps, we might come up with reasons why such attempts at naming are themselves counter-intuitive to the period.

For those panelists who've not yet posted to the conference, please do so. You may answer the more general questions posed in my first post or speak to more specific issues as they've come up in the conversation. Your voices need to be heard.

Maurice Berger

A NOTE TO PANELISTS: To avoid an overlong flow of posts, the symposium will be archived into 48-hour sections. To post into the discussion, you will need to click on that day's discussion on the topics page.

Maurice Berger

THIS SECTION OF THE SYMPOSIUM WILL NOW BE ARCHIVED. IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO POST INTO AN ARCHIVED SECTION. PLEASE CLICK ON "DISCUSSION 3-4 OCTOBER" ON THE TOPICS PAGE TO BEGIN NEW POSTS.

10-03-2001

Maurice Berger

Panelists please begin posting here for the discussion of 3-4 October (to avoid an overlong stream of posts, we will archive the discussion every two days). You may refer to the archived first two days in the first topic.

Maurice Berger

Hello panelists and visitors. We begin a new two-day session of our online symposium.

Once again, for panelists who've not yet posted, I refer you to my introductory post in the first session (and to all of the excellent posts that follow). I'll repeat the central questions of my introduction: What do you think about the term "postmodern"? Do you use it in your writing and teaching? Do you reject it entirely? Are you not sure? And, finally: What is your working definition of postmodernism? Or, conversely, why do you believe the term is invalid or problematic?

You may also refer to any of the other issues discussed in the first session. Indeed, feel free to pick up on any thread of ideas.

Visitors should feel free to E-mail me with questions and comments (see link on the main page for E-mail form). Due to the large volume of E-mail, I will not be able to respond to every inquiry or to post all of them.

Caroline Jones

Friends, I feel some responsibility to report, in a stream-of-consciousness way, on being elsewhere (Berlin); out of the giant culture swamp that formed my brain with its monocultures, its fantastic growths, and its plentiful mutations (America). In this elsewhere that I find myself, today is "German Unification Day," and the Nazi demonstrators are being met in the streets by anti-Nazi demonstrators. They'll probably come together somewhere close to the Brandenburger Tor, that neo-classical monument to German imperialism. There is nothing post-modern about this, but post-modernist theory (or, as some would call it, "critical theory," a.k.a. continental philosophy percolated through cultural studies) might help us understand the microphysics of power as they play out in costumes and confrontations. The best kind of art, I believe, operates in this kind of interstitial zone, troubling our complacent certainties about who's holding the reins, getting us to think again. If postmodernism means anything today (and I'll defend to the death its historical meaning in the period 1975-1985), it might be that we are forced to see our own involvement in these issues, our complicity and responsibility for the world of images and discourses that produce us as subjects.

Modernist morality was about "taking a stand." Postmodern morality, which I think we need to construct in an active way, is not so simple. It might mean that we accept the complexity and interdependence of a global economy without failing to judge human actions. (E.g., paying someone for a piggy share of the world's oil is reprehensible -- but it is not equivalent, nor does it justify, blowing up 6000 people.) It seems ridiculous to have to say this, but our leftist guilt immediately puts us in the position of assuming that we were punished for a reason. Postmodern critiques of Enlightenment have at least made us question "reason" -- often, there isn't a clear equivalence. This seems important to emphasize here.

I like Dan's distinction between global art and globalism. But the lesson of postmodernism, for me, is that these are not separable entities. They are symbiotic and interdependent.

One of the things I've thought about a lot is whether the global art Dan is talking about has traded in its local specificity for the lingua franca of biennial culture. Would we be seeing it in those venues if it weren't always already "Western..."? But then I immediately ask myself if any art, or human culture for that matter, can be fixed as "authentic" and free from bricolage and hybridity -- and the answer is obviously not. American culture is determined more by its "others" than by its ostensibly dominant northern European constituents.

So I hold on to the postmodernist notion of hybridity (thanks, Homi Bhabha). Inevitably, that mixing and sampling mode can create dissonance and disaster -- bin Laden's economic and engineering training, his status as "blowback" from CIA/KGB conflicts, are clear examples. But I have to believe (hoping it isn't Pollyannish) that the overall momentum of hybridization is positive -- and, indeed, that artists can imagine that blended world into being.

Caroline Jones from Berlin

Steve Dietz

Hello everyone. There should be a way to slip more gracefully into a virtual conversation late...

I have to admit that when Maurice invited me to participate in a symposium on postmodernism, I was a little surprised. It's not a term I've used for some time, and it wasn't clear to me why I should care now.

What these posts have jogged is a memory of, in fact, how important postmodernism was for me at one point. Douglas Crimp's Pictures show--Aigail Solomon-Godeau's essay about it, in particular--seemed both fresh and "right." Postmodernism became a very valuable tool to navigate a world that wasn't heroic, that wasn't about answers but about questioning.

At some point, and I have no similar demarcation, "postmodernism" became less useful and more style.

As I get more involved with digital media and networks--and this may relate to some of John's posts--there is the very useful notion of tactical media, which, perhaps without meaning to, codifies some aspects of postmodernism's notion of ephemerality--non-fixedness.

I'm very interested in Dan's discussion of global tendencies and John's pipe dreams of new technologies leading to new possibilities and perhaps these are ways to reanimate the original usefulness of postmodernism--or perhaps postmodernism was a useful concept, became less so, and that's ok?

Maxwell Anderson

Sorry to be late in jumping in. I've been consumed with getting our Board of Trustees to act on Rem Koolhaas's design for an expansion to the Whitney. Rem has dubbed it the NEWhitney, which seems like an appropriate moniker in light of this conference. As an architect, Koolhaas is beholden to no ideological point of departure and skillfully evades the epithet 'postmodernist', but his fascination with globalism (epitomized by his maddeningly time-consuming obsession with traffic patterns in Lagos as a cipher for a new urbanism) brought me into a new way of thinking about the American-focused mission of the Whitney. Larry Rinder's Biennial also promises to keep the question of American identity wide open.

As David so artfully demonstrated in a series of exhibitions here under the rubric "Views from Abroad," we do best when we elude the jingoistic. But post 9/11 I am constantly being asked to use artworks in ways that would strip them of their complexity--i.e. hang Jasper Johns's Three Flags in the Lobby as a gesture of solidarity. I need no further evidence of the persistence of irony that this recurring request, since the very museum founded to safeguard free expression is expected by many to circumscribe its mission exactly when it should be embracing our 'infidel' status.

I am grateful to be reading such thoughtful posts at a time when the museological dialectic is not modern/postmodern but educational v. commercial. Moonlighting here offers a welcome respite from daily personal struggles in the museum 'industry' to balance deeply held convictions with the pursuit of the almighty dollar. Ultimately I'm more worried about diminishing artistic freedoms because of the crush of consumer culture and market forces than I am about terminology, but I am ready to absorb and learn from everyone's contributions.

Maurice Berger

Thank you, Caroline, Steve, and Max. Three wonderful, thoughtful posts.

Caroline writes: "Postmodern critiques of Enlightenment have at least made us question "reason" -- often, there isn't a clear equivalence. This seems important to emphasize here." I might add, they've also insisted on questioning institutions, the power of wealth and capital (think of the Neo-Marxist bent of so much recent art and criticism), and the potential of representations to manipulate. In short, the self-reflexivity and criticality of so much culture called "postmodern" may actually directly play to the questions raised by Caroline and Max.

Max: Indeed, the critique of the museum--and of the institutions of culture--has been a central, resonant part of this critique. I guess this is why socially-responsible writers like Brian Wallis and Ann Gibson still use the term: it's certainly loaded with the connotations of this brave, sustained and socially-oriented critique.

Maurice Berger

Steve's notion of "postmodernism's" non-fixedness--an idea that would seem to describe the internet itself--has recurred throughout the conference. Something to think about in future posts.

Theresa Grandas

Hello to all panelists and organizers, and thank you very much to Maurice for inviting me to participate in this discussion. I assimilate the concept of "modernism", starting from Baudelaire and his consideration of the modern artist. I understand it as a new point of view, a confrontation with the establishment or the artistic tradition. The so-called postmodern condition has always looked to me as a kind of fictitious intent to restructure dominant thinking, instead of a truly knowledge exercise referred to an existing situation in a cultural, philosophical or artistic context. In any case, if we use terms like these, it is important to contextualize them in an economy in transformation and under the effects - not yet evaluable - of the globalization process. Right now, we can anticipate the effects in the artistic practice of the economical, social and political changes. I'm not sure concepts like "postmodernism" are in accordance to the needs and forms of the materialization of this plurality; even to discuss the politics of consensus, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has articulated under the idea of disagreement.

Maurice Berger

Interesting point, Teresa.

Your invocation of a modernist/postmodernist dialectic suggests a question raised by an E-mail I received by a visitor to the conference: what is modernism itself? If postmodernism is somehow a reaction to modernism, what is the former reacting to?

Here is the question as it was raised by SID SACHS from Philadelphia PA:

"There seems to be semantic problems because post modernism has many meanings to the different panelists. But modernism wasn't monolithic either. If the term "post modernism" is used not as a movement or style but a mindset: global, decentralized, dislocated, with an acknowledging sense of history and its faults, inclusionary, post industrial, digital, cybernetic - then postmodernism can be ironic or direct, post-human or humanist, etc. It can co-exist with pre-modernist thought, much as the thinking of the Taliban exists temporally with the correspondent's cyberspace."

Wendy Ewald

I suspect I may not be the only one in the room who's finding it hard to concentrate in a literal way on the topic at hand. For me, our ongoing dialogue is an attempt to locate one's work in a landscape that's been shattered. My instinct is to rebuild from the bottom up, anecdotally. So here, for what it's worth, is a parable about artistic hybridization:

In 1997, my husband Tom and I and our infant son traveled to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where I'd been asked to conduct photography workshops for women. The last night of our stay, we were invited to dinner by two sisters, one a novelist, the other a painter. They were unmarried, a most remarkable and precarious condition for women in Saudi Arabia. (It should be clear, by the end of this story, why it's best for them to be nameless here.)

We fell into a lengthy discussion about whether to go out for Chinese, Italian or Middle Eastern food. The sisters preferred Chinese, but when I protested that we could get Chinese food in the States, it was agreed that we should try a restaurant serving local food.

"Our car will take us," the painter said. "It will cost one thousand dollars an hour."

"No problem," I said. "You're a fabulously rich Saudi. And I'm a fabulously rich American."

The writer chuckled. We arrived at an open-air restaurant: starlight, refreshing breeze. Music brayed from the loudspeakers; evidently we were beyond the reach of the religious police.

"By the way," the writer inquired, "would you happen to know any American publishers interested in Saudi Arabian novelists?"

The writer was facing the unscalable wall standing between women and society-at-large in much of the Arab world. She had decided to try to reach beyond the wall. Though she lacked the bilingual fluency of Conrad or Beckett, she'd written her latest novel in English. My husband, who is a writer, agreed to read her manuscript on our way back to the States.

Her English resembled Proust attempted with classroom French. Tom was unable to read it without paraphrasing it as he went along, so he wrote down his "translation" and faxed the writer the first fifteen pages, adding an apology for his presumptuousness.

The next day she faxed back corrections and clarifications, along with the news that she had started embroidering his initials in Arabic letters on a bolt of black velvet so that she would be able to cast Bedouin spells appropriate to the task he'd undertaken. She stipulated that in order for the spells to work effectively, she needed to know his mother's unmarried name, which he instantly supplied. They groped along, swapping earnest faxes about the futility of transliterating Arabic names, giddy faxes about dreams and oil prices and the weather, and doing their best to convey the writer's blend of delicacy, high seriousness, and sensuous density. In countries such as Saudi Arabia or India (and perhaps in certain schools), where mother tongues are regarded as dialects and where an airless English serves as the lingua franca of the educated classes, it is easy to make the mistake of assuming that one is communicating when using such basic words as man, woman, water, thirst, death, food, sun, home and postmodernism. In fact one is communicating merely a sketch of the mysteries denoted by these words, the understanding of which comes only after living for many years in the culture where they are spoken. One is "speaking translation," a language so neutral it has no life of its own, a dialect as suspect as Switzerland.

A year after they'd started, the writer and Tom had completed not one but two novels, one of which will be published in the United States in the fall of 2002. So far, so good. At one point, however, the issue of the writer's security came up; there were passages in the novels that might be construed as offensive by the kind of people who'd proclaimed a fatwah against Salman Rushdie.

"I'm not afraid of dying," the writer replied. "For me, death is an ambition."

I cannot imagine a knottier issue. With images of the flesh-and-blood cost of moral ignorance and cultural antagonism fresh in our minds, we have been enlightened/burdened with a painful

understanding of how much can be at stake in the enterprise of multi-cultural vision.

To be continued?

Simon Leung

I'd like to respond to a few of the postings in a general way, since so much that's been written has been thought-provoking. One thing that I am stuck with in the discussion thus far is what neighborhoods we live in, namely, Art and Academia. I can imagine a very different route home, one more treacherous and unfamiliar, but I'm happy to hang out here.

I think it might be unwise to think post-modernism from the point of view of a "historical," time-based period especially in relationship to cultural production. Such an approach serves History but it also places post-modernism as a taxonomic dilemma, and I have found that good discussions, when turned to any specific topic, tend to undo the words that seem to describe them. Following Spivak, I think for me the most deeply felt lesson of deconstruction is that it is a persistent critique of something one cannot live without. One thinks of all the words which we cannot do without and how they all need to be rethought continually because words are by nature unstable and cannot sustain the meanings with which we once thought them: "race," "law," "gender," "architecture," "power." Like "power," "post-modernism" is such a catachresis. (Need we be reminded that the anti-affirmative action initiative here in California was called the "California Civil Rights Initiative?" Such a perversion of language is the ironic genius of language.)

Now, I'm not sure if I need to rethink p-m persistently like I once did; but like "power," these days I think post-modernism is best thought of as an ethics—always relational, always STRUGGLING with its "other." Post-modernism is a theory, in other words a frame.

Now one can argue that in many ways the modern was the condition under which we live and work when there was no longer a stable foundation of authority. This gave us many different modernisms. Yes we can certainly think of Duchamp as post-modern—this would be a productive retrospective view of the man, and would help to place those who came after. But for me it's more interesting to think of Duchamp, at least the Duchamp of the ready-made, in relationship to "modernist" criteria for the artist, in relationship to how in art, as in chess, Duchamp was thinking through modernist endgames. I say this in part because I am an artist. The Duchamp of 1912 who "gave up painting" was the mythic touchstone for anyone who ever tried to keep making art and asked "why go on?" This is not just because I am pathologically attached to art as a continual crisis of consciousness, but because I think this is the very reason I am an artist in the first place. I read the modernist self as an askesis--a care of the self, a difficult process full of constraints. I've always thought that the most important lesson about being an artist is how you live, think, concentrate, struggle while you are making art. No one, at least not in print, has ever talked about my work in terms of Modernism, but the brand of askesis I think through has a modernist trace.

I think most of us stopped using post-modernism in everyday conversation around the time of the late 80s. This, at least for people I knew, was because the social landscape was rather grim. My friends and I were in the grips of post-modern debates in the early 80s because post-modernism seemed to offer a new way of thinking culture, daily life, and the somewhat rarified art/literary production we were engaged in. I remember a time when people were eager to "be post-modern." But by the mid-late 80s, that particular post-modern turn seemed to have hit a few dead ends, or exits. AIDS, for example, made many of us think in a really different way about identity, representation and sublation. When Kobena Mercer and Douglas Crimp rethought their earlier critiques of Mapplethorpe, it signaled that post-modernism was no longer merely the means to critique/describe the remains, failures, and utopianism of modernism; but rather that our most intelligent critics of the post-modern visibility now saw more than they once did. Seeing more meant also a migration from say, Art History to Cultural Studies; gay to queer; post-modern as a hermeneutics of society to an operative ground for political agency in society. Some stopped

using the world merely because it was redundant; some stopped we needed new words, because the 90s felt so different from the 80s.

For me, as an artist, this leads back to what Dan wrote earlier about "art of the real." I would like to follow this up later in regards to what it means for me to be an artist now. Meanwhile, I'll sign off to grab a little slice of daily life.

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Wendy & Simon for your wonderful posts.

Wendy: I am moved by your post. Starting tomorrow, I will direct the conversation back to the question that has hung over this symposium like a kind of ghost: how the events of 11 September have changed our sense of nation, of priorities, of meaning, and of self. . . and what meaning, if any, these changes in attitude and perception have on the conversation at hand.

Simon: your conception of withdrawing the concept of "postmodernism" at the same time as affirming it reminds me of Jacques Derrida's notion of writing "under erasure." In a recent essay on the artist Gary Simmons, I wrote:

"This strategy [of writing under erasure] impels Derrida to write a word, cross it out, and then publish both word and deletion. It allows him confront and to reconcile the innate dilemma of language as a means of representation that produces, at best, an imprecise, historically determined depiction of reality but is also absolutely necessary for human communication. To write "under erasure" is to question the familiar, to acknowledge that the words we use every day may not be as neutral or as unbiased as they seem. For Derrida, this linguistic effacement is innately political: it insists that both the writer and the reader question the authority of language, the limitations, stereotypes, and prejudices that underwrite words and images. Thus writing "under erasure" allows the writer to affirm and to critique the primacy of language at one and the same time: "At each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses," writes Derrida of his process, "corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment I needed to use it."

I also want to add that the role of the artists in this symposium--Simon, Jonathan Weinberg, Mary Kelly and Fred Wilson--is very important. You put into cultural practice what critics and historians write about and theorize. So please talk more about your own aesthetic practices.

Maurice Berger

Once again, I'd like to point out a common thread throughout many of the comments posted in the past few days: the porosity, non-fixedness, and--to quote Wendy's splendid post--hybridity inherent to recent progressive cultural practices. Something to think about.

Robert Rosenblum

Hello, all -- A simple intrusion. Words, especially those that end with "ism," are prisoners of free thought. The usefulness of "postmodernism" might be compared to that of "postimpressionism." Both were invented to indicate that something had changed after a particular moment in history, so they both, in fact, work practically in terms of chronology. We would date "postimpressionism" from the 1880s on, and "postmodernism" probably from the 1960s on. Looking backwards we feel in both cases that they begin with some definitive sea change, but even that is questionable. What is foolish to give a word (a hyphenated construction, to boot) such power, as if it were an all-embracing concept subject to rational analysis. In terms of the history of the use of "postimpressionism," for example, although it was initially used to describe the likes of Seurat, Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Gauguin, more recent uses of the word (as in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1979-80) have been more broad-mindedly chronological, throwing into the pot of artists who flourished after the heyday of impressionism in the 1870s such totally different painters as Corinth, Segantini, Khnopff. This would have made Roger Fry turn in his grave. But they are all literally "postimpressionists." What holds them together is chronology, not some mysterious Zeitgeist. Ditto Postmodernism, which is an imperial word that would conquer so

many different territories that it ends up explaining nothing. Put Venturi, Kiefer, Gilbert & George, Morimura together and you have what? Well, for one thing, art between c. 1960 and now. So this is a word of caution. Don't turn Postmodernism into a thing to be captured and analyzed. It is only useful to conjure up a particular period of time, whose diversity (or, more fancily, pluralism) is probably no greater than the diversity of any earlier period in chronological brackets.

Maurice Berger

Robert, thank you for your provocative and incisive post.

You write: "Don't turn Postmodernism into a thing to be captured and analyzed. It is only useful to conjure up a particular period of time whose diversity (or, more fancily, pluralism) is probably no greater than the diversity of any earlier period in chronological brackets."

I wonder if it isn't the other way around: the desire to understand the complex, shifting, porous, global, and hyper-technological culture of the past 40 years is compelling us to find ways of marking, of holding on to something so slippery.

Your point is well taken, though. Later in the conference I want to talk about names & naming . . . and the ways they limit rather than expand our thinking.

Dan Cameron

Since a few of today's and yesterday's participants mentioned my previous postings, I just wanted to clarify a few points.

Like others, I am intrigued by John's so-called pipe-dream of cultural change based on technological change, but at times I suspect the process works in reverse. In recent years, the rise in internet use and the rise in art museum attendance have seemed to go hand in hand, as if the awareness of constant mediation that accompanies excessive computer use also increases one's capacity for cultural experiences (art being a perfect example) that are non-mediated. At the same time, I'm noticing at the New Museum that exhibitions of conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s (Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper) draw an overwhelmingly youthful audience, as if the generation that grew up clicking a mouse feel even more comfortable with radical art practices from thirty years ago than the artists' contemporaries did. So while I do believe that technological change is at the heart of all this, in some cases it seems to provide the impetus to escape, even briefly, its suffocating embrace.

I'm also prompted to reply to some of the questions about global art. While I agree that biennial cultures have flattened out some of the notions of difference, I've found that this phenomenon is much less pronounced at the so-called 'fringe' biennials: Istanbul, Johannesburg (now defunct), Kwangju, Havana, and even Sao Paulo (the 2nd largest after Venice). Because these exhibitions are already located at the so-called periphery of the dominant geographic pecking order, they do not so much drain local specificity as replace the conventional notion of center with a provisional center produced for the occasion -- although it would seem self-evident, art by Middle Eastern artists really does look very different in Istanbul than it does in Venice.

Lastly I'd like to comment, even in a sideways fashion, on both John Carlin's observation about whether the counterculture was absorbed or defeated, and on Maurice's reflection that perhaps artists will find a new role in a society looking for new, humanistic visions. I believe that artists are, by their very nature, committed to forging new paths into human consciousness, and that wherever it is we are collectively headed, artists will invariably arrive there first and have the basic terrain already mapped out for us by the time we get there. But rather than suggest that artists will be primarily involved in articulating new forms of dissent, or re-inventing applied humanism, or re-positioning the 'other' in our shared discourse, it's probably fair to say that they will be doing all that, and much more. Whether or not they will be given more cultural recognition for doing so depends on factors that are largely out of our control. For example, I get the sense that people are experiencing very deep feelings of dissatisfaction with the news programs they watch on

CNN, which are completely inadequate at satisfying (or even recognizing) their desire for a new model of reality that will conform to what's happened. Art, however, can help to assimilate new modes of processing reality, and the urgent need for this kind of cultural tool at the moment may in fact drive some people towards art who had never previously considered looking toward it for guidance. Somehow too, the unexpected relevance of art during a time of crisis seems pertinent to the subject of the postmodern era, since reality has just suffered its most serious assault in our lifetimes, and somebody needs to start piecing it back together.

Mason Klein

Rather than get bogged down in semantics, or questioning the power or applicability of any "ism," let's not lose sight of the complex "social space" that the postmodern has helped conjure through the aesthetic incorporation of so many theoretical approaches. Given the extraordinarily complex instability of the moment, we have to be more skeptical than ever of any concept of legitimation; the old narratives and historical bracketing simply do not suffice. We cannot approach the postmodern as simply a chronological marker, like postimpressionism, as Robert suggests.

It is precisely that such historicism no longer applies, that we can no longer turn to past narratives to explain the ways we interact today so that we can determine our own relations and define our own sociocultural or historical spheres without being readily commodified.

There is an imperative here not to align oneself to a particular camp, but to understand that the postmodern attempts to engage the specific problematics of communication, and of the vague and multiplex dissemination of language and knowledge played out within innumerable cultures in our contemporary global world.

"Post," indeed, can suggest progress, especially in the Duchampian sense that there is no one way in which the modern/past is received, negotiated or understood, but rather many. The world is changing, and the unprecedented contemporary instability we now are negotiating parallels the very decentered and shifting nature of disciplines and knowledge throughout the world. After decades of identity politics, I think it's important to contemplate the possibility of creative and new modes of knowledge that continue to foster a convergence of disciplines and the realignment of social institutions.

Maurice Berger

Excellent posts, Dan and Mason.

I think it's important that panelists are responding to each other more directly.

I'd like to encourage panelists who've not posted to do so by tomorrow morning (4 October).

Later in the day, I'd like to turn the symposium more specifically to the implications of 11 September and its aftermath. As many of us have noted, the tragedy has raised fundamental questions about meaning, cultural priorities, humanism, wealth, power, institutions, irony, cynicism, provincialism and globalism that would have been relevant to this symposium even before the disaster--an idea suggested by Dan in the last line of his post.

10-04-2001

Steve Dietz

I agree with much of what Dan wrote about how suffocating the technological embrace can become and the relationship between early conceptual art and the online world, but I want to harp on an apparent implication about the online world being mediated and the offline world being non-mediated. Dan wrote:

"I suspect the process works in reverse. In recent years, the rise in internet use and the rise in art

museum attendance have seemed to go hand in hand, as if the awareness of constant mediation that accompanies excessive computer use also increases one's capacity for cultural experiences (art being a perfect example) that are non-mediated."

For me, postmodernism means, in part, acknowledging the difficulty of identifying any unmediated experience, even (especially) a cultural one. Also, there are many artists working to create "stand-alone" online experiences, which are just as authentic as any other cultural experience in the gallery.

The WTC attacks and the definitive chasm between their results and their visuals--"it looked just like a Hollywood movie"--may indeed lead to reconsideration of the real and the mediated, but we live in a society of hybrid spaces, from the cell phone to the computer to CNN Baghdad, and it's not going to be easy to sever them.

I was quite inspired by Mason's comment, particularly the idea of convergence(s) leading to realignment(s).

"I think it's important to contemplate the possibility of creative and new modes of knowledge that continue to foster a convergence of disciplines and the realignment of social institutions."

Nick Mirzoeff

Hello everyone, At the increasing insistent prompting of the moderator, I just wanted to add a few words from Down Under. Here in Australia, where I am as a visitor, these debates on postmodernism don't quite seem as pertinent as they do in New York. At the opening of an exhibition or academic session here, it is the custom to make a gesture of deference to the "original" holders of the land where the event is taking place. So, to reference some earlier posts, the very place of speaking/art making is always already under erasure. And while it might have seemed for a while that a new "multicultural" Australia was being formed in the early 90s, the present moment was already one of reaction against that even before the events of September 11, which have acted here in displaced fashion to bring the ghost of 'white Australia' back out of its hiding place. So the narrative that I am accustomed to in New York of a postmodern suspicion of the body being replaced by a "post-post" notion of embodiment (as in Amelia Jones' work, for example) here seems more complex and less certain as a narrative. The first encounters between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific had a certain "post-modern" quality in their hybridity, their insistence on signs, erasure and displacement. But I don't think that it helps very much to call them postmodern, except in challenging now discredited narratives of discovery and progress. Yet Prime Minister Howard's refusal to apologize to the Aboriginal peoples of Australia is coming to seem more in tune with the popular mood, indeed to be forcing it. So I'm rethinking all my categories of periodization and geographical boundaries, rather as I think was the case in the high postmodern period (80-85 for my money).

all best

Nick

Maurice Berger

Great posts, Steve and Nick.

I think the two central issues of these posts--the real and the unmediated and the increasingly problematic place of periodicity and historical naming--are crucial to this symposium. I hope we'll have a chance to follow up on these ideas.

The issues of "apology," reconciliation, responsibility vis a vis the aboriginal populations of Australia are also relevant in the United States (e.g. the recent debate as to whether the US should apologize for slavery) and throughout the world (e.g. the discussion at the recent international conference on race). I think the points Nick raises also have real relevance in this

discussion.

Maurice Berger

Nick: your suggestion of a "high postmodern" period--1980-1985 sounds right to me, if even from the perspective of my own art writing.

Steve: I, too, was inspired by Mason's words. I hope he will extrapolate on these ideas.

Jerry Saltz

I have never used the word post modernism in my work because I don't think it means anything. It's a lazy word. It feels clubby. Robert Rosenblum is right to focus on the end of the word Post Modernism. Isms are often prisons. But the beginning of the term is just as bad. 'Post' is a heady, arrogant word. It's bland, generic, and opaque. It's like Neo, Way, or Center - as in Neo Geo, WestWAY, or OmniCENTER. It has a tinny, brittle ring. As Pepe Karmel has pointed out elsewhere, Roger Fry named Post Impressionism, but until the last minute he was going to use the term Expressionism, then chickened-out. These days, those who use the word POST imagine themselves living in special times, end times, or beginning times. It's a romantic conceit, a way of not dealing one's own time - except to say it's not like the time that came before, which is pretty obvious. It sounds good but - like most short-cut words - it says almost nothing. It's like an adult saying over and over, 'I don't live with my parents anymore.' Not only does it infantilize the adult, you want to say Who do you live with then? There's a reason no one says Post Cubism, or Post Baroque, or Post Post Impressionism. When I hear the word Post I take the safety off my skepticism. But not always. The term POST September 11 means something - even if we don't know what, yet.

Maurice Berger

Welcome, Jerry. And thank you for your provocative post.

I suspect that the post--in postmodernism--implies something much bigger than simply a breaking free or going beyond (or finding independence) from an earlier movement. Modernism--unlike Impressionism--was not a single movement, but a continuum of movements, ideas, aesthetic turns and twists on a fairly grand scale (though still minimal & elitist when contextualized by the culture and society at large).

To name something post MODERN is to attempt to mark, I think, an equally trenchant and broad-based set of changes. For me, the mannerist analogy works: mannerism was a complex, expansive response to the renaissance. The question is: is postmodern more like mannerism or like the baroque? Perhaps in time--or even by the end of this conference--we'll find a better, less passive word than "postmodern" to describe these crucial changes and shifts in the culture.

I agree with Jerry's sense of the word as weak. This is perhaps why I can't seem to get myself to use it.

Let's hear from others . . .

Dan Cameron

I'm pleased that Steve Deitz took the time to graciously point out the glaring pitfall in my earlier point about art and mediation. Obviously, art does not provide a non-mediated experience, nor should it ever aspire to such an improbable task. But in works of art I find there is a definite sense that the author is asking for the viewer's active collaboration (some would say complicity) in decoding and enabling the process of mediation, rather than employing carefully researched techniques to manipulate, persuade, or cajole a passive spectator, as this occurs in most media situations. Even art that employs the net or other digital media tends to do so in way that painstakingly undermines technology's swaggering assumptions of ubiquitousness. I guess my point was that setting aside the general case for cultural mediation, there is a special kind of mediation which is part of the technological experience that we have never experienced before,

simply because large numbers of people have never before operated such sophisticated technology for extended lengths of time in the course of their everyday lives. This quality is, I believe, part of what is spurring this relative stampede in the direction of contemporary art.

By the way, am I the only person who did not experience the events of September 11 as something that seemed like a movie? This is a totally serious question.

Ann Gibson

Problems with Postmodernism? It is instructive to read Simon Leung's recollection of his realization that postmodernism's usefulness seemed to wane, or maybe fade, as AIDs became more and more horrific. I was still trying to figure out what was happening to it in 1990 and 1991, though. Looking at Barbara Kruger's wonderful (I thought it was wonderful, anyway) all-over messages that assaulted viewers from the floors, ceilings, and walls of the Mary Boone Gallery back in 1991, and then talking to friends I became aware that viewers not already accustomed to Kruger, (and some were the very people whose rights Barbara championed) felt pushed around and belittled, not empowered, by this particular installation. They couldn't identify with the "speaker" like I did--they felt objectified. Michele Wallace's essay "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture in Out There from the New Museum which preceded Barbara's show in 1990, made an eye-opening (for me) point that much of what was considered "postmodern" continued the same kinds of exclusions that modernism was accused of practicing. It seems simple to say it now, but then, in 1990, it was shocking, since postmodernism was supposed to undo all that. This, however, was only true if you stayed in the mainstream world of publications, critics, museum and artists and didn't talk to people outside it. Nick Mirzoeff's and Robert Rosenblum's concerns about how "pertinent" postmodernism is are apt. Nick's remarks about periodization (thank you Sohnya Sayers and Fred Jameson) and geographical boundaries, and Robert's about pluralism are right to the point. Anybody who ventures outside of the elite world of the intelligentsia anywhere in the world, including the U.S. and Europe, or has never been in it, but equips herself or himself with the not-so-accessible but worth-the-trouble writings of the likes of Derrida (bless you, Maurice) will find all sorts of things out there with the earmarks of modernism and postmodernism. Around 1990 it seemed to me that lots of people noticed art, or maybe better, visually sophisticated practices occurring in social environments whose codes, humor, and ways of experiencing the world were not very accessible to some of us. They were not the same as the ones we learned in school and were in use in upscale writing, galleries, and studios--even when the visual appearances were similar. 1990 was the date of exhibitions like *The Nearest Edge of the World*, *Art and Cuba Now*, came to the Bronx Museum, with essays by Gerardo Mosquera, Kellie Jones and Luis Camnitzer--talk about a lineup! Luis C. usefully discussed what he saw as the difference between consciously-applied syncretism that stems from "unstoppable" imported influences, and postmodernism's historicism and recycling of appropriations actively sought out. Someone in the first two days of this symposium mentioned MoMA's 1984 "Primitivism" exhibition, a show that sparked many observations along these lines. One of the biggest points that this (1990-91) round of art and criticism or refinement delivered was the insight that where you stood in relation to power made a difference in your attitude toward images whether you saw them or made them. The truly amazing curators' essays, as well as the art and ideas in other essays in the *Decade Show* catalogue in 1990 and those in the *Power, Its Myths and Mores in Contemporary Art* (1991, Indiana Mus. Art) drove home a number of variations on this theme. I didn't think then that either the word or the concepts behind "Postmodernism" were a problem; I thought what I saw as its deconstructive underpinnings were terrific tools with the potential to pierce ideologies. Like any tools, they could also be used to support superficial things, or even harmful ones, but I didn't think that made the tool worthless. I thought it meant that we need to work hard to understand the cultures that seemed to be "doing" postmodern work (both art and writing) without benefit of our academic or intellectual portfolios. I thought we could learn a lot.

Michael Leja

I am fascinated by the strange confluence in this discussion--thoughts provoked by Sept. 11th mixing with retrospective ruminations about postmodernism. The timing of the symposium made

that inevitable, but I am not confident that this is a recipe for clearing up muddy waters. What strikes me about the conjunction is that the two share something interesting: a claim to have changed everything, although for me the claim rings hollow in both cases. We knew suicide bombing before 9/11; the shocks of the recent WTC tragedies were a matter of scale and location. Modernism began to plumb the complexities of living in a world made of unreliable representations. If we see Duchamp as a modernist--as I absolutely do, and as I argued that we should at the conference in Santa Fe last summer--then postmodernism as an artistic phenomenon is only a subspecies of modernism. The fact that our culture regularly feels a need to posit radical breaks in its history is paradoxically a sign of modernism's persistence.

Maurice Berger

Dan, I, for another, did not feel like I was watching a movie. Yes, I thought of that stupid scene in INDEPENDENCE DAY when the top of the US Capitol (or was it the White House) explodes. But things felt way too raw, way too dangerous and traumatic--way too REAL--to hit me the way a movie would. More on 11 September tomorrow, along with more introductory posts from new posters and more general posts about postmodernism.

Ann, a truly wonderful post. I know so many non-art world/non-academic types for whom the word postmodernism is like an elitist insult. It simply has no meaning or bearing on their lives. This is true of many cultural types I know, especially in the mass media (TV, film, newspapers). It also has no meaning for many artists & academics who view it as an odd attempt to provide easy and telegraphed meaning. The DECADE show--and its multicultural emphasis--made the word seem oddly genteel and oblique. I think of Robert and Jerry's observation that the word almost seems like a cop-out--an excuse for not doing the heavy intellectual, spiritual, and emotional lifting necessary to really figure out what's going on.

Maurice Berger

Welcome, Michael. Great post.

You wrote: "If we see Duchamp as a modernist--as I absolutely do, and as I argued that we should at the conference in Santa Fe last summer--then postmodernism as an artistic phenomenon is only a subspecies of modernism. The fact that our culture regularly feels a need to posit radical breaks in its history is paradoxically a sign of modernism's persistence. "

This is a very important point. Could you elaborate on this idea a bit more?

Also, even if the waters remain muddy at the end of this conference, I still think we're doing important work--if only to resort and rethink the culture of the past 40 years. I, for one, do not equate "postmodernism"--or the changes it appears to represent--with the changes & shifts people are sensing over the past three weeks. But certain issues appear common to these two discussions. In any case, Michael, I'd really like your feedback tomorrow, when we'll talk a bit more about 11 September.

Ian Berry

I like the idea Michael Leja suggests, and that Maurice highlights, that modernism reappears when groups or individuals break with the norm, and that this occurs as a pattern. Why do we often accept the pressure to find the new, show/write/teach the newest and be the first on the scene? I am interested in using modernism as a way to define these moments of break. I casually spoke with some students last night about the conference and they were interested in a definition for the term. The 'tool' is not worthless. Postmodernism, although decidedly fuzzy, is an excellent way to discuss the implications of our definitions.

Nick Mirzoeff

Hello everyone Because of the time difference, I'm not in synch with the discussion but I wanted to pick up on Dan Cameron's question about the WTC as a film. What I think people were trying to express here was not a direct analogy with a specific form of cinematic practice but a way of

seeing. That is to say, as much as people remarked on how the WTC was "like a movie," they have also said that people involved did not in fact behave like extras in a disaster film. In fact, the film most often referenced was "Apocalypse Now." Now it no doubt helps that the film had recently been re-released in a director's cut but that reference (consciously or unconsciously) seems to refer to the (post)colonial undercurrents of the events. That thread of popular response seems to have been quashed (in the media representations) by the effective and terrifying unleashing of what one might call (in Fanon's way) the colonial unconscious. Rather than follow the line that is implied by the comparison with Apocalypse Now--that delusions of grandeur and unstoppable power will eventually lead to terrible things--the orchestrated popular response has been a global reassertion of what one has to call white supremacy. Now that way of seeing is exactly what the other discourse of the WTC as being "like a movie" is all about: the crisp, hard-edged, "objective," positivist view of the world that was created in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a mode of representing the "discoveries" in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, and at the same time, of depicting the new colonies that were being created. Challenging that mode of visuality was precisely what the form of postmodernism highlighted by Ann Gibson was all about. I think that what critics of visual culture should be doing now is attempting to resuscitate that other way of seeing the WTC as the last in a string of colonial apocalypses that stretch from Prospero, via Captain Cook, to Kurtz and on to the many terrorists of the 20th century: and in so doing to contest the term "terror" as being something that has been applied by colonial governments to its subalterns and is now in what is apparently being called "blowback."
Mason Klein

The embrace of ideas that a particular concept like postmodernism, for lack of a better name, comprises does not necessarily imply the endorsement of a theoretical approach to the world's problem-solving. My earlier reference to the positive, progressive aspect of the term is rooted in the need to recognize what has occurred throughout the last decades (yes, within academia and to a Eurocentric and thus mostly excluded world) in terms of a shifting, interdisciplinary reformulation and application of knowledge. I spoke of a complex "social space" that the postmodern has helped create through the aesthetic incorporation of theoretical approaches. To labor over the term's tendentious attendant theoretical baggage is to decrease the potential usefulness for addressing specific types of social discourse. As we begin to negotiate for real what the West's vast colonialist culture has perpetrated throughout the world, it is urgent that we employ new paradigms that help us to examine any kind of construction of a monolithic understanding of culture. Whether those terms involve the use of postmodern or postcolonial shouldn't matter. What concerns me, for example, as East/West squares off, is the need to invoke a discourse that refuses essentialism and the perpetuation of certain power relationships.

10-05-2001

Maurice Berger

THIS SECTION OF THE SYMPOSIUM WILL NOW BE ARCHIVED. IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO POST INTO AN ARCHIVED SECTION. PLEASE CLICK ON "DISCUSSION 5-6 OCTOBER" ON THE TOPICS PAGE TO BEGIN NEW POSTS.

10-07-2001

Maurice Berger

Panelists, please begin new posts here. Thanks.

Yvonne Raier

I think that Simon's definition of "democracy not as the state of consensus, but as the sustained maintenance of conflict, uncertainty, debates in social/political negotiations" is an important one. However, it should be noted that consensus is not the same as majority rule. Majority rule leaves many voices and interests unrepresented, while consensus is usually only possible in a small and fairly cohesive social entity. That there appears to be "consensus" on a national scale following the 9-11 catastrophe is truly disturbing. All the flag-waving may give that impression, but when you start reading the reports of progressive-minded mothers (Katha Pollit et al) and their

pubescent offspring, you realize how the flag has taken on unconsensual meanings. Solidarity with victims' families, condemnation of terrorism, patriotic chauvinism, vengeful war lust, ethnic bigotry.

During the Vietnam War Judson Church mounted a "People's Flag Show" to protest the prosecution of artists and their dealers who were accused of "desecrating the flag." Twenty years later such a show might have been a very PoMo event. Historical perhaps, but lacking the original context it would have floated free of specific social meaning. After 9-11-01, however, how would Kate Millet's flag-draped toilet read?

"PAST/forward", a touring program of 60s and 70s dances produced by Michail Baryshnikov, included a work by David Gordon in which "The Stars and Stripes Forever" was ironically murmured by the performers as they danced. At a post-9/11 performance -- to my utter horror -- the dance was received in some quarters as very relevant to the current situation and consequently as a tribute to patriotic consensuality.

It seems clear from the above that artists who have previously deployed irony as a critical strategy must now rethink not the use of irony but perhaps retool a more ambiguous relation to it. There can be no irony in expressing grief at and condemnation of the recent devastation, but the all-out militaristic response to it with the attendant threat of curtailed civil liberties deserves all the ironic fury we can muster.

Barbara Lynes

As I read along in this fascinating and provocative discussion, I find myself asking, as Maurice previously asked, if Michael will elaborate on his earlier statement: "If we see Duchamp as a modernist. . . postmodernism as an artistic phenomenon is only a subspecies of modernism. The fact that our culture regularly feels a need to posit radical breaks in its history is paradoxically a sign of modernism's persistence." In other words, can we better assess the validity of the postmodern as a term, an idea, a state of mind, a period of time, a social space, as the politics of identity, as a "subspecies of modernism," by clarifying what we mean by the "modernism."

Simon Leung

Although I promised to, I'm not ready to address Dan's comments about "art of the real" just yet. But I would like to begin to think through how I would like to talk about it via Michelle Wallace's important contribution. What Michelle points out I think goes beyond the logic of retroactive inclusiveness; that is, the idea that PM rights the wrongs of M in regards to identities once excluded from the canon (meanwhile, it might be interesting to interface this with Jerry Saltz's 80s canon). If we think of Post-modernism from a genealogical perspective, as Jennifer Gonzalez proposes (and yes, "genealogy" was exactly the word I thought to counter "history,") then the problem for "artists of color" (ok, count me in, says he, identity calls you from beyond, you don't get to make the first call) is not really one of "finally being acknowledged," but rather, a more serious one: how does this artist signify as a Subject?

Michelle writes, "meanwhile, what could seem less in tune with high Modernism than any facet of slavery? Yet this is the key feature of our history." Yes. Exactly. If "art" since the Enlightenment from Kant and the German Romantics to Greenberg has been to signify the freedom of the individual amidst the cruel march of "progress" then we must remember that that which brought forth the modern was always a story of the doubled subject: the new citizen of the nation state, the immigrant, the colonized "native," the slave. Yes, what could seem less in tune with high Modernism than any facet of slavery, indeed. But who can trace the condition of the modern subject more painfully, and poignantly than the slave? Torn from her origin, following only the flow of capital, completely alienated from material production, inversely indexing the "progress" of industry the modern invention of "rights" for the individual. The slave was the other MODERN subject. This is not a new insight Hegel need the slave for his morphologies; and post-colonials think through the double as a matter of course, even while we know we are used as tokens.

This doubleness adds a layer to my thinking when I speak of the modern, the post-modern. At a Dia Art Center discussion on Display about ten years ago, I was struck by a presenter's celebration of "hybridity." My comment at the time was that once upon a time, a valued cultural producer who was thought to be the peripheral or total other to high modernism was "authentic," because this other was the signifier of an immemorial past, outside of the progress of a European timeline. After post-modernism something else was demanded of this subject. Namely, that this subject PERFORM hybridity as an identity. From Blade Runner to Moriko Mori, Asia, and to some extent Latin America, became the signifiers for the future of the newly acknowledged "multi-cultural" West. This was the new currency of exchange for the likes of me. We were asked to reproduce our "hybrid" identities in our work, because that was how we could be most conveniently received, and consumed under new pomo criteria. Many of us complied even while we knew that this was the newest face of Orientalism. Those who resisted were less useful, and therefore were not considered "post-modern" enough.

Although I put most of the last paragraph in the past tense, I don't think that this moment has quite passed. There is not the same white glare put on "identity" as there once was say around the 1993 Whitney Biennial. But for what it's worth, we are still asked to signify for the benefit of those who don't feel obliged themselves, except in intellectual abstractions. Ultimately, I think materialist analyses of "identity," the kind that Michelle is engaged in, will open up the divide which might be most telling for those of us who engage in PoMo talk. I am not particularly attached to the term, but if Post-Modernism can be used to locate the split that was always already the plight of the modern subject, then I think we must also let the ethical dimension of the term to make its appearance. That is, post-modernism can be the terms under which we interrogate how we SEE others for our own ends. Once again, I advocate thinking it as an ethics.

James Moy

I agree with Simon's notion of how race is appropriated into the pomo enterprise, but with a slightly different spin. Postmodernism's self-conscious cannibalization of earlier artistic tendencies combined with its desired dissolution of temporal/constructed boundaries, produced a sort of aesthetics of exhaustion (and ultimately panic). What is one to do when all alleged boundaries have been crossed/dissolved: when everything new has already been done? If the discourse of the new is to continue to seek the edge, the margin, then, one is left with little room in which to maneuver. Within this economy of marginality desired, the appropriation of race becomes a no-brainer! Avant garders (like Freud, Artaud, Picasso) about a hundred years back did essentially the same thing when they fetishized and appropriated African and Asian sensibilities to provide "new insights." In the more politically charged late twentieth century, however, artists of color are allowed to have an actual presence, but often as fetishes (or "tokens" to use Simon's words) to stand in for their "race," and to demonstrate an alleged desire to diversity. Simon's post argues for the continuation of a dominant (white) culture that must act in an "ethical" fashion when dealing with its racial others. Here, I break with Simon. And, here, I believe, will be the new break point in the future of 21st century representational practice in America: the desire to diversity must be real, not merely abstract and dealt with in an "ethical" fashion. We should all be reminded that by the year 2050 America will cease to be a white country, the combined populations of people of colors will have achieved majority status. I maintain that when the demographics of America's cultural institutions reflect the racial makeup of the population, we will know that the current controlling, connoisseurship driven culture (modern, pomo, poco whatever, theorists, critics, galleries, museums etc) has allowed itself to become an open structure. We will have entered the world of Gomez-Pena's New World Border. A true break in the abstract process we call progress.

Maurice Berger

Great posts.

Simon, you wrote: "Although I put most of the last paragraph in the past tense, I don't think that

this moment has quite passed. There is not the same white glare put on "identity" as there once was—say around the '93 Whitney Biennial. But for what it's worth, we are still asked to signify for the benefit of those who don't feel obliged themselves, except in intellectual abstractions."

This is so true. What was--and is--almost never examined (or even signified) in even the most progressive PoMo art is whiteness itself. I agree with James assertion that the call for diversity--rather than just a fashionable gesture--must be genuine. But I suspect that white cultural figures are rarely ever able to share cultural power. Part of this problem relates directly to the invisibility of whiteness itself from the discourse. Whiteness is innate, normative, self-evident, all powerful without ever having to announce itself in culture or academia. While people of color have always resorted to self-inquiry and self-awareness as a matter of survival, most white people have never had to think about the color of their skin and the power it affords them. How many white critics and art historians who now openly champion diversity or support artists of color have ever taken account of their own racism or power as white people?

I have no doubt that so much of what passes as "multicultural" in the mainstream culture as well as in the art world is nothing more than an unselfexamined gesture borne of guilt or fascination. That being said, I still believe that the critical discourse around postmodernism--a discourse of institutional critique and criticality in general--did open the door to a degree of cultural diversity not possible throughout most of the modernist epoch. That we have a long way to go towards a genuine and far-reaching acceptance of diversity--as Michele, Simon, and James suggests--is no doubt also true.

Maurice Berger

GRETCHEN GARNER of Santa Fe New Mexico has E-mailed this post about photography and the postmodern condition:

"I would like to offer a comment from a specifically photographic point of view. I don't mean my generalities to extend to other media, although they may. Modernism in photography meant, broadly, two things: 1) a purity of means, that is, photographs not trying to be anything else, but rather capitalizing on "the photographic", and 2) a kind of "universality" of language (Ann Gibson touches on this in her post). That is, photographs were in the idealistic phase of early modernism felt to be documents that could be read by anyone, and could be instruments for social justice, progress, etc. And when they were "purely artistic" they often made aesthetic capital out of the most banal of circumstances and objects. "All that began to change in the 1960s when photography began to turn inward--and that, in photography, is when the medium began to be post-modern, in my view."

"Nowadays, the ontology of photography and its era of idealism is all but forgotten--instead every other artist just "uses" a camera, without, in most cases, any understanding of the history of practice in photography."

"I will stop here, but to give myself a few credentials say that I have written about this change in the practice of photography. My book, *Disappearing Witness: How American Photography Has Changed*, is forthcoming (sometime in 2002, I hope) from Johns Hopkins University Press." It would be wonderful to read some photography oriented commentary.....it is, after all, the 800 pound gorilla in the living room of post-modernism.

Yvonne Rainer

Pessimist that I am, I think it will take more than a demographic ethnic shift to achieve the "open structure" that James Moy envisions. The way things are going, white male dominated U.S. nationalism shows no signs of ceding or sharing power. In the meantime, as an ethically minded artist, I would prefer to go with Simon's idea of a "post-modernism...under which we interrogate how we SEE others", if not "for our own ends" then for some unforeseen shared future.

But frankly, at this moment I'm finding it very difficult to entertain any vision of a future that does

not hold dire consequences for all of us.

10-08-2001

Michele Wallace

This is getting intense, at least for me. For those of you who are presently within the geographic confines of the U.S., Britain and a few other places--aren't "we" officially at war? Didn't "we" just bomb Afghanistan and aren't "our" troops invading, or doing something equally reprehensible as we "speak?" Okay, granted, it is a moot point, but you know I am terrified that that "collateral" damage thing is going to get out of hand again. What makes me very uneasy is the suicidal aspect of the WTC "attack." The reference I keep getting when I put together suicide with a militaristic attack in a U.S. context is Waco. I had a very strong suspicion when the Armageddon rhetoric began to float around then that we were heading toward a mass suicide scenario. I mean as Baldwin always use to say, I've read my bible. To my mind, a mass suicide scenario in this situation would be the only thing that would be even worse than the many deaths the U.S. caused in Iraq as result of the Gulf War ten years ago, and is sure to cause on this escapade as well.

Okay, now that I got that off my chest, when this whole WTC thing got going on September 11th, I thought I had pretty much finished OLYMPIA'S SERVANTS--and I just loved what Simon had to say about "the story of the doubled subject: the new citizen of the nation state, the immigrant, the colonized "native," the slave."

As Simon wrote:

"What could seem less in tune with high Modernism than any facet of slavery, indeed. But who can trace the condition of the modern subject more painfully and poignantly than the slave? Torn from her origin, following only the flow of capital, completely alienated from material production, inversely indexing the 'progress' of industry--the modern invention of 'rights' for the individual. The slave was the MODERN subject."

Perhaps for the entire month of August, I had been struggling with a new subject for me--actually another approach to this same hard to pinpoint postslavery modern subject: THE 'GOOD' LYNCHING: PASSING, GENDER AND JIM CROW IN U.S. CINEMA. I had thought at first I could write it quickly as a series of relatively short essays on a range of films made throughout the 20th century in which I thought lynching, and its tangential relationship to Jim Crow's perverse constructions of gender, was either an explicit or implicit theme (the silents: Uncle Tom's Cabin, Birth of a Nation, Micheaux's Within Our Gates, Gone with the Wind, Cabin in the Sky, Song of the South, Intruders in the Dust, Porgy and Bess, Imitation of Life, To Kill a Mocking Bird) but I wanted to begin with an introductory chapter on the "bad" lynching, or rather the real lynching as exemplified by the photographs of actual lynchings gathered in the exhibition and published collection by James Allen called WITHOUT SANCTUARY. This was where I got entirely bogged down because although I had been using the book and its images in my classes for about two years, I had never really succeeded in getting my students to really look at the pictures, and I myself could barely stand to do so. Just as the WTC event entered my radar screen on September 11th, I had just begun to realize that the 20 or so lynching photos that I had selected as the most compelling were compositionally very similar to a set of the most canonical of art images particularly of the Northern and the Italian Renaissances--including crucifixions, pietas, and various representations of the physically excruciating torment of the body of Christ. Indeed, human suffering has continued, I think, to be an important subject in representational art, often via religious imagery. Herein I had touched upon a motherlode of sado-masochistic, suicidal ecstatic imagery--a fascinating iconographic tradition (Sander Gilman and Tony Kushner in ANGELS IN AMERICA had both worked this field) fully operative for all the many thousands who participated in public, ritualized lynchings in the South from the Post Civil War period well through the 20th century. Perhaps the most powerful and most well known image in this collection would be the bloated, disfigured body of Emmett Till, a teenager lynched on a summer visit in 1955 to relatives in the South for whistling at a white girl, which ran in the media throughout the world

because his mother had the courage and the fortitude to insist upon an open casket at the funeral in New York.

I would like to connect this tradition of the lynching and torture of the black male (some women too actually and some nonblacks) directly to the massive murder--suicidal event forced upon our tv screens on September 11th. I live in Harlem on Sugar Hill on the 14th floor. I have what some have called a spectacular view of the George Washington Bridge, New Jersey, the Empire State Building, and God knows what else. I never look out the window. I hate heights. I don't much care for the city or its views. The night before the 11th I couldn't sleep. I didn't sleep till about 6 a.m. I didn't wake up until about 1 p.m. when it was over. I have no shades, no curtains on my windows because I had hoped at one point that having the sun streaming through my windows would help me wake up earlier. The only result is that it has made me love sleeping during the day even more. I had the air conditioner on, and the fan as well, as I always do so I heard nothing. Once I was finally awake, it took hours before I understood what had happened and in what sequence. In all that time, although I could have simply looked out the window at where the World Trade Center had once stood, I never did. I just stared and stared at the tv screen in disbelief and horror. They kept saying that there was a lot of smoke, and then all at once I knew that I had only to turn my head and look and that I would be able to see the residue and smoke for myself. I kept forgetting to do this but finally I had some coffee and a tranquilizer and a drink. And then I looked. It was a bad, bad feeling. It had to have been something like seeing the aftermath of a lynching--granted from far enough away so that I couldn't smell it, hadn't heard it, all of that. I am just so glad I was asleep.

But it seems to me that the photographic imagery coming out of this event (which makes me physically ill--and I would caution everyone to carefully regulate their exposure to these images for the time being) has in common with the lynching photographs a macabre element of spectacular self-hatred, self-loathing and contempt for human life much like that of the events of the Jewish Holocaust, or the ritualistic genocide in Rwanda, or easily several dozen other manmade (yet highly photographed and filmed) debacles of the 20th century, which also seem to defy the satisfying interpretive richness of the Modernist imagination. Therefore perhaps we can categorize it as PM, and therefore PM is what we always disdain to look at, what we always pretend to never see or never thought of before, no matter how many times we see it. Fine. But just don't forget things didn't just start not making any sense in 1965. There was rather a marked acceleration in the availability and access to the images. The defining event of my young life was a televisual one--the assassination and funeral of JFK in 1963 when I was 11 and in the 7th Grade. We were sent home from school for the duration so that we might better view the endless sequence of images, which have been replayed a million times since then.

Nonetheless, I would suggest that the more I look for it it, the more it seems the whole century has been wrought with such dissonances, ironies, outbursts, failures of good taste, reason and enlightenment--whatever you want to call it, however you want to describe it. Now if we wish to suggest that the art world only caught up with its own simulacrum effect in 1965--its own lack of inner clarity and coherence, its own suddenly humorous self-importance and pomposity, which was also at the same time exclusionary, elitist, racist, homophobic, sexist, autocratic and on and on. Okay.

Candidate number one for me as a major overlooked P.M. influence would be lynchings. They took place throughout the U.S. throughout the 20th century and all the good Modernists politely ignored them as they continue to do so to this day perhaps because there is no tasteful way to talk about lynchings. Indeed, there is no intelligent or even respectably intellectual way to talk about lynchings. But we do have a song that both Billie Holiday and Nina Simone have sung unforgettably called "Strange Fruit"--exemplary models of Modernist fortitude and grace, to my mind. There isn't any question that Eurocentric discourses of Modernism are about a lot of misappropriation and petty pilfering.

The thing that continues to worry me the most is Kelly's point, which I take to be that one really

does need to consider slavery and postslavery as an aspect of the Modern experience in order to understand the work of Kara Walker and the efforts of such curators as Kelly. Just as one needs to take jazz and African art seriously in order to understand Modernism in visual art.

Simon Leung

I very much appreciate Michele (sorry for the earlier misspelling), Yvonne, Maurice, and James's comments.

I am puzzled by James's representation of my post as an "(argument) for the continuation of a dominant (white) culture that must act in an "ethical" fashion when dealing with its racial others." I don't quite understand how that was interpreted from what I said. My point was that one must radically interrogate the position from which one speaks, and, sees. When I wrote that viewed optimistically, "post-modernism can be the terms under which we interrogate how we SEE others for our own ends," I meant to convey that HOW we SEE is already an ethical challenge. The ethical is not for the "dominant (white) culture" simply because for me, following Levinas, ethics precedes ontology. Before identity, there is the Other. The other is racialized only AFTER identity institutes itself as "white." Yes, Maurice, that is exactly my point that whiteness is internalized regardless of what the "actual" racial make-up of subject.

Yvonne's post reminds me of something Stuart Hall once said about the Caribbean society of his youth, the gist of which is this: although almost everyone was of African descent, hierarchy within this "black" culture was established according to people's European ancestry. "Identity" was created through being Scottish, or English, or French, or Irish among "black people." The fact of blackness was the unspeakable internal center of "identity." This is what I meant by a post-colonial subjectivity; and also an index of how "ethics precedes ontology." We needn't go through all the possible painful implications of a "non-white" majority after 2050. Racism does not only strike between white and the "other" than white the painful reminder of the black/Korean racial rift in post-Rodney King Los Angeles is but the most convenient example. We know all too well that non-white is a hostage to the normative notion of whiteness.

Yvonne's film, "Privilege" taught me something which has stayed with me very profoundly, something I think about a lot. Namely, that privilege is a threshold effect that one can appear to be on one side of privilege and simultaneously migrate to another side of another version of privilege, without even knowing it. One lesson of Post-Modernism for me was always that we no longer had faith in the self-manifest clarity of the channels of signification be that "race" or what seems to be a Walker Evans photograph. I think that questioning of seeing must also be a gaze turned inward, an undoing of identity. That is askesis; that is the ethical.

An aside, Maurice, apropos your comments on Whiteness: earlier this year, I was asked to be on a panel on "the Museum and Ethnicity." The panel comprised of a Jewish curator, an African American art-historian, and an Asian artist (me). I thought my days of signifying ethnicity was over, but there I was, silly me. So what's for me to do? I rehearsed a bit the whiteness studies critique, the importance of displacing whiteness. And then I gave a paper on Race, Matthew Barney, and the Baroque.

Like all of you must, I feel a bit weird right now we're at war. So time to sign off for now. Stop signifyin' for a bit.

Theresa Grandas

I think lot of us we agreed in the importance to create new modes of knowledge. I'm very interested on some approaches, like Mason Klein's one, in the sense of to be skeptical of any concept of legitimization. In this sense, Simon Leung introduces a very interesting reflexion on Amelia Jones writing, refusing the consensus as the main characteristic of democracy, and suggesting the concept of "difference" (I still prefer Rancière's notion of "disagreement"). Regarding last days events and today's news - when I'm writing these notes, television is

announcing the attack to talibans -, I would like to make reference to an e-mail I received after September 11th events. It is the transcription of an interview to Chomsky in Belgrade's Radio B92. It is not possible for me to check the veracity of the document, but in any case it points some ideas that, in general, hasn't been considered by the medias. Chomsky tried to analyze the reason of U.S. attacks last 9-11-01, focusing on American policies in Middle East region, in the complexity of the intervention first of all using some extremism for their own interests, like talibans against Rusia, and later fighting against them. At the end of his intervention, he signals the situation as a "novel event in world history, not because of the scale of the atrocity - regrettable -, but because of the target." What do you think on that? After the shock we lived, here in Spain through television images, I feel very sorry for all of you that were so close to the drama. Tomorrow will begin a three days forum in Barcelona, untitled "World and experiences" that will analyze cultural diversity from the globalization effects perspective, and of course I'm sure the conversation will be addressed from a new point of view after the new world situation. I can't believe in prophetic convictions neither of cultural activities, nor in general. In fact, right now we are living a so hard and difficult situation that make unpredictable the consequences. Any intent sounds futurology. But returning to the subject of this symposium, all generalization reduces the differences, the contradictions that contents. The names we apply for movements, always eliminates the diversity or plurality of the attitudes it refers. All of us know Maurice studies on minimalism, about political implications of artists attitudes that traditional historiography has studied from a unique formal perspective and has avoid other connotations. Maybe is a good moment to re-think which are the tools we use in cultural analysis and how we use them, which is the use of language we do and how medias influence in the messages we elaborate, which are the mechanisms that let us approach to the complexity and richness of creativity and knowledge. I think it is very pertinent Jennifer Gonzalez's suggestion to not to avoid to confront the situation from a critical point of view.

Caroline Jones

The dizzying diversity, the "vielfältig" quality, and the sheer number of postings over the weekend make a coherent contribution difficult. Truly, both Theresa and Jennifer can celebrate the fact that our many voices construct a view of events, politics, ethics and interpretations that can never, nor should ever, be "consensual."

That said, I think it is important to remember that Amelia Jones, for example, has only a tangential access to this site, through me as an "authorized" author. Therefore she can do little to clarify, much less defend, what she meant by her evocation of consensus -- offered in the heat of battle with Edward Rothstein. (It goes without saying that others, of course, have no access at all.) I will not speak for Amelia here, except to offer one small point to the searching critiques of democratic "consensus" provided by Simon, Yvonne, and others whose work I deeply respect and whose feisty point of view I celebrate. It seems Amelia must use words that the New York Times understands in order to address the NYT's discursive regime. This could be theorized as Foucault's "folding power upon itself," or it could simply be seen as the need to mobilize rhetoric urgently in the context of realpolitik without pausing to split hairs.

Going back to Moy's discussion of the first/third world politics here, I think it crucial to maintain some kind of analytic clarity, free from the customary self-hatred of the leftist intellectual (I name myself here). Chomsky, Sontag, and others seeing some kind of "justice" in this terrorism, some kind of "payback" for American imperialism, are accepting the language of crusade, albeit on the opposite side. I think it's important, on the contrary, to refute Moy's characterization of bin Laden or his supporters as "low tech" -- the cadres of American- and European-trained engineers who participated in this complex de-engineering project for (and with) bin Laden are part of global systems of power, not anterior to them. bin Laden's stock activities before and after the crash (in all senses) are sufficient proof of this.

I won't even try to connect this to postmodernism, except to celebrate, yet again, an ethics of criticality that I believe postmodernism rescued from modernism's buried past.
Maurice Berger

Well, the conversation is clearly heating up.

Simon, you wrote: "One lesson of Postmodernism for me was always that we no longer had faith in the self-manifest clarity of the channels of signification—be that "race" or what seems to be a Walker Evans photograph. I think that questioning of seeing must also be a gaze turned inward, an undoing of identity. That is askesis; that is the ethical."

Yes, I take away the same lesson from the postmodern, post-structuralist legacy of the past twenty years. I think it is important to separate the issue of diversity--i.e., the broadening and embrace of racial, sexual, and ethnic difference within culture--with the kind of postmodern criticality (or ethics, to use Simon's word) that those of us have been referring to. The critique of racism, sexism, and homophobia that has been part of this ethos--and mostly absent from the modernist epoch--has also helped changed the playing field of culture. Yet, it is clearly true that there have been far more art exhibitions devoted to token displays of people of color than racism. (Indeed, as far as I know, RACE & REPRESENTATION, the exhibition I organized with Lowery Sims almost 15 years ago at Hunter College, is still one of the very, very few devoted to the latter.) Sexism and homophobia do a bit better in this regard. Yes, I agree with Teresa (and Mason and others) that now is a "good moment to rethink which are the tools we use in cultural analysis and how we use them," especially in the process of changing fundamental attitudes about difference. Caroline, I'm surprised at the following parenthetical assertion in your post: "(It goes without saying that others, of course, have no access at all.)" This reference to outside access to the symposium is NOT true. Indeed, writers from outside the symposium have posted in comments and questions. Some have contributed several posts. So far, I've entered all of these comments onto the board.

Yvonne Rainer

Michele: Maybe I'm getting your message all wrong, but I can't get lynching to connect with those guys whose suicides annihilated 5000 people. True, photos and TV images of both events share a common ghastliness and horror. I still go to sleep and wake up with the recent images roiling in my head. I looked much too long and transfixed at TV on and after Sept. 11. I don't think I could withstand much looking at images of lynchings. Do specific histories disappear when we look at such pictures? Is one effect of 20 years of postmodern "chaos" and fluidity to erase history? One reason I've never liked the term.

James Moy

I appreciate the comments from Simon, Yvonne, and Caroline, and I've a few points to make. Caroline, I do not count myself among the clan of "self hating" leftist American liberals, thank you. Some may choose to place themselves in that camp, but I don't want to go there. I think, as a person of color (I had hoped that I would not have to "authorize" myself in this fashion in this forum, but others seem to have felt the need), I'm entitled to a point of view that doesn't fit into your cataloging. I did quote from a leftist author (who as a Tamil activist certainly doesn't suffer from white American liberal self hatred), but only to demonstrate to this pomo forum that there are some significant differences in perspective regarding the 9-1-1 event. My aim was to place these points in tension with the others expressed. After all, if we cannot begin to understand the others' perceptions then we're likely doomed to revisit this type of event, endlessly. In this regard Simon is clearly right when he suggests we should all try to come to grips with the "needs of others." However, I, like Yvonne, am pessimistic about this culture's ability to change, to deal in a meaningful way with truly radically different perspectives. The trouble, here, is that the postmodern enterprise has had some thirty years to make things better, to help us all to "just get along." The efforts and the results have been lame. Indeed, yes, perhaps a great deal of wringing of hands, but finally little beyond talk about the constructedness of everything, race included. Even papa Bush understood this: he campaigned talking about a soft, warm and fuzzy "kinder gentler America." With his "thousand points of light," remember? Just turns out that those points of light are missiles in the night sky over Afghanistan.

I, too, believe the suicide bombing of the WTC, with its immense loss of innocent life, was horrific.

But, on the issue of high-tech/low-tech-ness of the 9-1-1 event: Simulator flight training notwithstanding, I note that the terrorist merely crashed the vehicles into a couple of very large stationary buildings. It's not clear that the terrorists even knew how to take off or land the planes. In relative terms, then, this level of expertise seems to lag somewhat behind the advanced technical capabilities required to shoot bullets out of the sky with bullets, as in the star wars plans of Bush. Clearly, there were engineers, and technical consultants who provided support to the terrorists, and, but of course they know how to use cell phones and play the market, who doesn't? Still, Caroline's point is useful in helping to dispel an American stereotype of the Islamic world as a place populated only by people wearing sheets and rag heads who throw stones at armed soldiers in armored personnel carriers, only to get shot for their efforts. Did someone say disproportionate use of force?

Simon Leung

I agree with Caroline's comment that we must keep in mind that Amelia's critique was written for the NYT--that's how I understand your reminder that we must remember that there are others who have no access at all. I've known quite a few brilliant thinkers and critics who have tried to write opinion pieces for the NYT and were ultimately turned away because they just could not contort their prose anymore than they were willing to sacrifice sophistication. Also, I remember how the NYT ridiculed post-modernism/post-structuralism/cultural studies on its front page (!) a few years back when it attacked Social Text and Andrew Ross for the Sokol (sp?) affair. However in need of critique that was, a negative story on the front page of the NYT reached more readers than all the students in all the theory classes in all the universities.

Maurice Berger

Simon, you wrote: "I agree with Caroline's comment that we must keep in mind that Amelia's critique was written for the NYT--that's how I understand your reminder that we must remember that there are others who have no access at all. I've known quite a few brilliant thinkers and critics who have tried to write opinion pieces for the NYT and were ultimately turned away because they just could not contort their prose anymore than they were willing to sacrifice sophistication."

Yes, yes, yes, I know this is true of the NY TIMES and most mainstream cultural venues. But please note: NO ONE IS BEING TURNED AWAY FROM THIS SYMPOSIUM. All requests to post comments onto the board have been happily met.

Jonathan Weinberg

Sorry to have been out of the discussion for several days while I was traveling. I hope I am not repeating myself in what follows. Somehow my last post got lost in cyberspace, so I am writing it out again.

I find that I am very much agreement with James Moy, Yvonne Rainer and others in feeling disillusioned about the state of public discourse in America. The talking heads on TV are maddening. The idea of balance debate consists of getting someone from the far right to argue with someone from and the right. Heads of government agencies discuss things with former heads of government agencies. Every politician is falling all over themselves to get on the "unity" bandwagon and support the President who acts like an automaton at best, and at worst sounds like an idiot. My favorite quote is the one about how we have to "get those folks who did this." Even the O'Keeffe Museum feels obligated to introduce its website with a call for unity. But what we desperately need now is not unity as some kind of real debate about what all this war against terrorism actually means. The potential for a new kind of paranoia in the mode of the fifties communist witch-hunt in which anyone can be suspected of being part of a terrorist cell is frightening. I am also dismayed by the administrations pushing through of a series of corporate tax cuts and anti-privacy measures in the name of this war.

I agree with James Moy that we desperately need to try to understand the anger of those who hate the United States. People who are willing to commit suicide for a cause are not just "evil" or mad. In fact they are acting with many of the so-called virtues of courage and self-sacrifice that we tend to celebrate when we make up our own myths about war. On a more frightening level we

need to understand the world's attraction to self-annihilation: Freud called it the death wish. I suggest watching Apolcalypse Now Redux for a primer on the subject and the United States role in it. It is a good cure for rampant patriotism.

I just came back from a trip to the great American West. I spent a night in Yosemite and had the opportunity to overhear several conversations from what they call on TV "average Americans" i.e. white middle class people. They all seem to echo back the aggressive rhetoric that we hear from the President. One man in the airport talked about "them" finally getting what they deserve and how he could not wait to get back home to watch it on TV. Watching the news I cannot help feeling how completely tangential academic discourse seems in relationship to American politics. On the other hand, as I read through all the different posts, I suppose we can congratulate ourselves for not falling back on predictable answers and sides. Indeed, we all seem a bit adrift as Yeat's might have predicted.

Finally, I want to respond to Maurice's comments about how different the world seems after September 11. To use Freud's term, I think we are all going through a period of mourning, which I think may very well turn into melancholia, precisely because so many of us feel so marginalized and powerless. Of course, much of the world has to deal with the terrible threat of violence everyday. It is much better to be sitting in front of a computer in the U.S. than under the bombs in Afghanistan. But what makes this moment seem so terrible scary is the possibility that our own stupidity might make all of this spin out of control and we all join the suicidal imperative. A few days ago I had a nightmare that the nuclear bombs were falling. I have not had this nightmare since I was a little boy.

Steve Dietz

With Caroline, I agree that there is so much provoking conversation here that it is difficult to jump in. I have read the forum through the past couple of days but "gone away" without posting. Perhaps an object lesson in the hybrid format of written conversation? At any rate, all I can do is try and trace the route of where I am.

From my point of view (white, hetero, male, institutionally-employed, among other signifiers), there has been a dizzying, edifying progression from Nick Mirzoeff's linking of 9.11 with colonial apocalypse to Michele Wallace's and Kellie Jones's referencing of slavery and lynching to Maurice and many other's fortifying the discussion with issues of race and gender to Maurice's comment/summary/challenge about the invisibility of whiteness and its relation to genuine change:

"I agree with James assertion that the call for diversity--rather than just a fashionable gesture--must be genuine. But I suspect that white cultural figures are rarely ever able to share cultural power. Part of this problem relates directly to the invisibility of whiteness itself from the discourse. Whiteness is innate, normative, self-evident, all powerful without ever having to announce itself in culture or academia. While people of color have always resorted to self-inquiry and self-awareness as a matter of survival, most white people have never had to think about the color of their skin and the power it affords them. How many white critics and art historians who now openly champion diversity or support artists of color have ever taken account of their own racism or power as white people?"

Without wanting to lose the thread of historical connections--and current realities--that are being mined, I wonder if there is a way to reorient ""the tools we use in cultural analysis and how we use them," especially in the process of changing fundamental attitudes about difference" (Maurice quoting Teresa (and Mason and others)).

It seems to me that so much of our discussion and our resistance retains the model, implicitly and explicitly, of the center and the margin. In the 80s, more and less genuinely, the margins may have been more fully identified and come to center stage, but the underlying architecture remained.

I recognize this is utopian, but I think the idea of network structures--and I am NOT talking about the Internet as a specific technology, here--presents an alternative model. There is no center per se. There is no margin per se. Any node can be tactically important and almost equally present locally and globally--as Andreas Broeckman writes, "translocally."

The network, of course, does not erase history and cannot ignore power. But a close cousin of the tactical media I mentioned earlier is the "hack." The hack has multiple connotations, one of them being nerdy (male) geeks writing viruses that crash your hard drive. The usefulness of the hack, however, combined with the network, is its asymmetry. It allows the individual, the collective, the minority--and the terrorist--to in some senses equalize unequal hierarchies.

WTC/9.11 is not an issue of high tech vs. low tech. It is a devastating example of a kind of hack of sophisticated, interlocking network architectures.

Nevertheless, I believe there is the potential for this same network architecture to supplant or at least challenge ideologically the master narrative of the center-margin and allow for what Simon ascribes as a goal for post-modernism--that it allows us to "interrogate how we SEE others for our own ends. Once again, I advocate thinking it as an ethics."

Michele Wallace

Yvonne: I guess I would like to argue that there are certain kinds of images--having to do with too accurate a depiction of human pain, despair, torment and self-hatred--that never lose their power to disorient, never lose their strangeness, no matter how many times you view them. I would not say this is only true of photographs but it is particularly outstanding in some examples of photographs that I can think of. This may be why with a few exceptions, it seems as though the media entirely suppressed images of people falling and/or jumping out of the windows of the WTC in the past weeks.

This may also be why--despite the availability of the Allen book WITHOUT SANCTUARY in an expensive hardcover edition, and a great deal of interest prompted by the exhibition at the NY Historical Society, it has not surfaced in an inexpensive paperback although there have been various attempts to bring it out. Is this why we also persist in knowing so little about these photographs and the rich archive of information they provide about the circumstances of such occasions--the faces of the crowds who attended, composed of men, women and children some of them so ordinary looking that they could be our present neighbors, the instruments and procedures of torture, the attention to detail in the composition of the pose of the crowd. Whether the victim was still alive or not, partially mutilated, moved one or more times to multiple locations to satisfy the perverse appetite of the crowd for more and more theatrical stagings of the event. and restagings of the crime of the accused.

Such events seem to me not too foreign philosophically from the public executions of women favored by the Taliban. Indeed, according to a documentary in-progress on the subject by Gode Davis, lynchings genealogically came directly out of a previous appetite for public executions, and may have helped to replace and provide a historical link to our present high incarceration and passion for the death penalty.

Suicide, spectacle, torture, burning and execution all play a role in the images disseminated of September 11th. The only one also missing from lynchings is the suicide element--and yet the active self-hatred of the perpetrators of lynchings seems so palpable and self-evident to me--as though they were mutilating themselves as they mutilated the bodies of the people they lynched. Of course, they took away mementoes and body parts. Perhaps I get this from my once heavy indoctrination into the iconography of Christianity.

Yvonne Rainer

Michele: I just want to point out one thing: The photos of people watching the WTC attacks show

only incredulity and horror.

I can only agree with you about the self-hatred of the perpetrators of lynchings. Do you think it instructive to similarly psych out the WTC guys? Does their hatred of the U.S. -- cooked in the evil yeasty brew of righteous religion and political outrage -- also have a psychic component? Of course, it must. OK, let's talk about fear of and contempt for women. Supposedly Atta left a will in which he requested that no woman should touch his corpse, much less his genitals! Extreme Islam and Judaism have this in common. Let's get down to basics here. Can suicide bombers be "read" as fleeing from women, on this earth, that is.

10-09-2001

Maurice Berger

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10-09-2001

Maurice Berger

BEGIN NEW POSTS HERE.

Maurice Berger

POSTMODERNISM & THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

"Postmodernism has cut off the present from all futures. The daily media add to this by cutting off the past, which means that critical opinion is often orphaned in the present" John Berger (1991)

Yvonne, you wrote: "Do specific histories disappear when we look at such pictures? Is one effect of 20 years of postmodern "chaos" and fluidity to erase history? One reason I've never liked the term."

In a number of ways, the question of history is another ghost in this conference. In *THE SIXTIES WITHOUT APOLOGY*, Fredric Jameson wonders whether periodicity itself is a problem, whether the historian's imperative to name defined periods is itself problematic. When does the countercultural ethos of the 1960s actually begin (1958, 1960, 1965)? And when does it end (1970, 1973, the onset of Reaganism)? The question of history turns back on the question of naming in another of Yvonne's posts: does the disjunctive, decentered, and multivalent nature of culture of the past 40 years make it particularly resistant to the historian's methodology of marking and naming.

Over the next few days, I'd like to examine "postmodernism" through the lens of history--of historical methodology, of historical meaning, of the need of the historian to periodize and name. Do we think that there has been a definable, trans-cultural shift in artistic and cultural practices over the past 40 years? What of art history's attempts at defining modernism? (I think here of Michael Leja's suggestion that we need first to better define modernism in order to understand whether and if postmodernism is even a viable conception.) Must we periodize--and name--in order to make sense of culture during and given moment? Does the very nature of postmodernism demand an end to history as we know it (as John Berger suggests in the epigraph to this post)? And what is the historian to do with the idea of "post"? If postmodernism continues much of the modernist ethos--the Duchamp imperative, for example, which is as much a product of modernism's most transgressive edge as it is a manifestation of any POST modern tendency--than why isn't "post" a useful term?

Maurice Berger

Please feel free to also follow up on earlier threads in the discussion.

Michele Wallace

Yvonne: In making a comparison of the production of images of the WTC thing with lynching photographs--the first is clearly in a much more varied, complex and high tech range than the other. Consequently, there are a much broader range of photographs of various kinds of witnesses of the WTC attack, bombing, etc. The phenomenon of journalistic photography and film is light years ahead in this time than in that. Also, I should think there was always some degree of shame involved in having been a direct witness of a lynching. This is implicit in the very nature of the few photographs that have managed to survive tucked away in people's attics and such. It seems like the pictures were often not taken by journalists per se, but rather by local entrepreneurs who were trusted by the perpetrators, or working with them to document events. Surviving photographs of observers of lynchings frequently seem to be posing with the victims, as though they were either directly involved in the perpetuation of events or either entirely complicitious with the torture and/or execution, whereas witnesses of WTC are assumed to be entirely innocent bystanders or even victims. It is such a different situation. There is no complicity implied whatsoever by one's observation of WTC, quite the contrary. Whereas if you allowed yourself to be photographed in the presence of a lynching, it is assumed--although there really is no way of knowing for sure, that you were totally complicitious with the will of the crowd.

On the other hand, I didn't mean to psychologize the whole self-hatred thing. In the case of the lynch mob, I see it as massive, group-self-hatred, primitive and reptilian, kill or be killed, eat or be eaten. I think perhaps from a psychological standpoint there really is no such thing as a consensual crowd. It is a sad fact that people can do things in a crowd that they would never think of doing individually.

As for the psyche of the lynch mob or the psyche of the suicide bombers, Atta et al, I really don't think it is of much use to try to psychologically diagnose this kind of thing. Contrary to our belief system, I think such behavior is so entirely within the range of normal expressions of heterosexist patriarchal dominance that it probably never marinates long enough to penetrate the individual psyche. I think probably the kind of rabid racial thinking that produces a racist lynch mob, or a bunch of souped-up suicide bombers ready to die for god and country is operating at such a reptilian level of the primitive brain that to try to psychoanalyse would be to entirely miss the whole point of it. What makes me most uneasy about Atta and Ben Laden et al is precisely the obvious fact that their actions show lengthy and extensive premeditation and forethought. But I don't think that means it is any more deep than aggravated patriarchal misogynistic behavior usually is. Needless to say, Attah had no use for a woman or anybody else but it ain't deep. Rather it is probably we who need to be psychoanalysed for having allowed ourselves to get so far beyond normal human responses that we need to have such behavior extensively explained and rationalized. If the news is at all accurate, all over the U.S. people are ready to kill and be killed on the basis of what I see as a very limited comprehension of the events. All of that is entirely normal, it seems to me. Look at any portion of historical and/or military and/or religious history you care to read--and there it is all laid out like a map. When pressed, this is what people (particularly male people I'll grant you) will do and do and do and have always done. But the questions are fascinating to me.

In response to Maurice's opening remarks in this section. I see no changes whatsoever in the last 100 years or so. I don't think we are post-anything with Benjamin's mechanical reproduction being the big marker between before and after, probably the Modernist break. Rather I think we intellectuals find ourselves in a house of mirrors composed of multiple representations and images--with the endless necessity of examining each in turn for the possibility of difference, which again and again turns out to be both impossible and invisible. There have come to be so many different kinds of representation so elaborately articulated through a range of technologies (most of which I can barely grasp and definitely do not understand) that I am sure I will be long dead before it has begun to approach its natural conclusion. Then maybe something may change. If there is still a planet.

I don't suggest paying attention to lynching or slavery or material history because I wish to advocate greater diversity, globalism, tolerance or understanding. I am sure most of you are doing the best you can and frankly, I believe that most of us are acutely limited in terms of our capacity for such things. I just think you should remember there are some things you know, and some things you don't know, and the difference between the two. High Modernism and High Postmodernism, in its turn, seems to admit to no such boundaries or frontier, no limitations upon the range of their knowledges whatsoever. And this just pisses me off sometimes.

Caroline Jones

I'll keep this brief. Postmodernism as a term emerges in the 1930s with Philip Toynbee's theorization of history -- modern history. Personally, it works for me to keep a dual optic: postmodernism is both modernism's other, its constant companion, its doppelgänger, and it is a timebound term that becomes urgent and motivational by June 13, 1979 and embarrassing by October 12, 1987. (A little jokey history.) It is necessarily historical because of its use-value in a specific historical moment. And it is trans-historical in the sense that it represents a range of possibilities suppressed by modern-ization and mainstream modernist theory.

Never mind Marcel. What about Elsa?

David A. Ross

I am fascinated by Michele's discussion of photographic representation and the knowable. It seems to me that the reason for the morbid pornographic fascination with lynching imagery, or photographs of piles of corpses in death camps, is just that they are so fully inconceivable that they defy knowing as we stare. Our collective viewing of the destruction of the WTC was one thing. But I remain troubled by our (my) compulsive hunger for images of the disaster, and equally disturbed that I can't believe what I know from direct observation to be true. Viewing the images brings no pleasure, but the pain of reviewing them satisfies some need that I can't quite name.

If the modern ideal was supported by an understanding that as human beings we had the capacity for reasonably complete understanding (and perhaps even a corresponding level of control over) our shared world, then is the postmodern, merely the mournful recognition of our collective hubris on this as well as on so many other levels?

The issue may be quite evident when forms of representation are questioned and our faith in them and use for them is revised, but the issue goes much deeper than a crisis of representation. Perhaps it is a crisis of consciousness.

Donna DeSalvo

I think Yvonne's comment on history is a very important one and I am glad to see that it has been brought to the forefront. Despite their immense limitations, terminology, labels, in a sense, are all we have. They are sign posts but their meanings can and should be contested, debated. What has worried me for some time is the devaluing of history that has taken place over the last ten or more years. It is hard to talk about art history without talking about history. For instance, at Tate Modern, our approach to collection displays has deviated from the more standard chronological or movement based presentation. This has created conditions for interpretation that has stimulated new dialogues and multiple meanings, things that, in some ways, cannot be easily labeled--this is a good. I worry, however, about how this approach can also de-contextualise objects, removing them from the historical conditions within which they were created. We may debate fine points in the academy, critical journals, etc., but what about our publics? Within the context of the art museum, which is where I largely operate, where does history belong?

James Moy

David. For me it's the empowering witness to a momentous event. With an almost "god" like ability, we can see and resee the real planes disappear into the sides of the buildings, and then see the structures come down. We witness in these moments the deaths of thousands of innocent people. Mulvey aside, I suspect 9-1-1 will cause us to refigure our expectations for the

gaze and scopophilia. From 9-1-1 forward, it might not be as much fun to mark the progress of a building going up, or a gallery installation in the process of becoming. And, installation artists will likely have a difficult time producing work that can feel profound, lest the profound appear trivial in the face of the WTC installation. In the broader art scene, the result may be that the market for fun non-violent representations will boom. Hollywood is already responding.

Yvonne Rainer

Thanks Michele for your eloquent and measured response to my unsubtle questions. Maurice: At the risk of belaboring a previous post of mine, let me point to a possible and viable art practice in the last and this century as a continuity of resistance rather than a series of clearly demarcated and fixed historical periods. A way of producing and looking that does away with post-anything. Although the so-called PM since Duchamp (and Elsa? Pardon my momentary amnesia, Caroline, Elsa who?) often -- and deliberately -- obfuscated the terms of such resistance, a continuity can be traced.

You will ask "resistance to what?" It almost doesn't matter. Resistance to previously imposed canons of taste, to imperialism, to patriarchy, to social inequity, to war, to abstract expressionism, you name it. However wrongheaded, misguided, naive, ineffectual, enraged, sublimated -- a thread is there. And I have faith that it will go on in as yet unforeseen forms. Wow. I find myself in art church. I guess what I'm getting at (I prefer questions to imperatives) is "How useful is it to quibble or make debatable distinctions between Mod and PoMod at a time like this?"

Mason Klein

I'm thinking of how little we have evolved throughout our history, not because we're pondering the usefulness of a certain prefix to qualify a historical moment while we become engaged in a war with a fringe group of fundamentalists who live by a medieval code of ethics lurking pathologically in global cells--but because of the belligerent and fundamentalist way we have responded to the attacks and to our "unprecedented amorphous" enemy. As our consensual tribal hordes rally to cries of freedom and democracy without ever questioning for a moment what this is all really about--in terms of control, authority, and mastery--we have good reason to reexamine the inadequacy of our conventional methods of social and historical analysis that have failed to articulate the real issues of exclusion, injustice, and the pain and oppression that numerous peoples have endured.

Progress has been made in postmodernism's critical reevaluation of the socio-political dynamic of colonial cultures and in the historian/critic's practice. This has filtered down to the art world and challenged the conception of art and criticism as ideologically neutral. Socially minded artists from Hans Hacke to Fred Wilson have questioned the relationship of representation, power, and the institution within a postmodern context.

Since the fall of Communism, an aggressive capitalism has pervaded the world. Its concomitant globalization, which is perceived correctly as American, can rightly be seen as threatening the integrity of foreign cultures (even the French continue to legislate the number of Americanisms that may annually enter their lexicon). This is not something we can control, but it should at least sensitize us, make us aware on every level of the need for discourse, and question our wanton intrusion in, disregard for, and global dissipation of other cultures.

Catherine Lord

Somewhere in the aftermath of what most interestingly no one can agree on a name for (September 11? WTC bombing? first shot in a war so old we refuse to remember the beginnings?), in the midst of my now hopeless television addiction, I got tired of seeing men on television--small groups, big groups, huge groups, whatever, wherever, but men--so I went to sit and meditate with the local Buddhists. Meditating with Buddhists is not something I actually do, though it is something I truly believe I should do. Breathe in pain, said the woman leading the session, breathe out compassion. Breathe in pain for the firefighters, breathe out compassion. Breathe in pain for the victims, breathe in pain for the families. Breathe out compassion. Easy.

Breathe in pain for the hijackers, breathe out compassion. You could hear the breathing catch. It's the most shocking thing I have heard in the last month. I cannot get there. Like Yvonne says, it ain't deep but I still (or consequently?) cannot get there.

Somewhere in all of this I fled to Utah and Arizona with my girlfriend. We hired a guide in order to visit Canyon de Chelly. Do people on the rez think about New York?, I asked. Not really, he said. They still remember the Long March. He was 24 years old and wore a GAP T-shirt.

History was the wrench in the works before this particular pomo event began. I'm riveted by images of disaster. I have to look. People falling from the WTC like fruit from a tree (someone interviewed in the aftermath, groping to describe, said that), lynchings, camps. Pornography? Trying break one mirror in the house of mirrors? Is there a difference? Does it matter? That blundering metaphor, and its unconscious but resonate link with lynching, is more powerful to me now than the one image of a falling body I saved before all such pictures were suppressed.

I don't think the term postmodernism gets us far. Coming in late, it's not something I use in my teaching, except when I'm in a horrible mood at the end of a long day and intent on dismissing a particular strand of careerist one-linerism. Caroline contains PM nicely. And like Yvonne, and Simon, and others, suggests that the interest of the term lies in the conceptualization of resistance--theorizing it, documenting it, provoking it, inscribing it into history. The multivalent culture of the last 40 years is resistant only to what I suppose would be called a modernist historical methodology, not to strategies of history that are themselves multivalent, decentered, and disjunctive. Maybe those strategies are something we might be talking about now, in this moment, to make room to move in the space between Art Church and the Office of Homeland Security.

Maurice Berger

Welcome, Catherine.

You wrote: "The multivalent culture of the last 40 years is resistant only to what I suppose would be called a modernist historical methodology, not to strategies of history that are themselves multivalent, decentered, and disjunctive. Maybe those strategies are something we might be talking about now, in this moment, to make room to move in the space between Art Church and the Office of Homeland Security."

I very much agree that resistance is an important aspect of progressive culture . . . and may be very much more important given the nationalism and jingoism that is sweeping the nation. But this notion begs another question: wasn't a good part of what we think of as modernism--from Manet through German Expressionism and dada--also built on strategies of resistance, both cultural and social?

Jonathan Weinberg

To respond to Maurice, part of the problem with thinking about the question of periodization and history in relationship to the last thirty years or so, is that I am not sure that we are really functioning as historians when we talk about the recent past. We are more like witnesses. This is a real problem in so much of writing about contemporary art. There is a real denial about the way the art critic participates in the creation of certain careers and movements.

As I have suggested before, I don't think we can do much about the term Post-modern. It is with us now no matter what. My real problem with such periodization is when we begin to exclude certain work as reactionary etc. because it doesn't fit some overall conception of the march of history. Personally, I think art historians and art critics spend too much time trying to construct overall narratives about the course of modern art. I am far more interested in specific works of art and their social contexts, rather than how they fit into some periodization scheme.

Mason Klein

Given the last fifty years since the notion of "spectacle" was re-presented by neo-Dadaists, the International Situationists, among many others, we have seen how the perceptible world has been transformed through media (and traditional cooptive historical methodologies) into credible illusion; or how the collective fantasies of an alienated audience has thrived on the pseudo-life of celebrity. These fetishistic and manipulated channels of communications have been paralyzed, frozen by the phenomenon of a spectacle turned inside out, one irrevocably intruded by "real" life.

As we try to resist the waves of pathological fanaticism from all sides, it is instructive to know that such a forum as this, a World Wide Web, operating to diversify monolithically standard, reflexive, or divisive views, helps us to recognize that we're dealing with traditions and cultures that paradoxically transcend and situate historical moments. The spectacle of this forum is reassuring in its acknowledgement of the need for fluid ideas, and for the recognition of both our power and powerlessness in dealing with such a complex, ambiguous and pluralistic moment.

Activism takes on an ahistorical face when it involves or includes (along with manifest volunteerism) a more contemplative and thoughtful dimension: it is not necessarily a bad thing now to support resistance rather than pride, acceptance instead of defiance, discourse rather than a narrow ideological tract, and meditation rather than a spontaneous exercise of freedom. We have to recognize that to challenge traditional ways of seeing and thinking, to disrupt the normal, today, may require something other than traditional, and self-satisfying, methods of critique and action.

Maurice Berger

Thank you, Mason.

Indeed, the rationale for this conference was to openly defy a traditional approach to conversation and discourse. It is not a secret to many of my colleagues that I loathe traditional academic or museum conferences. They reach few people, they serve limited communities, and they require considerable sums of money (for travel, food, accommodations, hall rental, etc.). Most of all, they are limited by the vagaries of time: the window of opportunity for discourse is limited to the short period that panelists spend on stage. Here we are--in an Internet conference that is relatively unprecedented in the museum world--speaking day and night from different positions and geographical locations.

I must again bring up Michael's notion of "muddying the waters." When I first started thinking about internet symposia, cool, rational, collective thinking was not even on my radar screen. (In 1993, David Ross--then Director of the Whitney Museum--bought me my first modem and set me up in my first internet symposium. The Whitney had joined forces with ECHO, a NY-based Internet Salon. The symposium I moderated--on race in American culture--ended 5-months and almost 700 posts later.) This kind of discussion seems right to me: I love fragmented, disjunctive discourse. I love Roland Barthes--his lust for the speech fragment exemplified by such works as the EMPIRE OF SIGNS or THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT--precisely because he rejects the idea of an overarching intellectual unity and coherence. Yet, like this symposium, the best of his texts are eminently readable. I love reading through to the joy, fascination, and passion that pulses throughout them.

As I read these posts, I feel the same kind of pleasure. I think we're on to something--a new way of talking to each other.

Maurice Berger

The artist NINA YANKOWITZ has E-mailed the following comments:

"There were so many interesting issues that all of the panelists opened up that it is very difficult to respond to each discourse. Many of you brought up approaches to this subject that I, as an artist, have and still reflect upon. I too have felt that the term \"postmodernism\" has been used to corral the multiple voices being expressed in the works of artists during the late 60's and 70's. I believe

this phrasing gave people a "heading" with which to then set up sub units in order to dissect and examine meaning during this multifaceted time. I believe that currently with the advent of multicultural and global merging and post September 11th disorientation, we are now faced with losing what we have known as personal identification and personal "place". While in this process of reformatting what identity and place mean, our global society is also developing an electronic and digital vocabulary that artists are investigating. Many public or site specific artists are currently attempting to instate, infuse, and create "UNREAL ESTATES" or fabricated worlds by using technology to construct ephemeral or phenomenon based spaces. These places can also be perceived as anti-locations or unbelievable "places". I think that since the tragedy of Sept. 11, many more artists will engage in this discourse of creating digital worlds, perhaps as a way of creating a less painful world devoid of suffering and loss, a world that Alice in Wonderland can negotiate."

John Carlin

I was locked out of the system for several days. Ah technology! So it was a pleasure to wade back in and see such a lively discussion.

My commentary at this point is to note how similar this discussion is to others actually occurring in real time at work and among friends. The sad consensus I perceive can be summed up as follows:

THE FUTURE HAS BEEN POSTPONED.

I see the explosion of words around me as echoes of that lament - and a growing sense of discontent at being locked in the feedback chamber of time. The media can only be manipulated so far - by artists, 'free world' leaders or loathsome terrorists. It is time to take the abstraction caused by media as a given and move on. We live in a signscape. It has replaced landscape. I take that as a fact and am looking for art to help create maps of this murky terrain and to help navigate humanity through it.

Michele Wallace

I'll admit I wasn't a happy camper at the outset but I think this whole discussion has turned out to be really fascinating. But there is one thing I don't understand--I've begun to try to spread the word about this discussion to a few people on a pretty limited basis, people I thought who would naturally be interested and I've been kind of surprised by the level of free-floating hostility and resistance to the very idea of an online web conference, or whatever you want to call this. One person told me flat out that the address I gave her did not work--it is the same one that I followed directly here from the article in the New Mexico piece--and I am no techno-rat. What I am trying to say is I think Maurice has a useful idea for a less repressive form of debate here. But then I've always rather liked everything about Maurice. What do others think?

Nick Mirzoeff

I agree with Michele that the conference is gaining momentum as it goes. One reason for that is the wider focus that recent discussion has opened up. Who really lies awake at night worrying about exactly what date postmodernism began? And wasn't one of the points of the theorizing of that period to be distrustful of questions of origins? At the same time an online conference seems odd at a moment in which techophilic prophecies of a dazzling virtual future seem, shall we say, postponed.

In turning to history there seems to be a terrain that really requires attention. Let's not forget here that right-wing postmodernism, in the person of Francis Fukuyama, claimed that history was over and it was all going to be about consumer capitalism. It was that sense of the inevitability of the US imperium that has crashed into dust just as much as any postcolonial or postmodern theory.

At the same time, the academic historians are in very unforgiving mood these days. The call there is for evidence and archives and if the people you are interested in don't leave archives behind them, too bad. In art history, "History" was for a long time posed as the solution--quite how and

why was never clear. Now that the times feel more like the 1930s than the 80s, it might be time to recall Walter Benjamin's saying "the past is an emergency." In the US, that emergency has had the name "race" for centuries, via slavery and Jim Crow. Lynching photographs, like the photographs of the enslaved, are so hard to look at I think not just because of the violence, horrible though that is, but because the photograph was and is a reactionary medium designed to reassure its viewers that things are as they should be. Slavery and lynching show us the emergency of the past, just as the ruins of the WTC recall Benjamin's vision of the angel of history.

Chrissie Iles

My post begins with a quick response to Jerry's mention of my flip remark about the 80s, just to set the record straight. I agree with you Jerry, and my throwaway comment was merely a hurried late night jest, and not at all to be taken seriously. Sorry that you took it that way. I have a lot to say about the 80s (which produced much excellent art) and was working on that section of my post when Maurice emailed me, waiting for my post to place it online, letting me know that he was going offline for the night, so I rushed the last part, and completely swept past what I had intended to develop, so that it could go up before the weekend.

A brief word about Damien Hirst, which will hopefully be relevant to the more general debate. I did indeed grow up with him in the same 'body politic' (which was, indeed, the 80s, with all the good as well as the bad parts), and have followed his career since he first left Goldsmiths. Hype aside (from others as much as from him), his work, like that of Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, has always grappled with feelings of depression, death, the decay of the body, violence and self-destruction, a fact which is often under-examined. All three express a serious personal angst and desperation in both their art and their personal lives which shocked all of us in London when it first appeared, since its personal angst contrasted so sharply with the formal concerns of the previous generation of British artists such as Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg, etc. It's a brave thing to put the contents of your bed up for meticulous inspection by the rest of the world, whether one likes Tracey's piece or not. Perhaps the issue is the fact that, twenty years ago, such work would not have been so readily embraced by the Tate Gallery, but would have moved up more slowly through the ranks of museal acceptability, via an alternative space, or Kunstverein, as Damien's work would have done. This is the result of the Postmodernist simultaneity which has compressed the time frame between studio, gallery, collector and museum to result in a collapsing of time unthinkable in the past in terms of 'validating' art, which provides no air to breathe, assess or take stock.

And, Post September 11th, what role do any of those aspects of the art world have, and what place does the personal have, for any artist? How do those questions relate to our Postmodern debate? It seems self-indulgent on a personal or artistic level to even begin to address the subject when we are surrounded by so much suffering, and reminded of it daily each time we walk past a fire station or a missing notice, or look up at the empty space in the sky. Perhaps we should look back to what Paul Celan asked: after 1945 and the Holocaust, how was it possible then to create? Sadly, tragic, dramatic and traumatic as September 11th was, the civilian numbers are echoed in many other countries, if delivered in a less spectacular form (Iraq, 60,000 Iraqi children alone killed in Desert Storm, 17,000 Lebanese citizens killed in 1984 when Israel went into Southern Lebanon, thousands recently killed in Kosovo and Belgrade). Somehow it only hits home in a direct way when it happens in your country/city/neighbourhood. When Marina Abramovic came to New York shortly after we had bombed Belgrade, she was taken aback and angry; she had expected demonstrations from the likes of us on the streets, Vietnam style, against the U.S.'s attack on Belgrade. Only now do I truly understand why she felt so passionately, despite all political arguments justifying the act; her home was being destroyed. What we are facing is a triple shock - the shock of realising what everyone else outside America has always known - that America is vulnerable too; the tangible shock of the reality of what happened; and the shock of its reverberation around the world, and the realisation of what that implies in terms of not just international, but global instability and future danger. It is this triple de-stabilisation, surely, to which the question of Postmodernism must now be addressed.

10-10-2001

Olu Oguibe

A little shell-shocked [a Jamaican artist died on Sept. 11 in the same studio where I worked last year at the North Tower of the World Trade Center] and in the middle of a book project at the moment, I have only had time to listen in until now. So much already said. So much yet to be said. Perhaps a way to begin is to concur that there is a prevailing crisis of relevance with regard to both art making and the discourse of art, even as many who hitherto had little anchor to take such discourse beyond the purely abstract now scramble, rather painfully, to engage meaningfully with the present. Poor souls! It is understandable, then, if some have difficulty relating to a discussion on postmodernism, or indeed anything studiously theoretical--the word is that Derrida's recent book-promotion lecture at the New School was scantily attended and most slept through it--when almost all received frames of engagement now seem meaningless and conceited. One speaks here, of course, of the prevalent air, which one does not necessarily share, given that one approaches from a certain distance--of experience and cultural, perhaps even political location--and has not failed to notice that there are contingents that do not share in the current perimeters of acceptable thought post-September 11. Which is to say that while many are caught in a crisis of certainty, others currently contend with one of loyalties, and with so much crises around and so many caught between mourning, unhinging voyeurism, and fear, who gives a fadden about postmodernism? Yet if ever there was an appropriate moment to reengage the idea of the postmodern beyond lame, pseudo-Marxist Ivory Tower scholarship, that moment seems to be now, for not since the defeat in Vietnam has this federation had an opportunity to come face to face with the collapse of the fable of infinite progress. The Twin Towers were the epitome of the modernist credo of boundless possibility on the infinite tracks of the grid; two indomitable phalli that defied gravity and gratified the ego, beautiful testimonies to the mistaken conviction that with science on our side, all things are feasible, and that all things feasible are invariably wise. Besides, those two steel mountains were, also, among the world's most efficient modern transformations of the Victorian sweat factory, with hundreds of thousands of infinitely diminutive factory hands flocking in and out, day and night while the executive suites ministered to deals of all kinds from multi-million dollar drug deals to elaborate bailouts for vulnerable and ailing foreign economies. They spelt power and signified America's unmistakable might as an imperial giant on two solid feet. They were supremely modern and they rested on logic. Which is why, now that the illogical has overtaken them, we may in fact begin to speak of the postmodern, truly and effectively, beyond the quibbling of the "cultural" troupes and their miniscule inconsistencies. The postmodern does not begin until the illogical visibly and resoundingly overtakes the logic of infinite possibility. On September 11 visionary technology failed against crude, impeccable intelligence failed against dogged determination, voyeurism failed in the face of reality, and the fable of limitless freedom came undone. Last night the precision bombers went out as usual, to bomb mountain goats and abandoned camps, but the luster is already lost. The radar screens with their dot-matrix counters already lost their hold on us. The age of imperial invincibility is over, and so the primacy of scientific logic over humane wisdom and commonsense. The architects are back at their tables, a little dazed and nonplused. No more the irrepressible reach for the skies. No more the fatuous and egotistical that Gehry came to represent at the end of the millennium. No more Towers of Babel. Now folks are thinking; perhaps Charles of Wales was right all along. Welcome to the postmodern.

Aleta Ringlero

Thank you for asking if the rez thought about the postmodern, it has been a point I have struggled with throughout this week of posts and discussions. I can say rather confidently, no. In fact, out here in Indian country of Arizona, the discussion of postmodern and modernism are far from the reality of daily existence. Watching the events of WTC again and again on television reinforced why I choose to be removed from the urban society. This is not to say the reservation lifestyle is free of the same problems that plague city dwellers, it is not. Art created by tribal people today is always repositioning the fact of native cultures in transition from a historical past, and toward the future of hybridity. The recognition of postmodernism as a past without a past motivate native artists to examine how identity, race, and representation is no longer simply the recollections of

elders and oral traditions, but very real interactions on a global scale with forces of change that have an instantaneous access to the reservation world.

Maurice Berger

Welcome, Olu. I'm pleased you were finally able to post in.

Maurice Berger

I want to stimulate more discussion by posting into the symposium a quote from T.J. CLARK'S recent essay on "postmodernism" (NEW LEFT REVIEW, no. 2 (March-April 2000: <<http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR23606.shtml>>). The essay examines the issue of whether "postmodernism" is a sequel to modernism, a distinct historical entity, or simply a continuation of its central interests and belief systems. Clark centers of two scholars, and their take on postmodernism: Perry Anderson & Fredric Jameson. In the end--while admitting that it might be too early to make such an essentially historical call--Clarks tends to fall into the camp that questions whether modernism had, indeed, died at all. In this regard, Clark writes:

"It is not an answer to the idea of postmodernism simply to say that the modernist field contained many of the same procedures and proposals. The question is: Were those procedures and proposals formative? Were they already what gave modernism its shape, its dynamic? None of my counterexamples would matter, in other words, if I did not believe they added up, finally, to another account of modernism's whole situation. By 'situation' I mean not just the movement's undecidable social place in relation to a visible-and-invisible bourgeoisie (whose visibility and invisibility it continually chose to recognize and not recognize), but also, more deeply, its sense of the means at its disposal in the face of modernity—what it had to do, what technical or material logic it had to follow, what political or critical vantage point it might have to deny itself, to keep the possibility of representation alive. To put it in a nutshell (to speak to the founding father) I do not see that Warhol's ascesis of 'attitude', or collapse of distance, or atony or impenetrability, does other than continue a tactic—but it is more than a tactic, it is a structural necessity—that had made modernism what it was." I find Clark's assertion interesting and somewhat persuasive. But I'm am troubled by the following, collateral observation: "So the only sufficient answer to Anderson and Jameson would turn on a demonstration not just that modernism and postmodernism share 'devices and features', but that their purposes, problems and objects are essentially the same—they stand in the same central, undecidable relation of ambivalence toward the main forms of modernity, of bourgeois industrial society. I am inclined to think this is true."

Given the conversation of the past few days--especially the arc of the discussion over the weekend--I can't help believe that Clark is positing a highly reductive view of modernism & postmodernism. How, for example, does the issue of globalism fit into this critique? What about race and sexuality and other issues that had little or no play in the modernist canon (or, indeed, very little play in Clark's brilliant work)? And what of postindustrial technology (from TV & radio to computers and the Internet)?

I'd like to introduce these observations into our discussion. Please feel free to respond to them or to any other thread of thinking over the past few days.

John Carlin

I have been engaged in another dialogue with the art historical Jonathan Fineberg about the idea of 20th century American art. One of the interesting threads of that conversation is the degree to which Modernism is a European phenomenon. A reaction against something positioned fundamentally in a hierarchical way. There never was a real Modernist movement in America. And even where there was, it was often a distortion of modernist forms applied to a purpose so different as to require a new label. Mature artistic practice here was post-modern to begin with.

By that I mean our cultural production was never based upon the traditional European idea of abstraction from something. We are a culture born of abstraction and our tendency is back toward the 'real' rather than away from it. We began abstract, deracinated and founded culturally,

politically, economically and legally upon idealized intellectual principals. We never came to grips with the fundamental reality of the land and its indigenous people. We threw ourselves into the transformation of that land (or destruction depending on your point of view) toward ideologically determined cultural bias.

This is the fundamental American idea - conveniently located in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The 19th century American program he announced is both pre-and post-Modern. More to follow

Jonathan Weinberg

As an Americanist who from time to time has been mistaken for Jonathan Fineberg and even gotten some of his mail, I cannot resist arguing with John Carlin's idea that there never was a real modernist movement in America. This just doesn't make any sense to me given the fact that the United States produced Clement Greenberg and the Museum of Modern Art. In other words the story of the very institutionalization of Modernism is partially an American story. I also find myself objecting to the use of "We" in John's comment--the cultures of the United States are too complex and multi-faceted to fit into neat generalizations. What about the role of the trans-Atlantic Avant-Garde which at times included Duchamp, Mies and Mondrian?. At the sametime, I am not sure it makes sense to talk about Europe in such a generalized way. Where is the strong abstract tradition in British art?

Ian Berry

I agree with Donna De Salvo when she says meaning should be contested and debated. Broader historical contexts are partially what postmodernism means or allows. The ability and correctness of discussing political events within our current debate over terminology is a good example of this. I would say to Donna's question, history belongs in our exhibitions directly. Not solely located within a text or label but in our installation decisions and in the objects we choose. Why limit ourselves to just the collection? Why not add popular culture, music, tools, etc. Certainly not a new idea but a strategy we should continue to utilize. If an object of science best introduces or supports an exhibition's idea, then put it out next to the sculpture.

To Johnathan Weinberg, I have thought about this idea of my multi-faceted role within contemporary art and living artists work. Although critics and curators support, witness and choose among the new and emerging, we also engage with history and the practice of art history. When I contextualize an artist's work, current events, biography, environment and discoveries of all kinds come into play. These seem like art historical questions to me. Why does someone paint an abstract picture one month and then a representational picture the next. What changed, what was happening around that action?

I agree with the power of a specific object as often greater than that of a presentation of a movement or timeline. I don't think we 'erase history' when we ask questions or change the rules but engage with it overtly and in an expansive way. If a timeline is desired then choose multiple ones that overlap (or not) at different points. Naming periods or moments is only disruptive when after naming, thinking and examining end. We should remain unsatisfied, ever-reaching and open to additional truths (and lies) about the objects we engage with.

Maurice Berger

THIS SECTION OF THE SYMPOSIUM WILL NOW BE ARCHIVED. IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO POST INTO AN ARCHIVED SECTION. PLEASE CLICK ON "DISCUSSION 11-12 OCTOBER" ON THE TOPICS PAGE TO BEGIN NEW POSTS.

10-10-2001

Maurice Berger

BEGIN NEW POSTS HERE.

Let's give the central questions of the past few days--about history and periodicity-- another day of consideration. Starting on Friday, we'll bring the symposium into the home stretch--a final period of reflection and concluding comments from panelists.

10-11-2001

Chrissie Iles

Yvonne's point regarding the misreading of irony at her recent performance of the Flag piece, and Donna's confirmation of the importance of history, raise important issues about the relationship of the events of September 11th to Postmodernism, including the process by which everything is always modifying everything else. The recent tragic events have polarised people in astonishing ways. Trauma draws out the best and worst in people - old depressions are triggered, past unresolved griefs over losses resurface; people fall into the void created by the sense of suspended reality and feel a licence to behave in ways unacceptable four weeks ago. Ranks are closed as well as opened. Crises make people more who they really are. The artistic and life decisions everyone makes take on a new import. The way we communicate with each other, how wise, generous, sensitive or unthinking, is noticed, and takes on a significance and judgement previously absent. The political, usually un-noticed by those who are not political, becomes personal. In this new climate of kinship, those who do not agree with the party line also run the risk of being marginalised in ways they would not previously have been. Opposition has become something frowned upon.

If everything is always modifying everything else, the most important factor is the speed with which that modification takes place, and the balance between different speeds operating in relation to one another. The imbalance between the speed with which one half of the world has moved in relation to the other cannot but create a world crisis once it reaches a certain critical mass. There exist, broadly speaking, two completely different perceptions of time and place in the world, almost entirely due, as Hal Foster and others have pointed out and as we all know, to developments since the late 19th century of industrialisation and, since the 60s, of high-speed electronic technology, in particular the internet.

This has a profound impact on how one understands the concept of the 'real'. Though running the risk of generalisation, it is still largely true that in the Middle East time moves more slowly, manual labour is more predominant, a linearity of time and tradition - passing knowledge, skills, prejudices, habits and family values from one generation to the next - is more intact. There is a stronger sense of history, partly because people are surrounded by tangible evidence of their own, ancient collective history, architecturally and socially, linguistically and aesthetically.

Within this context, the west appears as a disinterested, arrogant, materialistically-driven force which directly threatens it. The appeal of fundamentalism is obvious. It provides a tangible focus for the intense anxiety technology, late Capitalist Darwinism and globalism provokes for people not part of that body politic. It is easy to forget that a billion people live on a dollar a day. It is essential to recognise, as Clinton's impressive speech in Washington yesterday articulated so clearly, the importance of addressing the economic and social deprivation of the majority of the world if there is to be any real attempt at solutions to the current crisis, which appears to be about to turn into the Third World War.

I agree with Caroline Jones' challenge of the description of Bin Laden's operation as low-tech; his use of the American media to communicate his message to henchmen in America and Europe via CNN shows a shrewd understanding of global technology and of the media. It articulates what Hal argues concerning the way in which the two major tangents of technology in the 60s - Debord's spectacle and McLuhan's interconnectiveness - have been fused into a heavily mediated experience of tragic events via TV et al, from the Kennedy assassination and the terrorism at the Munich Olympics to Kosovo, Tianenmen Square, O.J. Simpson and, now, to the World Trade Centre. Unlike the Afghans, the Bosnians, the citizens of Belgrade or of East Timor, we are not used to experiencing this kind of thing 'for real'. Anyone pondering on the meaning of

'real' should walk down to near Ground Zero.

Yet Yvonne, I, and everyone I know remained glued to CNN and other news channels in ways we would never do normally, even though we lived only streets away. We were enacting the classic psychological need to understand a traumatic event which had such a direct relationship to us by absorbing it through repeated exposure, thereby regaining some feeling of control over our immediate environment. And we did so also because this is the way our world, including our immediate surroundings, is mediated. It was a surreal experience to watch Tower 1 burning from my rooftop, then watch the same view a minute later on TV downstairs (no TV report can convey the horror of that); or to watch people running past us up the street, covered in dust and crying, then go back and encounter the same river of people on TV. This near simultaneity of real and mediated experience, so opposite, whose contrast is normally only experienced in an 'art' situation, in countless instant feedback/real time video works, lies at the very heart of the Postmodernist debate, and is why so many people wondered immediately afterwards what direction art and criticism would take here-on, now that the real was asserting itself so forcefully over representation.

Dan Cameron

In a way, the postmodern paradox is summed up for me by two observations in Chrissie's last post that appear to be self-contradictory, but are probably not. One is that there are parts of the world, in general those least touched by industrialization, where time moves more slowly, most labor is done by hand, and the ideas of fundamentalism find fertile soil in a social ethos threatened by the hyper-modern West. The second observation concerned bin Laden's shrewd manipulation of world media to generate fear and continue to pose as legitimate representative of a disheartened populace. Assuming that bin Laden is not glued to CNN in whatever cave he is holed up in, this indicates that the web of global simultaneity which media technology has spawned does not require a seasoned or even sophisticated approach. What it does require is fanaticism and ruthlessness, both of which he and his network possess in abundance. However, his assumption that the West will be frightened out of its wits just because he appears on Qatar TV the morning after the bombing begins (in a prerecorded video, of course) to threaten America once more indicates to me that he has seriously underestimated his adversary. First of all, he has now admitted to the entire globe that he was behind the Sept. 11 events, erasing any doubts that moderate Muslims might continue to harbor on that score. Secondly, he seems to believe that we in the West are essentially children, scared of the bogey-man hiding behind the shrubbery. In other words, he has the weakness of all fundamentalist fanatics, which is his absolute belief in the infallibility of his own world-view, and that will probably end up being his Achilles' heel. Granted that a lot of Americans are freaking out at the moment, it wasn't until watching bin Laden's performance skills crumble this week that I had more than a faint hope that this might all end without actually triggering World War III.

This brings me to the problem that Mason Klein very eloquently described a couple of days ago, which I quote: "...we have good reason to examine the inadequacy of our conventional methods of social and historical analysis that have failed to articulate the real issues of exclusion, injustice, and... pain...". If we can accept these premises while at the same time rejecting the terrorist's mode of bringing them to the world's attention, we have a very good definition for what roles artists and intellectuals will be filling in the years to come. I for one am quite convinced that since the march of technology, media and consumer capitalism seems to be continuing unabated across the world, there must be a corresponding effort to bring together different cultural perspectives, and with them, a complex, hybrid notion of reality that enables us to live our lives with a relative sense of security while keeping closely attuned to the injustice and exclusion carried out in our name, and in many cases, by us directly.

I'm now going to shamelessly try and tie these issues together with the omnipresent topic of postmodernism and whether or not it is merely an extension of the modernism's general principle, using different methodologies. For me, one of the most defining characteristics of modern art is that it took place in very few places at very precise moments, and was defined by a limited range

of stylistic possibilities. If you were an artist in the 1920s, you had to live in Paris if you wanted recognition for your work, and your idea of reality (not to mention style) was shaped by the locality that was Paris at that moment. A form of modernism did appear in other points around the planet, but it was always regarded as a belated form of modernism, invariably viewed as inferior to the 'original.' This notion of the historic and geographic exclusivity of artistic movements continues unabated until the end of the 1960s, with the advent of global art movements like Fluxus. It seems that the difference between this limited sense of time and place with regard to developments in art (modernism), and our own time, with its plethora of secondary centers, hybrid localities, and overlapping cultures, is what constitutes the essence of postmodernism. However, I also believe that when Yvonne says that the modern is/was about "a continuity of resistance," she has also pinpointed the one central feature of art-making that has not altered significantly during the past century.

Kellie Jones

Periodization always seems a bit tricky, especially for those of us who are in the business of excavating histories that have been buried. It seems to me that there is the canonical standard (Modernism was Paris in the 1920s) and there are all those other histories out there.

I would agree with Jonathan that "the very institutionalization of Modernism is an American story." It is of course also an African, Asian, and Latin American story. In the case of the latter we are not just talking about Tarsila do Amaral coming to Paris, then going back to Brazil and making pictures dripping with primitivism like "Black Woman" (1923). We also need to consider that Pissarro (from the Caribbean) began painting as an "artist-traveler" in 1850s Venezuela before moving to France to contribute to Impressionism. Besides the concepts of "affinity" or "influence" put forth by MOMA, I don't think the real research has been done yet tracing back not just the point of contact between these cultures and those of Europe but the context and the people involved (Asian and French, German and African, etc).

Jonathan's and Catherine's warnings about generalization are important to keep in mind when talking about "American" or "European" culture. What Dubois characterized as life behind the "veil" (African Americans experiencing their "own" culture and that of "white" America simultaneously) at the turn of the 20th century, becomes Stuart Hall talking about his fractured existence now being the "norm" in the 1980s (which is why I have some warm spot in my heart for the idea of postmodernism, even if it was a problematic term). Yet, I think there is something compelling about John's idea that "our cultural production was never based on the traditional European idea of abstraction from something. We are a culture born of abstraction and our tendency is back toward the 'real' rather than away from it." I find it particularly interesting in terms of the history of African American artists who, with very few exceptions, had no control over their own images until the 20th century. For that reason they were fixated on making "true" representations of themselves as a way to combat centuries of stereotypes. It is a century from that place to Gary Simmons or Kara Walker. Garcia Canclini talks about this in the Latin American context as "modernism after postmodernism."

What I think we need to move away from as cultural theorists is the idea that what happened in Europe at a certain moment is the full definition of what Modernism is. Maybe it's simply substituting "Modernism" for "Modern" or "modernism" to allow the term to open onto other histories and interpretations. Perhaps we have a better shot at "postmodern" in terms of making it a useful definition. While Dan sees the 1960s on as offering a more decentered history of art, it remains to be seen if this is the case as the histories get written. So far it is still a largely (white) American and European tale.

Yvonne Rainer

I'd like to post something from David Antin, with whom I've been exchanging emails about the post 9-11 situation:

There was nothing irrational about the terrorists. They employed the same logic that the rationalist traders of the World Trade Center employed. They calculated from the airline schedules which planes filled with maximal fuel would be taking off from nearby east coast

airports at closely related times. They figured out by careful observation of airport security what kinds of weapons they could easily bring on the airplanes. They learned enough about flying to navigate their hijacked planes to their targets, and their leaders may have even had the foresight to sell short on the international market various stocks that logic could predict would decline very radically after the attack. They also almost certainly made use of cell phones, email, faxes and the internet to accomplish their aims. In this sense they were intricately involved in the most modern technological world -- much of which is very low tech from the point of view of the user and user friendly. The only aspects of the attack that may seem irrational is the willingness of the hijack teams to give up their lives to accomplish their ends and the seeming pointlessness of the destruction. But were they any more irrational in their commitment to their aims than the firemen who braved death and found it when they rushed into World Trade Center to rescue people they didn't know? And, of course, the outcome of the destruction of the towers also has a rational aspect. From the point of view of its planners, it would almost inevitably accomplish two things -- make the planners look magically powerful against a superpower that seemed far beyond the reach of all the disenfranchised and resentful members of the Islamic world, and provoke an inevitable counterattack that would logically intensify the hostility of the Islamic world against the malevolent superpower and provide more recruits for a war aimed to bring down Western secular culture. No, our enemies are not irrational or mad and they have access to many of the niceties of modern technology. What is postmodern about the situation is the condition in which this world lives -- a condition in which radically different cultural world views that would have been separated by great distances and barriers have been brought right up against each other by the new globalism and all its consequence. The Sept 11 effect is only the most recent and striking example of this. The notion that we've been resituated in the reality of the irrational is simply intellectual trash.

Olu Oguibe

Chrissie Illes's wonderful post, and Dan Cameron's both make a number of points regarding the West-Rest binary that beg response. One cannot help but ignore the more jingoistic of Dan's assertions regarding Bin Ladin [they sound no different than CNN and the State Department]. Let us grant that patriotism demands that we withhold certain acknowledgments from the enemy: the adversary is always a shade less smart than we are. How else can we possibly prevail over them, especially when prevail we must? One's greatest sorrow in this whole affair is that the American leadership does not have the integrity to level with the citizenry, even when so much blood has been shed and much more is bound to be shed. There is no mention anywhere that a campaign against Afghanistan had already been scheduled for October long before the World Trade Center incident [MSNBC reported this online a few days following Sept. 11, quoting a named Pakistani official. The report was pulled a week later.] Or that dumb Bin Ladin or at least some of his colleagues learnt about it beforehand and probably decided to strike first. Or much else that the citizenry ought to know.

One is compelled to posit that the postmodern never really happened in America, despite the widespread indulgence in the theoretical postmortem of modernism. How else does one explain the current, uniform feeling that terrorism is something from the outside that Civility must now contend with; the "threatened" Other lashing out, as Chrissie seems to imply, or the fanatical Deprived characteristically resorting to the crude and rustic while predictably underestimating the might of Justice, as Dan insinuates? This faith in a diametric of Sense vs. rage, Progress vs. deprivation, Civility /Democracy vs. chaos, with the lower-case signing the Other while the upper-case represents US is so entrenched it effervesces right through the seemingly most sympathetic, liberal positions. It is tempting to think that this surfaces only in moments of crisis such as now, but it has always been there in the single-line spacing. Clearly, in spite of the appeal of "destabilizing" discourses that "pry apart" the "grand narrative" and "open up" spaces to "insert" "unacknowledged" histories, it is clear that we are truly only comfortable when such discourses and "interruptions" are firmly and safely quarantined in the infirmary of the text, and would sooner feel threatened and unsettled should they venture out onto the streets. And so, we doggedly locate them somewhere other than at home. We look elsewhere. We have to look elsewhere.

Yet, if we must identify terrorism with at best a discomfiture with the "threat" of progress and at worst an envy of the arrogant might of the United States [Chrissie], how do we account for the fact that until rather very recently, organized terrorism against the African American was a regular part of the culture of these United States and that this terrorism was perpetrated by fairly comfortable, middle-class citizens, respectable members of their communities, deacons of the church and country sheriffs with kids in college, who nevertheless went out upon a weekend with picnic basket and the wife and kids in the automobile to hang black men from trees and set their bodies on fire, so as to drive fear into the heart of the black community and sometimes drive the community out of town? When was the last lynching recorded in the United States? How long ago was the last African American place of worship bombed or set on fire, or indeed whole town razed to the ground? Yet, how else may we understand terrorism simply to mean religious fanatics from Elsewhereland lashing out against the arrogance and threat of progress, other than that we remain solidly entrenched in the belief that we represent order and progress, while chaos, backwardness and frustration reside elsewhere? Now, where is the postmodern in that?

By the way, anyone who believes even the most infinitesimal of all the crap coming from the Pentagon PR machine and filtering through to the population in the guise of reliable journalism right now, whether it is about Bin Ladin and his mystery terror machine or the brave march of the forces of Freedom against that machine, and forgets the role of the press in the Spanish war [and the annexation of the Philippines and effectively, of Cuba] or indeed the Pearl Harbor attack [about which, it has been incontrovertibly proven that the White House knew beforehand, yet let it go through at the cost of American lives], or the recent Gulf War, is living in the Modern, square and firm. McLuhan might as well have never lived! Such faith is no less blind than that of the so-called religious fanatics and terrorists.

One might add, just for the road, that the apparent failure of American Intelligence to pick up on Sept. 11, and the coordinated precision of the attack itself, should probably challenge certain ideas about who is high-tech and who is low.

10-12-2001

Maurice Berger

Thanks, Chrissie, Dan, Kellie, and Olu.

I hardly want to interrupt the thread of the discussion today. But I think it is important to begin thinking about the ways this discussion of the past few weeks has affected panelists and visitors. To what extent, if any, has it caused you to rethink certain assumptions about history, reality, irony, meaning, criticality, and humanism . . . both in relationship to the issue at hand (postmodernism) and the grave events that have intervened?

Over the next three days--the last three days, in fact, of this symposium--I ask that EACH panelist offer some final words. How has the discussion of the past ten days shifted, altered, affirmed your thinking? What of postmodernism? Irony? Reality? What of art historical methodology? What of this cybernetic format of discussion and debate? Even if you believe that this discussion has changed nothing (or worse was not profitable), please comment. Think of these posts as concluding statements.

I'll post my own concluding remarks on Sunday night.

One last thing: any panelist wishing to respond to today's posts--or posts of the past few days--should feel free to do so. But please also post a concluding statement.

Visitors may submit comments by clicking on the CONTACT US line or the CONTACT THE MODERATOR line on the symposium homepage.

Theresa Grandas

The conditions that made possible postmodernism have radically changed. Critical discourses with social, political and cultural order, have been erased but hegemonic discourses that have transformed public spaces, the transmission of the information and the medias. Two days ago I read a text wrote by Armand Mattelard, about the significance of the periods that artistic practices are involved in an engagement (like May 68, as an example), the relationship between cultural practices and the polemic with everydaylife. His thesis is based on the idea that the disenchantment of politic utopias has made significant changes in the lecture of appearances. In fact it is true that in the last years some artistic practices has developed new ways to consider what is art, which is the role of different agents (like artist, curator, the market), discussing the activity, the results and even the necessities of creativity and knowledge. I can mention as examples "Services" project that Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler started in Luneberg and later was also developed in other different cities, in which participated lot of artists, theoreticians, and people from other professional fields. It tries to distinguish the difference between conventional practices and possible social transformations around artistic activity; the critical analysis of the institutions, information and intellectual propriety as results of market's critic and the non-materialization of artistic object. Or the exhibition that is held right now at Töpries Foundation in Barcelona, "Architectures of discourse", a project by Ute Meta-Bauer that involves collective groups and artists not in the construction of an artistic item, but making questions about the curatorial practice from a critical perspective. They try to analyze the connections between artistic practice, institutions and culture in relationship with the quotidian, the social space that makes possible a dialogue, a communication and to establish relationships between all these different parts. More than possible answers that these and others projects can offer, what it is interesting from my point of view is the critical frame they offer to some models that in a lot of cases doesn't correspond to the needs of some practices and to the intentions to create platforms of critical analysis. More than possible labels (M or PM) what I'm trying to introduce are possible forms of discussion that let us the possibility to built up different approaches to a many-sided reality.

Maxwell Anderson

It's been very heartening to have a space outside of mass media to benefit from the debates of informed colleagues. These are real debates exploring nuances that make the political and media leadership in this country squirm; witness yesterday's decision by New York City not to accept Alwaleed's check for \$10 million because it came with a reminder that the West is not absolved from its deplorable acts because an unimaginable crime was committed on our soil.

While I tend to recoil from the syntactical homilies of postmodernism, I have developed a newfound tolerance for arcane vocabulary when it is in service of greater understanding rather than reflexive dethroning of the elders.

Thank you, Maurice, and everyone else who has contributed to this extended late-night exchange. It's made it possible to put some perspective on a horror which none of us could have imagined.

Caroline Jones

The fractiousness that has opened up in the last few posts should make me feel better -- isn't this the open discourse that we have been calling for and celebrating? But instead, the guilt-mongering and lashing-out and muddle-headedness makes me feel more like the Berlin dawn: gray, damp, unresolved, dogged, stoic, depressed.

I don't know Olu Oguibe -- so how can I even begin to tender the observations (top of the head ones, like all of ours) stimulated by his furious post? There is as much disinformation as information out there, and I am not remotely equipped to do the research, much less make the claim, regarding intelligence reports' precedence or antecedence to attack (in the case of Pearl Harbor, the Pentagon apparently knew too much, in the case of WTC, too little). But I can say, from my heart as well as my head, that I am pained by the failure to draw distinctions in the rush

to make it all connect -- such "connections" belie both the contingency and particularity of history, and make a detestable algebra of human suffering.

Similarly, what is the logical or philosophical status of David Antin's equation between firefighters and terrorists? That both have a guiding belief system enabling them to risk death? I have one, too, and I'm sure he does if he would care to admit it. The logic of the equation is thus a truism, leading to no useful analytic distinctions and serving only as a nifty polemic to confront the ready-made heroism of one, and the mass-marketed demonism of the other. There are better ways to make critiques; better tools than these.

Mason Klein's observation regarding the "inadequacy of conventional methods" of critique "to articulate the real issues of exclusion, injustice, and... pain..." is more measured and responsible. It is also ancient (but not unjustified for that). Judaism's notion of a fractured world that humans are cursed to inhabit and blessed to heal is apposite: "tikkun olam" is here transmogrified, as it were, into avant-garde idealism. But a moral condemnation of modernism/postmodernism's failure is also an astonishing claim as to its presumptive efficacy -- do we still imagine that *articulating* the real issues is all that could be asked of us? The project is ongoing, the issues are everywhere, our work is never destined to be complete.

Somehow this connects for me with Nick Mirzoeff's astonishing claim that the recent terrorism solved all our leftist problems, since "it was that sense of the inevitability of the US imperium that has crashed into dust." Speaking from, ahem, the self-proclaimed capital of the 21st century, may I point out to my confreres and consoeurs that the US does not own imperialism? (Geez, it never even *had* an emperor...) To imagine Amerika as the One Great Evil is to believe modernist centralities over very evident postmodern dispersions and capillarities of power. (Not to mention serving to complete bin Laden's scenario.) It is to imagine an easy solution to our problems. Death doesn't solve anything, doesn't get rid of anything; neither can dust bury imperialism so suddenly. We need to keep articulating how power folds into the interior of cultural subjects (even *our* interiors). Further, we need to do our work as teachers, parents, producers, community activists, voters, gardeners, and even consumers to propel our questions and refusals into the crannies of hegemony, to "fold power back upon itself." Thus I side with Yvonne, whose notion of "perpetual resistance" is all we have left from the shreds of an early modernism too quickly made canonical. It was in this regard that I called for a shift from the endless authoritative pomo pater Duchamp to *Elsa*, and to all the other unnamed and unfigured participants in modernism, and resisters of (modernist, but also other kinds of) hegemony. In this case, Yvonne, I was referring to Elsa von Freytag Loringhaven, the "living Dadaist" who had none of Duchamp's ingratiating, organizational, or archival skills, who was possibly an ambulatory schizophrenic, and whose ghost haunts what Kellie outlines as modernism's ethnocentric core. Perhaps after 9/11, and after all the bits and bytes, we can only continue the good, but never completed, task -- to articulate structures of power and chart pathways to resistance, even when it is that same network of distributed power that configures our very subjectivity in the world.

We who write here have privilege, and power, in our limited capillary site of intellectual discourse. We need to use that power by giving it away. By constantly seizing it and redirecting it. By recognizing our imbrication in systems that we simultaneously work to dismantle. By teaching, making, building, helping, giving, doing.

It is now mid afternoon on this side of the planet; the sun has come out and molecules reconfigure themselves in productive and entropic ways. Maybe there's hope. I'm going to go look for it -- talk to you all later, in the flesh.

Wendy Ewald

I've been away from home and off-line for a few days, enjoying the distractions of work in North Carolina and trying to convince my six-year-old to stop cheating at Junior Monopoly. At a provincial distance from Ground Zero, in a university environment where everyone has a PhD and a Saab, the nervousness radiating from NY feels diffuse. The armed Guardsmen at the airport

look like actors rehearsing an operetta.

It's comforting to return to the murmur of intellectual argument, to the clink of virtual vodka-and-tonics, to know that conversation can still go on.

But will it all seem, a year from now, just a quaint memory? Will we look back assuming there's going to be a year from now and blush at the enormous privileges we'd gotten used to, especially the privilege of being merely frustrated as opposed to the prospect of getting shot at or jailed or run out of town or blown up or sliced to pieces, the way things go in Colombia, say, or Afghanistan or Algeria, because that's what it means to be on the minority side of an argument in most places on our planet.

Our symposium has flipped through the rolodex of PM issues. The conversation about pictures of lynchings and images of the Trade Towers was riveting. David Ross's observation "Viewing the images brings no pleasure, but the pain of reviewing them satisfies some need I can't quite name" points to an agenda for ongoing discussion, as does Nick Mirzoeff's provocative characterization of photography as "a reactionary medium designed to reassure its viewers that things are as they should be."

True -- some pictures make you sick, some make you well. Middle-of-the-road, mass media photography teaches you not to fret about the way dead people peek cryogenically out of the past, and not to worry about the way every photo subject seems a captive Aztec, and every photojournalist an officiator at a sort of human sacrifice. Pictures, pictures, pictures; repetition, repetition, unholy literalism... We are Oprah-ized enough to cry, but too educated to scream.

The connection between pictures of lynchings and of the Trade Towers' death throes doesn't quite parse in intellectual terms, yet something about it feels profoundly right. Both are public displays of violent death inflicted on innocents who find themselves ferociously hated, and the deeds are done in defiance of civic law. But visually speaking

There is about such images more than a whiff of "morbid delectation" (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Aquinas). Like audiences at the very first flickers, we can only gawk at the most private of moments, meretriciously made public.

Pictures of death do offer reassurance, though not necessarily reassurance of the reactionary kind. Perhaps our voyeurism is a riff on Zeno's Paradox: At a level somewhere under the threshold of understanding, we sense that by looking and looking again and again, by measuring ad infinitum, we can indefinitely postpone arriving at the end point, the point beyond which we would rather see no more, the awful point of our own extinction. It's one of our coarsest, most elementary equations: The more we look, the longer we stay alive.

Plus: holding the images timelessly before our eyes puts off acknowledging our implication in the events sketched by the images. I'm not suggesting that looking means complicity and culpability -- it can, but it doesn't have to. At the very least, though, the images tempt us to participate without truly being touched, to metaphor-ize unpalatable facts of life, to estheticize realpolitik.

It may be useful to compare, even in passing, how the West is seeing and talking about 9/11 with the way it's being seen and talked about by millions of fundamentalists. One could say, grossly simplifying, that we have been trying to understand what happened by asking what such a murderous spectacle signifies, by weighing the ethical competition between cultures, and generally trying to settle our nerves by attributing to the attackers a narrow range of motives from psychotic to petty to demonic.

The fundamentalists, on the other hand, remain frighteningly literal-minded and doggedly down-to-earth: they keep insisting, when we are permitted to hear them, that the attack stemmed from

outrage at the occupation of Arab land. Some of the people making this claim may be opportunists with napoleonic agendas, some may be zillionaire oils sheiks with creepy sunglasses. Political theater is tacky and the evidence is always tainted. But this does not obliterate the substance of what they are talking about.

In the western media, Palestinian grievances have been consigned to the limbo reserved for B-list moral stalemates like the dispossession of Native Americans, the brutalization of Belfast Catholics, the extermination of the Bushmen. Herein lies photography's reactionary strain: It's one thing to see pictures of Palestinians tossing stones; the images are predictable, therefore harmless. But it's altogether something else to be inside a Palestinian refugee camp. Anyone who's ever set foot in one has no trouble understanding how these unspeakable places gestate suicide bombers by the hundreds.

The mutual blindness of West and East is not entirely willful. Evidently there is comfort to be found in the blindness and detachment induced by prolonged looking. It may come from centuries of religious squinting, it may come from the obliviousness of immigrants forgetful of their painful past and disdainful of the intractable land-envy of distant people. Maybe it's the tunnel-vision of chronic vacationers who can't help staring at celebrity suns.

Maybe the reassurance of blindness derives from the suspension of suffering that follows meditating on the invisible, on the unsee-able, on the taboo topics about which Islamic culture has strong ideas, many of them much more subtle than Westerners care to admit.

There is a myth in pre-Islamic folklore which holds that once upon a time the Arabian desert was Eden. (The myth has foundation in geo-historical fact.) I'd like to bid farewell and offer thanks to all by citing a few lines from the novel my husband has been translating with our Saudi writer friend:

Mahmoud stayed with his speckled camel, who was heading north, leaving the caravan behind. The wind gusted, scattering pebbles in his path. The camel snorted a charming dromedary song. Mahmoud was harmonizing in a higher register when he caught sight of a caravan far more splendid than the one he'd left behind, lurching and stutter-stepping along a steep mountain path.

The camel drivers were clad in pale purple-blue robes patterned with silvery tiles and tassels of pure silver and cowrie shells. They reminded Mahmoud of the treasures in the riverbeds and shallows ringing the Arabian Peninsula. The silver seas and the rivers of light flashed in his mind, tempting him back to the time before The Great Fire, to that appallingly long day when the sun came too close to earth and scorched its face with a flame so brilliant that it turned Arabia's Eden into barren desert, leaving only the beauty of its dunes and the groping of the sun on the sand to insist, with stunning clarity, that this Eden had once been loved, but loved too warmly for Paradise to endure.

Slowly, peacefully, the speckled camel joined the caravan.

Dan Cameron

Olu's last post troubles me, insofar as it seems to bear little relation to what I actually wrote yesterday. Therefore I'd like to try and clarify my position once more.

The West, as almost anyone contributing here would agree, has a lot to account for. Not only have we largely ignored the Palestinian people's urgent pleas for justice and sovereignty, propped up a corrupt, anti-democratic regime in Saudi Arabia, and caused the starvation of untold thousands of Iraqi children, but we have also refused to engage collectively as a society in a discussion about any of these issues. Giuliani's act of refusing a \$10 million relief check from an Arab prince, because his aides later released a statement calling for balanced support in the Mideast, is a classic example of how easy it has become to unhesitatingly dismiss and even

condemn a legitimate issue on the sole basis of its having also served as part of a terrorist's demand. However, I believe the conversation must and will open up within a free society, if only because so many of us now realize how high the stakes have suddenly become.

I am also deeply shaken and somewhat humbled by the discussion in the symposium regarding the systematic terrorism that the U.S. has historically visited on its own citizens, from slavery through the destruction of indigenous culture, manifest destiny, internment camps, lynchings and on into the present day. These points of connection, which have been for me the most important revelations of this symposium, cannot be addressed easily or neatly, and must therefore continue to work their way through my own thought processes. This is equally true, if not more so, for their implication within the fields of art history and curatorial practice.

What I wish to defend about my earlier statements has to do with my blanket rejection of all fundamentalism, and my basis for classifying Osama bin Laden an enemy of civilization. Perhaps I am a bit guilty of oversimplification, but when I look at bin Laden's face I also see Jerry Falwell's and Meier Kahane's as well. Because of his violent homophobic screed, for example, I personally hold Falwell responsible for the suicides of scores of gay teenagers (who, statistically speaking, are twice as likely to kill themselves as their heterosexual peers), and I have no qualms about saying that his vision of Christianity is a grotesque distortion of the teachings of Christ. In fact, my personal experience has been that fundamentalist Christians often turn out to be the greatest enemies of freedom and tolerance in our society. So yes, Jerry Falwell is an enemy of civilization as we know it. The same goes for those who, in the name of Zionism, have become unable to acknowledge the humanity of their Arab neighbors, and act accordingly.

My questions then become: is there something about fundamentalist Islam that exempts it from the harsh absolutist judgements that have made Christian and Jewish fundamentalism such an obstacle to peace in our time? Is there some redeeming factor about the Taliban regime that we, who have spent the past two years signing nonstop petitions protesting their increasingly barbaric acts against humanity, now need to stop and consider? Is there something morally suspicious about taking a close critical look at bin Laden and declaring him unfit to pass judgement on anyone else? What troubles me is Olu's willingness to lump my condemnation of bin Laden together with an imagined disregard of the very legitimate grievances of the Arab world.

I am by inclination an anti-war activist, and am therefore more than a little surprised to see my words labeled as near-jingoism. Yes, the West has great crimes, and untold rivers of blood, on its hands, and yes, America is guilty, even as we speak, of injustices against the rest of the world that desperately cry out to be addressed. But I also believe that bin Laden's methods of drawing the world's attention to his agenda completely delegitimize his claims to speak on behalf of any issue involving truth or justice, and should be condemned as an extremist polemic that can only have a negative effect on the cause he professes to uphold: the dignity of people of Islamic faith.

Yvonne Rainer

I think the conference entries will make a good book or pamphlet. I find myself agreeing with everyone, admiring everyone's amazing verbal and cognitive facility. On the one hand we have made a tower of babel, but oh how different it would have been before Sept. 11. The real, which had come into question in academic circles in the last 20 years, can no longer be doubted now that the U.S. has awakened from its impervious dream (not that many of us in this conference had doubted it previously). The sufferings of others at U.S. hands must be reckoned with, yes, but the issues of guilt and accountability are too complex to assign in one sentence. I also think we can now lay the dead horse called PoMo to rest. Though undoubtedly the poor beast will continue to get its fair -- and unfair -- share of kicks. Thank you all for helping to give my mind and nose a brief respite from the smell of death in my home in lower Manhattan.

Maurice Berger

THIS SECTION OF THE SYMPOSIUM WILL NOW BE ARCHIVED. IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO POST INTO AN ARCHIVED SECTION. PLEASE CLICK ON "DISCUSSION 13-14"

OCTOBER" ON THE TOPICS PAGE TO BEGIN NEW POSTS.

10-12-2001

Maurice Berger
CONCLUSIONS

It is important to begin thinking about the ways this discussion of the past few weeks has affected panelists and visitors. To what extent, if any, has it caused you to rethink certain assumptions about history, reality, irony, meaning, criticality, and humanism . . . both in relationship to the issue at hand (postmodernism) and the grave events that have intervened?

Over the next two days I ask that EACH panelist offer some final words. How has the discussion of the past ten days shifted, altered, affirmed your thinking? What of postmodernism? Irony? Reality? What of art historical methodology? What of this cybernetic format of discussion and debate? Even if you believe that this discussion has changed nothing (or worse was not profitable), please comment. Think of these posts as concluding statements.

Maurice Berger

Please note: several concluding statements were posted onto yesterday's conference board.

10-13-2001

Chrissie Iles

Here are some final thoughts.

I've found it striking the way we have all swung between the more abstract, academic arguments regarding the topic, and personal, emotional comments regarding the World Trade Centre attack, terrorism and the Middle East. It seems to sum up the dichotomy between real experience and representation which the topic of the conference addresses. Yvonne termed 'postmodernism' the dead horse, around which we have all continued to stand, with concerned expressions, for some time.

The postmodernist arguments of the 80s and 90s seem well-absorbed and almost too well-rehearsed. This is not to say that the issues they address are not still critical - but our sense of the necessity of a new approach to them was, like the looming economic crisis, already present before September 11th, and has now been kicked violently and abruptly into fast-forward.

I was struck by John Carlin's eloquent post regarding Modernism as a European phenomenon, as a reaction against the hierarchical and based on abstraction from something (my emphasis), and his argument that America was, by contrast, born of abstraction, and tends naturally back towards the real; and that American artistic practice was always post-modern to begin with. American art's strongest appeal for me has always been its radical rejection of hierarchy, whether manifested in, say, Yvonne's work or that of Judd - and yet, as John's important post makes clear, there is an extraordinary paradox between the postmodernist real epitomised in Yvonne's classic 'Continuous Project Altered Daily', or Judd's pragmatic approach to the real as articulated in his 'Specific Objects', and the postmodernist utter surreality of American popular culture, so blatantly childlike and direct, and articulated so clearly in the work of Jeff Koons.

I've experienced this paradox in the American West, twice - when visiting the Judd Foundation in Marfa, where the rigorous 'real' of Minimalist sculpture is surrounded by Dairy Queen and kitschy Texan motels in the shape of giant teepees. And, recently, in experiencing Michael Heizer's 'City' project, whose abstract form, which took an hour to walk through, was the most 'real' experience I have ever had sculpturally, and was preceded by a long drive to it from Las Vegas, whose surreal palaces of childish fantasy and brainwashing are beyond anything I've ever seen (or hope to see again). Two manifestations of John's innate 'abstraction' within postmodernism. I once

entertained a colleague from L.A. in Oxford. They looked at a classic Oxford scene and said - but it's just like Disneyland! No, no! said I; Disneyland is just like this.

I tried, before, to describe what I was thinking regarding Postmodernism visually, as something broader, and represented as a kind of arc which began in the early nineteenth century in Paris - where the Statue of Liberty was built - and ends - well, here in America, in downtown Manhattan, now - where it very nearly toppled, and where its (post)modern equivalent was so savagely crushed. Surely Duchamp is the key; he began to draw that arc, dashing backwards and forwards between Paris and New York with such speed that it was hard to know whether to read him as an American (and as we all know he became an American citizen) or as the ultimate European intellectual snob. He was, in the end, an American - not because he became a citizen, but because he understood intrinsically, the moment he arrived in New York, that American Postmodernist non-hierarchy that John described so clearly, and recognised immediately that it was this which enabled him to re-define the real. And what could be more real than the snow shovel he bought, and signed, in Manhattan? It is no surprise that one of Duchamp's snow shovels can be found hanging in Judd's home in Spring Street, Soho; or that so many American artists of the 60s and 70s were so profoundly influenced by him - more so than anywhere in Europe. This is not only because the major holdings of Duchamp are in America, and therefore more present in the general academic and museum body politic; but because he has always been, to Europeans, profoundly American, and understood America's Postmodernism in ways we have never quite grasped. He represents the rising of that arc above Europe, over to America; it recognised in him what he recognised in it - the Postmodernist sensibility which embraced the real on the one hand, and the Las Vegas irreverence towards history on the other.

But is postmodernism really, according to John's argument which I am reinforcing, an American phenomenon, an extension of an intrinsic social and cultural fragmentation? Has both European and Arab culture, whilst hierarchical, not always also been postmodern, in its shifting borders, political power, cultural layerings and architectural forms? Is the difference, and the reason we are talking of current Postmodernism as so American in nature not, perhaps, one, rather, of speed? The layers in the European and Arab world which one might describe as 'postmodern', evolved over a millenium. America's formation took place in a far shorter time. As the interchanges become ever-speedier, the sense of continuous feedback intensifies the density of the layering, making its Postmodernist patterns at once more predictable and more complex.

As recent events have tragically demonstrated, America has had its own form of hierarchy - itself on one level, and the rest of the world on the other. I adore America, despite the kinds of faults Yvonne and others have reminded us of, so I do not mean this as an aggressive statement - it is simply how the rest of the world perceives it - us - and it is (or has been) the cultural, political and economic reality. It is taking its turn at being an empire, just as the British did for three centuries, the Austrians for another three, the Turks for nearly four, and the Arabs. Since the eighth century, when the Arabs created an Arab empire fanning out from Mohammed's birthplace in Mecca to encompass a vast area as far west as Sicily and Spain, every part of the world has ruled the other and then been overthrown. Just as America does now, the Arabs, at their moment of supreme power, had a major impact on Europe, introducing the Europeans to the Greek philosophers, for example, whose writings they had already translated into Arabic. And so perhaps it is natural that Postmodernism as we are addressing it now, is a specifically American Postmodernism, in the sense that the last century was "The American Century"; and that, therefore, in the face of the end of this particular empire, we should be discussing the possible end of Postmodernism as we know it.

Thanks to everyone. I've enjoyed being part of this on-line debate, and wish it could continue! A special thanks to Maurice for moderating us all, in our emotionally bruised states. It's been a wonderful tonic.

Mason Klein

"One is compelled to posit that the postmodern never really happened in America," remarks Olu

Oguibe. Does that mean it's an illusory condition, or something that might still happen, work, despite Olu's caveat that, "in spite of the appeal of 'destabilizing' discourses that 'pry apart' the 'grand narrative' and 'open up' spaces to 'insert' 'unacknowledged' histories, it is clear that we are truly only comfortable when such discourses and 'interruptions' are firmly and safely quarantined in the infirmary of the text, and would sooner feel threatened and unsettled should they venture out onto the streets."

If a reconceptualization of education is one of the core (postmodern) issues, then its objectives require a rethinking in order to meet the needs of students and society today. This would involve technology and the dissemination of texts that could provide those means by which the democratic ideal inherently espoused in "modernist" perspectives could be realized. Then, perhaps, education could become less reactionary an institution. By realizing a transdisciplinary approach within socio-political fields would allow for complex dialogue (acknowledging "otherness") and a cultural traversal across increasing gaps of ignorance and separatism. Education and the concomitant privilege to communicate could be effectively served by technology. Witness this forum. Yes, we are post-industrial, and technology does define where we are and probably the future as well. Empowerment and the future of democratic praxis being actually taught in the classroom and in turn transforming education depends on such belated enlightenment.

In this invocation of the radicalizing implications of real democratic praxis vs. its pathetic abstraction, I find myself thinking of the transitional period of the '60s, a time in which much rethinking was done as the monolith of modernism, and all its "grand narratives," was begun to be deconstructed, or at least we thought. I can't help but cite an early and unfettered case of the postmodern, when Yvonne Rainer first employed the term postmodern in the '60s, to simply chronologically speak of dance after Martha Graham et al. She chose to redefine the terms and players of her art, to democratize dance by conceiving of works that could be performed by anyone who wished to move. She, among others, insisted on relating and reconnecting her art/work to her life, amplifying Cage's blurring of life and artistic practice in her belief that dance had to be real. And by validating everyday movement, which heroically embraced the quotidian in a manner that was both simple and profound, she and others participated in a kind of reclamation of the body as a compass of relevance, honesty, vulnerability, and strength.

It's also no doubt a degree of nostalgia that underlies my thinking of this perhaps last period of utopian artistic practice, when various art forms within the counterculture became radicalized. After initially dismantling outmoded, dominant vocabularies in favor of a more egalitarian, open, and experimental kind of aesthetic being in the world, postmodern dance continued to evolve, undergoing multiple transformations that engaged interdisciplinary media and multiperspectival and socio-political issues.

Whether a continuum or sublation of the modern or a bona fide "post," it's really only the discourse that matters. After two generations of identity politics--exemplified by the civil rights movement and the multiculturalism of the last decades--artists worldwide continue to unravel the different historical circumstances and sets of cultural associations that have given rise to dominant images of sexual, racial, and religious "otherness." As the physical and cultural borders of the world seem to constantly change, they signal the force of emerging peoples, and mark a space in which something new or traditional can be fostered and reshaped. Within these hybrid forms of cultural expression, does the voice of autonomy matter less? Or can we acknowledge that what separates us may be what we most have in common and most need to respect?

Michele Wallace

First, I want to vehemently object to Dan Cameron's notion that Modernism took place at certain times in certain places and includes (the statement implies) certain particular people who just so happen to already be copiously included in the permanent collections of the Whitney, the Guggenheim, Dia and the Museum of Modern Art. As Olu and Kellie have tactfully suggested, we have not yet begun to fully tap and document the resources of Modernism around the world--from

the turn-of-the-century and perhaps before--throughout the Americas, throughout Asia and Africa as well as Europe. That's why Modernism is thought of as a world movement because it reverberated around the world. The questions which often preoccupy the canon-keepers of who influenced whom and who innovated what (for instance, say, African, Oceanic and Native American traditional arts were not influences or innovations but rather either derivative or "affinities") are boring and irrelevant from a historical standpoint I think. These were the limited questions that helped inaugurate modernist discourses in a variety of fields but it is now over a hundred years later, the collectors have all made their fortunes times 1000 and we don't need this lame excuse for broad exclusions anymore. Even if the museums can't accomodate all the possible candidates, at least we cultural historians and intellectuals should be prepared to draw upon a richer archive.

That being said, I am just now involved with my Mom in the development of a series of grants through the AnyOneCanFly Foundation to encourage 1) art historical writing on the following frequently neglected African American artists whose careers began before 1940 and 2) the setting up of an organization called Art With Kids, which will send artists and art historians into the public schools to introduce these same artists via slides, museum visits and art workshops to elementary school children and teachers. The list we have thus far, many of whom were Afro-American Modernists: Joshua Johnston, Robert Duncanson, Edward Bannister, Harriet Powers, Edmonia Lewis, Henry Ossawa Tanner, William Edmonson, Meta Warrick Fuller, James Van Der Zee, Laura Wheeler Waring, Horace Pippin, Sargent Johnson, Archibald Motley, Augusta Savage, Minnie Evans, Palmer Hayden, Alma Thomas, Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Selma Burke, William Johnson, Beauford Delaney, Richmond Barthe, James Lesesne Wells, Louis Mailou Jones, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, Alan Rohan Crite, Romare Bearden, Hughie Lee Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Eldzier Cortor, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Roy de Carava, Robert Blackburn and Wilfredo Lam.

Now I see why contemporary black artists are so frequently categorized as postmodern and postblack. It is in order to keep the sacred precincts of high Modernism holy and pristine. To continue to deny to the death all the African, Asian, Oceanic and American "influences" and participants. And it isn't like we intellectuals profit in any way by this bargain. On the contrary, somebody needs to take the lead in being more broadminded. Ordinarily it wouldn't be the place of the collectors and gallery dealers over the cultural historians and museum people but who knows? Leadership has come from stranger places before.

My second point--which relates to the larger political debate about postmodernism and this new war the U.S. is engaged in. It may subsequently be known as the first stage of a new world feminist movement. People of various good will have been striving for a way to define who the real and justifiable enemy is here--is there even an enemy beyond the usual racial profiling for which we have such a great fondness? The more I think about it, the more I think it may be that crusty old nemesis the Patriarchy (maybe even the Capitalist Patriarchy--not sure but these guys seems to have a helluva lot of money) such as we haven't quite seen him rear his ugly head since the 50s and 60s in the U.S. Just as I was beginning to wonder whether feminist movement had any relevance anymore, I am drawn to the examples of feminist revolution in these reactionary waterholes around the world where women (Islamic/Arab) feminists in the Middle East from Nawal el Sadawi to my former East Asian student, the actress and director Geeta Citygirl, to the Afghani-American feminist/Arab lit scholar presently in my class at the graduate center) are calling themselves revolutionary feminists and seizing upon freedoms we now take for granted (from wearing make-up to the right of abortion to public political opposition to participation in the professions) as issues for which they are willing to engage in life and death struggle.

What has helped to evacuate feminist movement in our world (at least for all those who have been announcing the death of the movement for decades) has been the sense that the major battles have been won-- even if Clarence Thomas is on the court despite Anita Hill's testimony, even if O.J. is still at large despite the murder of his battered wife, even if there are still a lot of poor, disenfranchised women who can no longer depend on AFDC for anything but insults. The

rights of poor women are ostensibly on the books in the U.S. as in South Africa.

At this late date, nevertheless, people are talking about a time warp in the Arab world. There's no time warp I think. There's just patriarchy unbridled and unchecked--which it seems to me is still true in most of the world of Africa, the Americas, Asia and much of Europe. But then in order to say that patriarchy has been successfully pushed back in some places, one needs to give feminism credit for getting something right and for having made perhaps the most enduring contribution to the articulation of democratic freedoms in the U.S. and Western Europe of the postmodern period. Indeed, feminism seems to me a defining feature of Postmodern and however you define the art of this period would certainly bear me out--from Kara Walker to Adrian Piper to Jenny Holzer to Sherrie Levine to Barbara Kruger to Carrie Mae Weems--all the girls and quite a few of the boys. The irony of Bush fighting a war for feminism is beyond me. What do you suppose he will do when he finds out? What a bubble head, or is the CIA listening?

Ciao! And thanks.

Barbara Lynes

I have been reading and following this discussion from the relative quiet of the Georgia O'Keeffe Research Center, and want to comment now, first to thank all of you who have contributed to this lively and provocative discussion, and especially, Maurice for guiding us in this inquiry with such skill and brilliance, and second to "post" to the issues of the "modern" and the "post-modern" in American Art that the Center supports through its stipend program. As we struggle to understand the reality and aftermath of 9-11, we find ourselves mesmerized by visual records that are global in their immediacy to the eyes of the world and hideous in their reminder of the vulnerability of our seemingly safe haven of a self-conscious humanism, which despite the numerous and complex flaws of its history, many of which have been addressed here, allows us to be part of and contribute to process we value so fundamentally that we devote our lives to questioning, debating, trying to come to terms with meanings and significances that we sort and resort into various strategies of thought. And, although no strategy has been proposed that would draw consensus here, each that has been suggested contributes to our re-examination of the very complex cultural abstractions and realities that have been used to construct them.

Our fascination with images of destruction, whether those of WTC buildings in collapse, "piles of corpses in death camps," lynchings," is in some part due to their forcing us to confront a profound evil, and this realization, whether immediate or mediated, lurches us into a dizzying space of recognition that such evil is not imposed by something without, but emerges entirely from within. This provokes a new self-consciousness of ourselves, as people, as individuals, and especially, as Americans. And because the modernism of technology made a visual record of the last minutes of the latest manifestation of that evil, at least in New York, as a live, in-motion event, it has crystallized it for us as a matter of fact, as a reality, in ways that force us to confront what we had only imagined as abstractions.

The WTC and Pentagon attacks, which were executed with unspeakable precision in the name of a higher good, make us acutely aware of a way of thinking that is not new, but that has previously been somewhere "over there"--one that values death above life, and this same mind set brings in its wake another kind of imagery that has not been mentioned in this debate, despite its relationship to its ideas--images that record the Taliban enforcing its extremism daily on its own people, this time the women of Afghanistan, in particular, forced into burqa, deprived of all rights to personal identity, to education, to medical attention, subjected to whippings or to being murdered by "Vice and Virtue," the religious police, who roam the streets enforcing law with brutal weapons that are human-made and that subject people--men and women alike--into the stupor of numbed and silent submission. Where are we with this?

Chrissie has pointed out the tensions in this forum between its purpose of thinking and re-thinking our own abstractions--the ideas of history through which we have named, shaped, ordered, and reordered events, be they modern, post-modern, post-post modern--and realities, this time a

reality of fracture, an event that so warps the moment that it places us squarely within the unknown, taking us light years beyond ourselves. But such fractures are not unknown in history, and those “piles of corpses in death camps,” “lynchings,” women in burqa, the bombing in Oklahoma City, came into being through similar forms of extremism. Is this not a reflection, albeit grossly distorted by the events of 9-11, of the on-going dialogue/debate between abstraction and representation, i.e. the complex issues of the representational and the non-representational that have structured and restructured our thinking about developments in American art since the last decades of the 19th century?

Surely this forum would have been very different if the events of 9-11 had not occurred. And, in its invigorating complexity, it is a paradigm for what we thrive on—discussions that reveal the inclusions and exclusions of our thinking, that raise aspects of the ethical, global, political, and personal, that allow expressions of dramatically divergent points of view. And, in our efforts to make sense of our abstractions in such a moment of the real, we find ourselves in a new space and time, and although imposed rather than self-generated, this real seems incredibly “modern” in how it forces us to confront ourselves and our history as a people, as individuals, as Americans-- whatever that means given the diversity of the cultures we encompass.

And, one could argue, that the “modernism” that Duchamp confronted as he first saw and raved about New York, was in fact a “modernism” that emerged within and of this country, and that we are still very much part of that space, whether we like it or not, although momentarily wounded, but newly self-consciousness of what we are, were, and might be within the larger whole of a world at odds with itself--a state of being that is in and of itself MODERN in allowing us a new and discomfiting perspective from which to make spaces and names for each of its subspecies--no matter what they have been called--"modern," "postmodern," "post-post modern.”

Jonathan Weinberg

First of all, I want to thank Maurice Berger and Barbara Lynes and all the people at the O’Keeffe Museum Research center for making this symposium possible.

I have found the experience of participating fascinating, but also very frustrating. Like Maxwell Anderson, I agree that there is something exhilarating about the diversity and degree of disagreement in the dialogues, and the willingness of the various contributors to think about the current situation in ways that do not seem allowable in the media. It has actually been a great comfort to me to find so many voices who share with me a sense that merely waving the flag and declaring unity is not the answer. I also sense how much each of us is struggling to mourn, and to figure out some kind of rational response. I think we forged over the two weeks a sense of a community.

That said, I feel very much constrained by the format of the symposium. I think it would have been better if we had some way to do a real time chat. The present format is too much like little speeches. It also suffers from the problem of e-mail in that it is too easy to be misunderstood, and then to find out that it is too late to take something back. Also missing is are the subtle nuances of inflection and expression that come with a face to face encounter. On the other hand, it is exciting that each contributor is given equal weight and anyone can participate. I just wish there was more give and take, more a sense of a dialogue rather than a crazy quilt of statements.

Everyone take care, and thank you for your thoughtful attempts to make sense of these troubled times.

Dan Cameron

I’m about to board a plane, so I need to be very brief. I want to thank Maurice and my colleagues for giving me so much to think about in the weeks and months ahead.

The most pressing questions that I have with regard to art history center on my unexpected realization in the midst of this symposium that, however postmodernism may be defined (or not), modernity clearly has not yet run its course. In other words, if we can claim Duchamp as the first postmodern artist, while continuing to label as modern those artists whose current research is

bringing to light from the same period Duchamp lived and worked, are we then willing to keep revising and expanding our definition of the modern so that in the end we have made it totally unrecognizable to those who lived within its boundaries and constraints? Or does the modern studied with postmodern eyes become something different? Do careers and reputations salvaged using revamped historical paradigms land in their own time or in ours? Have modernity and postmodernity been running side by side in parallel historical tracks all along?

David A. Ross

Maurice, I'd like to join the others in thanking you for taking the time to moderate this conference. I only wish it could have had a two or three month-long life, so the dynamic of the conversation would have settled into something less forced, but equally forceful. The O'Keeffe Museum is to be congratulated for taking this initiative, and I hope that other museums and publications will follow suit. This really is art forum, and it's more necessary than ever.

The topic may have seemed odd to some readers, especially in light of the war we are now waging, and the need for all of us to try and come to grips with the changes taking place within the art world and its extended community. But in fact, the apparent conflict within modernity is not only beyond resolution, but it is necessary. It alone fuels the continuing growth of the aesthetic challenges and rewards of a system too feeble and too overburdened with several centuries worth of baggage.

I've learned a great deal reading Yvonne, Chrissie, Dan and Michele, and thank each of them for their extraordinarily clear writing.

Till next time.

10-14-2001

Yvonne Rainer

One thing I like (not the only one) about on-line conferencing is that one can do it when "about to board a plane." Thanks, Maurice.

Jerry Saltz

On September 11th and then Postmodernism

In my darker hours after September 11th, I find myself thinking: In an empire's beginning is its ending. If empires lasted forever we'd all be living in Babylon or Egypt. How can an empire fight this kind of enemy? We will live but not as an empire. If America is a body, then terrorism - which has turned truly terrifying - is like cancer. The invader is so small and vicious and we are so large. We don't know how to fight it. To kill it may mean killing ourselves. We grapple with genetics, destiny, environmental causes, and whatever we might have done to contribute to its onset. We did not deserve this. But "deserve" doesn't matter anymore. The back burner just stepped forward. Some things will be lost; some things will be gained. Something I don't understand: Many of my European friends say, "Don't worry, you'll get used to living with terrorism." This reaction seems so callous - almost smug. I want to say, "You don't get it. We didn't experience a taste of terrorism; we experienced a taste of annihilation - a glimpse of the end. This has opened up a space in the imagination that wasn't there before." I want to say to all my friends in the U. K., "Numbers don't matter, but more people died in one hour on September 11th than have died in all the time of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland." I want to tell them that "More British citizens died in the World Trade Center than died in all the I.R.A. bombings combined." I want to bottle the acrid smell and send it to them as a keepsake of their hardness. I want to ask George W. Bush why he rushed into war with Afganastan when something closer to commando actions, snipers, assassins, or sieges were called for - not war. I want to ask the one billion Muslims around the world, "Yes, you hate America - I hate America too - but where are the 999 million of you who ought to be up in arms against this kind of terrorism? Has your ambivalence grown deeper than your compassion?" I want to scream at people who say we brought this on ourselves. I haven't.

But I may. Backs against Postmodernism

In 1980 George W.S. Trow published one of the cornerstone works of Postmodern thinking, "Within the Context of No Context." Trow claimed (and many believe), ours is a world without differentiation, where all distances have faded into one continuous blur - a world where dissimilarity has been replaced by similarity. This is an absurdity, especially now. America's context just bumped into the world's. Or more accurately, the world's context just bumped into America's. Whatever happened, we should never again allow ourselves the illusion that everything that happens is happening to everybody, everywhere, at the same time. The pragmatists were right. Everything that happens to everyone is understood differently by everyone. That globalistic hum people thought they were listening to, turns out to have been background noise to a cacophony of conflicting contexts.

Now we know we are nothing BUT context and that context changes everything. When it comes to art, this means things made in one time under one circumstance will look different in another time or other circumstances. Who thinks about Greenbergian flatness when they think about Rothko? Who thinks about German Neo-Expressionists like Rainer Fetting at all? The Sistine Chapel doesn't rouse the old passions of the counter-reformation. Cubism isn't shocking. Fauvism isn't ugly. On September 11, context changed again. This month's terrorist fashion feature in 'The Face' doesn't look so imaginary anymore. Camouflage designs are more ominous. The title of current movies like 'Training Day,' 'The Glass House,' or 'Soul Survivors' take on new meanings. Suddenly, 'Beau Monde' - the title of Dave Hickey's Site Santa Fe exhibition - seems a little off. In Venice, Robert Gober's installation in the American pavilion, with its glowing redemptive light shining through cracks in a cellar storm door, takes on new relevance. Closer to home, artists have written insipid statements explaining their work. Others have simply made insipid work about September 11th. In a New York gallery, Carolee Schneemann has mounted a large grid of black-and-white Xeroxes of people jumping to their death from the World Trade Center. This misguided work proves that bad artists can't make good art out of bad or good subjects. This work is contemptible for its presumptuousness and utter lack of originality.

Exactly two weeks after the events of September 11th, a forum of architects, engineers, academics, and city planners met in Cooper Union's 'Great Hall' to address "the pressing issue" of what should be done with the World Trade Center site. Never mind that the area is a burial mound, the air in the auditorium was moist with self-interest. A steady stream of well-heeled professionals paraded to the podium and termed the tragedy an "opportunity" (a word I hadn't heard used to describe the situation, until then). One expert gushed, "architects are the ministers of society." Another declared architecture is "the only humanistic art." An engineer bragged of "circumnavigating" the site four times, then displayed a souvenir bolt he had snatched from the ruins. Another said "only Frank Gehry should be allowed to build here." Yet another complained about authorities who hadn't allowed him to carry out his own structural analysis. All agreed, "It's up to us." Why do these people - who are among the most responsible for the sorry state of our cities - imagine that they can do a better job now than they've ever done? Who said "Irony is dead?"

Inside World

Seven things I became while eavesdropping on a conversation about Postmodernism:

Envious: A lot of these people don't seem to have jobs. Many get up late, sleep through bombings, or hire guides to lead them through canyons "just to get away" (getting away seems to be big).

Perplexed: As far as I can tell, ideas about Postmodernism haven't changed much in the last 20 years. Or, they did and I didn't notice. Or, they will but haven't, yet. Or, they won't and will have

to. Or, no one will be listening.

Miffed: That David Ross only thanked "Yvonne, Chrissie, Dan and Michele."

Embarrassed: I probably had no business in a conversation like this.

Amazed: I was genuinely dazzled by the commitment, intelligence, and the passion of many of the participants. I was awed by a few, and confused by a several.

Grateful: To Maurice Berger for his kind words and gentle heart; to the people at the O'Keeffe Museum who allowed me something really voyeuristic and fun to do while trying to meet a weekly deadline.

Contented: Postmodernism is now officially history, isn't it?

Kellie Jones

I've never been one for listservs or chat groups, but I think this one came at the right moment. Because of 9/11 I sense we were all much more open to 1) doing this at all, 2) interrogating what place our practice really had in the scheme of things...now. That context, and the moving back and forth between events in the world and the world of art is what engaged me. Is this postmodernism? I'm not so sure now but I do know that it is the way I approach my own cultural work.

Yet it seems to me that whatever postmodernism might mean it certainly cannot be contained simply by the Franco-American circuit that Chrissie outlines. There were too many other events that impacted artmaking (and Duchamp) in that century (including the Berlin West Africa Conference, the reign of Maximilian in Mexico, etc.) to draw the line of progression so narrowly.

Michele's final post on a Bush war making the world safe for feminism is interesting. That I'm sure is only a possible by-product though one to be hoped for. His real aim is to get another boy up in there that can seemingly be controlled by the u.s., the same scenario that we've seen played out over the last century in Latin America, Africa, etc., etc.

Somehow all this brings me to the final words of Caroline's post a few days ago, that we must articulate the structures of power, acknowledge also our imbrication in them, and yet chart pathways of resistance. But most importantly that the best use of our power is to redirect it to other places. This, it seems to me, acknowledges that we here do have the capacity to change things as they are, whether it be the way we understand and approach art or function as part of a global community. Some victories are larger than others.

One final question I wondered about is whether NYC will continue to be the so-called center of the artworld now that it seems to have become the focus for terrorism?

I have enjoyed being engaged by all your splendid intellects, even when I was in disagreement. Thanks to Maurice for understanding that this was the moment for us to keep talking.

Steve Dietz

Someone wrote (roughly) "I believe everything everyone writes," which is a response I recognize. The discourse has been compulsively consumed with everything making sense. I suppose this echoes the common misconception that postmodernism doesn't mean anything because everything is relative. For me, that was the import of this discussion, though. It very clearly identified many issues that do matter from ongoing resistance, to the ongoing importance of criticality about representation even as gutwrenchingly real as 9-11 has been, to an ongoing struggle with difference, particularly in relation to history and globalization.

As the official and popular response in the U.S. to 9-11 draws ever tighter a kind of noose of unity-

-I hope I do not use this word unadvisedly in relation to the forced conformity of lynching--this discussion reaffirmed for me the "ongoingness" of postmodernism's issues, with Yvonne importantly pre-extending the term to modernism's resistances and Simon converting it to an ethics of how we might approach the (each) other in the future.

Nevertheless, "postmodernism" is not a term I can resurrect any feelings for. It has a modicum of use value as shorthand for some things that happened at some time (all to be debated), but it seems to function mostly as a lightning rod for deflecting conversation from the very issues it is intended to ignite. I trust that it will have appropriate contextualization in academia over time, but the issues of resistance, representation, and difference are perhaps even more in crisis after 9-11, and I don't believe that agreement about what is postmodernism is a difference that would make a difference.

I do believe the world is transforming from a visual base to a data base. As one simplistic example, I'm not sure that skin color will be as critical an issue as dna makeup. Mason Klein wrote "Yes, we are post-industrial, and technology does define where we are and probably the future as well," but our discussion of "technology,"--and I include myself in this--is very unnuanced compared to all the other topics tackled. As one example, why do we only, or primarily, talk about technology and networks in terms of Virillio's speed and real time rather than Kittler's notion of storage and archive? Synchronous and asynchronous time are equally critical capabilities of technology and the network.

I understand that the notion of a "fresh start" is hopelessly naive and ahistorical. Functioning telegraphic systems existed as early as 350 B.C.E. The term cybernetic was introduced in 1945. Telematic art has been practiced since the mid-70s, well before the World Wide Web, and Duchamp and the ideas surrounding his work are as applicable to contemporary digital art as postmodernism. Nevertheless, I think that an "ethics of resistance," to combine Yvonne's and Simon's insights, can be mapped to the hybrid reality we find ourselves in--in both theory and practice--in ways that we have only begun to recognize and imagine.

Finally, I would like to thank Maurice for putting together this network of correspondents. While I agree with Jonathan Weinberg about some of the shortcomings of the electronic forum, it has been a provocative experience and Maurice's example of paying attention and prodding the conversation has been remarkable.

Thanks to everyone.

James Moy

I thank Maurice Berger for taking the time to moderate this event. It has provided an uncommon open forum for the discussion of perspectives that extend beyond the panicked flag waving seen in most American media. My participation was not without frustrations: my busy schedule, and my inability to provide nuanced responses before the forum moved on to new topics, estranged me from the process and I found myself changing channels, switching to websites (in east Asia, south Asia or the Middle East) more clearly in tune with my views. Still, the opportunity to engage was available to me. I especially like the fact that the forum took place "live" throughout the workday. The forum provided an engaging pomo event, not a framed frozen piece of "academic" exchange offered within the context a protected scholarly conference. For some of us who care, the 9-1-1 event has warped notions of what the future of art in America can be, and rendered problematic many of the self-reflexive (self-absorbed) tendencies of the both the modernist art scene and the more rarefied postmodern enterprise. Your forum in the face of the bombing has served to highlight many of these problems. Again, Maurice Berger, Barbara Lynes, and the O'Keeffe Museum are to be commended for the courage it took to offer this space of dialogue so soon after 9-1-1. Thanks.

Aleta Ringlero

I would like to thank Maurice and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum for the opportunity to be involved

in this forum. The ability to address these topics on a worldwide basis is technology at its best. Whether any definitive resolution to the discussion of postmodernism is reached, it is clear that these issues raise much more than simply intellectual interest. Modernism has yet to be laid to rest amid the world of Native American art production, a situation that has become naturalized by tribal artists and the market that promotes formalist criteria for judgement and aesthetic consideration. While postmodern discussion of tribal art is relegated to the ghettoized institutions and thematic museums, the inclusion of native artists in mainstream public collections is yet relegated to special thematic exhibitions where parity is the practice, but not the norm. How does the postmodern discourse effect the contemporary-traditionalist artist whose practice is grounded in the ethnographic past? Within the presentation of Euro-American Indian art, artists struggle with issues of personal identity and ideology, tribalism, and political agendas that have effectively limited the course of contemporary art and its inevitable evolutionary development. These are but a few of the issues which the postmodern discussion raises today.

How 911 will come to be viewed by the indigenous communities whose own histories of interaction with the dominant society have been equally devastated, shocked, and wounded, is to speculate. It is nothing that has not been experienced before and seen with equal shock and horror. That this will be the last time is to deny the histories of our societies.

Thank you.

Ian Berry

This symposium has altered my assumptions and confounded my past experiences with online events. I have regularly been disappointed in the remote-ness, missing the unspoken communication that happens when we talk to each other. While I was still wanting that here I was happily surprised at the fluidity of the exchange over the past two weeks. Thanks Maurice for such effective and warm moderating.

I mostly listened and learned much from the conversation. It was great to be invited into this community, albeit text only, when our world became so more unsettled than ever before.

It was good to hear others make connections, to define and redefine. One thing I take away is the importance of this continuous process of redefinition and continued curiosity and questioning. Is this the best term, was it then, will it be in this situation or that? I think I choose to keep postmodern in my world if only to remind me to question.

Internet media has helped during the past month while others like talk radio for example sent me running straight north from NYC this Friday for fear of an Anthrax outbreak. As we know media is powerful and I count this experience as one that affected in a healthy way towards something closer to understanding.

Some key points for me in the last few days charge us with work to be done; Kellie Jones is sadly correct that so far art history is slow to react and is still filled with the white and male; Theresa Grandas reminds us that curators, artists and museum are collaborating on projects that at their core debate our process and unspoken definitions; Jerry brought up George W.S. Trow's important volume, context is a possible candidate for a term to bring all of our side discussions together; and Caroline's concluding post sums up much for me. We should heed her charge, go forward, and speak to each other again soon.

As I posted earlier, the work of many has created a smoother path to travel on when I attempt to engage a variety of ideas and artworks in the gallery. If this symposium's good work manifests itself in new histories will remain to be seen. Maurice, I hope you bring us together again, a decade or so wiser, to see if our hopes and realities have changed.

Olu Oguike

By Way of Conclusion

I must thank Dan Cameron for clarifying his position on all fundamentalisms. That indiscriminateness did not come through, at least to me, in his earlier post. I must also thank Caroline Jones for lending credence to my contention that there is a definite boundary to our ease with the unregulated discourse that is often identified as postmodern, on the strength of which contention I also propose that America never truly experienced the postmodern, at least not until the present.

I believe that any meaningful discussion of the modern/ postmodern dialectic must go beyond the art of the modern/ postmodern to the sensibilities of the modern vs. the postmodern. It is there that we begin to see beyond the possibility of artifice and indeed the contradictions between certain examples of art produced under modernism, and the spirit of the modern itself the essence of which is to certify the ultimate triumph of the human will and faculty over nature and all that is subhuman [natives, savages, primitives, niggers, outsiders, others, etc.]

Order is the fundamental logic of the modern, for only order guarantees the ability to prevail over the forces of nature and the threat of contamination by or descent into savagery. Empiricism or scientific rigor, industrial automation, civic propriety and decency, physical hygiene, the infallible grid, are all part of this elaborate logic of order. To maintain this order in turn necessitates an equally elaborate system of regulation which ranges from surveillance to sanction. Over the past hundred and fifty years of the modern age, a machine was developed and installed to ensure the functionality of this system: institutions ranging from schools and law-enforcement agencies to sanitariums and penitentiaries; a huge panoptic web to observe and isolate threats and impurities from the body-politick; hierarchies and structures of mobility and transit to regulate both social and geographical flux; as well as sanitized narratives of progress in which only the human contingent, that is to say, the dominant culture is registered. To belong, the individual must acquiesce or self-regulate, or otherwise suffer policing, sanction, quarantine, or termination. A bold line is drawn between "the mainstream" of culture, and "the fringe".

In the modern age, intellect is regulated through not only institutions and strict control of avenues of expression: text, media, the classroom, professional bodies, the political economy of research, but even more effectively through language, also. Not only is the individual expected to adhere to fairly strict patterns of enunciation, lexical inventions and insertions are made in the register of discourse to place certain individuals and polities under firm sanction: to dismiss, disparage, deride, and effectively discount them and thus excise them from the body of valid and lasting intellectual discourse, and ultimately from the body of intellectual culture. In America, and especially in the period that this symposium has considered namely the late 20th century, the most effective of these lexical instruments of sanction was "Rage". The very antithesis of logic, sense, order, intellect all of which represent the ethos of the modern age, "Rage" was inserted in the lexicon of public discourse to circumscribe and demote enunciation by all who were meant to have no place in the American polity, to place them on the hierarchical notch of the subhuman or the under-civilized, deface their speech and invalidate their claim to a common space, discount them, and erase them from the narratives of civility and progress. "Rage" is irrational, inarticulate, uncivil, immature, even juvenile; pristine. It is inequable and unEnlightened. Beginning at mid-century, every effort was made to hoist this gauze over sections of American culture in order to deface and displace them. It is significant to note that this rather peculiar enotation of "Rage" did not occur in Europe till much later in the century. In stead "Anger" or "Fury" or "Rage" was considered eccentric, youthful, epochal, even righteous, and a playwright like ♦ could achieve celebrity with a work titled "A Look Back in Anger". In America, however, the rhetoric, "Why are they so angry?" was used instead to silent or displace those contingents of discourse that appeared to seriously engage, question, challenge, or threaten to destabilize, approved patterns and tenets of the culture, especially the project of the great American nation: white, Christian, free-market. It was smeared on the civil rights movement till the great flood of righteousness could no longer be contained. Then it was hung over any trajectory of the movement that was not in agreement with Dr. King's "turn the other cheek" philosophy, philosophically paving way for the slaughter of young men and women who offended because they disagreed. Hysteria, a variant of

"Rage" (uncontrollable emotion or excitement: OED) was tagged on feminism to more effect than has been acknowledged, and in many ways explains why feminism ultimately expired and female enunciation and challenge within the larger body-politick remain easily displaced [witness, as someone else has pointed out, Clarence Thomas's ability to prevail over the testimony of Anita Hill. That a Hillary has been voted into congress since, mind you, does little to ameliorate the situation because, remember, modernism emerged in the Victorian age at the very apogee of a female monarch who vehemently opposed women's suffrage.] In the 1980s and 1990s, "Rage" was hung over hip-hop, perhaps the only promise of a true postmodern transition in American culture in the late 20th century, and its propagators were discountenanced as "angry, inner city" and therefore sub-cultural and aberrant. Inconsequential.

Ironically, all this was happening most prevalently and conspicuously in the very period that some would like to describe as "post-modern" and therefore essentially signified by pluralism and the collapse of a singular, dominant sensibility. The latter, however, was and remains only a fable. Witness, for instance, the very effective manner in which whatever paltry dent was made in the body-politick of the great, American modern has been rolled back over the past twenty years.

I began this conclusion with a note of thanks to Caroline Jones for certifying my contention that the postmodern never really happened in America. I return to her post to call attention to the entrenched manner in which discourse in the fabled age of American postmodernism readily brandishes that proven baton of modernist sanction, namely the language of discountenance, in order to displace challenge to the singular narrative of American greatness and courage. In Jones's post she flicks the switch invoking the "R" word, referring to my earlier post as "furious". The post in question was quite short, and in it, other than taking Dan Cameron up on the question of fundamentalism and the Yemeni renegade, bin Ladin, there was little else that could possibly be conceived or described, within the conventions of the English language as I understand it, as "furious", other than that I implied that in my thinking sanitation is fundamentally a modern ethic, and narrative sanitation could be achieved by either disinfection, whereby elements of historical significance are nevertheless clinically excised, or through mere whitewashing whereby they are glossed over through what Whoopi Goldberg once termed "deliberate ignorance", what some of us might call willful amnesia, while impurities are sought and located elsewhere in what Christianity beautifully codifies as the act of searching for a speck in someone else's eyes while carrying a log in one's. I illustrated my point by contending further that the only way America can possibly extenuate terrorism as a phenomenon that originates elsewhere to threaten a civil and peace-loving nation is to ignore completely a history thick in organized terrorism within, perpetrated especially against the minority population by an otherwise decent and freedom-loving citizenry. I argued that it is incongruous to theorize terrorism simply as the inarticulate response of the frustrated except within a culture of sanitization which ignores the failure of such theory when applied to the tradition of sanctioned terrorism within America itself. That was the hair-trigger. Such notions being anathema, the switch of "rage" was instantly drawn and applied. Furious. Fury. Rage. Anger

Are we really ready to depart the modern regime of regulated and hierarchized enunciation and discourse so as to inhabit a post- space where the sanitized, authorized narrative is scraped open to reveal what lies beneath the whitewash, yes, and where such incisions become prevalent within both theory and praxis without threat of displacing registers?

Hierarchy is fundamental to the structure of the modern. The persistence and primacy of hierarchy in the dominant ethos of an epoch sufficiently makes it untenable to qualify that epoch as postmodern. Hierarchy is evident not only in the organization and operation of culture in the age that art historians most assuredly qualify as modern in America; it is also evident and operational, indeed, pivotal to the organization of culture, society and discourse in America throughout the late 20th century as it remains till the present. There may be elements of the postmodern present within the epoch, but those do not define the spirit of that age. I have read somewhere here of "American Postmodernist non-hierarchy", beginning, in fact, in the age of Duchamp [Iles: concluding remarks], but nothing could be more anachronistic as a notion. The

idea of a non-hierarchical = postmodernist America is as astonishing as Walt Whitman's celebration of the American "common people... their deathless attachment to freedom - their aversion to anything indecorous or mean." That at a time when the American "common people" went about lynching other humans, setting their homes on fire, forcing even the most accomplished among them to sit at the back of the bus or have their paid lunch standing in the back alley under a sign that said "Coloreds". "Deathless attachment to freedom ♦ aversion to anything indecorous or mean." What sins!

The American century was a century of immutable hierarchy. That hierarchy was largely racial, but also gendered. In art and its structures of distribution and narration, hierarchy manifested most resoundingly in the dispensing of authority and sanction, the allotment of recognition and consignment to ignominy, the patterns of celebration and dismissal, and in the acts and prejudices of chronicling. It was solidly institutionalized and intellectual foundation and longevity were accorded it in discourse. It was concretized and consecrated through canonization, and the boundaries of the canon were hard and fast. Funny that Duchamp should find a "Postmodernist non-hierarchy" in America [Iles] when the most accomplished African American artists only found segregation and displacing discrimination, with no place whatsoever in the dominant, authorized, spaces of cultural practice and fulfillment. Duchamp discovered an American non-hierarchy even as Henry Ossawa Tanner languished in France, ignored by his own country although France had awarded him the Legion of Honor in recognition of his work. [In a broadside at the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum which would not acquire Tanner's work, the critic Harrison Morrison wrote: "Ought we over here in his home, be less sensible to his merit", referring to the honor from the French.] Over half a century later, this culture of hierarchy in an America of "Postmodernist non-hierarchy" led several minority artists in the early 1970s to protest critical, curatorial, and acquisition practices within the culture establishment in America, and in so doing deliver themselves into the blacklist of an essentially intolerant machine of sanction.

Marinated into the very marrow of the culture establishment through a systemic pedagogy of sanitization and disinfection, this hierarchy has ensured that art history in America is yet to come to terms with the multiple contingents in the making of the American century. Token insertions into revised volumes of sacred, canonical texts remain the best that a pluralist nation can do to acknowledge its own, even as it claims departure from the disavowing propensities of modernism.

Earlier in the 20th century, art was subject to the tyranny of formal sensibilities or style. Despite the claims of modernist art to rebellion, it nevertheless did not rebel against the prevailing and fundamental spirit of the modern, including its imperial inclinations. Again and again it sought its forms and ideas from the colonies, just as the emporium scavenged colonial outposts for economic rejuvenation. In the late 20th century, modern art's fundamental conservatism continued in the form of a tyranny of thematic sensibilities: the tyranny of identity, the tyranny of feminist introspection, the tyranny of body politics, the tyranny of ephemera. Again, the system was hierarchized so that practice at any given period that fell outside these dominant sensibilities automatically displaced itself into ignominy. That is the period that most would designate, postmodern although the conservative, modernist adherence to dominant cultural physiognomies and the primacy of hierarchical structures of consecration and sanction remained. Ought one to proceed when there is but little purpose to the enumeration?

What is one to think of the modern/ postmodern dialectic in American culture in the late 20th century? One can only answer with a classic Gandhi retort. Asked what he thought of England and civilization, the Mahatma replied; "That would be a good idea."

10-15-2001

Olu Oguike

By the way I have just noticed an omission in my concluding remarks. The British dramatist and author of "Look Back in Anger" was John Osborne. "...silence" is to replace an occurrence of "silent" immediately after. Thanks everyone and see you soon.

Simon Leung

I want to use Chrissie Iles's next to last post as a point of departure for what I've wanted to address since the beginning of this symposium, namely, what Dan Cameron called "Art of the real." She writes of September 11:

This near simultaneity of real and mediated experience, so opposite, whose contrast is normally only experienced in an 'art' situation, in countless instant feedback/real time video works, lies at the very heart of the Postmodernist debate, and is why so many people wondered immediately afterwards what direction art and criticism would take here-on, now that the real was asserting itself so forcefully over representation.

For Dan, the 'art of the real,' was defined as a rubric "in which artists are increasingly addressing the terms by which we understand something as being real in the world. Art as a self-sufficient system is no longer as credible as it was during the modern and early postmodern phases, and artists want instead to produce tools that enable themselves and others to come to terms with this new, more contested, notion of reality."

It is very important for me not to describe the Real in any way that suggests that it is negotiable according to the choreography of representation. But the fact is, sadly not even "ironically," that which we use to describe the trauma of September 11, namely the images we saw on television, was as much manipulation of "reality" as anything we "normally see on TV." The terrorists understood this, and used the very logic of the televisual spectacle—the news, the morning talk show; as well as all the technologically "advanced" tools of the Late Capitalist post-industrial age, from the internet to airline schedules to flight school (shades of the American hubris of describing our technical/cultural expertise in deploying "smart bombs" in the Gulf war as the result of a generation of American boys playing "virtual" video games), to make us look at our "notion of reality" as radically different from what we thought.

That which brought forth the REAL were acts of artifice meant to undo "reality."

I mark a Lacanian separation between "reality" and "the Real" because it is crucial to how I believe we must think of what we do as artist, critics, historians, curators, teachers. Our sense of Reality is as much imaginary as our sense of our bodies—culturally produced, ideologically driven, and if you lead an examined life, continually subjected to re-evaluation. The Real, in contrast, is the radical, intrinsic, ineffable experience; the hard slap of your own mortality across your face. But while we can point to it, try to index it with representation, the "Real" is unrepresentable as such—that is why it is the Real and not the Symbolic.

Trauma, for example, is Real. But trauma is not necessarily the product of "real" things happening to you. What causes trauma does not have to be "real" acts that you "experience" first hand—it can in fact be representation—like the continual replay of the collapse of the twin towers on TV. Trauma is being caught in the recognition that what one observes, sees, heard, felt, was radically disjointed from the fabric of reality one takes to be the foundation of daily function. We are always caught by surprise not because we didn't know, but because we now know in a radically different way. The Real is the fear, love, or alienation that is irreducibly yours. The reason those of us not in NY on September 11 rushed to turn the TV on once our friends called was that we needed to "artificially" PRODUCE for ourselves this traumatic crisis in Being—we needed to cut through the knotty fiction of "reality" because we knew something "Real" happened, and we needed to make it our own.

The reason that Stockhausen got into so much trouble when he said that planes crashing into the WTC was akin to a great work of art was that he acknowledged this fact of Artifice in the attack from the point of view of the terrorists. Historically, artifice had a direct relationship to trauma. Artifice was meant to be the salve that turns the traumatic into a transfigured emotion for

assimilation into the psyche. Artifice, whether as inoculation or idealization, in other words, always had an implicitly "moral" value. Therein lies, I believe, our sense of trauma from September 11—it was like a collective "psychotic break with Reality" because the social contract that we use to navigate ourselves was torn. We were shocked, are in shock, because it WAS artifice—planned, executed, a horrific media production, a spectacle, AND an index of the REAL. We were caught watching something watching us.

Pace Caroline Jones's critique of David Antin's description of the "rationality" of the "terrorists," what I take from his statement is the important caution that we must resist the thinking of them as the "total other." They were in fact NOT the total other—they were not living in the Other reality, the slow Arab connectedness that Chrissie compared to our techno-info-capitalist disjointed world. Was I the only one who felt that what was truly shocking and painful to understand was how some of the assumed hijackers had in fact lived in the US for years. They had lives "here." They developed human contacts here. They ate pizza, went to the gym, had jobs, were "good neighbors" in some cases. They had wives and children. They were "educated." On the night before the attacks, some of them went to a strip joint, got drunk, spent hundreds of dollars on lap-dances. In other words, they were not extraordinary EXCEPT for their notion of their identity as being intrinsically OPPOSED to what they must destroy. What Michele brought up in relationship to lynching is relevant: in the construction of certain concepts of "identity," there ARE those versions of selves which are secured only at the expense of the Other's destruction—the fascist, the lynch mob, the slave-holder, the colonizer, the gay-basher, the list goes on. Sometime they are "murderous" identities, as Leo Bersani would say. What struck me was that whoever these "terrorists" were, whatever the object of their total hatred—Western imperialism, the US, global capital—whatever it was, whatever they were, they also LIVED it, and became a part of it in order to carry out what they did. Psychically, it makes perfect sense that these were suicide attacks—they had to take on, at least in part, assimilated identities they must then radically destroy in the course of the attacks in order to "cleanse" themselves. In the note that one of them was said to have left, there were specific emphases on cleanliness and purity, qualities no doubt to contrast with the infidels. (We must remember tropes of rehabilitation were exactly what the elder Bush deployed in the Gulf War—that was meant to be a "cleansing war" for America, too—the war that "kicked the Vietnam syndrome" once and for all.) The terrorists, in short, were choosing between REPRESENTATIONS of reality.

This is what Bush does in our name as we bomb Afghanistan, as we "smoke them out..." All the rhetorical tropes of the denigrated other are called forth. No need to go into that here. No Jerry, I don't think the billion Moslems in the world "hate America," and I don't know what to do with your comparison of your hatred of America to theirs—I just don't know what to do with your model of otherness, but I do see it as representation.

Throughout this symposium, I have emphasized the ancient Greek (and Foucauldian) notion of Askesis—the care and project of the self—as an ethical model for cultural practice. This model does not begin at "action," at "what one does" when confronted with the Other; but rather, at the attention one pays to HOW we See the Other in relationship to the self; how we live our lives, how we try to maintain an ethical relationship in the self so that we can prepare the possibility of behaving ethically with the Other; and yes, how we, to use Yvonne's term, resist.

I don't think this is necessarily what Dan meant to evoke at the outset with the term "art of the real." Still, I would like to graft this dimension onto his term, because I understand my work as an artist to be linked to the thinking through of representation, the Real, and reality I have tried to demonstrate through the criteria of his rubric of the term. Strangely or not, shocked as I am, sad as I am, I don't feel everything in work has changed at all.

I had evoked Duchamp and askesis at the beginning of the symposium not only because he is the touchstone through which all post-modern discourses must pass, but also because in my own work throughout much of the last decade (Mason, Maurice, Yvonne, and some others here know this) I have explicitly worked on rethinking the Duchampian AS a discourse of ethics because for

me, thinking with Duchamp is a thinking beyond the ontology of the art object, towards the mortal subject. This is the Duchamp of Fountain; but also the Duchamp who collaborated with dust; the Duchamp of Etant donn s; and the Duchamp after Duchamp, who reminds us that "anyways, it is always the others who die"

Levinas, Nancy, Derrida, and others have tapped into this: Community begins at the recognition of the death of the Other. It is because the Other is fragile, is mortal, that gives meaning to, that in fact inaugurates the spirit of this difficult word: Community. I think the seriousness and generosity with which we have discussed ideas here have been at least in part borne out of a horrific devastation; but in some ways, I have been listening to the care with which we here and elsewhere have been talking to one another, and I sense how important it is to us that we feel ourselves transformed, continually, by our common vulnerability. Collectively, I hope, these are the new terms of whatever those old terms--modernism/postmodernism--can be. Thanks everyone.

Nick Mirzoeff

At the end of a long, long series of posts I'll be brief! Kudos to Maurice for keeping this symposium going, open and revealing. I saw three discussions here: 1) The US Left trying to formulate a response to the WTC that confronted the US left's long-term failure to deal with affect. This failure has set the stage for the various pomposities of people like Christopher Hitchens but the damage to radical and progressive causes is real and will be long-lasting. 2) Spinning out of that, a complex discussion of "race," slavery and the modern that was the best of the event for me. Let's remember CLR James in 1938 noting that the first modern workplaces were the slave-powered sugar factories of Haiti and the Caribbean; that Pissarro painted in Saint Thomas for years before he then took his trip to Venezuela and painted Caribbean scenes in France; that Ortiz theorized the transculture that we often call postmodern from Cuba in the 1940s; and so on and on. But this conference has seemed to show that the times are against these kind of historical reflections. 3) On-line but East Coast--the best of the exchanges were very much on East coast time. And to whoever it was that said people don't have much to do, some of us fit this conference around child care, illness, insomnia, jet-lag--and we were still glad we did it. Thanks all.

Caroline Jones

For once it benefits one to be on an earlier slice of our sometimes sunny planet -- although I share Jerry's bruises that neither Nick nor David appreciate posts off of the East Coast. For all that, I've especially appreciated the soul-searching of our museum participants. Barbara, David, and Maxwell have needed to think in very concrete ways about how objects signify to everyone changed by 9/11; thanks to them for thinking out loud about that.

I'd like now to meet people in person -- I'm sure that the difficulty of reading tone and affect would dissipate were we all to have physical or at least visual access to our pained, anguished, and loving countenances. I do still believe that although I've felt "written out" and "written over" by some, we are in some kind of agreement about the egregious past. I still need to insist that it is a grotesque algebra to make it "equal" to the terror.

Pace Yvonne, I don't think we want to make a book out of this. But I'd like a party -- or a wake, or some kind of event where we could see each other and engage in the ancient symbol of pressing palms together.

Let me join those who've thanked our sponsors, and celebrate the fact that a tired and somewhat abandoned historical label (smelly ol' pomo) served to stimulate some profound (and some silly) ruminations on power, guilt, responsibility, and future activism. I share Mason Klein's call for a renewal of commitment, and a revision of method, in our teaching and writing. These are the ways we have all attempted to change the world -- we just have to do it differently, and better, and more urgently.

Thank you for including me.

Donna DeSalvo

After the last two weeks of postings, I think it ill advised to venture a definition of postmodernism; it would be woefully inadequate. Clearly, some feel we are still within the condition of modernism, while others believe this has been eclipsed. Some posit that a term does not even exist yet to describe our present state. At the end of the day, and echoing some of Mason's sentiments, I suppose what matters most (and this symposium reinforces) is an ongoing commitment to critical thinking and action.

Much of the truly innovative art produced over the last two centuries challenged what came before, even while that very work contained a tiny bit of the very thing it defied. Traces of the past inform any notion of the present. Perceptions of the past can equally be informed by our thinking in the present. The more voices engaged in that activity, the better. The more opportunities for that thinking to enter into the culture, the better. The more we have enlightened patrons who are willing to support such activities, enabling access to structures of power, the better.

As some have said, the US is an abstraction. On an abstract level it is difficult to conceive of any single definition of anything as the norm in the US. In practice, however, we know that stereotypes and wrongly held beliefs persist. The US is a place filled with contradictions in its simultaneous love of innovation and conformity, piety and money, collectivism and individualism. Within that contradiction, though, I see something good, an expression of the gritty way things really are as opposed only to the beauty of compositional balance.

I write this post having just returned from my first trip to New York since 11 September. I am greatly humbled by what I saw. I am also less certain about some things than ever before, which is why reading the thoughts of others has been especially useful.

I too want to thank Maurice for bringing us together, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum for giving us space, and all the other panelists, whatever their geographic location, for sharing their powerful ideas.

Maurice Berger

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

I want to thank all of the panelists and visitors to the symposium for their extraordinary contributions. The past month has been one of the most difficult in our nation's history--a time of profound realizations about little we really know and understand about the world around us. I could not think of a more troubling backdrop for our conversation. Yet the subject at hand--postmodernism--seemed to come alive, in a way it would not have save for the events of 9-11-01.

The intermeshing of these issues and events, I think, has lent our conversation a sense of gravity and urgency. From the outset, I held no expectation that we would solve the historiographic, conceptual, or theoretical questions of modernism and postmodernism. But our discourse--fragmented, passionate, spirited, intertextual, eloquent--created a powerful continuum of ideas. I have learned much from each of you, much from the "meta-text" that you have collectively created--a text that is, in its disjunctive nature, quintessentially postmodern.

I would like to thank Barbara Lynes and George King of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and Study Center for their unwavering support of this symposium. Cheryl Osborn and Molly McDow of Panorama Point built a site for the symposium that was at once smart, user-friendly, and lively. I owe a special debt to Molly for her generous and unwavering attention to EVERY detail of the symposium site. Faith Strongheart of the O'Keeffe Museum followed through on the symposium's myriad details, offering good ideas and calming words along the way.

Most of all, I would like to thank the 28 colleagues who joined me--day after day, night after night--in a dialogue that has helped reshaped my thinking at time of trenchant and profound change.