

The modern painter's world

Robert Motherwell

REVISIONES

Revista de crítica cultural

### **The modern painter's world**

Written early in August 1944 and presented as a lecture at the «Pontigny en Amérique» conference at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts, on August 10, 1944. The conference was divided into four sessions. Motherwell spoke at the third session, titled «Arts Plastique», which was moderated by André Masson. Other participants included Robert Goldwater, Stanley William Hayter, Jean Hélion, José Luis Sert, and Ossip Zadkine. The lecture text was originally titled «The Place of the Spiritual in a World of Property». It was retitled for publication: «The Modern Painter's World», *Dyn I*, n.º 6 (November 1944), pp. 9-14. [Apud *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, edited by Dore Ashton with Joan Banach, introd. by Dore Ashton, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 27-35.]  
Art © Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Robert Motherwell,  
«The modern painter's world»,  
*Revisiones*, n.º 6 (2010), pp. 69-78.

I must apologize for my subject, which is that of the relation of the painter to a middle-class world. This is not the most interesting relation by which to grasp our art. More interesting are the technical problems involved by the evolution of artistic structure. More fundamental is the individual problem, the capacity of an artist to absorb the shocks of reality, whether coming from the internal or external world, and to reassert himself in the face of such shocks, as when a dog shakes off water after emerging from the sea. The twentieth century has been one of tremendous crises in the external world, yet, artistically speaking, it has been predominantly a classic age. In such epochs it is architecture, not painting or poetry or music, which leads. Only modern architecture, among the great creations of twentieth-century art, is accepted quite naturally by everyone. Both Surrealist and «non-figurative» painting, with which I am concerned in this lecture, are the feminine and masculine extremes of what, when we think of the post-impressionists, the fauves, the cubists, and the art which stems, in conception, from them, has been a classic age.

**Great art is never extreme...**

Criticism moves in a false direction, as does art, when it aspires to be a social science. The role of the individual is too great. If this were not so, we might all well despair. The modern states that we have seen so far have all been enemies of the artist; those states which follow may be, too.

Still, the social relation is a real one, and perhaps the little geography that I have made, in the text which follows, of the contemporary painter's response to a property-loving world is not without value. But I cannot introduce my argument without having first remarked on the strict limitations of the subject, without having admitted how oversimplified this geography is.

The function of the artist is to express reality as *felt*. In saying this, we must remember that ideas modify feelings. The anti-intellectualism of English and American artists has led them to the error of not perceiving the connection between the feeling of modern forms and modern ideas. By feeling is meant the response of the «body-and-mind» *as a whole* to the events of reality. It is the whole man who feels in artistic experience as when we say with Plato: «The man has a pain in his finger» (The *Republic*, 462 D), and not, «The finger has a pain». I have taken this example from Bosanquet, who goes on to say: «When a 'body-and-mind' is, as a whole, in any experience, that is the chief feature... of what we mean by feeling. Think of him as he sings, or loves, or fights. When he is as one, I believe it is always through feeling...» (*Three Lectures on Aesthetic*.)

The function of the *modern* artist is by definition the felt expression of modern reality. This implies that reality changes to some degree. This implication is the realization that history is «real», or, to reverse the proposition, that reality has a historical character. Perhaps Hegel was the first fully to feel this. With Marx this notion is coupled with the feeling of how *material* reality is...

It is because reality has a historical character that we feel the need for new art. The past has bequeathed us great works of art; if they were wholly satisfying, we should not need new ones. From this past art, we accept what persists [as] eternally valuable, as when we reject the specific religious values of Egyptian or Christian art, and accept with gratitude their form. Other values in this past art we do not want. To say this is to recognize that works of art are by nature pluralistic: they contain more than one *class* of values. It is the eternal values that we accept in past art. By eternal values are meant those which, humanly speaking, persist in reality in any space-time, like those of aesthetic form, or the confronting of death.

Not all values are eternal. Some values are historical –if you like, *social*, as when now artists especially value personal liberty because they do not find positive liberties in the concrete character of the modern state. It is the values of our own epoch which we cannot find in past art. This is the origin of our desire for new art. In our case, for *modern art*...

The term «modern» covers the last hundred years, more or less. Perhaps it was Eugène Delacroix who was the first modern artist. But the popular association with the phrase «modern art» like that of medieval art, is stronger than its historical denotation. The popular association with medieval art is religiousness. The popular association with modern art is its *remoteness* from the symbols and values of the majority of men. There is a break in modern times between artists and other men without historical precedent in depth and generality. Both sides are wounded by the break. There is even hate at times, though we all have a thirst for love.

The remoteness of modern art is not merely a question of language, of the increasing «abstractness» of modern art. Abstractness, it is true, exists, as the result of a long, specialized internal development in modern artistic structure. But the crisis is the modern artists' rejection, almost *in toto*, of the values of the bourgeois world. In this world modern artists form a kind of *spiritual underground*...

\*

Modern art is related to the problem of the modern individual's freedom. For this reason the history of modern art tends at certain moments to become the history of modern freedom. It is here that there is a genuine rapport between the artist and the working-class. At the same time, modern artists have not a social, but an individualist

experience of freedom: this is the source of the irreconcilable conflict between the Surrealists and the political parties of the working-class.

\*

The social condition of the modern world which gives every experience its form is the spiritual breakdown which followed the collapse of religion. This condition has led to the isolation of the artist from the rest of society. The modern artist's social history is that of a spiritual being in a property-loving world.

No synthesized view of reality has replaced religion. Science is not a view, but a method. The consequence is that the modern artist tends to become the last active spiritual being in the great world. It is true that each artist has his own religion. It is true that artists are constantly excommunicating each other. It is true that artists are not always pure, that some times they are concerned with their public standing or their material circumstance. Yet for all that it is the artists who guard the spiritual in the modern world.

The weakness of socialists derives from the inertness of the working-class. The weakness of artists derives from their isolation. Weak as they are, it is these groups who provide the *opposition*. The socialist is to free the working-class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual can be possessed by all. The function of the artist is to make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed. It is here that art instructs, if it does at all.

\*

In the spiritual underground the modern artist tends to be reduced to a single subject, his ego... This situation tells us where to expect the successes and failures of modern art. If the artist's conception, from temperament and conditio-

ning, of freedom is highly individualistic, his egoism then takes a romantic form. Hence the Surrealists' love at first sight for the Romantic period, for disoriented and *minor* artists: individualism limits *size*. If the artist, on the contrary, resents the limitations of such subjectivism, he tries to objectify his ego. In the modern world, the way open to the objectivization of the ego is through form. This is the tendency of what we call, not quite accurately, abstract art. Romanticism and formalism both are responses to the modern world, a rejection, or at least a reduction, of modern social values. Hence the relative failure of Picasso's public mural of the Spanish Republic's pavilion in the Paris Exposition, *The Bombing of Guernica*. Hence Picasso's great successes, given his great personal gifts, with the formal and emotional inventions in cubism, the *papier collé*, and even in many of the preliminary drawings for *Guernica*; here it is a question of Picasso's own genius. In the public mural, it is a question of his solidarity with other men. Picasso is cut off from the great social classes, by the decadence of the middle-class and the indifference of the working-class, by his own spirituality in a property-ridden world. *Guernica* is therefore a *tour de force*. It expresses Picasso's indignation, as an individual, at public events. In this it is akin to Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra*. The smaller format of etchings, or even of easel paintings is more appropriate. We see this in the greater effective horror of Picasso's *Girl with a Cock*. The mural form, by virtue of its size and public character, must speak for a whole society, or at the very least, a whole class. *Guernica* hangs in an uneasy equilibrium between now disappearing social values, i.e., moral indignation at the character of modern life –what Mondrian called the *tragic*, as opposed to the eternal and the formal, the aesthetics of the *papier collé*.

We admire Picasso for having created *Guernica*. We are moved by its intent. Yet how accurately, though intuitively, art measures the contradictions of life. Here a

contradiction exists. So long as the artist does not belong, in the most concrete sense, to one of the great historical classes of humanity, so long he cannot realize a social expression in all its public fullness. Which is to say, an expression for, and not against. The artist is greatest in affirmation. This isolation spiritually cripples the artist, and sometimes gives him, at present, a certain resemblance to Dostoyevsky's *idiot*.

\*

The history of Picasso, from one point of view, is that of his effort not to be limited to the strictly aesthetic, not to strip his art bare of a full social content, and contemplate her merely under the eternal aspect of beauty. He would not so impoverish himself. It is an aesthetician's error to suppose that the artist's principal concern is Beauty, any more than the philosopher's principal concern is Truth. Both are technical problems, which the artist and the philosopher must solve, but they do not represent the end in view. To express the felt nature of reality is the artist's principal concern. Picasso *wills* therefore the retention of social values, at any cost, just as Masson strives with a kind of desperation, like Delacroix, to raise modern painting out of the petty relations of modern life to the level of our great humanist past. But since Picasso, no more than any artist, can accept the values of a middle-class world, he must, in retaining them, treat them with a savage mockery, like Joyce. Here somewhere is the ground of Picasso's otherwise unparalleled parody of the history of art.

It was the late Piet Mondrian who accepted the impoverishment of his art involved by the rejection of social values. He was perhaps less opposed to ordinary life than indifferent to its drama. It was the eternal, the «universal», in his terminology, which preoccupied him: he had an af-

finity with oriental saints, with, say, Mallarmé. Since the aesthetic is the main quality of the eternal in art, it may be that this is why Mondrian's work, along with certain aspects of automatism, was the first technical advance in twentieth century painting since the greatest of our discoveries, the *papier collé*. It was Mondrian who accepted most simply that debased social values provide no social content.

\*

History has its own ironies. It is now Mondrian, who dealt with the «eternal», who dates the most. To underestimate the capacity of the individual to transcend the social, is to deny the possibility of art now.

\*

The present ruling class was able to gain its freedom from the aristocracy by the accumulation of private property. *Property is the historical base of contemporary freedom*. The danger lies in thinking we own only our private possessions. Property creates the unfreedom of the majority of men. «When this majority in turn secures its freedom by expropriating the bourgeoisie, the condition of its freedom is the unfreedom of the bourgeoisie; but whereas the bourgeoisie like all ruling classes, requires an unfree exploited class for its existence, the proletariat does not require to maintain the bourgeoisie in order to maintain its own freedom.» (Caldwell, *Reality and Illusion*.) There is hope therefore of ending the conflict inherent in class society.

\*

The artist's problem is *with what to identify himself*. The middle-class is decaying, and as a conscious entity the

working-class does not exist. Hence the tendency of modern painters to paint for each other...

The preponderance of modern artists come from the middle-class. To this class modern art is always hostile by implication, and sometimes directly so. Even before the socialists, the artists recognized the enemy in the middle-class. But being themselves of middle-class origin, and leading middle-class lives –certainly not the lives of the proletariat– the artist in a certain sense attacks himself. He undermines his own concrete foundation. He is then led to abstract eternal goods from reality. Here begins the rise of abstract art. All art is abstract in character. But it is especially in modern times that after the operation of abstraction so little remains.

The artist's hostility for the middle-class is reciprocated. This period, more than others, has detested its greatest creations, even when made by extremely conventional beings, like Cézanne. In the face of this hostility, there have been three possible attitudes of which the artist was not always conscious: to ignore the middle-class and seek the eternal, like Delacroix, Seurat, Cézanne, the cubists, and their heirs; to support the middle-class by restricting oneself to the decorative, like Ingres, Corot, the impressionists in general, and the fauves; or to oppose the middle-class, like Courbet, Daumier, Pissarro, Van Gogh, and the dadaists. This last class tends to be destroyed by the struggle. Some artists, like Picasso, have had all three relations to the middle-class.

Actually, nearly all modern painters have been rejected by the middle-class until their works gained a property-value. Henri Matisse had to resist a career as a Salon painter; Manet and Degas were involved in the impressionist's fight; Rouault is not mentioned in a recent comprehensive work on modern Catholic painting. The sentimental and academic painting which the middle-class really likes disappears with its patrons.

The right-wing Surrealists and «neo-romantics» have been the first modern painters to be accepted from the beginning by the middle-class.

\*

The Surrealists had the laudable aim of bringing the spiritual to everyone. But in a period as demoralized as our own, this could lead only to the demoralization of art. In the greatest painting, the painter communes with himself. Painting is his thought's medium. Others are able to participate in this communion to the degree that they are spiritual. But for the painter to communicate with all, *in their own terms*, is for him to take on their character, not his own.

Painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself; it is a medium of thought. Thus painting, like music, tends to become its own content.

The medium of painting is color and space: drawing is essentially a division of space. Painting is therefore the mind realizing itself in color and space. The greatest adventures, especially in a brutal and *policed* period, take place in the mind.

Painting is a reality, among realities, which has been felt and formed.

It is the pattern of choices made, from the realm of possible choices, which gives a painting its form.

The content of painting is our response to the painting's qualitative character, as made apprehendable by its form. This content is the feeling «body-and-mind». The «body-and-mind», in turn, is an event in reality, the interplay of a sentient being and the external world. The «body-and-mind» being the interaction of the animal self and the external world, is just reality itself. It is for this reason that the «mind», in realizing itself in one of its mediums, expresses the nature of reality as felt.

In benevolent periods the external world, in its social aspects, contributes greatly to this interaction. In other periods, like our own, the external world contributes less, and the choices of the mind are, from necessity, less rich. For the right-wing Surrealists to ask us to interact with the members of society when, to the spiritual mind, they represent no object of desire, is to risk what modern art has gained.

\*

Spinoza reminds us that the thing most important to man is man. Hence the poverty of the modern painter's experience. We long to embrace one another, and instead our relations are false. It is after the French Revolution and the triumph of the bourgeoisie that the human figure disappears from painting, and the rise of landscape begins. With Cézanne landscape itself comes to an end, and from him to the cubists the emphasis is changed: the subject becomes «neutral». Now certain painters wish to be called non-figurative...

\*

The transitional figures, appearing before the middle-class hold in the world became strong, were Goethe, Beethoven and Goya. The first to disassociate themselves from class, they were able to identify themselves with humanity, with all men. They have a size, a fertility, a vitality subsequently unmatched. It is in the unindustrialized Spanish-speaking countries of the Occident that this humanism, in a far more popular form, it is true, still persists. In an era where the greatest painters all skirt the inhuman, the too abstract, the Spaniards Picasso and Miró are specially loved, just as in the political sphere it is Spanish civil war and the Mexican efforts which strike our hearts. Yet this *humanismo popular* is no true solution to the contradictions

which split industrial society. Our reaction to it is rather an instinctive response to the humanism of the unindustrialized past.

\*

Empty of all save fugitive relations with other men, there are increased demands on the individual's own ego for the content of experience. We say that the individual withdraws into himself. Rather, he must draw from himself. If the external world does not provide experience's content, the ego must. The ego can draw from itself in two ways: the ego can be the subject of its own expression, in which case the painters' personality is the principal meaning expressed; otherwise the ego can socialize itself –i.e., become mature and objectified– through formalization.

In terms of Freud's fictions, the ego is the synthesis of the «superego» and the «id.» The superego represents the external world: the father, the family, society, in short, authority. The id represents the inner world: our basic animal drives. In the situation in which the ego rebels against the authority of the external world, but still retains an aspect of that world which is eternal, the aesthetic, the superego is the effect of society; in the present case those values have been reduced to that of form. Form, like the influence of society in the usual superego, comes from the outside, the world. It is in this sense that formalization represents a socialization of the ego. In rejecting the values of middle-class society, as a historical event, the aesthetic, and other eternal values, like chance, love, and logic, are what remain.

It is the nature of such art to value above all the eternal, the «pure», the «objective». Thus Mondrian used to speak of the «universal». Thus the notion of «pure form» among the non-figurative painters, and Valéry's idea of the «pure self». Thus the modern sculptor's admiration

for the purity of materials. Thus Arp's violent attacks on Romantic painters' egoism; and the general admiration of abstract painters for an art without a Self... The desire for the universal is that for one of its forms, the aesthetic; the desire for purity is the rejection of contemporary social values for the aesthetic; the desire for objectivity is that for the socialization of the ego through the aesthetic. Lisitsky's white square on a white ground contains the logic of the aesthetic position in its most implacable form.

The power of this position must not be underestimated. It has produced some of the greatest creations of modern art. But the fundamental criticism of the purely formalist position is how it reduces the individual's ego, how much he must renounce. No wonder there is such insistence among formalists on perfection. Such limited material is capable of perfection, and with perfection it must replace so much else.

\*

The Surrealist position is far more contradictory. They have been the most radical, romantic defenders of the individual ego. Yet part of their program involves its destruction. Where the abstractionists would reduce the content of the superego to the aesthetic, not even the aesthetic has value for the Surrealists. It serves merely as a weapon of the middle-class. Authority from the external world is rejected altogether. This is the Dada strand in the fabric of Surrealism. With the content of the superego gone, the Surrealists are driven to the animal drives of the id. From hence the Surrealist's admiration for men who have shattered the social content of the superego, for Lautréamont and the Marquis de Sade, for children and the insane. This is the Sadistic strand. It is from this direction that Surrealism tends to become predominantly sexual. Yet it is plainly impossible for cultivated men to live on the plane

of animal drives. It is therefore a pseudo-solution to the problem posed by the decadence of the middle-class.

A second major tendency of Surrealism is to renounce the conscious ego altogether, to abandon the social and the biological, the superego and the id. One retreats into the unconscious. The paradox is that the retreat into the unconscious is in a sense the desire to maintain a «pure ego». Everything in the conscious world is held to be contaminating, as when the hero in search of the fabulous princess, in the Celtic fairy-tale, *must never permit himself to be touched*, whether by a leaf, an insect, or anything from the external world, as he flies through the forests on his magic horse. If he were touched by the world, his quest would immediately come to a disastrous end. Even when the hero arrives at the Princess's castle, he must jump from his flying horse through a window without touching the window-frame. He does in the end reach the Princess, and after resting with her seven days and nights, wherein she never opens her eyes, she gives birth to a young god. The Surrealist conception of the journey into the unconscious is of some such hero's task. Automatism is the dark forest through which the path runs. The fundamental criticism of automatism is that the unconscious cannot be *directed*, that it presents none of the possible choices which, when taken, constitute any expression's form. To give oneself over completely to the unconscious is to become a slave. But here it must be asserted at once that plastic automatism though perhaps not verbal automatism –as employed by modern masters, like Masson, Miró and Picasso, is actually very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms. As such it is one of the twentieth century's greatest formal inventions... Still, the impulse towards the unconscious contradicts to a degree that towards the id. Hence a content partly consciously sexual, partly automatic, in many of the Surrealist painters.

Self-annihilation is of course undesirable. We are neither merely biological organisms nor automatons. Thus the third tendency of the Surrealists, contradictory to the other two: the destruction of the free ego's enemy, the middle-class. Here is the *rapport* between Surrealism and the politics of the left. But here the Surrealists have been blocked by the inertness of the working-class.

\*

Because of its internal contradictions, and its impracticality in the external world, the Surrealist position has been subject to a certain instability. What we love best in the Surrealist artists is not their program. The strength of Duchamp and Ernst has been their Dada disrespect for traditional uses of the painter's medium, with its accompanying technical innovations. The strength of Arp, Masson, Miró and Picasso lies in the great humanity of their formalism. Dalí long ago became reactionary: art has its traitors, too.

\*

The argument of this lecture is that the materialism of the middle-class and the inertness of the working-class

leave the modern artist without any vital connection to society, save that of the opposition; and that modern artists have had, from the broadest point, to replace other social values with the strictly aesthetic. Even where the Surrealists have succeeded, it has been on technical grounds. This formalism has led to an intolerable weakening of the artist's ego; but so long as modern society is dominated by the love of property – and it will be, so long as property is the only source of freedom – the artist has no alternative to formalism. He strengthens his formalism with his other advantages, his increased knowledge of history and modern science, his connections with the eternal, the aesthetic, his relations with the folk (e.g., Picasso and Miró), and, finally his very opposition to middle-class society gives him a certain strength. Until there is a radical revolution in the values of modern society, we may look for a highly formal art to continue. We can be grateful for its extraordinary technical discoveries, which have raised modern art, plastically speaking, to a level unreached since the earlier Renaissance. When a revolution in values will take place, no one at present can tell. The technical problems which stand before us I must speak of some other time.