

Labour of Love, Matthew Poole and Amanda Beech

A duo talk as part of the panel discussion for the exhibition Modern Lovers, curated by Pil and Galia Kolectiv. Discussion held at Goldsmiths College, March 2006

AB

Today we want to think about exactly how the exhibition Modern Lovers gets involved in its reformulation of Modernism. But rather than talk about the exhibition directly, we hope to deal with how and if the acting out of particular ideas as images brings us to the paradox proposed in the exhibition literature; that a love of modernism both degrades and conserves it.

To do this we will concentrate on the idea of Modernism as a task, as an ethics, and also what happens when Modernism is drawn upon as something that is past. This is a question of how a demonstration of love as a practice of conservation invites most obviously the political question of neo-conservatism.

So, to get started we have drawn up a few points that we identify as characteristics of the exhibition, and modernity, as a means to understand the terms of the dialogue the former claims with the latter. These are not detailed in any particular way but act as a series of variously connected thoughts that ask questions about these relations, some of which are more rhetorical than others, that we hope will be discussed later.

MP

PROJECT

The ideology of Modernism is based on a requirement that aesthetics are key to social change. Specifically, aesthetics are sublated to the primacy of utility; in that form follows function. The project of Modernism is to order the distinct territories of art and life into one socio-materiality, so to make our lifestyles function efficiently according to the social programme of emancipation. Ties are cut with the past. Change is centralised. The modernist project is anti-historical and always underway. The project is rational, organised, applied and procedural.

Art under the project of Modernism has a clear role in terms of its social function, where art is instrumentalised to effect social change. However, to do this it requires a Project. It needs organising in relation to the social sphere. Because of this we can assume that the artwork is intrinsically disorganised, or trivial when it comes to its social affect. However, at the same time, the artwork is special to social freedom because it conditions the success of the social project: Aesthetics are key to social change.

As such art's place in this Project is one of 'forming', 'manifesting', and producing and of being organised. The politics of modernist aesthetics demands engagement, commitment, and authenticity. Here we can see the production of art as a project, a distinct and defined project of becoming, a project of the now and a project of revolution.

Now, we know that this project failed in the crisis of its own representationalism. In other words the Modernist ideal of unifying art and life realised the violence of this rationalisation that was immanent to it, in the Gulag, the concentration camp, and the Holocaust. Adorno's injunction of "no poetry after Auschwitz" defined this crisis: that freedom as manifest is equivalent to such terror.

This idea of life without poetry is an idea of life without representationalism; a life without the insistence of structuring the relationship between image and meaning. But this is not a life without culture or images but a denial of an instrumentalist paradigm. This promises the erasing of art's distance from the social and therefore points to the failure of art's social project.

So, this brings me to ask of the term 'Modern Lovers': if this telos of Modernism is considered as and becomes the material for an archaeological activity in the present, where we remake from the debris of its events a newly formed and lived heritage of Modernism, then what are we [and what should we be] recouping from this apparently 'wrongheaded' rationalisation of art and life? What is the utility of the aesthetics of utility? What happens to the conception of the artwork as public when this is played out at the level of private historical and local constructions?

And, what exactly is recovered in this consideration of Modernism without Project; where now, in its archaeology, Modernism is written as literature in its inscription as text? This is an engagement with a tradition of the new, a tradition of futurity, a tradition of representationalism. Can we think of this engagement without nostalgia for those procedural days of rationalising the poetic, and instead, in this en-culturing of Modernism's political project see the collapse of those tensions that constituted it.

AB

It's hard not to think of Michel Foucault when we invoke terms like archaeology. It's also significant to remember that Foucault inscribed Kant - the figure of modernism - into his postmodern theory. I think that this offers a way we might approach what I'd call this "reading the modern out loud". What I'm talking about is that Foucault's postmodern theory institutionalised modernity within it.

So, first of all we have to ask what is Kant, whose philosophy figured the standards of modernist autonomy, doing in Foucault's postmodern theory?

In his Preface to the Critique of Pure Reason Kant said that : "Our age is, in especial degree the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit".

In one of Foucault's later texts 'What is Enlightenment?' he talks about the enlightenment idea of critique as the 'attitude of modernity'. He understands this 'attitude of critique' as prevailing in contemporary culture and society. Modernism for Foucault therefore is primarily not an epoch or a standard of time that is opened and closed. This is because critique is something so embedded within the thought of freedom that freedom could not be thought without it.

In this way Foucault pulls us around to see this understanding of Modernism as project from another perspective: without its universal predicates and without it's specific and concrete ties to critique as a means to some emancipatory end.

Foucault sees Modernism in a genealogical sense. He constructs a local critique, where the Ethics of Project become a lived ethos of genre and style. Critique, the attitude of modernity is the prevailing ethos in Foucault's work and this prevailing ethos is the work of self-invention. Freedom inscribed as and in critique doesn't take us outside to a new place, rather it enables us to understand ourselves as different to yesterday. Here we can see that in Foucault's archaeology of critique we are now freed from the ends of the Project of Modernity but its means remains intact. Now there are no ends, only means. The means are ends in themselves. Now the subject is propelled forward as the one who undertakes this task of critique as self-invention - as a dandy like agent.

MP

What's interesting about this for me in this is that although Modernism is popularly thought of as revolutionary, we see in Kant's conception of freedom and autonomy an intrinsic conservatism, where he states that:

" ... a public can only achieve enlightenment slowly. A revolution may well put an end to autocratic despotism and to rapacious or power-seeking oppression, but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, like the old ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking mass."

[from: Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment", I. Kant, 1784]

So in taking up Kant, Foucault attempted to think 'critique as attitude' without Enlightenment's revolutionary spirit. And as we see in Kant here, the idea of reform is centralised. Therefore, as the mark of embedding the notion of critique without *Project but as* reform, we can see that we no longer have a rejection of the past, but the work of preserving some ways of life as an ethico-aesthetic; a part in the process of self invention.

But what happens when this ethos of reform without project- this attitude of critique seems stabilised as "a critical aesthetic"?

The aesthetic of Modernity in *Modern Lovers* shows us the old ideals as contemporary fascinations played out before us and whether they are made banal, reformed as humorous, celebrated as spectacular and performed as stupid, they are taken seriously in forms pictures and shapes of critique.

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So bearing this in mind we can re-play a few questions that have been asked of Foucault and turn them to the exhibition: In fact it is these questions that the exhibition provokes:

How and in what way does this rhetoric of modernity in the present distinguish between emancipatory project (as either being transcendental or nihilistic) and the idea of non-teleological critical actions?

If Project is no longer the case for either Foucault or such artworks' relationship to modernity then what and how exactly does the critique operate? Can we have critique without project?

What does this insistence on a specific genre of critique claim?

MP

What needs reiterating here is that in *Modern Lovers* we could say that the act of 'picturing' becomes the effect; it is the end and not the means. However, does the very prevalence of the rhetoric of modernity tell us that we require this aesthetic as something that activates modernist sensibilities as contemporary demands in the socio-cultural sphere? What is this engagement with the past? What kind of Modernism, if it truly is a kind of Modernism, is this? What politics does this love of design over a design for life incorporate?

AB

This idea of love introduces a few interesting points, but centrally I think it is within the loving of history where *Modern Lovers* opens up questions about reform and reformation.

MP

Yes, as antihistorical, Modernism exists in the 'immediate'. It is *modo* - 'of the now'. It defines itself as ideality in reality.

But let's look at the antimodern. As modernism upside down, the antimodern revels in a symbiosis with history, wherein its ideal is located. The 'now' is an embodiment of history rather than a rejection of history. Emancipation is understood as a theory of being "free with" rather than "free from" normative and "everlasting" codes such as spirit, history and nature. Taking this antimodernism to Heidegger we also understand that the gluing of the 'then-ness' of history to the 'now-ness' of self and vice versa is at the cost of technological advance.

Technological advance is anathema to the critique of capital intrinsic to antimodern ideology because mass production is seen to create surplus, excess. It is not efficient. It is alienating from the apparatus of production and therefore it is alienating from community and the social matrix.

Reactionary Modernism, however, is a term that is able to describe the following paradox: this is a radical critique of capital whilst embracing technology as the primarily biological spirit of history.

In the catalogue essay for *Modern Lovers*, Pil & Galia cite Jeffrey Herf's - you could say - well timed 1984 book *Reactionary Modernism*, as a subject that could help us think about formulations to effect an optimism for culture [in a deep sense] in the present.

The Reactionary Modernists explored by Herf all, paradoxically, advocate technological and scientific advancement, but reject the rationalism of Enlightenment doctrine, as an arid soulless philosophy.

As such, these reactionary modernists laid the foundations for an essentialising of the uses of technology and industry, creating in its wake a particular paradoxical brand of modernism; an anterior modernism.

This epic-Leftism is also proto-fascist and deeply conservative. And of course we can say that for antimodernism too. However, they both hold onto the intrinsic notion of freedom in itself. The project remains.

This brings us to the thesis, that a plurality of modernist ideologies existed in the first half of the twentieth century, some Left-thinking, some Right-thinking, and therefore this frees us from a monolithic conception of Modernism, and allows us to begin our archaeology.

AB

This is where we can turn to the political question that's at stake here. Let's entertain the theory for a moment that a defence of modernist politics – or the aim to think as a liberal – made through a retrieval of modernism's orthodox or defining aesthetics is in fact a neo-conservative move, of a similar order to what has been termed here as 'reactionary modernism'.

In this way the historicising and localising of these modernist images of 'change' or 'difference' can contain a kind of nihilism or nostalgia. It can remind us that we have left behind a 'project of progress': that we conserve them as images that mark our lost faith. That we have given up.

I want to look very briefly at how this act of looking backwards may lead us to think that we refuse a concept of 'change for the better' or that progress is not a possible thought in contemporary culture.

This complaint of neo-conservatism is also a very general claim made against postmodern theory. This is the idea that 'the postmodern' includes and necessitates a radical rejection of Modernism's Project and a result of this rejection is the recuperation of an antimodern-style politics in the social sphere. As such to be 'post'-modern is to be 'anti'-modern: it is anathema to democracy, for it forgets community, solidarity, equality or progress.

But this idea that postmodernism is an out and out rejection of modernity and therefore inherently conservative is problematic because it forgets that postmodernism doesn't let go of concepts like critique, freedom and agency. Indeed rather than see these terms as specifically modern we can also see them as pre-modern or classical.

Neither does postmodern theory always conflate a concept of freedom to the level of self-consciousness about the limits of our beliefs or hopes, something familiar to the genre of parody. Of course I'm schematising here but I think it's important to identify that these very same questions about progress, community and reform can be seen to drive postmodern theory rather than are rejected by it. This is when we have to think once more about the difference between rejecting Project and rejecting the political itself.

MP

Another point that arises from this idea that a predilection for the past is implicitly conservative is the problematic assumption that we **can** live without history, that its images and its ideas are capable of being removed from our concerns. That we can remove ourselves from the context of language, others, and community and not share even yesterday.

This fact of history (that we don't live without it – even if our understanding of it is open) and its fictionalisations (its futurity) turns us to deal with the polemics that Modernism defends and the fantasy of 'choice' that it offers. The fantasy here is that we can choose between the *past or the future*. I think that Reactionary Modernism points us to the paradox of these choices in a helpful way, it reminds us that those choices don't exist and as such it allows us to re-question the politics of artworks within this genre because we see the same collapse of defined left or right wing positions.

AB

To extend this point a little, we can say that identifying history as now, engrains ourselves as subject of and with history. However, rather than contaminating history or diluting history I'd see these operations as dominating history. They are authoritarian. This is a re-enactment of history as a vigorous re-interpretation of it; a claiming of images as ones own. A realism that is non-representational. This is the delivery of new traditions.

MP

You could also say that this is a kind of archiving in action. As we know from Derrida's Archive Fever (1996), the archive is the embodiment and domicile of the Law. It is the very actuality of conservation.

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So from this we can ask two questions:

If this reading of history as the now *is* authoritarian, then what are its politics?
And to what extent do 'pictures of political attitudes' play within this?

To put this question another way: What does this love and reinforcement of tradition as a modernist aesthetic share with the same corruption of architectural form seen for example in the 'ideal villages' created in the 80's in places like Chelmsford that Prince Charles loves so much?

So, is there something about this use of the past that is different here. Maybe we can come back to his later.

MP

Yes, and the question remains, why choose to image oneself with this particular 'brand of images', this particular 'brand of modernism'? The work in *Modern Lovers* on the whole takes its cues from early 20th century geometric abstraction (excepting perhaps Lippmann, who is interesting in relation to the postmodernity *avant la lettre* of Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Roussel, and Gertrude Stein). Perhaps it's the **Charismatic** qualities of **Modernity**? But what is charismatic about Modernism?

Who *wouldn't* love Modernism? How can we not be attracted to Modernism [either Right-wing or Left-wing]? The promise of dynamism, the pride of progress, and the light of rationality. We are surely all inspired by the ecstasy of liberty, the warmth of fraternity, and the sublime expanse of égalité.

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But, does this love of Modernism run the risk of killing for company? If we think of serial-killer Dennis Neilsen who murdered his lovers and sat with them eating TV dinners, then we *could* say that something similar is happening here. Are we seeing the domestication of the corpse of modernity? Do we need the company of this corpse to share our TV dinners? Is this an 'armchair modernism' which can only be written as a perverse private fantasy, unsuitable for and even the opposite of the Modern dream?

Is this is where the charisma of modernism can only be played out? When its routinisation becomes antisocial, when modernism has to stay at home?

MP

So what we've covered here is not only the attraction of modernism, namely its project, but the question of political associations with images. Returning very briefly to Foucault, he talks about the Enlightenment as a kind of blackmail. Because Enlightenment is made equivalent to maturity, responsibility, liberty, knowledge but above all goodness, we are forced to think about the ramifications of rejecting the things that this project represents. So what we've put forward here is a question of an equivalence between a modernist aesthetic and liberalism and if that equivalence is substantiated in these uses of modernism.

We could say that our negotiation of our ethics and our role in society has been transformed from 'Virtue', as in moral goodness, to 'Virtu', as in virtuosity. This is an important question that we think *Modern Lovers* opens up.

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And finally we've tried to think of this love of modernism simply as a category of the postmodern, where although goodness and evil are not as distinct as we assume and past and future are conditioned upon each other, we propose that this is not antithetical to progress or agency.

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