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## TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODERN ART: EVOLUTION AND MAIN TRENDS

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*Abstract.* In the eighteenth century, Western civilization entered a historical epoch known as the Enlightenment, which established a new cultural and artistic paradigm of modernity. A German philosopher Jürgen Habermas remarked in this context: “The Enlightenment project formulated by the Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century consisted in their desire to create an objective science, a universal morality and law, and an autonomous art based on their internal logic of development.” The following two centuries brought incredible diversity and depth to the Western art scene. They witnessed an unprecedented array of movements and creative originality. In addition, and in pursuit of the proclaimed ideal of total autonomy, twentieth-century artists revised the three most essential principles of art. The masters of modernism reinterpreted a traditional relationship between the means of representation and the object of art. They developed a new understanding of the role of the author in creating an artwork. And finally, they changed their view of the relationship between art and life. Those three features, in my opinion, comprise the substantive evolution of twentieth-century modern art.

*Keywords:* European Enlightenment, modernism, means of expression as an art object, erasing artist's individuality, dissipation of art in life.

“Art has experienced many crises in its history, but what is happening to art in our epoch cannot be called one of the crises among others. We are witnessing a profound upheaval in the thousands of years of its foundations.”

Nicholas Berdyaev

### *Introductory Remarks*

In the eighteenth century, Western civilization entered a historical epoch known as the Enlightenment, which established a new cultural and artistic paradigm of modernity. The Enlightenment ideology questioned the traditional authority of religion and asserted the independence and self-sufficiency of human reason. For the first time in Christian history, it developed an all-encompassing worldview that stemmed from rational inquiry and analysis rather than scriptural authority. The concepts of human ratio, nature, liberty, and progress, along with their profound reinterpretation, played a crucial role in forming the ideological canon of modernity.

Several centuries after the launch of the Enlightenment project, we find ourselves living in the middle of it while observing a completely transformed socio-political, economic, and cultural map of the world. The founding of the United States of America marked the birth of the first Enlightenment-type political state based on the progressivist ideas of reason, liberty, and human brotherhood. European countries followed suit, which neither the First nor the Second World Wars could break or stop. The alternative communist vision of the Soviet Union did not stand the test of time and, by the end of the twentieth century, collapsed along with the Soviet Empire and its Eastern European satellites. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, most countries of the American continent had already established multi-party democratic state systems. The radical impact of the Enlightenment project, which initiated Modern times, is uncomplicated to observe in the political, social, or economic areas. But how did modernity transform the theory and practice of the arts?

#### *General Tendencies*

The twentieth century brought incredible diversity and depth to the Western art scene. In so many ways, that century became unique in human history. The era of space flight and world wars, the age of penicillin and the nuclear bomb, and the time of Einstein and Hitler. In the field of art, it produced an unprecedented array of movements and creative originality. Today, looking back at the cultural baggage of the century, experts naturally strive for a comprehensive appraisal of its heritage. They pay attention, not to various styles and techniques but to the main trends in modernist art.

A period of incredible progress in science and technology, the twentieth century also witnessed an equally unprecedented crisis of spirituality and religious consciousness. Contemporary artists reflected the drama of the situation with particular poignancy as people realized that they were powerless before the fruits of their own inventions. The little man, unable to defend his dignity and turned into one of the cogs of a giant machine, became one of the typical characters in the artistic palette. He is tormented by life's meaninglessness, hopelessness, and despair. The novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the plays of Samuel Beckett, the short stories of Franz Kafka and the operas of Alban Berg, the films of Charlie Chaplin, and the poems of Thomas Eliot vividly reflect the breakdown of traditional values and the decline of morality.

However, the enormous scope of the cultural crisis made an even more profound impact on the modern artistic landscape. A famous twentieth-century Russian thinker Nicholas Berdyaev once remarked:

“Art has experienced many crises in its history, but what is happening to art in our epoch cannot be called one of the crises among others. We are witnessing a profound upheaval in the thousands of years of its foundations” (Berdyaev, 1994, p. 399).

And German philosopher Jürgen Habermas narrowed it down to the following observation:

“The Enlightenment project formulated by the Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century consisted in their desire to create an objective science, a universal morality and law, and an autonomous art based on their internal logic of development” (Habermas, 1983, p. 9).

In pursuit of the proclaimed ideal of total autonomy, twentieth-century artists revised the three most essential principles of art. The masters of modernism reinterpreted a traditional relationship between the means of representation and the object of art. They developed a new understanding of the role of the author in creating an artwork. And finally, they changed their view of the relationship between art and life. Those three features, in my opinion, comprise the substantive evolution of twentieth-century modern art. Let us consider each of them in more detail.

#### *Means of Expression as an Art Object*

The revision of the traditional relationship between the means of representation and the object of art in European culture began in the nineteenth century. It was embodied in the painting by the “Father of Modernism,” Edouard Manet (1832–1883), whose canvases depicted not so much the external world as the feelings and experiences of their author. Impressionism, which became popular with the European public at the end of the nineteenth century, radically changed the views on painting and led to a rejection of the artistic standards introduced during the Renaissance. According to those rules, the pictorial canvas served the viewer as a window into three-dimensional reality and therefore had to copy its properties as they appeared to the human eye. The invention of photography in the

nineteenth century confirmed the correctness of perspective as discovered and mastered by Renaissance artists. At the same time, the spread of photography outsourced painting as an art form and forced painters to look for other bases for their art. As a result, with the pioneering efforts of the Impressionists, they gradually abandoned the blind imitation of the physical world and turned to the two-dimensional nature of the pictorial canvas.

In Fauvism and Expressionism, two movements that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century, painters have put even more emphasis on the inner side of human existence. Trying to embody the spiritual world of man, representatives of those two groups radically broke with traditional forms of artistic expression. The colors in their paintings looked unrealistic, and the objects were distorted and disproportionate. The color scheme and compositional structure of such artworks reveal, first and foremost, the worldview of their authors. The French artist Henri Matisse (1869–1954), leader of the Fauvists, expressed the credo of the new art: “Composition is the art of decorating the various elements at the artist’s disposal and serving to express his feelings” (Chipp, 1968, p. 132).

Cubism and Futurism have taken the next step toward rejecting the world’s mirror image in the works of art. These two movements, which experienced their heyday at the dawn of the twentieth century before World War I, showed how one could visually embody a reality that was neither material nor subjective but conceptual. The technique of color separation and decomposition of forms, favored by the Futurists and Cubists, aimed to penetrate beyond the psychophysical covers and express the ultimate essence of being. For the Futurists, this foundation of existence was the *élan vital* or “life impulse” of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), the inexhaustible source of the evolution of being. The Futurists conveyed the power of this universal twister, its engulfing whirlwind, blurring the clear outlines of objects and erasing the boundaries between people, flowing one into another in their paintings. Cubist art was more analytical and static than dynamic, intuitive Futurist paintings. However, in their pictorial experiments, the Cubists, too, dissecting objects and bodies into geometric figures, were absorbed by the desire, as Berdyaev wrote, “to get to the skeleton of things, to the solid forms hidden behind softened coverings” (Berdyaev, 1994, p. 420).

The culmination of such experiments was the

birth of abstraction, no longer constrained by anything — objective, subjective, or even conceptual limits. Abstract art renounced the very idea of representation. In their search for pure spirituality, the abstractionists completely dissolved the object of art into the pictorial means characteristic of individual artistic activities. Each of them acquired uniqueness by focusing on a manner of expression that was exclusive to them. The subject of the painting was color and form, the subject of dance was style, and movement figures, the subject of literature was the manner and technique of writing, and so on. Abstraction became known in the twentieth-century culture as “art for art’s sake.” In this capacity, it was recognized as “High Modernism” in the second half of the century.

#### *Erasing the Individuality of the Artist*

Another novel understanding of the creative act emerged in early twentieth-century France. Following the innovations of abstraction, the adherents of modern art proposed reconsidering the artist’s role in creating artworks. In 1907, one of the founders of modernism, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), completed his famous painting *Ladies of Avignon*, now recognized as one of the masterpieces of the modernist style. In this painting, Picasso depicted five women whose bodies are drawn unnaturally large and angular and whose faces look like African masks.

Later, in interviews with journalists, Picasso acknowledged the influence of African art on his work. He expressed his admiration for African primitivism but not because of its formal techniques. He appreciated the spiritualist function it fulfilled in the archaic society. Picasso said about his visit to the Trocadero Museum in Paris (now the Musée de l’Homme), where a collection of African masks was on display:

They [these masks] were weapons. They were tools. Tools to free people from spiritual slavery; to gain independence. By giving physical form to spirits, we liberate ourselves from them and gain independence. The spirits, the unconscious... emotions, it all has the same meaning. Now I understood why I had become an artist. Perhaps it was that moment that the *Ladies of Avignon* were summoned to life... It was my first exorcist painting (Crowther, 1997, p. 33).

Such a confession from the great Spaniard is precious since it reveals one of the characteristic features

of twentieth-century art. For Picasso, the role of the artist was not one of self-expression but, on the contrary, that of self-vanishing. The artists should strive not to convey their spiritual experiences but to ensure that their individuality does not interfere with the embodiment of emotions accumulated in the subconscious. The idea of the artist's personality disappearance from his creations, foreseen by Picasso, fell on fertile ground. It rang particularly true of the Surrealists, whose activity later took center stage.

Surrealism was founded in the mid-twenties by André Breton (1896–1966) precisely to liberate the subconscious by various techniques designed to limit or completely exclude human rationality from the creative process. The practice of this school in art and literature that became fashionable in Europe between the world wars grew out of the psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), with which Breton, a physician by training, was well acquainted. The Surrealists translated subconscious impulses into works of art using a specially developed technique of automatism, which they opposed to conscious creativity. By applying automatism, the writers or artists aimed, as did the shamans in tribal religions, to purify their consciousness and get out from under the control of the mind. They were called upon to accommodate the paradoxical and terrifying world of unconscious impulses. It was no longer a question of artistic talent but psychological training. Anyone who had the resolve to face the forbidden desires of their soul could engage in creative activities.

Depriving the artist-creator of the halo of chosenness bequeathed by the Romantics found an enthusiastic response in the modernist art of the second half of the century. Inspired by the experience of the surrealists, the abstract expressionists in post-war America began to blaze new trails leading to the labyrinth of the unconscious. Some of the techniques they used were only indirectly related to traditional art. One of the idols of Abstract Expressionism or, as it was called, “action-painting” was Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). Adopting the Surrealist methods, he favored the process of creating an artwork rather than the end result, and instead of painting in the old-fashioned way, he preferred to splash paint randomly on the canvas.

Another movement in post-war America, Pop Art, rejected the role of human individuality in the art based on other considerations and by using different tech-

niques. Pop art emerged in the West in the sixties as a reaction to the prevailing abstract art of those years. It challenged not only an abstraction but also the opposition between “low” and “high,” the vulgar and the refined, the popular and the elitist. The artists who practiced Pop Art made art familiar and understandable to the masses. They were not squeamish about everyday life and boldly introduced elements of commercial culture into their works. To blend in with the crowd, pop art practitioners craved to depersonalize their products completely.

They achieved this goal through specially developed methods. One of them was the principle of seriality, applied, for instance, by the American artist and pop icon Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Warhol's paintings consisted of identical, repetitive, monotonous subjects like cans of Campbell soup or postage stamps. Often, they were portraits of pop and movie stars, whose images Warhol copied from photographs and then replicated with the help of a stencil.

Twentieth-century minimalists went even further along the path of depersonalizing art. Minimalism, like Pop Art, emerged in the sixties as a reaction to abstract expressionism. However, unlike pop art, minimalism rebelled not against abstract elitism but expressionist subjectivity. Minimalists believed that art should finally get rid of the mania for self-expression. They argued that true creativity is incompatible with the author's arbitrariness. It should reveal itself to the public in its original literalness, simplicity, and conceptual clarity. The structures of Dan Flavin (1933–1996) and Donald Judd (1928–1994), which usually represent a set of absolutely identical modules — cubes, tubes, plates, etc. — serve as an appropriate example of such minimalist perfection. Overall, when formulated conceptually, minimalist compositions do not require any professional skill and can be ordered in a factory and then put into mass production.

While abstraction completely dissolved the art subject in the visual medium, minimalism led to the final disappearance of the artists' personalities from their works. As a result, art's borders became blurred and virtually indistinguishable from life itself. Freed from the dictates of its object and subject, the creative artistic act has finally achieved full autonomy.

#### *The Dissipation of Art in Life*

The disembodiment of art and its atomization in the flow of life constitutes the third general tendency

of twentieth-century modernism. It might seem that the long-held dream of the Romanticists of a theurgic creation uniting art and life in a single impulse and becoming an extension of the divine creation has come true. Sharing this noble vision, Nicholas Berdyaev remarked:

“...Never before had the problem of...creativity and being, never before has there been such a thirst to move from the creation of works of art to the creation of life itself, of new life” (Berdyaev, 1994, p. 400).

However, the similarities here are nothing but superficial.

In their theurgic ideal, the Romantics aimed at uniting the various arts and enriching life with their synthesis. Furthermore, in theurgy, life itself was dissolved in the art to become one of the voices in the multivocal chorus of universal creativity. In modernism, on the contrary, the idea of the fusion of art and life is imbued not with the spirit of unity but of separation, division, or, to use a nowadays fashionable term, deconstruction. Tearing off one of art's shells after another, artists gradually dissolved it into life and merged with it since nothing was left to distinguish one from the other.

This tendency was already apparent in an artistic movement called Dadaism at the beginning of the century. Dada emerged during the First World War in neutral Zurich, Switzerland, and after the end of the war, it became widespread in Europe. The Dada activities reflected a spontaneous European reaction to the immorality and horrors of war. Its participants expressed their contempt for the established institutions of European culture, which they saw as responsible for the senseless slaughter. They couched their protest in mockery, parody, and an absurdist posture intended to debunk the traditional values they hated.

Dadaism was not so much an art group as an anti-art movement. As one of its adherents, Hans Richter (1888–1976), wrote: “Dada hates art, but Dada renews art through a movement in art that is against art” (*Dada Artifacts*, 1978, p. 24). And the future founder of Surrealism, André Breton, added that Dada is more than art or anti-art; it is “a state of mind” (Stangos, 1997, p. 111).

The emergence of Dadaism marked the birth of a Western counter-culture that opposed the establishment and made itself known with anti-war marches and youth demonstrations in the second half of the century.

Behind the façade of the farcical Dadaist rebellion, however, was a deeper and more serious intention. It was about rethinking the very nature of the creative act and giving the status of works of art to the objects of everyday life. One of the idols of Dadaism, the French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who strongly influenced twentieth-century modernism, then discovered his “found objects” that later became scandalously famous. Those objects, or ready-mades, consisted of ordinary things like a toilet bowl or a hat rack, removed from common usage and offered as works of art at exhibitions. Duchamp soon brought his Dadaist experiments to their natural conclusion. He rejected art altogether and became seriously involved in chess playing.

Nonetheless, the Frenchman's extravagant antics have not been consigned to oblivion and have found grateful followers in the century's second half. The emergence and epidemic spread in the sixties of conceptualism crowned Duchamp's efforts to surrender art to life. Following their master, the conceptualists believed that the true essence of creativity is not artistic skill and filigree technique but ideas or concepts alone. If it plays any role, their material embodiment is somewhat secondary. Therefore, the activity of conceptualists was highly diverse and full of unexpected experimentations. It ranged from transmitting telepathic messages to photographing invisible gases in the atmosphere. Technically, any action, even a frankly meaningless, could have been elevated to the rank of art if its organizer proclaimed it as such. Thus, by the end of the century, modern art achieved complete autonomy from the standards that had recently seemed inviolable and wholly dissolved into the whirlpool of life.

#### *Remarks in Conclusion*

We must recognize that the twentieth century was crucial for developing modern art forms. Following the Enlightenment's precepts, the supporters of modernism demonstrated the internal logic of their program and implemented the project of the absolute autonomy of art. Postmodernism that came to replace abstraction seeks to open a different, new page in contemporary culture. The same prefix “post” implies that the mission of modernism has been exhausted, and the ideals of modernist art have been surpassed.

Let us not dispute the importance of this mission and the nobility of the ideals. Today we take it for grant-



ed that art should be free. And yet, as Nicholas Berdyaev observed, art's "autonomy does not mean at all that artistic creation can or should be divorced from spiritual life and human spiritual development. Freedom is not emptiness. Free art grows out of the spiritual depth of man as a free fruit. And deep and valuable is the only art in which this depth is felt" (Berdyaev, 1994, p. 412).

Having achieved full autonomy, has modernist

art become more profound? Has it been able to fill the growing spiritual void, to transcend the prevailing mood of negativity and emptiness? Only time will tell us the complete answer to these questions. And for the time being, the avant-garde art continues to perplex the curious viewer, whose confusion cannot be dispelled by any, even the most cunning, arguments of its sophisticated connoisseurs.

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**Сергєєв Михайл**

#### Сучасне мистецтво ХХ століття: еволюція та течії

*Анотація.* У вісімнадцятому столітті західна цивілізація вступила в історичну епоху, відому як Просвітництво, яка встановила нову культурну та мистецьку парадигму сучасності. Німецький філософ Юрген Хабермас у цьому контексті зауважив: «Задум Просвітництва, сформульований мислителями Просвітництва у вісімнадцятому столітті, полягав у їхньому прагненні створити об'єктивну науку, універсальну мораль і право, а також автономне мистецтво, засноване на їхній внутрішній логіці розвитку.» Наступні два століття привнесли неймовірну різноманітність і глибину на західну мистецьку сцену. Вони стали свідками безпрецедентної різноманітності течій і творчої оригінальності. Крім того, в гонитві за проголошеним ідеалом повної автономії митці двадцятого століття переглянули три найважливіші принципи мистецтва. По-перше, майстри модернізму переосмислили традиційне співвідношення засобів зображення та предмету мистецтва. По-друге, вони виробили нове розуміння ролі автора у створенні художнього твору. І, насамкінець, вони змінили свій погляд на співвідношення мистецтва та життя. Ці три аспекти, на мою думку, складають змістовну еволюцію сучасного мистецтва ХХ століття.

*Ключові слова:* європейське Просвітництво, модернізм, засоби виразності як предмет мистецтва, стирання індивідуальності митця, розсіювання мистецтва в житті.