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University College Cork
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Lectures in the Theory of Modernism and Postmodernism

at the University College Cork, Ireland

Series editor: James Elkins

Series Preface

There is a gap in accounts of modern art. Some of the best historical work has been done by scholars who have not wanted to contribute to the large-scale questions of what modernism might be, or how nineteenth-century art might fit in the lineages that lead to postmodernism. That is one side of the gap. On the other is a common pedagogic literature intended to introduce modernism to beginning students; it is generally not written by the scholars whose work is central to the developing discipline, and it is not often cited. Between these two extremes there should be a kind of writing that is at once attentive to the fine grain of history and responsive to the different and often contentious accounts of modernism as a whole. That kind of writing is relatively rare, for a variety of

reasons—some of which are deeply embedded in the ways modernism itself has been understood.

This series is intended as an opportunity for major scholars in the field to consider the shape of the twentieth century: its essential and marginal moments, its optimal narratives, the strengths and weaknesses of its self-descriptions. I hope that the series as a whole will be helpful for those who find, as I do, that it can be revealing to put a little pressure on the assumptions that are made in everyday scholarship regarding what is, and isn't, crucial to an understanding of twentieth-century art. There is a growing scholarship, for example, on surrealism and its afterlife. In what ways does that scholarship imply that a version of surrealism is central to a description of some contemporary art? Or to take another example: How does cubism sit with accounts that rely on modernism's political aspirations? Where is Greenberg, his ghosts or avatars, in current historiography?

Large questions like these are the subject of this series. If we do not try to assemble the best theories, winnow the worst, and prepare a clear collation, then what does it mean to continue to write art history in an age of increasing pluralism? I hope it means more than playing in an era that is happily "after the history of art," in Arthur Danto's phrase.

I have mixed hopes for this series. On the one hand I doubt the ideas these authors set out will comprise a consensus, or even a satisfactory survey. On the other hand I believe that there is not an indefinitely large number of cogent, informed, and committed versions of how the century went: on the contrary, I think only a handful of separate and simultaneous conversations sustain our sense of what modernism was, or is, and it is possible to gather and compare them.

A parallel might be made to physics here: physics turns on what are called GUTs (grand unified theories) and TOEs (theories of everything), in the sense that physicists work with those possibilities always in mind, so that the smallest theoretical demonstration or technical innovation gains significance by its potential connection to the literally larger questions. In the event, many things may happen to physics before the small-scale result can ever effect its ideal theoretical impetus, but that does not vitiate the fact that in physics it is absolutely crucial that large-scale theories exist to drive local inquiries. Art history is different in many ways, not least in that art historians need not

think of large-scale problems at all. Yet in art history reticence regarding larger problems is sometimes taken as a virtue, and that, I think, is questionable. It is as if the most prominent physicists—the Steven Weinbergs or the Stephen Hawkings—were silent about the basic laws of physics. Or as if the most active and creative physicists were committed to looking only at specialized phenomena, leaving the form of the physical world, and the direction of physics, to others as a matter of speculation. What I mean to suggest is that there is a point beyond which attention to the fine structure of historical events is no longer the necessary virtue of good historical work, but rather becomes a strategy of avoidance that can threaten the coherence of the enterprise as a whole. In that sense “larger” questions are not unhelpfully large or irrelevantly large, as they tend to be taken to be, but crucially large.

The risks of avoiding going on the record about larger questions of twentieth-century art are nicely illustrated by a recent exchange involving the English critic Julian Bell, the American art historian Michael Fried, and the nineteenth-century German realist painter Adolf Menzel. In the London *Times Literary Supplement*, Bell reviewed Fried’s book on Menzel, praising Fried’s readings of individual works and his rigor, but remarking that it is unfortunate Fried chose not to connect this book, his first on a German artist, with his decades of work on the French tradition. How is Menzel linked, Bell wonders, to the sequences of French painters that Fried has studied in the past? How is modernism affected, if at all, by this alternate genealogy? They are good questions, hastily posed but essentially accurate. Menzel is not, cannot be, an isolated figure somehow beyond the streams of modernism, if only because the critical terms Fried has brought to bear on modernism figure throughout his book on Menzel, driving Fried’s inquiries and informing his judgments. It is the aim of this series to provide a space where challenges like Bell’s can be taken seriously without becoming either ephemeral polemics or floating generalizations of the sort most useful to first-year students.

The books in this series were originally lectures, each given on two successive evenings, at the University College Cork, Ireland, over a period of three years from 2004 to 2006. Each pair of lectures was followed by a seminar discussion, part of which is included in each book. The authors were each encouraged to respond to previous efforts: the notion was that the series might grow to resemble a protracted exchange, in which

each person has months or years to consider how to respond to what has been said. That speed seems entirely appropriate to a subject as intricate, and as prone to overly quick assertions, as this.

I wrote the first book in order to provide a preliminary survey of the field, although I avoided describing the work of the authors in the series. That absence shouldn't be taken as a lack of interest (the opposite is true): it is meant to provide a fruitful starting place for meditations I hope will follow. Readers may begin the series with any book, but taken as a whole, and read in sequence, the series is intended as perhaps the world's slowest, and I hope best-pondered, conversation on modernism.