

CONCENTRATION RESEARCH PAPER

VISUAL ART AND MODERN CULTURE:
THE BID FOR ATTENTION

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In the twentieth century the amount and quality of man-made culture began to compete with nature for influence over artists and the work they produced. Evidence of the industrial revolution and the manufactured landscape that it produced began to appear in art. The way of life required in an industrial society affected the way artists perceived and portrayed themselves and their world. Whether artists embraced and glorified the multiplicity and mechanization of the new industrial world or recoiled from it, its presence and effects influenced those who had contact with it.

The Futurists, a group of Italian artists brought together through political and stylistic concerns, celebrated the speed and power of industry and invention. The chief theorist and propagandist of the Futurist movement was F. T. Marinetti. In the Futurist Manifesto of 1908 he called on artists to turn away from the procedures and conventions of past art and concern themselves with the vital and noisy life of the industrial city. The belligerent manifesto extolled the virtues of aggression, speed, struggle, violence, militarism, patriotism, and "War--the only true hygiene of the world."¹

We will sing the great masses agitated by work, pleasure, or revolt; we will sing the multicolored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals; the nocturnal vibration of arsenals and docks beneath their glaring electric moons; greedy stations devouring smoking serpents; factories hanging from the clouds by the threads of their smoke; bridges like

¹F. T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," Theories of Modern Art, ed. Herschel Chipp, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 286.

giant gymnasts stepping over sunny rivers sparkling like diabolical cutlery; adventurous steamers scenting the horizon; large breasted locomotives bridled with long tubes, and the slippery flight of airplanes whose propellers have flaglike flutterings and applauses of enthusiastic crowds.²

This early twentieth century movement was not only influenced by modern culture, they adopted it as the only worthy subject matter. There is irony in a group of artists calling for a war in which some would lose their lives. There is also irony in glorifying the aspects of modern life that would soon come to be extremely competitive with art in the bid for attention.

In America, Robert Henri was encouraging his students to paint the images of the city around them. Painters such as Edward Hopper and Charles Sheeler, influenced by the teachings of Henri, painted the city but kept the commercial imagery of city life at a safe distance. An occasional element of signage or advertising would enter into their work but it was kept to a minimum and could never be considered the primary subject of the painting.

One of the first Americans to incorporate the images and style of contemporary culture in his art was Stuart Davis, another student of Henri. He combined Henri's encouragement to paint the common environment with the modernist European influence presented in the armory show of 1913, and a desire to epitomize the speed and media of American city life. Davis savored the life of the city, and the city left its mark on him and his work. Davis talked and painted the language of jazz and the city. He made a trip to Paris to experience firsthand the cubism he was in the process of Americanizing, and on

²Marinetti, p. 286.

his return he commented, "As an American I had a need for the impersonal dynamics of New York City . . ." ³ As a processor of environmental data, Davis was aware of his need for an environment that provided the raw material necessary to produce the particular form and content of his paintings. Davis stated that if there was a lack of tension he felt vacant, but he also had some idea of the city's potential to overwhelm the art it gave rise to, when he said, "It was difficult to think of either art or oneself as having any significance whatever in the face of this frenetic commercial engine." ⁴ However, Davis maintained his unashamed love for modern city life and kept his vision of it as an ideal subject matter for a modern painter. He not only processed the appearance of modern life but also utilized its rhythms, sounds, contrasts, and juxtapositions. The typography in his paintings adds an element of extrapictorial meaning and noise, in the same way type functions in Futurist paintings. They also serve a formal function, as the words used in Cubism did. Even Davis' signature becomes an important formal element in his paintings. He chose the bright colors and common imagery of popular subjects for his paintings, but unlike later Pop artists there was little irony or cynicism in the choice. "It was an affirmation, not a snide kind of thing," ⁵ The subjects were purely American and usually quite modern. Davis had made a conscious decision to be a modern American artist.

³Stuart Davis, Stuart Davis, ed. Diane Kelder, (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 27.

⁴Brian O'Doherty, American Masters: The Voice and the Myth, (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 54.

⁵O'Doherty, p. 52.

In a self-interview Stuart Davis explained the special character of the American environment and its effect on artists.

Q: Can you name some of the important positive factors that contribute to the vitality of the American atmosphere you spoke about?

A: The movies and the radio.

Q: Why?

A: Because they allow us to experience hundreds of diverse scenes, sounds and ideas in a juxtaposition that has never before been possible. Regardless of their significance, they force a new sense of reality and this, of course, must be reflected in art.

Q: But don't they have radios and movies in Europe?

A: Of course, but they don't have the same volume or quantity. It is precisely this volume which forces the issue.⁶

Understanding the impact of technology on life, Davis believed it should favorably affect artists and their work. He rejected movements and artists that denied or hid from the influence of contemporary environment. He had a running argument with members of the Regionalist movement and its proponents.

We prefer the modern works because they are closer to our daily experience. They were painted by men who lived, and who still live, in the revolutionary lights, speeds and spaces of today, which science and art have made possible.

An artist who has traveled on a stream train, driven an automobile, or flown in an airplane doesn't feel the same way about form and space, as one who has not. And an artist who lives in the world of the motion picture, electricity and synthetic chemistry doesn't feel the same way about light and color as one who has not.

These new experiences, emotions, and ideas are reflected in modern art, but not as a copy of them. They are coordinated by the artist and established as a real order in the materials.⁷

⁶O'Doherty, pp. 53-54.

⁷Davis, p. 122.

As mechanization, technology, and mass communication proliferated, the painter found his traditional possession of the role of image-maker in jeopardy. The job of producing and presenting images was taken over by the machines that could produce endless copies of images faster, cheaper, and with universal appeal. Eventually, Polaroid and Kodak would give anyone with twenty dollars the ability to create and preserve images of personally meaningful subjects, people, and events. This ability coupled with the limitless quantity of images provided by other sources reduced the demand for, and interest in, the expensive and often obscure images made by painters. Mechanical reproduction also robbed art objects of their singularity. The images and objects considered to be the most important and desirable because of the singularity were those reproduced on the largest scale.

As a result of this flood of manufactured images and information, members of modern society are faced with a man-made landscape that subjects them to an overload of visual stimuli. The electronic media have become an inescapable part of life. Television is a ubiquitous source of sound and moving images. Even the poorest neighborhoods made up of tin and cardboard shacks are topped by a forest of television aerials. As a source of entertainment, information, and endless images, television appears to have become a necessity of life. Advertising in its various forms presents itself in a constant bid for attention and patronage. The visual images of advertising are presented in magazines, newspapers, signs, and billboards. It would be very difficult to achieve the isolation necessary to escape the constant barrage of commercial visual images present in modern culture.

In a Pointillist painting or in a weaving, when the individual elements become profuse, they reach a point of saturation where they fail to retain their individual identity and importance. The individual brush strokes or threads are not singled out but the image, pattern, or texture created by the elements is seen. The presence of the elements is felt but no effort is made to identify or evaluate them. Much in the same way, the infinite number of visual images encountered in our culture become a texture and artworks risk the danger of becoming nothing more than indiscrete elements in the weave of images. The conditions under which such an element in a painting or the fabric of visual images attracts attention is when it is contrasting or incongruous enough to separate itself from the surrounding elements. Image makers contend to endow their images with the power to demand attention, but since everything is being made more powerful and attractive, it is rare when an image attains the power necessary for noticeability. When one does, it is not long before other image-makers have responded and brought their images to the same level. A similar phenomenon takes place at isolated freeway exits where gas stations compete to build the tallest most noticeable sign. The passing motorist does not notice a particular sign but sees a group of abnormally tall signs. Images dependent on their shock value have a short life. Initially, they may shock and in so doing attract individual attention, but it is not long before they are tolerated and eventually ignored. Robert Rauschenberg has lamented the fact that the public can no longer be shocked. It is not necessarily that the public has aesthetically or morally accepted the shocking image but that they

have been desensitized by overexposure to such material. When everything is trying to be shocking, nothing can be.

Just as a general pattern and not the elements used to construct it is seen, individual visual images tend to be only subliminally perceived. The mode of perception employed when faced with an overload is what Brian O'Doherty calls the "vernacular glance."⁸ The vernacular glance is the method of seeing we use when confronted with the media landscape. It is a way of seeing that focuses on effect rather than detail. The vernacular glance almost immediately familiarizes the unexpected, develops a taste for anything, and makes no distinction between beauty and ugliness. Since the relationships of the images of contemporary culture are provisional and accidental, little notice is given to incongruous juxtaposition. And because it is impossible to give thoughtful consideration to the excess of images, they are seen, categorized, and assimilated as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Although even in the museum, because of their quantity and relationships, art objects can become a blur, the exhibition space still plays an important role in presenting artworks for the purpose of contemplation. It is a place where objects vulnerable to incorporation into the fabric of mass imagery are given the opportunity to attract and hold attention. The special environment of the exhibition space is essential for the protection of works from the encroachment of mass imagery and allowing for careful consideration of relationships and meaning. And though the presentation in the museum can take on the complexity of the outside world, in most cases the person willing

⁸O'Doherty, p. 201.

to go to the added effort and expense to see art objects will also be willing to make the shift from rapid scanning to conscious seeing. The role of the exhibition space is especially indispensable to work that reflects the modern world by assuming its appearance. A painting by James Rosenquist presented in the context of a billboard could become a billboard and receive little more attention than any other sign. A cardboard sculpture by Robert Rauschenberg risks becoming a pile of cardboard anywhere but in the museum.

Robert Rauschenberg, like Stuart Davis, was greatly influenced by modern city life.

I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world . . . I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality.⁹

Through the use of collage in his work Rauschenberg created the kind of relationships that exist in a view of the manufactured landscape. As well as producing work with the overloaded appearance of the technological world, the works ask to be seen with a glance rather than scrutinized in the mode of perception usually used when viewing art. Although different layers of meaning may be revealed by careful consideration of the individual images used to construct one of Rauschenberg's pieces, for the work to function as an honest representation of reality it must be perceived in the same way external reality is. Rauschenberg has voiced his intention of not wishing to dictate the viewer's response to his work. The appearance, structure, and prescribed method of looking at the work help to evoke

⁹Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New, (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 345.

multiple interpretations. Every time the work is scanned it has a different effect, and the general effect of the work is more important than the individual details. If the elements and their relationships are identified, defined, and interpreted, the work loses its ability to generate limitless responses.

Modern culture being both raw material for art and its biggest competitor creates a complex relationship between the two. On one side, artists struggle against the shortened attention span of their audience and against the overwhelming quantity of competing images. They strive to produce work that will have enough power to draw attention to itself. These artists take full advantage of the protective nature of exhibition space and desire to cause in their viewers the shift from subliminal perception to conscious seeing. On the other side, artists are creating immediately perceptible images that compete with mass culture on its own level and do not require a great extension of the attention span. They also, in some ways, defeat the purpose of the exhibition space by bringing into it objects that possess characteristics of popular culture.

Whether artists chose to embrace and reflect the immediacy, simultaneity, and mechanization of mass culture, or reject it as groups such as the Regionalists did, its inescapable presence has an impact on artists, their work, and how it is perceived.

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