The New Moderns

There certainly seems to be a new style emerging in recent contemporary art practice. This is demonstrated not only in The Showroom’s own curatorial programme for the last year, but also in other galleries in London and elsewhere. For me this ‘new’ style seems to involve a turn towards more object-based practices, and more specifically towards the production of what might be called ‘assemblages’. It also seems to involve a re-engagement with painting: a painting that oscillates between figuration and abstraction, and is characterised by its idiosyncratic, we might even say specifically subjective subject matter.

For me, this was particularly apparent in the art that was being produced in the 1990s (and still is being produced) in Glasgow. We might highlight the sculptural practices of Jim Lambie and Cathy Wilkes, or the paintings of Victoria Morton and Hayley Tompkins. I remember the first time I saw Wilkes’ work, which quite frankly, I found unfathomable and impossible to place. It seemed to stymie any interpretive strategies at my disposal (signifier enthusiast as I was back then). Although I knew something was going on with the practice – it had a certain complexity and a definite intentionality – I found I had very few reference points from which to approach it. Looking back, this art did not seem to fit in with the ‘political’ practices being carried out elsewhere, and that in general seemed to characterise the art of the late 1980s and 90s. (1) Put more bluntly it did not fit my own interpretive frameworks, and although this was bothersome, it was also compelling.

So much for that particular encounter and for my own investment in that particular moment. What I want to do below is outline the characteristics of this new style (if indeed there is one).

Firstly, it often utilises material from, or makes reference to, sub and popular cultures (what has been termed a ‘slacker aesthetic’). Indeed, we might say that such art emerges from a scene in which the boundaries between art and other forms of culture are less rigid, more porous. Certainly in Glasgow, some of the artists were also involved in music and in club culture. As other commentators have pointed out there was a kind of ‘ambient creativity’ in the city at that time. (2) In fact, this shift in art practice could be said to result from a larger and more general shift within popular culture towards electronic music, and specifically the DIY pragmatics of dance and rave culture. Here is not the place to explore this fully, but it is important to note that at stake in this moment is more than just a different content to art, but also a different attitude. DJ and club
culture involves a manipulation of already existing regimes of signs (sampling etc.), but also a turn away from overly signifying regimes. We might characterise the latter as a turn to the affective dimension of music and of culture in general.

We might also highlight here the collective nature of such practices; they arise from a group, a scene, which shares a common if autonomous language (indeed many of the aforementioned artists were involved in collaborative projects that paralleled their own work). To a certain extent then this new moment cannot be divorced from the scene from which it emerges. Indeed, we might say that the difficulty of this art – for example in the case of my first contact – is often a result of being unfamiliar with its original context. It seems to come from ‘somewhere else’.

Of course an important point emerges at this here: these new practices are the product of wider social and cultural change. New forms of art reflect new forms of consciousness, which themselves are determined by wider socio-economic forces. There is a lot that can be said in relation to this, not least as regards what Antonio Negri refers to as the ‘total subsumption of capital’. (3) What does art do – what can art do - when every space, and indeed time itself, is colonised by capital? Certainly notions of what constitutes ‘resistance’ or an oppositional practice seem increasingly up for question in an operating field in which recuperation is a given.

Within some of these practices, the turn away from signifying strategies might be characterised as a turn towards the aesthetic potential of art. This is not necessarily to reinstate a transcendent space for art, to position it in an ‘elsewhere’, or as transporting us to an ‘elsewhere’, but it is to say that art does something else. It is more than just an object to be read. Another way of saying this is that such art is ultimately irreducible to signification, and indeed to any discursive account given of it (something always remains, an excess, after any written report). We might say then that the aesthetic names art’s specificity as art, that is, its operation up and beyond signification.

A further point leads on from this. These art practices are often highly subjective in nature. If they do mobilise a language, at least of form, then this language is certainly not one that characterises the typical assemblages that surround us on an everyday basis (the assemblages offered by the mass media for example). Indeed, we might say then that these practices are the expression of specifically singular subjectivities.

Of course, aesthetics also names a response to the world, and to objects in the world. In fact, following Kant, at least on this point, aesthetics names a specifically disinterested response. This
amounts to saying that it is not enough for new assemblages and combinations to exist, after all anything can be read and referred back to previous knowledges and frames of reference (there will always be those ‘reading engineers’ and ‘maintenance crews’ of the big explanatory systems, as Jean-Francois Lyotard once called them). (4) At stake in this ‘new’ work is then also a new spectator or participant, and his or her own ‘production of subjectivity’. Put simply, the change in attitude is one which the artists and their public share.

Paradoxically this also often involves the utilisation of previous art (this, along with the above, constitutes its archive). Here the production of a new assemblage involves a recombination or scrambling of already existing elements in and of the world. More specifically, and in relation to the art concerning us today, it is the utilisation of specifically modern forms, and more particularly Minimalist forms. Indeed, on the face of it, Minimalism appears ideal for this apparent appropriation. Minimalism can appear as an empty form ripe for re-use (ready to have content ‘injected in’ as it were).

At first glance however this does not appear to be a new strategy. Certainly ‘postmodern’ practices – as characterised by Craig Owens amongst others – self-consciously utilised previous forms (this is the so called allegorical turn tracked by October and its writers). (5) Is there something different in these newer practices? Well, we might say again that there is a different attitude. Whereas the representation of modern forms in the 1980s often operated as an ironic critique of the tenets of modernism, what we have here is a repetition of the modern; a repetition that repeats the energy, the force, of the latter. We might say then that rather than a critique of originality and authenticity, these practices repeat and celebrate the modern impulse, which we might characterise generally as the desire for the new.

As a brief excursion we might characterise this attitude as being one of the fan. Indeed fandom might be an interesting critical idiom for thinking about this utilisation of previous form, involving as it does an attachment and affective resonance with its object. (6) If there is a lightness and playfulness in this repetition, it is then less to do with irony and detachment and more to do with affirmation and involvement.

The first conclusion that we might make could then be that the mobilisation of aspects of popular culture alongside so called ‘high art’ and indeed other more personal references is not necessarily a collapsing of binaries (in the typical postmodern sense). In fact there might be something
similar to each of these spheres: a similar inventive and creative energy, a similar desire to build something new, to affirm something different.

However, modern art has, it seems to me, always involved this impulse. In terms of the conference theme we might say that modern art has always contained deeper social or even spiritual resonances (‘resonances beyond surface appearance’). (7) Modernism has always already been *altermodernism* in this sense; modern art has always differed from and to any accepted ‘account’ given of it. To a certain extent this has often been effaced by the dominant histories of modernism. An example might be the typical account of Minimalism as given to us negatively by Michael Fried amongst others. This is a sanitised narrative of a group of artists that, in seeking to form a movement, necessarily ignores the specificity of each artist’s practices, and the wider social milieu that produced these practices. Here a simple social history of Minimalism would serve to correct the notion that such art was disconnected from its wider socio-cultural context (the artists after all were a product of their time). An account of, for example, Minimalism is partial if it does not refer to the wider social upheavals, protest movements and other cultural experiments happening at the time (what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri term the revolutionary activation of the plane of immanence’). (8)

We might also want to problemmatise here the notion that such art did not engage with wider social and political contexts on its own terms. After all art is made in the world, and modern art specifically addressed the context in which it was being produced. Perhaps then, *altermodernism* is simply the foregrounding of this politics, this engagement that was always there but often goes un-remarked upon. An example of this kind of *altermodernist* practice might be Mike Nelson’s restaging of Robert Smithson’s partially buried woodshed at MOMA in Oxford last year: a restaging that calls attention to the very real context of the Vietnam war, and the way in which the earthwork became a monument to the four students killed during the riots at Kent state in May 1970. (9) Nelson’s use of sand and oil drums rather than earth makes the original context explicit, and works further to link his installation to the current geopolitical situation.

We might also think a little more carefully about the field of effectivity of art in general. Indeed what constitutes art’s political effectivity? For political art does not always look political. In fact, art is not politics in the typical or molar sense. It operates under a different logic. I will attend to this different logic in a moment, but as a kind of precursor, I want to cite two examples of modern
art, and briefly suggest how they might be characterised as political in terms of their manipulation of matter and time.

The first is Don Judd’s 1965 steel and plexiglass box. This was the production of a new object, a new assemblage different from those that surround us everyday. As Robert Smithson remarked: ‘the first time I saw Don Judd’s “pink plexiglass box” it suggested a giant crystal from another planet’. (10) There is indeed something alien about the box, and Judd’s other specific objects. They have a certain unfamiliarity and seemingly non-artistic character, at least for audiences at the time. They do not pander to our desire for ‘reassurance’ by multiplying the ‘fantasies of realism’ as perhaps Lyotard would say). (11) There is also a strange attitude towards time and temporality, which are themselves seen as a kind of material to play with. Again, Robert Smithson’s writings are good on this, but we might also cite Ilya and Emilia Kabakov’s enthusiasm for Judd, which arose from their fascination with the way Judd’s sculptures did something to the sense of time – in fact froze it:

The first time we saw the work of Donald Judd was at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1990. Before that we did not know much about him. Once we encountered his pieces we were instantly impressed. They had a huge impact on us. The most astonishing thing about his works was that time seemed to disappear around it. All other art objects at the time were quite ordinary by comparison, while Judd’s sculptures were frozen in time or were even freezing time. The boxes appeared to be some strange, unexplainable anomaly. (12)

The second is Robert Smithson’s Yucatan Mirror Displacements. This work comprised the placement of nine small mirrors in different configurations in the desert, and likewise involved a playing with notions of time: mirror travel involved the actualisation of different durations (the mirrors reflected the different flora, fauna and geological/meteorological conditions of the specific location they were placed within). We might say then that the mirror works were a part of the very earth they were inserted into, but also apart from that earth, actualising as they did different organic and inorganic durations. Smithson’s own essay on mirror-travel operates as a mythic narrative of the journey (13), and like the rest of his writing on his own art (and on that of his contemporaries) operates as a corrective to anyone who sees modern art as divorced from more subjective, political and indeed ‘spiritual’ concerns.

So, we might say that the politics of such art comes from this exploration of matter – the production of different combinations of matter, as well as experiments with different temporalities – and the actualisation of different durations. Again, if we follow Antonio Negri
then this field might be said to constitute the new battleground against capitalism: the exploration of alternative ‘times’. There is lots more that can be said here: about the different temporal experiments of modernity (from Kaprow’s happenings to Schneeman’s performances), about the different temporalities at stake in different media (for example film, which as Deleuze’s cinema books point out, involves the exploration of different space-times), but also, following Spinoza, about the deployment of the eternal against temporality. Certainly in a time of total capitalism, the time of art becomes crucial.

The second corrective is related to the second part of the conference theme – globalisation – and to the issue of whether we can talk about a movement of ‘altermodernism’ given the contested status of globalisation. In fact, I would argue that there have always been ‘new moderns’ in the sense of repetitions of the modern. An example might be Isek Kingelez’s cityscapes that were included in the Hayward Gallery’s recent exhibition, *Africa Remix* – almost a kind of repetition of the city models of Constant (although a repetition with difference). (14) Indeed we might say that other countries, other spaces and places, all have their moment of modernity. These ‘alternative’ modernities, to say it once more, are not representations of an originary European modernism, but repetitions of the modern specific to certain locations. Being modern, if you like, is less a historically specific attribute, and more a kind of ahistorical, or what Nietzsche called ‘untimely’, attitude (a becoming). (15) That is to say an event that produces history but is irreducible to it.

We might conclude then that the suggestion of an altermodernist movement, although it names a tendency, is also an art world gambit – a desire to isolate and identify a new movement (not least for the market). Altermodernism might in fact name the very logic of the modern (repetition and difference), a logic that is now being recognised within art practice.

Deleuze

The above has really just been a descriptive survey, some thoughts about recent contemporary art practice and its relation to the modern. Now I want to turn to the second, more philosophical part of my paper that seeks to account for the effectivity of these ‘new’ practices utilising a number of Deleuzian concepts. (16) I want to make eight brief points – or suggest eight possible themes – that might be mobilised in thinking this ‘new’ art.

One: Aesthetics.
Reinstating a notion of aesthetics need not involve a wholesale turn to the Kantian heritage, or indeed to the Adornian deterritorialisation of Kant. Aesthetics might in fact be the name, on the one hand, for a rupturing quality of art, its ability to break with our usual ways of being and acting in the world (our habitual responses), and on the other for a concomitant second moment: the production of something new (a creative response to the world).

At stake here is two moments in aesthetics: one of dissent (a turn from, a refusal of, the typical) and one of affirmation (of something different). Two moments then: one of criticism and one of creativity. Often it is only the former that is discussed in relation to contemporary art (art here is understood as a form of expanded ideological critique), and certainly an untheorised celebration of the latter, especially when it is pinned to a transcendent aesthetic, can be nothing more than an apology for the status quo. Perhaps the new practices under question take the former as their departure point, as a given, but are not content with remaining with the critique, trapped as it can be by the very thing it critiques (and I think, as a hinted at above, at stake here is one’s style of life as Deleuze might say: whether one is drawn to negation and critique or to affirmation and creativity). (17)

Two: Affects and ethics

Affect names the intensive quality, or ‘becomings’ of life, the risings and fallings – the movement from one state of being to another. (18) For Deleuze’s Spinoza, ethics would be the organisation of one’s life so as to increase specifically joyful affects – or those that increase our capacity to act in the world. Here ethics involves the production of joyful encounters (for example with two or more individuals coming together that essentially ‘agree’). Our encounter with art has the capacity to produce these kinds of joyful becomings (and of course this is also the case with more ‘relational’ practices). We might say then that art practice involves the production of specifically joyful affects as opposed to sad affects – the fear and paranoia produced by our encounter with more typical affective assemblages (again, I am thinking here of the mass media). Sad affects of course specifically decrease our capacity to act in the world.

For Deleuze, affects can also be thought of as self-sufficient elements in the world. Indeed art can be thought of as a kind of bloc of affects. (19) Art is made of becomings frozen in time and space, waiting to be reactivated. It is an artist’s style that coheres this assemblage together. We might say that artists offer up new combinations of affect, new affective assemblages that are
specifically different to those we are familiar with (the realm of opinion). Again, this would seem to be a particularly appropriate way to think the practices that concern us today.

Three: The production of subjectivity.

It follows that art is involved in the production of subjectivity. Indeed, we might say that the production of subjectivity – our processual self-creation – is in general an aesthetic business (the construction of a particular combination of affects, of the ideas/attitudes following from them and of the ruptures away from both of these). (20) Art objects (specific combinations of affect) offer us models, diagrams for our own subjectivities. In offering up a different assemblage, a different combination, different possibilities for life are suggested. Again this is to rethink the political importance of art – its role in the production of subjectivity, rather than merely critiquing the existent, or being at the service of typical political regimes of signification (‘left wing’ or otherwise).

Four: The minor.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a minor literature involves three components. (21) The first is the foregrounding of the affective or intensive quality of language (its operation on an a-signifying register). A minor literature stutters and stammers the major, it breaks with the operation of ‘order words’, it ‘stops making sense’. Second is the always-already political nature of such literature. It is always connected to the wider social milieu and not fixated on the domestic/Oedipal. Third, is its collective character. A minor literature is always a collective enunciation, and in fact works to pave the way for a community (sometimes a nation) yet to come. This is a minor literature’s future orientation.

Each of these components of a minor literature seem relevant to the practices under consideration (and I think operate as a corrective to a simple affirmation of the new), however it is the last point that seems to me particular pertinent to these new practices. They are not made for an already existing audience, but to invoke an audience, and to draw out a new subjectivity from within the old: they do not offer ‘more of the same’, they do not necessarily produce ‘knowledge’, they do not offer a reassuring mirror reflection of a subjectivity already in place. With such art the ‘people are missing’ as Deleuze might say. (22) We might say then that the operating field of these practices is the future, and that the artists operate here as kind of prophets and specifically as traitor prophets (traitors to a given affective/signifying regime). (23) This gives art a utopian
function, although it is a specifically *immanent* utopia, intrinsically connected to the present and made out of the same materials.

Five: *The diagram*.
In Deleuze’s account of Francis Bacon it is the diagram that enables the ‘stuttering’ of the major: in this case the deterritorialisation of figuration and narrative. (24) In painting, and specifically Bacon’s painting, the diagram involves the making of random marks that allow the figural – a new kind of ‘world’ – to emerge from the figure: ‘The diagram is ... the operative set of a-signifying and non-representative lines and zones, line-strokes and colour-patches’. (25) We might apply this rule of the diagram to the art concerning us today, and indeed with any and all art that must involve this play with chance, this contact and utilisation with that which goes beyond conscious control. Here random occurrences are ontologically constitutive of art (and not an accident that befalls it). It is in this sense that art can never be wholly predetermined or worked out in advance.

The diagram is then: ‘a chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm. It is a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of the painting’. (26) The diagram is rhythm emerging from the chaos, the manipulation of chance to suggest the ‘emergence of another world’. (27) Again, the practices under consideration today – for example Cathy Wilkes’ paintings and assemblages - might be said to produce rhythmic worlds in this sense, worlds hitherto unseen but always produced from within the seen.

Six: *The virtual*.
Art might be located on that seeping edge between the actual and the virtual. (28) Indeed, art might operate as a kind of *actualising* machine. We might have a quick reminder of Deleuze’s ontology here: an ontology of fullness, of plenitude of which only a fraction is ever actualised. Rather than looking to a transcendent horizon – of positioning art as taking us to ‘another place’ (or promising to take us there) – we might understand art practice as simply being involved in actualising the potentials that surround us here and now (the realm of the virtual). This is the massive reorientation that Deleuze performs in *Difference and Repetition* when he replaces the ontological coordinates of the real and the possible with those of the actual and the virtual. (29)

This actualising machine might for example involve the switching of speeds, or the actualising of different durations. Smithson’s mirror-travels would be a case in point. Important here might also
be a notion of slowing down, a hesitancy, the opening of that gap, that Henri Bergson wrote about, between stimulus and reaction, a gap in which creativity, or a creative response to the world, can arise. (30)

Perhaps the most important point to make here is about the endless possibilities – and fundamental creativity – in and of the world. This is to affirm immanence, to affirm life as it is here and now. Ultimately it is to turn away from transcendent points of coordination whether they are religion, fashion or general telematic standardisation. It is a turn towards matter and the possibilities inherent in the manipulation of matter (a tracking of matter’s singularities). We might say then that it is a turn to a more brutal inhuman materialism, itself a turn from the linguistic turn of poststructuralism.

Seven: Probe-heads.

Probe-heads name the production of experimental devices aimed at dismantling the strata that constitutes us as human (our habitual formations). (31) Probe-heads operate against faciality (or dominant regimes of signification) producing new territories and new configurations. Crucially, probe-heads are not a return to some kind of primitive pre-faciality. They are in fact an escape that takes place from within the terrain of the face, a kind of stammering from within. And probe-heads need not necessarily be pictures of heads but rather any device that disrupts faciality, for the latter applies not just to faces but to most of the mechanisms that produce signification and subjectivity. Indeed, facialisation must be understood as precisely a, if not the, system of human organisation.

A Probe-head is then that which explores the terrain beyond the face, the terrain from which the face is nothing more than an extraction or crystallisation. Probe-heads are in this sense a move into chaos: they ‘dismantle the strata in their wake, break through walls of signification, pour out of the holes of subjectivity, fell trees in favour of veritable rhizomes, and steer the flows down lines of positive deterritorialisation or creative flight’. (32) But they are also, as the name suggests, productive of other, stranger and more fluid modes of organisation:

Beyond the face lies an altogether different inhumanity: no longer that of the primitive head, but of ‘probe-heads’; here, cutting edges of deterritorialisation become operative and lines of deterritorialisation positive and absolute, forming strange new becomings, new polyvocalities. (33)
Another name for probeheads is war machines, which, it is as well to remind ourselves, is not a configuration that has war as its object, but the occupation of a different space-time (it is in this sense, as Deleuze remarks, that art practices as well as political formations might operate as war machines). (34)

We might make a point about resistance and capital here. Although to some it may sound unsavoury, it is not really a question of putting a break on capitalism or of opposing it with more striated policies and procedures (approaching ‘capitalism’ as a given, as the first moment from which art must resist). Indeed it is more a question of attending to a certain logic of capitalism – we might say its logic of invention and innovation – and of pushing this further, beyond the controls placed on it by specific capitalist formations and regimes (it is in this sense that we need more deterritorialisation – more expression – and not less). Indeed capitalism – as a mode of production and system of exchange – is itself parasitical on the endless productivity of life that is ontologically prior to it. This is what Deleuze meant when he suggested that ‘resistance is primary’. Probe-heads then name the production of new forms from within a capitalist mode of production (there is no longer any ‘outside’ to this). It is then less a question of resisting commodification and capital than of pushing its logics further, ‘beating capital at its own game’, as Sylveire Lotringer has it, ‘decoding its flows even further, or constantly displacing oneself in relation to them’. (35) We might say that creative practices are involved in exactly this latter strategy.

Eight: Mythopoesis.

Art might still maintain a narrative function or a certain power of fabulation, of ‘myth’: the production of a new story of the world for a new subjectivity in the world. As both Walter Benjamin and Henri Bergson have pointed out, this power of fabulation also operates as a general slowing down so as to allow access to something beyond the world (beyond the actual). (36) Again we turn here to the affirmative role of art: the production of new worlds and new subjectivities for those worlds. Art might involve itself in critique, the critique for example of that apparatus of capture – Empire – that feeds off creativity (hence deconstructive strategies/ideological critique), but it must also plug into that moment that is ontologically prior to this capture.

This last point also operates as a corrective to a simple one-sided celebration of the asignifying nature of art (as we get for example with Lyotard, and to a lesser extent with Deleuze). Art is
involved in the production of autonomous signifying regimes as well as in the manipulation of already existing regimes. We might say that art involves a novel manipulation and scrambling of capitalisms dominant systems of coding – a jamming of the sensible and intelligible – as well as the production of new autonomous codings (the ‘new’ languages I pointed to above). Once more I think it is here that a notion of the minor is so important, naming as it does the stuttering and stammering of the major – the working with already existing materials/language but in a different manner – which in itself calls forth new subjects.

I want to end my contribution to the conference then by foregrounding Deleuze’s notion of difference and repetition. Perhaps what is at stake with this new art is the repetition of previous forms, and indeed forms from elsewhere, but with difference. A different combination of already existing components, a new dice throw, as perhaps Deleuze would say. This is to affirm life and the endless possibilities of life. It is this I think that gives the better of these new practices their hopeful, inspiring, and we might even say utopian character. None of this, I think, is really new. Modern art has always involved this logic. Perhaps what is new then is our attitude, as spectators and participants of/with art. Rather than mobilising pre-existing reading strategies and interpretive paradigms we have become attentive to art’s own logic, a logic of invention and creation.

So what might it mean to be modern now? Well, it might mean to repeat the modern gesture, to repeat its attitude rather than merely parasitically critiquing it. Being modern now means the invention of new forms, new languages – new modes of being – a repetition of the force and forms of modernism in the production of new assemblages. This does not mean a simple turning away from critique, for the production of something new will always also involve the refusal of what came before. It does however mean a celebration of expression and of the expressive potential of matter – and the production of new combinations in and of the world which suggest new ways of being and acting in the world.

Endnotes


(6) Thanks to James Hellings for this point.


(16) This is a project I carry out more exhaustively in my book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, London: Palgrave, 2005.


(19) For an account of affect in this second sense see the Chapter on art, ‘Percept, Affect, Concept’, in *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 163 – 99.


(27) Ibid., p. 100.


(32) Ibid., p. 190.

(33) Ibid., p. 190 - 91.
