

Modernity's
Secularized
Monastery:
The Relaxed
Painting of
Rebecca Morris
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At the moment, it seems, society is tired of cool positions.

It is uncool to be cool. The figures of distance, self-assurance, and untouchability receive increasingly bad press. Religiosity and risk, passion and pathos are steadily gaining strength in the framework of a neotraditional cultural movement of reaction. This is the case both globally, where religious conviction and fanaticisms are on the rise, as well as in the little world of the visual arts. Melancholy and metaphysical painting are once again very popular, especially in Germany, where I am writing. People like to be moved again, and they show it. The peculiar kitsch of this emotionalist position is that technically it is quite expert and professional; it follows pictorial traditions from romanticism, pop art, the Pre-Raphaelites, and neo-expressionism, without allowing any fractures or moments of reflection whatsoever to surface in the reproduction of the form, and ascribes the emotionality entirely to the ostensible content.

Against these positions, I would like to defend the (or a) cool one. The cool position is the only one to express the fact—which was very little doubted until recently—that there can be no such thing as a direct and open expression of the person using universally comprehensible, objectifiable languages and techniques. And that even a maximally expressive but uncommunicative solipsism is not to be had without at the same time articulating doubts about the mechanism that produces this self, which is alone with itself in “solipsism.” Only a cool position—one prepared to take a sober and realistic look at its own origins—can work with these issues.

At the same time, however, this will not really be a cool position either if it does no more than congratulate itself on its own reflexivity. It too will only reflect obedience to certain critical standards that even today continue to exist, side by side with neoromanticism, and, despite any cultural sea change, very much impose their hegemony in certain areas. It is necessary to make something more of the reflexively prepared material than the simple demonstration that one can also do this now—that one can prepare the material in the first place, that one can distance oneself. OK, now I have distanced myself. I have understood the material in its historicity. And now? Can I make something that does more than merely signal that all of these (legitimate) demands have been fulfilled? Can I respond to critical authority with something other than obedience?

With respect to a religion, three positions are possible: 1) We believe in it. 2) We decidedly do not believe in it and consider belief in it to be dangerous. We think it should be combated and restricted. We would like to replace it with a different religion. Or with a different world view, which takes the place of religion. In either case, just like the religious person, this opponent of religion believes. If he does not believe in the same revelation, he still believes that content like this should be taken seriously. 3) We do not believe in belief itself at all. We regard the entire cognitive phenomenon as something archaic and obsolete. The compelling argument of this ironic position is: who has not seen their own world view change in the course of their life? Thus, one can never be sure that worldview is definitively valid and must approach it with the appropriate reservations.

In the art of the last fifty years, these three models have come into view in different ways. They have done so, however, less in connection with actual religions than in response to the last guiding principle to present itself as a norm in the visual arts: modernism. During the reign of modernism, what we mean when we speak today of the central “doctrines of modernism” was probably not particularly clear. When they were relevant and contemporary, the many twentieth-century movements which—together with their accompanying interpretations—could claim to be modern were not distinguished by the differing degrees of absoluteness of their claims. They presented themselves as antagonists rather than different versions of one thing.

It is only in retrospect that critics have developed, for everyday use, a construction that summarizes “modernism” more rigorously than would ever have been possible during its lifetime. This construction is a combination of Soviet avant-garde, Bauhaus, constructivism, Greenberg, and Adorno, whose common aims are self-reflection and enlightenment, mixed with mistrust of a bourgeois notion of art that privileges complacent edification. Self-reflexivity was posited as a norm, which touches both the aesthetic and technical conditions of the artwork’s creation and its function in both the existing and an idealized public realm. As for awareness of the internal contradictions, incompatibilities, and doubts within this construction, a certain contemporary historiography seeks to delegate that awareness to postmodernity, which it presents as the purveyor of enlightenment about the Enlightenment, or even as the absolute opponent of the Enlightenment, as if these debates had not long existed within modernity itself.

Nevertheless, with all due caution vis-à-vis the construction here proposed, it is still possible to draw the analogy. Modernism too permits of only the three responses described above as the classic reactions to religion: agreement, opposition, and postmodern irony.

In Rebecca Morris’s painting, for example, we find many grids. Grids are pertinent material in any

discussion of modernity. They belong to a particular version of modernity as well as to modernity's disenchantment, its relativization, critique, and symptomatology, as in the work of Rosalind Krauss. It is clear, however, that in Morris's case these grids are not celebrated for their own sake. They are fractured, relativized, strangely contextualized, and above all strangely executed in many different ways. For instance, the lines that make them up have individual lives. They have a quality that distracts from their function in the grid and almost gives them the expressive character of handwriting. On the other hand, if expressiveness were the point, grids would of course be an utterly ridiculous device to employ.

To heighten this contradiction even further, sometimes there are grid lines that not only look individual, they look as if they had been sprayed onto the canvas. Indeed, in some of Morris's images there are elements—including background elements—that come out of spray cans. To introduce graffiti, with its enormous cultural resonance, into a project that is self-reflexively controlled would be to contaminate it with the poison of cultural charging, association, allusion, and subliminal connections to the maximum possible degree. And yet in Morris's paintings all such elements that could be directly interpreted as disruptions of a well-controlled and orderly modernist project seem much too undramatic, too friendly, and too cool to be regarded as objections or proudly ironic reinterpretations. Mere distancing, which would belong to type three above—postmodern irony—also suddenly changes into its opposite when one looks more closely. In almost all the works, the pictorial structure is related to constructivist or other abstract traditions, and yet the classic rhetorical device of distancing and irony—the quotation—is avoided.

A quotation, after all—at least in the visual arts, with their fixation on authorship—is the statement, "I did not make this."

And now I am referring to it, to what I did not make. I am referring because I did not make." In a world in which making is possible—in which making, in the sense of a handicraft, still happens—reference can only occur in a situation in which one decidedly does not make. In the visual arts and painting in particular, there can hardly be a clearer rhetorical act than: "I did not make this." Then there are various possible ways to soften that gesture and to change and increase the value assigned to the second part of the statement that is implicit in every quotation: "Now I am referring to it." The painting of the last fifty years, and especially that of the last twenty, is full of attempts at mediation and nuance. But none of that is present in Morris's work. Her acts of reference do not say, "I did not make this; that was someone else; I am only referring to it." On the contrary, she says quite clearly, "I made this."

To all appearances, then, she has succeeded in performing an operation that does not belong to any of the three modes described above—affirmative, negative, or postmodern-ironic—and that nonetheless is both a clearly recognizable reference and yet is recognizably made. Indeed, her work not only contains the indexical trace that leads to the painter and, combined with it, the gesture that imputes the work to a complete and fully responsible author-subject. It also contains—just as recognizably—an allusion, if not a quotation, that is, an act of submission to and recognition of tradition, vocabulary, definitive forms, and the limits of expression. Yet it does not stage the relationship of these two sides as a contradiction, or suggest that they can only be reconciled ironically. The contradiction does not even seem to exist.

While Rebecca Morris is a cool and relaxed artist, she is by no means without very targeted and single-minded ambition. Her ambition is decidedly painterly in nature. There are an enormous number of tricks and techniques on display in her work. And often, one is misled in one's interpretation of those painting procedures and tricks: what appears to be sprayed is actually hand-painted, brush and palette knife impersonate each other, well-known formal principles are twisted and inverted. In short, the way her paintings are made is very important. The artist transforms subtly into technical means: she builds an enlightened methodological machine of reliable devices and techniques from the poetic material of semiconscious nuanced decisions and taste preferences.

It has been so long, however, since handicraft was last on the agenda that a handicraft like this one, which is fully as sophisticated as the most advanced contemporary artistic debates, has a great deal of catching up to do. And there is a great deal of that to be found in Morris's work, in her manifold attempts to combine the making and forging of positive material, or "artistic data," with its manifold inspirations, sources, and references. It is the attempt—certainly not the first, but a very special and contemporary attempt—to raise a handicraft language to the level of a discourse that regards the making of artifacts as in many respects obsolete. For someone who makes things with their hands, there is usually no other way to interact with a technically advanced artist who cites than as someone else's quotation or as someone who is quoted. That the craftsman should converse with citation art on an equal footing and himself develop something that functions a little bit like quotation but is something else—precisely because manual work changes the face and the materiality of the

reference—is relatively new. It is also an entirely different project from that of artists like Sherrie Levine and others, who have worked with this constellation but only *ex negativo*, in order to locate the work in its disappearance.

It is no accident that Rebecca Morris's work sets a course toward many such artistic traditions, some of them outside modernism in the narrow sense. They are traditions in which the author plays a different role than in the tradition that leads from the genius who works with his hands to the postmodern imperator of the studio, the line from Picasso to Damien Hirst. For where the artist's handwriting or personal signature was read as a marker of genius, the path that led to the postmodern studio artist then also led, in the most direct and problematic manner, to the genius entrepreneur, as so often embodied by the famous artists of the present. Where there was nothing to place on the scales except the artist's personal signature and individuality, the road to pure spirit free of all context, the convergence of genius and entrepreneur, was close at hand.

Things look quite different where the question of handicraft versus technology, personal signature versus intellectual decision has always been secondary because political, philosophical, or conceptual considerations took center stage. It was not the ideal trace, the perfect symptom, or the most detailed and accurate impression of immaterial spirit in material that mattered to the Bauhaus and constructivism—or to murals and the culture of graffiti—but a prior notion of art's (social and political) missions. In this context, handicraft and personal signature take on a different meaning than in the artistic tradition of auratic genius, which has always wished to regard the interaction with matter and material as a necessary evil or at best as an inspiring obstacle for the spirit.

The relaxed manner in which Rebecca Morris relates to the traditions of modernity and later urban culture opens up a different approach to handicraft from the auratic one. In many sub- and countercultures, the element of handicraft had nothing to do with the aura; it was merely the simplest, fastest, and most economical way to proceed. It is well known that in punk, hip-hop, and graffiti culture, technically advanced practices coexisted with traditional handicraft practices, because something else was more urgently at stake. Morris refers in part to these direct and open approaches. Unlike their original practitioners, however, her objectives are primarily artistic from the beginning. Thus she relates to these practices with a reflexive gaze—a gaze that is steeped in the specificity of media, materials, and techniques—which is missing in those other, subcultural practices. A gaze like this, however, cannot be sustained by mere quotation and collage. It only functions within the retracing and recopying movement of an independent artistic reconstruction.

The history of popular design contains a number of moments in which constructivist elements reappear in trivial, subcultural, or popular—in any event, new and alien—contexts. From the product design line that the firm L'Oréal has worked with for decades to the New Wave record covers designed for Elvis Costello and the Buzzcocks by the graphic design firm Assorted Images, we have become familiar with an interest in surface stimuli and a reference to hard-edged color fields; monochromaticism; and the fundamentality of point, line, and plane. This constructivist "look" returns in the graphic design culture surrounding contemporary electronic music, where it is often refined even further. Morris is working on a parallel project. She deconstructs the "look" by reconstructing it as a technique and as primary visual material. But she does not seek to combat either the original or ostensibly illegitimate references to it.

How then is it technically and philosophically possible to adopt a fourth position *vis-à-vis* modernism and its historical consequences, a position that is something other than affirmative, negative, or ironic? It is possible because, despite the claims of many postmodern critics, modernism—and particularly the traditions Morris refers to—is not in fact a religion. Against the monolithic and normative theoretical edifice, Morris begins by reconstructing material practices that arose in the service of more fundamental ideological considerations as purely material practices. On this material plane, the modernism thus unearthed suddenly reveals connections to other—socially and politically motivated—artistic practices, which at first glance seem to have nothing ideologically to do with it. To ask if Moholy Nagy and Samo or Futura 2000 might actually have points of contact or connections—this would be one way of using the space that is opened up by Morris's work. (It is a funny coincidence that Moholy Nagy was actually the first artist to discover scratching in the context of his experiments with record players.)

On a certain level it is a question of carrying on, of continuing to "make" in a tradition of making that is already underway. This carrying on or continuing to make—without believing or not believing—is precisely what cannot be done with religions, but can be done with social and political attempts to construct the world. The crucial insight in Morris's work, however, is not so much that this can be done with certain modernist traditions. Rather, it is that only by carrying on in this way—beyond the enormous theoretical and ideological historical fetish "modernism"—can one establish this fourth way and thus show the possibility of the nonreligious and ultimately political

and practical aspects of modernism.

Questions of carrying on or continuing to "make" seem to be extremely important, and not just in the context of the visual arts. Especially serious is the dialectic of the "on" or "onward" in "carrying on." On the one hand, one has a load of historical baggage on one's back. On the other hand, one bears sole responsibility for the next steps. Until now, the others were everything. The others are first of all "not-I"; in the second place, however, they are important, great, patriarchal. By contrast, up ahead everything is open and belongs to me. And yet I alone am accountable. The cool position in music, where (as is well known) that position was born, was always a sovereign gesture of coming forth out of tradition in the presence of the tradition's representatives. Solo/ensemble.

Cool is when I have the freedom and capacity to step forward as well as back. Instead of being alone and exposed with my oedipal trauma. This ability to use at will not only the moments one has always commanded, the subjective ones, but also those one does not command, the objectivity and historicity of one's languages and backgrounds, is without doubt what is truly surprising, but also relaxing and entertaining about Morris's work. It shows us that, as a contemporary subject, one can carry out an easing and unburdening reference to things that came before, a relationship that is not religious or traditionalistic, but the opposite: modern.