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# Modernism's Lost Future

> "The past is normally depicted by a series of meta-
> phors whose material is the present."
> Roman Jakobson[1]

"What has become of the social, ethical, and religious activism of the early years
of the November Group?"[2] asked art critic Ernő Kállai[3] in a 1929 article marking
the tenth anniversary of the group's founding in Berlin. He particularly missed
the November Group as "a major collective undertaking" that was meant to
model a future collective work. His question is a resounding confirmation of
an earlier statement, that "the age of ferment, of 'isms' is over [...]. We are wit-
nessing a time of professional consolidation and absorption in objective, expert
work."[4] At the time of writing this Kállai was employed at the Dessau Bauhaus
as editor of the school's journal, and had plenty of experience of the vanishing
of modernism's idealist spirit, and the onset of a colder, business-like, matter-
of-fact approach to the creative work.

Today modernism is history that generates, in many, criticism as well as nostal-
gia. It was taken for granted for many long decades that studies in modernism
and the avant-gardes dominated the cultural history of the post-World War II

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[1]  Roman Jakobson, "Dada," *Vestnik Teatr* (Theatrical herald), 1921, 82; trans. Stephen Rudy,
    in Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992, 63.

[2]  Ernő Kállai, "Zehn Jahre Novembergruppe," *Der Kunstnarr*, April 1929, n. p. trans. David
    Britt, in *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930* [here-
    after: BW], eds. Timothy O. Benson, Éva Forgács, Cambridge, Mass., Los Angeles: The MIT
    Press and LACMA, 2002, 718.

[3]  Ernő Kállai (1890-1954) was a Hungarian art critic who lived and worked in Germany from
    1920 to 1935. He contributed such journals as *Das Kunstblatt*, *Die Weltbühne, Sozialistische
    Monatshefte, Jahrbuch der jungen Kunst, bauhaus*, that he edited from 1928 to 1930, and
    others. He collaborated with Hungarian artist, poet and editor Lajos Kassák, and contrib-
    uted, among other Hungarian venues, his journals *Ma* (Today) and *Munka* (Work).

[4]  Ernő Kállai, "Ideológiák alkonya" (The twilight of Ideologies), 365, April 19-20, 1925, trans.
    John Bátki, BW, 615.

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period. It was a matter of course: focusing on modernism was as much a moral as a professional choice of historians. After the ashes left behind by the War it was their duty to pick up the pieces of the broken culture of modernity that had been lost to Nazism, Stalinism, and the War itself. Historians and theorists who worked to re-establish modernism's continuity and relevance, and researched it in details, disregarded the vast mass of anti-modern output for a long time. This darker side of the moon has been brought to attention and gotten scrutinized in the recent decades.

Reclaiming modernism after 1945, however, also entailed the mending of its former failure in the second half of the 1920s, a process that had started as early as the breakout of the Great War. On the one hand, the actual experience of trench warfare derailed the futurists' fascination with the shiny technological future they had anticipated, but, on the other hand, the lesson of World War I fuelled further utopian/modernist ideas of internationalism, inspired by the shocking lessons of jingoistic warfare and the 1917 Russian Revolution. The mirage of a new internationalism pervaded the concepts and the work of the post-World War I modernists and the avant-gardes. The second half of the 1920s, however, was the time of sobering up after their limitless ambitions and illusions. "Modernism" and the "avant-gardes" are not synonymous terms, of course. For the purposes of this paper "modernism" will be used as the umbrella term of modern art and the culture of modernity, while the "avant-gardes" as the activist, militant vanguard movements within modernism, that pursued clear-cut agendas usually articulated in manifestoes. While the avant-gardes were all modernists, if on the radical side, not all modernists were avant-gardes. The avant-gardes operated within the modernist cultural space as representatives of some of modernism's quintessential concepts, for example their claim to the future.

Modernists and their fighting units, the avant-gardes, had exiled themselves into the future since Count Saint-Simon first outlined a future state that will employ the avant-garde artists as the state's official communicators with the populace. Throughout the hundred years stretching from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries, modernism and the avant-gardes were consistently future-bound. Modernism was *power-art*, both when reflecting the actual power of the modernizing bourgeoisie and when opposing it in the name of a yet to be established new social order and new culture that the modernists would create through the avant-garde movements. The modernist artist claimed to have a mandate, either from

the dominant social groups or from their energetic progressive opposition. Modernism's universal claim to the future was expressed not only in the term "futurism". Conquering the future on a cosmic scale was expressed in the title *Victory Over the Sun*, Aleksei Kruchenkih, Mikhail Matyushin, Kazimir Malevich and Velimir Khlebnikov's 1913 futurist opera as well as in Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero's 1915 manifesto *The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*, to cite only two of the most obvious and grand examples of the cosmic conquest that modernists felt imminent. The anticipation of lingering epochal changes in the Russian society and then the historic fact of the Russian revolution, fast-paced progress in sciences and new technologies as well as, among other things, the success of early aviation fuelled the sensation that mankind's wildest dreams were being redeemed, and the future was within reach. Malevich declared that he had already relocated into the future, leaving behind "the blue lampshade of color limitations," and calling: "after me, comrade aviators!"[5]

More meticulous and pragmatic designs and concepts also abounded in the first two and a half decades of the twentieth century. The participants of De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and Russian constructivism, the circles of the journals *L'Esprit Nouveau* and *ABC Beiträge zum Bauen* worked on buildings and objects that people could actually use in the near future. Housing projects, interior design, new typography and modern fashion design from Tatlin and Varvara Stepanova to Balla[6] and Sonia Delaunay were equally propositions for an anticipated change in the way of life, now in the frame of a socially and technologically advanced, soon-to-be realized new world.

Modernism's vision and anticipation of the future both artistically and discursively, was confronted by past-bound regenerative trends that had a massive presence since the end of the nineteenth century and saw themselves not less revolutionary than the modernists. The myth of the fascist "new man" touting violence and fundamentalism, as theorized by Georges Sorel (1847-1922) and his successors[7] was

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[5]  Malevich, "Suprematism," April 1919, in *Malevich on Suprematism, Six Essays: 1915 to 1926*, ed. Patricia Railing, Iowa City: The University of Iowa, 1999, 46.

[6]  See Giacomo Balla, "Futurist Men's Clothing: A Manifesto," 1914, in *Futurism. An Anthology*, eds. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009, 194-195.

[7]  Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism. The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 2.

the counterpart of El Lissitzky's utopian *New Man* in his 1923 portfolio version of *Victory Over the Sun*. The implication of modernist artists and even some of the representatives of the avant-gardes in the nascent fascist myth-making that projected a "fascist revolution" in the period between 1909 and 1939[8] has been the object of more detailed research since the 1990s, resulting in a more layered and complicated concept of modernism than the previously held image, which focused exclusively on the presence of the progressive features of modernity and the avant-gardes. Considering the anti-democracy, anti-capitalism, extreme nationalism and conservatism of these movements, it appears that the 1920s *rappel à l'ordre* should not have come as a surprise. But it did: in contemporary criticism as well as in later historiography. Benjamin D. Buchloh gives a detailed discussion of what he calls regression to figurative painting in a 1981 essay,[9] not hesitating to call the post-1915 developments the first "collapse of the modernist idiom" that he saw as a cautionary tale at the time of writing, and which is just as relevant today:

> The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation [...] reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism; or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice; or, worse yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come.[10]

This insight raises several questions: What exactly was getting lost when the former futurists and cubists resorted to figurative expression? Did they become, in Clement Greenberg's terms, producers of kitsch by giving up the avant-garde's demanding and critical position? Did they convert to the market? Did they regress to an easily understandable, populist visual language, as Buchloh suggests? Were they complicit in bringing on authoritarian neo-classicism?

These questions imply that modernism was the opposite of kitsch, the market, populism, and authoritarian neo-classicism. However, it was not only the neo-

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8   For detailed discussion see *op. cit.*
9   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981), 39-68; reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 107-134.
10  *Ibid.*, 108.

classicist style of Mussolini's Novecento, the Nazis, and Socialist Realism that filled with the spirit of a new order the forms of age-old classicism: the "rhetoric of power"[11] haunted the future-bound modernists' formal language as well, if not in the neo-classical style, but geometric abstraction. Seeking collective spirit in artistic expression to overcome the national and individual particularities in the wake of World War I, modernist aspirations turned away from expressionism and looked for its antithesis in art[12]. The new art of the future, the modernists were convinced, had to leave behind subjectivism, and be equally valid and understandable for all, displaying images of a common future. The most clearly overarching formal elements were the purely geometric ones, although very different philosophies generated them from theosophy to communism to suprematist metaphysics. Surveying the new art of the first post-World War I years Kállai discerned the anti-expressionist, anti-subjectivist tendencies that he attributed to the spirit of a future collectivism and labeled *objectivism* in spring 1921. He described the most progressive art as *constructions* (even if he could have hardly heard the term from Moscow, as it was just emerging there), that

> have created new space for the style of the twentieth century, which has lost metaphysics and illusions, but is unstoppable and progressive in technology and its civilization. [...] We don't need to go as far as art. What a great classicism: clear, transparent order, subtlety, beauty of form and movement we see in the system of modern machines! How much earthly, human dignity is in the proud verticality of the factories, the cruising of steamships, the flight of airplanes, the arches of the bridges![13]

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[11]  For the implications of early twentieth century geometric abstraction that the minimalists of the 1970s considered their model, see Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine,* Vol. 64, No. 5 (January 1990), 44-63.

[12]  Modernism's flirtation with classicism goes back to even earlier times the discussion of which would go beyond the scope of the present paper. The Hungarian modernist tendencies of the first decade of the twentieth century that blended cubism and expressionism, were welcomed by Georg Lukács as "the art of the old times" in his programmatic 1910 article, "Az Utak Elváltak," *Nyugat* III/3 (February 1910): 190-193; English translation: "The Ways Have Parted," English translation by George Cushing, in BW 125-129 in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkay, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, 167-173. For more on the subject, see Éva Forgács, "The Safe Haven of a New Classicism. The Quest for a New Aesthetics in Hungary 1904-1912," *Studies in East European Thought*, No. 60, 2008.

[13]  Ernő Kállai, "Új művészet" (New art), Part II, *Ma*, Vienna, Aug. 1, 1921, 115. My translation.

The unapologetic use of the term "classicism" for what he describes as cutting edge modernity and the fusion of art and life in objects that attest to the technical and aesthetic ingenuity of the modern man, indicates that in spite of the sharply contrasting concepts there was a rhetorical and formal overlap between the languages of the modernists and the regenerative traditionalists. Kállai naively used the word "classicist" to express his admiration for a regained order over what, at that point, appeared to him, and many modernists, as chaotic and deliberate subjectivism and bourgeois individualism. Leaning toward technological constructions and machine aesthetics, that became the staple of progressive abstract art for the next years, was also a reaction to the chaos of the war and the widely spread modernist desire to build the new, international world on rational and socially egalitarian foundations. That is, new art of a new *order*. Deleting the past is emphatically underlined in many programmatic works from *Victory Over the Sun* to a number of manifestos. The vision of a collectivist future found expression in the simple geometric forms and pure colours of the modernist aesthetic. However, Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia and Mussolini's Italy were equally anti-individualist, and also ushered in a certain degree of modernization: the former two in technologies, the latter also in style. Relatively permissive in visual expression and architecture, Fascist Italy complicates our concepts of modernism. As Emily Frances Braun points out, it "overturns longstanding presumptions that the modes of abstraction, non-objective art, or expressionism were the sole purview of liberal or left wing exponents. In Fascist Italy, modernism, as well as tradition, were employed to the ends of anti-democratic politics."[14] Such overlap occurred in leftwing and right-wing populist phraseology, too. For example the Bauhaus's second director Hannes Meyer, a left-wing, self-described "scientific Marxist" programmatically used terms like "Volksseele," "Volksinteresse," "Volksgemeinschaft"—also key terms in Nazi talk.[15]

By the mid-1920s Neue Sachlichkeit ruled, along with a "shift to allegorical mode"[16] and a turn of the futurist and cubist painting to what Buchloh calls "au-

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14   Emily Frances Braun, "The Modernity of Tradition: The Fine Arts in Fascist Italy 1919-1929," in *Reinterpreting the Past. Traditionalist Artistic Trends in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1920s and 1930s*, ed. Irena Kossowska, Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2010, 46.

15   Hannes Meyer, "bauhaus und gesellschaft," *bauhaus zeitschrift* 1929/1, 20.

16   Buchloh, 112.

thoritarian neo-classicism." Modernist product design was highly successful on the market and became fashionable, but was stripped of the utopian social visions of the early 1920s. El Lissitzky returned to Moscow in 1925; Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy left the Bauhaus early in 1928; Theo van Doesburg died in 1931; Hitler came to power in 1933; and Socialist Realism was declared mandatory in the Soviet Union in 1934. Thus, years before World War II the modern imagination and the confident faith of the modernists in shaping and owning the future was suppressed and disappeared from sight. The power that the modernist and the avant-garde artist had thought to possess evaporated. As Buchloh points out,

> The Harlequins, Pierrots, Bajazzos and Pulcinelles invading the work of Picasso, Beckmann, Severini, Derain and others in the early twenties (and, in the mid-thirties, even the work of the former constructivist/productivist Rodchenko in Russia) can be identified as ciphers of an enforced regression. They serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the avant-garde artist who has come to realize his historical failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, entertaining figure [...].[17]

If regression in the 1920s materialized, among other things, in the figure of the clown, it still found in the clown a long time cultural symbol condensing a rich poetic, dramatic and literary tradition, quite unlike today's plush bunnies and Barbie dolls. The clown was still the emblem of the modernist artist who created art as an alternative to the world of power even when he was left powerless.

An early confession of the lost future appeared in a 1923 Soviet short story, in which the director of a salt mine explains to a painter what the murals of the new theatre, which was formerly the mine's church, have to represent. The pictures will show the changed life of man, with physical labour done by machines, natural catastrophes controlled by the power of the liberated human intellect, man overcoming the powers of the cosmos as well as human emotions that had divided humankind. But he soon receives a letter from a friend that brings him back to the present:

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[17]   Buchloh, 118.

I will not hesitate [...] I will shoot myself in the head. [...] We have shot, crushed, and destroyed everything that even vaguely resembled the past. We have leaped ahead a thousand years, a millennium separated us from those we killed. [...] In brief, I struggled against time and space. I wanted to make the future present. This had seemed possible in those panic-stricken, confused years when time seemed to vanish, but now that the panic has subdued, life again proceeds in time and space. And even if space can be conquered, time cannot. Life is, once again, ruled by the same old things: love, money, and glory.[18]

Such early reckoning with the futility and irreality of the expectations attached to the future was rare in the mostly optimistic early 1920s. Four decades later, in the wake of World War II hope in a better world had to prevail, the more so, because the horrors of that war had to be forgotten. The human losses of World War II and the Nazi Holocaust were beyond comprehension and expression. All efforts had to be directed at the future. Thus the return of modernism to the mainstream of Western art and historiography after 1945 more than ever before, was inevitable, and modernity's position in the centre of the culture, now invested with a retroactive anti-war and anti-fascism stance, was confirmed for several decades. Modernism, once again highly politicized, was also a reference point for the anti-capitalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, including various groups of the New Left. The period from 1956, when many Western communists found the Soviet Union's crushing the Hungarian uprising inacceptable and abandoned their respective communist parties generating the New Left, was the run-up to the intoxicating 1960s that culminated in 1968. This decade brought the rediscovery of the Russian avant-garde and, along with it, the rediscovery of the modernism and the avant-gardes of the 1920s both East and West.[19] The utopian and internationalist contents of modernism put the artist, once again, in the role of a potential leader who can serve as a guide into the future—suffice it to point at the figure of Joseph Beuys and the role he assumed as a leader and

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18  Mikhail Slonimsky, "The Emery Machine," 1923, in *Kegyetlen szerelem* (Cruel love, an anthology), Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 1963, translated from János Elbert's Hungarian to English by the author and John Bátki. Russian original: Mikhail Leonidovich Slonimskiĭ, *Mashina Ėmeri*, Moscow: Ateneĭ, 1924.

19  For a detailed discussion of the integration of the Soviet-Russian avant-garde into the master narrative of Western art, see Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," in *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit. Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, ed. Cornelia Klinger, Wiener Reihe. Themen der Philosophie, Bd. 16, Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 2014.

organizer with the wide support of followers and the media. The cult of modernism entailed inquiry into history, and more: the need to construct the relevant narrative of modernism. It entailed, furthermore, that knowledge of social and political history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, music and literature were, to a degree as high as possible, indispensable for understanding modernism.

This scale of competence supported the concept of the sustained relevance of modernism, its high standards and tenet of unfailing progress, projected into the future until modernism's crisis and demise starting in the late 1970s and around the early 1980s. Exactly at the time when Buchloh wrote his essay on the regressive anti-modern tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s that he appropriately tied to the present, the myth of modernism was fading out and was seen as the more and more irrelevant. Almost suddenly everything was questioned: who exactly is the artist, in whose name is he actually speaking, and what is he representing beside his own private self? At about this time modernism, and, along with it, the artist lost power and social mandate, for a number of reasons that need yet to be spelled out. One of these reasons was that the culture's focus shifted from the future to the present (and the past as well), so the ground fell out from below the modernist visions. A case in point is the ubiquity of the theme, and, indeed, the myth, of childhood in a lot of the visual art of the 1980s and 90s, when plush toys, dolls, toy cars and other childhood objects flooded the exhibition rooms. In contrast to modernism's vision of a shared future these objects and images tell private stories and personal memories of the past, or offer critical comments on the present in exceedingly private language. They display personal history instead of a common future, or tell narratives in allegorical language.

Although I would like to point out the ubiquity of toys in the 1980s and 1990s as indicative of a paradigm shift from the 'adult' modernist to the vulnerable *transmodernist* who discovered the child in his or her self, it would not be right to claim that toys and the theme of childhood first appeared in the art world and literature during this period. The idea and cult of childhood first appeared as instant critique of the Enlightenment. Even before Kant argued for mankind's newly acquired maturity that "the public use of one's reason"[20] warrants for, the anti-rationalist concept of the child as genius, free of the corruption perpe-

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[20]  Immanuel Kant: "What Is Enlightenment?" in Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City: The Bobbs Merrill Company, Inc., 1959, 87.

trated by the culture, was introduced by Rousseau and was further cultivated by Goethe. Generations of reform pedagogues based their methods on saving the "innate genius" of children. Romanticism saw childhood as the entirety of the possibilities any human being has ahead in life. Freud and Proust, the expressionists, and the surrealists were all intent on fathoming childhood. The child was discovered inside the adult as the bottom of his ego, his primitive, authentic, primordial core of uncorrupted sensitivity.

In the 1980s, however, self-pity and narcissism were in the air: one had only to recognize their visual expressions[21]. René Ricard depicted his favourite Francesco Clemente painting in his 1981 essay "The Radiant Child."[22] He singled out a Clemente picture of a frog in a green pond as the "preservation of a lost moment from childhood, perfectly seen and remembered in a flash", and claimed that it was exactly this flashed childhood moment that "sets this picture apart as art."[23] But he was most of all moved by Keith Haring's picture *The Radiant Child*. "We are the radiant child and have spent our lives defending that little baby, constructing an adult around it to protect it from the unlisted signals of forces we have no control over. We are that little baby, the radiant child [...]."[24] Ricard is claiming back the Winnicotian "true self," lost amidst the maturing process and the worldly operations of "false self" adults. Also importantly, in contrast to the modernist attitude of being in charge and control, he points to "forces we have no control over," admitting the powerlessness of the artist.

By the end of the 1980s this narcissistic melodrama gave way to a more sophisticated and more educated critique that I would call *transmodern*, in order to express a complexity and an attitude that do not come across from the term *postmodern*. Transmodern combined sociological, psychological, anthropological and even educational awareness but dismissed their significance as a kind of tangential, secondary feature, while exuding alarming vulnerability, thus making it clear that being armed with knowledge and psycho-analytical

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[21]   Naturally, there is never a clear-cut divide when it comes to motifs. Childhood and the childlike appeared as themes much earlier in the work of Hans Bellmer and Joseph Cornell, as well as, for example, the work of Christian Boltanski in the 1960s. These occurrences were, however, isolated.

[22]   René Ricard, "The Radiant Child," *Artforum*, December 1981, 38.

[23]   Ricard, 38.

[24]   *Ibid.*, 45.

literacy were of little help for the artist in asserting his social position or secur-ing a stronghold in life. Everything that made the modernist artist powerful no longer worked for the transmodernist of the 1980s and 1990s. This came across, for example, the 1990 group exhibition *The Pathetic Aesthetic*,[25] "a blunt aes-thetic of failure, embarrassment and thumping degradation," as Los Angeles art critic Christopher Knight described it, coining the term *Patheticism* for it.[26] "Pathetic art is adamantly anti-idealistic," Knight concludes, "Rather than en-visioning utopias [...]. Patheticism simply makes do with what is. And 'what is' is frequently a mess. It embraces all those quietly horrific feelings one has gone to great if unwitting lengths to repress from memory."[27]

Transmodern—a more inclusive term than Patheticism, by analogy of the Italian term of the same years, *transavanguardia*— was tired of modernism's ambitions, achievements, and its claim for moral high-grounds, and expressed it through choosing private topics, marginal subject matters, or pathetic junk objects as if refraining from mainstream art. At the same time however, along with the pathet-ic, it displayed a lot of erudition, sophistication, and critique, but conspicuously on the sidelines, eschewing making a point or coming up with a big idea. Trans-modern is cool: it differs from postmodern inasmuch as it points to easily super-seding and dismissing, rather than just chronologically following modernism.

Transmodern art was often so sophisticated that at times it appeared as mod-ernism in disguise. Mike Kelley's or Annette Messager's soft toys, for example, reflected deep knowledge of the culture, eliciting sexuality, aggression, soli-tude, and yearning, confronting the actual reality of children, or the sustained childlike sensitivity of the artist, to the adults' rigid, stubbornly upheld image of an idealized world of flawless perfection, order and cleanliness. But where the modernist artist would have opposed establishment culture and politics

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[25]    The show as organized by writer Ralph Rugoff in the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in summer 1990. The participants included Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, John Miller, Georg Her-ald, and others. I am grateful to Kim Dingle for bringing it, as well as Christopher Knight's review, to my attention.

[26]    Christopher Knight, "The Pathetic Aesthetic: Making Do With What Is," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1990.

[27]    *Ibid.* Julie Kristeva's 1980 book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, in English: *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, should be mentioned in this context, even if a detailed discussion of it would go beyond the scope of this essay.

by activism, the transmodernist positions himself or herself as a detached ob-
server, if not victim. Kelley, for example, was perplexed by the aggression of
the adult world against children that manifested, among other things, in gift-
giving. He saw home-made plush toys, supposedly the tokens of love, also as
impositions of a will on children, a gesture that reflected society's attitude to
the individual. Kelley's transmodern sensitivity perceived the continued power
struggle in the culture and he sided with the powerless. "If you give this thing
to Junior," he said, "he owes you something. It might not be money, but he owes
you something. The most terrible thing is that he doesn't know what he owes
you because there's no price on the thing."[28] The question is answered by Brian
Sutton-Smith, who observed that toy objects have had a tendency to replace
games in children's lives, and that the toys are designed for solitary occupa-
tion to isolate children from the earliest age on.[29] "Although the 'gift' is meant
to bond the child to the parents, the child's reciprocal obligation is to become
capable of solitary behaviour. Solitariness is the child's gift to the parents."[30]
We have come a long way from modernism's collectivist ideals.

The transmodern is anti-authoritarian and does not have the ambition to step
up as authority. A case in point is a body of work by Kim Dingle, the *Priss Room*
installations (1994). Dingle also plays on the sharp contrast between the cul-
tural facade and the raw, original, precultural reality presented as that of chil-
dren: here two-year-old girls smear feces on the wall and throw violently ripped
plush toys around. Donning frilly white dresses and black shoes as flawlessly
cute little girls, the Prisses—prim, cissy and belligerent—clench their tiny fists,
raring to fight. They explode with the energy of aggression and violence. Hand-
made and dressed by Dingle (and fashioned as caricatured self-portraits), they
look like miniature beasts of prey, ready for action at any minute. If they have
a demonic quality about them, it stems, as in Kelley's works, from the demons
of our culture. The Prisses' piercing eyes express little illusion about life being
a ruthless fight—a physical fight, that is—and they are clearly chomping at the
bit, taking pleasure in the prospective. And no wonder: pull up their Sunday
best dresses, and you will find bellies covered with tattoos that are in fact min-

40

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[28]   Mike Kelley interviewed by John Miller in Los Angeles on March 21, 1991. In *Mike Kelley*,
       Los Angeles: Art Press, 1992, 18.

[29]   Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys As Culture*, New York: Gardener Press, 1986, especially the chap-
       ters "The Toy as Solitariness," and "The Use of Toys for Isolation."

[30]   *Ibid*., 53.

(left): Kim Dingle, *Priss*, 1994. Mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.
(right): Kim Dingle: *Priss Room*, 1994. Installation, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

iature oil paintings depicting scenes from great American myths: wild battles with the native Americans, all horses, whips and guns. The transmodern message is: down with the big ideas! Nobody can claim moral high grounds in a culture of unending violence.

Nayland Blake's *El Dorado*, another 1994 installation[31] is an Orwellian vision featuring yellow toy rabbits (apparently cloned) as parts of a model-size community. One rabbit is gleefully smearing some brown substance on the wall, another is drawing. One group has constituted an execution squad and is preparing to shoot one of their fellow rabbits; another group is simply playing. One rabbit, chased by yet another group, is trying to hide; another lies dead in a refrigerator. There seems to be no moral or other scale to differentiate between individual actions. Killing is like "playing at execution", being dead is like "playing dead"; drawing may be interrupted for shooting. Since the toy world so resembles the real one, there is no clear-cut borderline between feigning an ac-

41

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[31]    It was on show in Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, in 1994.

tion and performing it. The cute little bunny-rabbits, as spotless as Kelley's toys were when first given to a child, act out their little masters' or their own unconscious ideas and desires in a violent free-for-all. If this is a vision of the future, it fundamentally differs from modernism's concept of an ever-improving, ever more advanced future world.

The novelty of the use of toys in the art of the 1980s and 90s, as opposed to the way surrealists used them in the 1930s was that they changed the route of communication between artist and viewer. Although each artist used them in a different way and for different purposes, toys are more objects than representations. They were not handmade by the artist, nor were they displayed as *objets trouvés*. As mass-produced or serially handcrafted objects they were familiar from everyone's childhood, so it was justified to use them as the lowest common cultural denominator of at least one generation. They lack the intellectual sophistication of the surrealists who addressed the unconscious through symbols so the viewer could intellectually respond to the challenge by deciphering them. The artists of the 90s did not address the viewer's mind. They used the viscerality of toys directly to electrify the viewer's unconscious, this art's real target. The intellectual step between the image and its frame of reference was eliminated as another sign of dismissing modernism. While Duchamp's readymades were carefully chosen objects, so neutral they did not invite any kind of identification and stayed halfway between viewer and exhibitor, the toy, by contrast to the bicycle wheel, is an object that absorbs both the artist and the viewer. Not only does it address the childhood ego, but, by its physical presence, powerfully reinvigorates it, so that it ceases to be, like other artworks, the object of contemplation. Instead, it is recognized as part of the viewer's self. Childhood was discovered in the art of transmodernity as the last common myth and cultural bond that activates everyone's private memories. Toys invited both artist and viewer, who shared an otherwise not admitted anxiety, to regress into pre-verbal childhood.

The 1980s and 90s didn't need the art world, though, to put children, with or without toys, on display: their images were ubiquitous. Ads in the print media and TV commercials quickly grasped the cult of children and childhood, the yearning for security, and the emotionalism involved. The media still incessantly flash images of infants, toddlers, and children to sell insurance, safe cars, retirement plans, to mention only a few typical items. Images of security

László Fehér, *Harbour*, 1988, oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist.



and images of happy childhood have grown inseparable, while the exploitation of the sexuality, consumer potential, and emotional reverberations related to children, have also become ubiquitous. Childhood, as PR experts have realized, has come to be seen as the ultimate safe haven from anxiety. The multifaceted use of children or the childlike in a multi-layered visual vernacular is reflected on in many more artists' works such as Sally Mann, Charles Ray, Nicole Eisenman, Tamara Fites, Tony Oursler, and others.

Childhood and the personal past were also prominent subject matter in Eastern Europe in the same decades in art as well as literature. Hungarian painter László Fehér, for example, consistently used the motif of childhood memories in his reductive compositions. Shadows and transparent figures open the picture space up to an inner reality while the style-frame is photorealist. Because of the local context the topic of childhood, as writer Péter Nádas explained, gave an opportunity to generate "subjective time that everyone creates for himself; [thus] thematising childhood was a hidden response to schematism and the ensuing more sophisticated forms of manipulation."[32] Re-visiting childhood

43

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[32]  Péter Nádas, "A gyerekkor: rejtett válasz a sematizmusra" (Childhood: a hidden response to schematism), interview with András Görömbei, *Alföld*, 1977, No. 7, my translation.
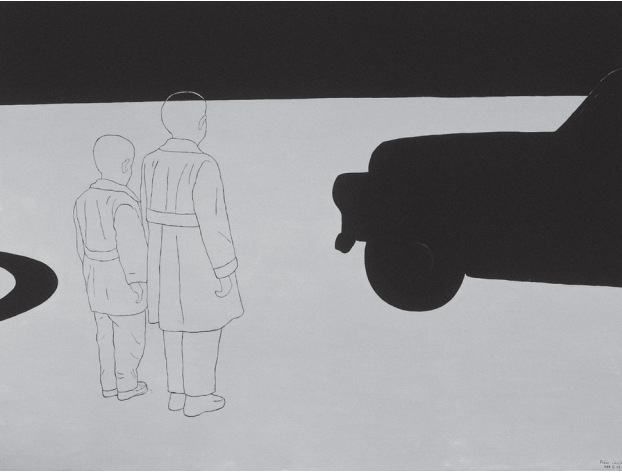
László Fehér, *Black Car*, 1989, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

helped create personal freedom in the space of the artwork. Even if the topic of childhood was an invention against censorship and oppression, it was past-bound, and served as refuge from the present, unlike modernism's brave anticipation of the future.

Not giving up childhood is a soft resistance of the "essentially powerless" artist, in Buchloh's words, in the world of hard-edge corporate architecture. "Powerless" seems to have had a different meaning in the modernist past. Franz Kafka, who felt entirely powerless in his relationship to his father, summed up his weakness in his *Letter to his Father* and turned his very weakness into a powerful weapon in the battle against him. This struggle was not only Oedipal. It was tantamount to rejecting the world of the adults, which he saw epitomized, just as the young Oskar in Günther Grass's *The Tin Drum*, by business and the establishment. While he passionately expressed a sense of not belonging, he created the alternative space of the artist for himself, because, in the scale of modernist values the successful artist (who he already was) ranked higher than the successful businessman. Art was universal whereas money was merely materially functional. Having the power of artistic imagery and articulation was superior to worldly power.

It is inconceivable today that a son, armed only with artistic talent, could defeat corporate power whether it materializes in the figure of his father or otherwise. Art is weak unless it functions on the level of a corporate agency. The

44

term "modernism" entails the powerful artist with faith in the future that he will bring to mankind, but this faith and power are now history.[33] Presently "modernism" as a concept appears to be teetering on the borderline between a restricted aesthetic-ideological category of the past, and a purely descriptive chronological rubric in historiography.

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[33]  Just one example from the ocean of such references is Dieter Hacker's recent exhibition in Berlin' Diehl Gallery, accompanied by a text that puts modernism in perspective, titled "The Right Angle as a Socio-Political Art Concept." (On view March 22-April 25, 2014.)