

Afterword

Modernism and Modernity

The conditions out of which paintings emerge become interwoven in their content, which is not – except in minimal cases – limited to the subject represented.

Michael Podro, 'The Portrait'¹

Modernism

'Modernism' refers to a range of cultural practices deriving from, and promising expression to, the characteristic beliefs and experiences of modernity. It is thus intimately bound up with 'modernisation' – the technological, economic and political processes following in the wake of the Industrial Revolution – and with 'modernity' as the cumulative effect of these changes on social conditions and modes of experience.² That said, the principal components of 'modernism', and the exact nature of its relations with 'modernity' and 'modernisation', are harder to pin down.³

First, modernism, which developed in tandem with a critical stance that defined and defended it, is the outcome of what Raymond Williams has termed a 'selective tradition'.⁴ Although its protagonists were often self-consciously motivated to 'make it new', the works that constitute it have been singled out according to particular evaluative criteria.⁵ To deduce from them the defining characteristics of 'modernism' is simply to close the circle.⁶ One might with hindsight want to review the canon of modernist works and attend to the processes that sift the modern from the merely contemporary. There is more than one kind of modernism (and modernity) at stake.

Second, many of the canonical works – as Charles Harrison has pointed out – are not easily connected 'either to the processes of modernisation or to the experience of modernity'.⁷ Modernism is a heterogeneous response to a shared experience of seismic upheaval.⁸ Some artists, notably the Futurists and, more sceptically, Wyndham Lewis, embraced urban subject matter and what T. E. Hulme called 'the idea of the machine'. But others, including Kandinsky and Brancusi and, in their more abstract studies, Bomberg and Bell, appeared at least, indifferent to 'modernity' and solely concerned with pictorial form.

Third, modernism offers a kind of articulation or refraction of modern life, it does not mirror it (though its representations may, reflexively, structure our sense of it). Art has traditions and resources of its own. Under modern conditions, problems specific to the history and practice of picture-making itself can be 'powerful motivating factors in the development of new forms and styles'.⁹ Modernism is not *itself* a style, but rather the varied outcome of 'a kind of scepticism or wariness about *any* fixed relationship between a picture and its subjects – a form of self-consciousness, in other words, about *how* the picturing is done'.¹⁰

The fact is that the modernisation of *art itself* – the development of a largely autonomous field of aesthetic activity, as the power of the Academies waned between the Salon des Refusés of 1863 and Fry's first Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910 – emancipated artists from the obligation to represent the experience and context of social life in immediately comprehensible terms. It cost them their broader audience, but set a number of related mechanisms in place. As Robert Jensen has pointed out, 'Aesthetic modernism . . . produced not only a body of work, the "isms" that stretched from realism to suprematism, but also a body of institutions, a matrix of practices that, unlike the art, was absorbed almost without resistance by the European and American public for art'.¹¹ These interlocking 'symbolic systems' included the refashioning of the commercial gallery from something like a book dealer's or an antiquarian's to something closer to the modern museum;¹² the rise of the promotional dealer (like Paul Durand-Ruel);¹³ a rhetoric of independence and group identity (rooted in the example of the 'Impressionist' exhibitions of the 1870s); an avant-garde narrative of exclusion or neglect and subsequent vindication; and the rise of the monograph and the retrospective exhibition as the principal means of canonising artists and brokering relations between historiography and the market-place. The local audience for art declined, as established criteria of competence were breached and the national academies lost their power. But the international audience for new art expanded as secessionists founded a plethora of small magazines and exhibited across the West. Lewis was reproduced in Russia and Vorticist work was shown in New York. Fifteen countries were represented in the Berlin Autumn Salon of 1913. The exhibition of Futurist painting at the Sackville Gallery in March 1912 began in Paris, and travelled to Berlin, Brussels, Hamburg, Amsterdam, The Hague, Frankfurt, Breslau, Dresden, Zurich, Munich and Vienna.

Various things follow from, but also helped stimulate, what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the autonomisation of the aesthetic field'.¹⁴ Classical and naturalistic styles are perceived as exhausted and inadequate. There is a break in pictorial decorum, insofar as the rejection of elevated and idealising subject matter, perspectival space and academic 'finish', leads ultimately to various kinds of expressive distortion, heightened colouring, exaggerated handling and simplified or fragmented form. There is a double injunction, to be adequate to the conditions of modern experience in the twentieth century, and to detach art from 'the slavish imitation of life'. In the words of Ezra Pound: 'IT IS NOT ESSENTIAL THAT THE SUBJECT MATTER SHOULD REPRESENT OR BE LIKE ANYTHING IN NATURE: ONLY IT

MUST BE ALIVE WITH A RHYTHMIC VITALITY OF ITS OWN'.¹⁵ These terms are publicly trumpeted by the avant-garde as a necessary breach with exhausted and rule-bound formulae and an opening onto something new. (For Clive Bell, Cézanne was the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form.¹⁶) For its detractors, equally aggressive, modernism was to be understood as the consequence and symptom of cultural decline: anarchy, degeneration, hysteria or sexual perversion manifesting themselves in the field of art. (For Charles Ricketts, 'some sort of decivilising change, latent about us, which expresses itself especially in uncouth sabotage, Suffragette and post-Impressionism, Cubist and Futurist tendencies'.¹⁷)

There is also this break with the audience, insofar as the Victorian narrative painting that modernists despised – like Frith's *Derby Day* and Luke Fildes's *The Doctor* (pl. 137) – was a popular and, through engravings, widely accessible art. Some modernists (Lewis, for instance), believed with Nietzsche that artists need have no truck with the 'herd', or (like Pound and Gaudier) that the artist was the 'antenna of the race'. But those of a more liberal cast, like Ramsay and Fry, stung by accusations of anarchism on the one hand and élitism on the other, insisted that modernism was essentially democratic. Viewers had simply to trust their instincts and their independent judgement. Reviewing the Allied Artists' Exhibition (an enormous, unjuried selection) at the Albert Hall in 1913, Fry remarked that it called for a particular effort on the part of a spectator who was 'forced to leave at the door the crutches of snobbism and social prestige with

137 Luke Fildes, *The Doctor*, 1891, 166.4 × 241.9 cm. Tate Gallery, London.



which he has hobbled round the Academy and the Salons'. No friendly hand would lead him to the 'picture of the year', and 'the luck of the ballot may have placed the best work in the corner of the nth cubicle, indistinguishable by any mark but its intrinsic merit'. It was 'a hard test . . . but in the end he may learn to walk alone'.¹⁸ Later, Fry recalled that the 'accusation of anarchism was constantly made' in 1910 which was from 'an aesthetic point of view . . . the exact opposite of the truth'. His crime had been 'to strike at the vested emotional interests' of people who

felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets. That to be able to speak glibly of T'ang and Ming, of Amico di Sandro and Baldovinetti, gave them a social standing and a distinctive cachet. . . . It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one's maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second. So that the accusation of revolutionary anarchism was due to a social rather than an aesthetic prejudice.¹⁹

This is a very Bourdieu-like understanding of the investments of cultural capital.²⁰ The difficulty is that the more autonomous the field becomes the more reflexive it is: paintings are increasingly addressed to 'pictorial' problems and enmeshed in a web of allusions to other works. To *know* about art, rather than simply (or not so simply) to respond to it subjectively, requires a knowledge of the history and scope of the field. Fry's maid was probably as little rehearsed in this as in the details of 'Amico di Sandro'. (It is far from clear, in fact, that Botticelli requires the specialist insights of Renaissance scholarship but a Matisse 'only a certain sensibility'.) A distinct constituency emerged for modernism insofar as modernist works gave imaginative form to new experiences, anxieties and desires (where traditional genres and modes of picturing seemed depleted or inadequate to the modern condition); but also insofar as an affiliation to modernism served to distinguish a forward-looking aristocracy of taste from those with only wealth, breeding, or cultural capital in the classical canon.²¹

A distinction is often made between 'modernism' and the 'avant-garde', where 'modernism' is the inclusive term (embracing Manet and Baudelaire in the 1850s and Pollock and Eliot in the 1950s), and 'avant-garde' is reserved for the self-consciously radical subgroups of cultural militants (Futurists, Vorticists, Imagists, Dadaists), prominent from around 1910.²² Manifestos and magazines such as *Blast*, *Lacerba*, *Sturm* and *Cabaret Voltaire* projected a group-image often passionately and scornfully opposed to traditional art forms and bourgeois society. But what they partly reflect is the impact of commercial publicity on the artistic field: the half-tone printing process, cinema and new recording and reproductive techniques are roughly contemporary with the development of modernism after about 1880; and, as Williams pointed out, avant-garde polemics are 'the products, at the first historical level, of changes in public media'.²³

In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger saw the purpose of these groups as that of reconnecting art with life.²⁴ On this reading, 'avant-garde' is the more inclusive term, on the basis that avant-garde activities are, or aim to be, more interdisciplinary and more radically transformative. Modernism is in this perspective a reflexive, autonomous and largely formalist practice, compensating for the loss of traditional forms of patronage and its place on the margins of a secular, commercial society. Its gains are virtues born of necessity. The avant-garde, on the other hand, struggles against the alienation and introspection of modernism, and in attempting to rouse art to life (and life to art) attacks the status accorded to art in modern society.

The difficulty, as Thomas Crow has pointed out, is that avant-garde tactics will be overtaken by modernism (and eventually by their old enemies, commerce and fashion). The avant-garde draws on refractory, non-aesthetic, 'impure' resources for 'an aggressive clearing of space', which is subsequently discarded, leaving 'a cool, self-regarding formal precision, dispassionate technique as the principal site of meaning, behind which the social reference retreats; the art of painting overtakes its tactical arm and restores to itself the high-cultural autonomy it had momentarily abandoned'.²⁵

It is in the end unhelpful to insist on dogmatic distinctions between 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'.²⁶ The labels are often retrospective and self-interested, and definition turns not only on an assessment of the avant-garde's own sense of its radical ambitions and achievement, but on an assessment – which may be different – of the forms of art and social practice it pitted itself against. Partly *faute de mieux*, and partly as a consequence of its own desire to remake its audience, the avant-garde was never free of fashion or commerce or economically independent of the bourgeois society whose tastes and values it disdained, 'from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold'.²⁷ The avant-garde rhetoric of exclusion and neglect was a precondition for the attraction of its products to the discerning consumer, and no barrier to the Omega's aristocratic patrons or the coronetted envelopes showering through Lewis's letter-box.²⁸

Laurence Binyon, reviewing the Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910, remarked that in contrast to the French: 'We in England don't have movements if we can help it . . . in spite of the excitement we lose'.²⁹ By 1914, a critic reviewing the Whitechapel exhibition *Twentieth Century Art* complained that artists had now to belong to a group as to a trades union.³⁰ The 'English' were catching up, but only Vorticism (under the influence of Futurism) meets the conventional criteria for an avant-garde. John was outside coterie. Sickert's Fitzroy and Camden Town Groups were established chiefly to stir up interest in modern art and promote a market for it. Fry and Bell, more evangelical, were not publicly polemical in the manner of *Blast*. Bloomsbury was essentially humanist, and though Clive Bell, like Bomberg and Hulme, approved the 'Break-up of the Renaissance', he did not share the avant-garde rupture with the past, insisting that 'a good Post-Impressionist picture is good for precisely the same reasons as any other picture is good. The essential quality in art is permanent'.³¹

Modernism is thus bound up with an interest in the formal procedures of art and the elements of picturing; with some particular and often critical stance on the experience of modernity; and with a predominantly formalist criticism by which 'modernist' art is glossed and evaluated. This leaves the question of how to engage with the 'selective tradition' in pursuit of a *non*-modernist history of modernism. Such a history would have to be adequate to, but larger than, the passionate investments of its various protagonists. It would have to resist the compulsion to sort the academic sheep from the avant-garde goats. It could not be chiefly structured by oppositions like radical/traditional, technophilia/technophobia, heroic/domestic, ephemeral/permanent, modernity/modernism. It would have to account for the reactionary elements of avant-garde posturing and the radical interests of more conventional painting without altogether undoing those terms. It would unravel something of the condensations and displacements by which the experiences of 'modernity' figure in art, including the ways in which particular forms of modernism enact a compensatory wholeness and autonomy absent from the alienating and fragmenting effects of the modern city. And it would mark the continuities too: with a continuing solace in the depiction of women and landscape, however 'modernised' in handling and 'exoticised' in theme (which John shared with such nineteenth-century Symbolists as Puvis, Gauguin and even Munch); with the human comedy enacted in music halls and dusty, back-lit, tenement rooms (which Sickert developed from Degas); with dance as a metaphor for sexual relations and the cycle of life (which Lewis and others reworked from the Symbolists and Matisse); with maternity (religious and sentimental enough to be ripe for aggressive 'primitivising' by Epstein, Gaudier and Lewis); and with the old problems and ambitions of large-scale figure painting, still structuring compositions by Bomberg and Lewis.

John, regarded as 'modern' by his contemporaries, at least before 1914, slipped from the record of *British Art in the 20th Century* (1987) because he seemed to reject both modernity and the modernist experiments of his peers.³² He is nevertheless obliquely related to the processes of modernisation and inescapably 'modern' in his attempts to resist or evade them. Sickert is more obviously interested in a modernist *facture* (Degas, Bonnard and Vuillard inflecting his love of the English illustrators with a Frenchified painterliness), and Bell in the integrity of the picture plane and the expressive potential of simplified form. Both make it into contemporary accounts of British modernism but at subaltern rank compared with Bomberg and Lewis. This is not entirely unfair. But it overlooks the ambiguity and rich complexity of Vorticist *reference* (rather than form), and the ways in which Sickert and Bell, with Bomberg and Lewis, speak to less salient but critical features of modern experience: immigration, urban geographies, sexual violence, mass entertainment, popular newspapers, modern dancing, feminist politics, maternal ambivalence.

My response has been to expand the frame: to consider each of these artists as in some sense 'modern', within a cultural history of representations of modernity, rather than an art history of canonical modernists. (From this position, the modernists look different.) I have looked for other ways in which to analyse the

contemporary force and continuing resonance of modernist work, and I have tried to register the impact of gender and 'primitivism' as disturbances, but also as thematic resources and motivating factors in the modernist field.³³

*Modernity*³⁴

By the 1870s, 'modern' – a term first used in distinction to 'classical' or 'medieval' – was increasingly applied to 'the way we live now': to 'the age of evolution, plutocracy, gaslight, and feminism, rather than the long sweep of European civilisation'.³⁵ Between 1875 and 1900 there was something like a quantum leap in scientific discoveries and new technologies, and an acceleration in existing processes of secularisation, rationalisation, imperial expansion and state intervention. Mass production was under way in a range of industries and new forms of consumption and leisure had developed. There had been a dramatic expansion and reconfiguration of urban space and, less visibly, through demographic as well as social and political changes, shifts in the relations between the sexes and within the family.

A single generation experienced the impact of the typewriter (1874), the telephone (1876), the gramophone (1877), electric lighting (1880), the internal combustion engine (1885), the underground tube-train (1890), wireless telegraphy (1895), the cinema (1895), the cheap, mass-circulation daily newspaper (1896), the motor-bus (1897) and powered flight (1903).³⁶ The typewriter, the tape machine and the telephone restructured (and regendered) the modern office. The 'twopenny tube', in competition with motor-buses from 1905, by compressing travel time, accelerated the expansion of the modern city in what Nikolaus Pevsner described as 'a permanent race between vehicles and builders'.³⁷ Mass literacy and the growth of advertising led to the expansion of the popular press, with the publication of Harmsworth's *Daily Mail* a landmark in 1896 (so much diversity, so many hidden or exotic developments condensed into the space of a page).

Baudelaire had celebrated in what he first termed 'modernité', 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable'.³⁸ By the turn of the century these modern, fleeting and essentially urban qualities were associated with mass culture and the impact of technological modernity on everyday life. Interviewed for the *Daily Express* in 1913, Severini deplored the 'hideous prettiness' of the English countryside and praised 'the lyricism of electric light, of motor-cars, of locomotives, and of aeroplanes': 'Motor-buses passing and re-passing rapidly in the crowded streets . . . are far more beautiful than the canvases of Leonardo or Titian, and closer to Nature'.³⁹ New technologies provided new subject matter: Turner and Monet had painted steam trains; Fry and Malcolm Drummond painted the underground; Sickert and Walter Bayes, the cinema; Charles Ginner, the Clapham Omnibus at Piccadilly Circus; and Spencer Gore, Blériot's biplane in *Flying at Hendon* (1912). But technology also provided the impetus for particular kinds of geometric, streamlined

or mechanical form, such as the propeller-like ellipses in Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) and Lewis's Yale *Kermesse* (1912), and the skyscraper-grids of Lewis's *New York* (1914) and *The Crowd* (1915).⁴⁰

The break-up of Newtonian physics between 1895 and 1915, together with the discovery of structures and particles invisible to the naked eye, encouraged the idea of an art that penetrated surface appearance and offered metaphors for the comprehension of modern life as fluid, energetic and chaotic rather than ordered and patterned. Marinetti's manifesto of 1913, 'parole in libertà' ('words in freedom'), referred to 'Browning movements': the ceaseless, random and irregular motion of particles in liquids and gases. Ezra Pound suggested that 'we might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radio-activity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying . . . rather like water when it spurts up through very bright sand and sets it in swift motion'.⁴¹ Dynamism and progress were the banners of modernity, its motivating belief the sense that 'everything is destined to be speeded up, dissolved, displaced, transformed, reshaped. It is the shift – materially and culturally – into this new conception of social life which is the real transition to modernity'.⁴² As Marx put it: 'all that is solid melts into air'.⁴³

The negative side to this was exhaustion, alienation and ennui. Technology held both a phantasmatic promise and a phantasmatic threat: men might become 'prosthetic gods', or mere cogs in the machinery of modernity.⁴⁴ Where Severini celebrated the dynamism of the urban environment, Arnold Bennett lamented 'the immensity of the penalty' paid by metropolitan life: 'Tubes, electrified "Districts", petrol omnibuses, electric cars and cabs, and automobiles; these are only the more theatrical aspects of an activity which permeates and exhausts the life of the community. Locomotion has become an obsession in London; it has become a perfect nightmare'.⁴⁵

As Max Weber, and then Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, the project of modernity and the emancipatory promise of Enlightenment rationalism, secularisation and commitment to 'progress' was haunted by an erosion of meaning and belonging in the modern world. Modernity, in Georg Simmel's famous essay on 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), was responsible for hollowing out social experience, rendering it colourless, time-ordered, commodified. José Harris points to the 'other face of Edwardian modernity' revealing 'a lurking grief at the memory of a lost domain – a sense that change was inevitable, and in many respects desirable, but that its gains were being purchased at a terrible price'.⁴⁶ This is perhaps what connects the private loss or displacement more or less evident in *Lyric Fantasy* and *Studdland Beach* (and hinted at in the manic or dizzying qualities of *Kermesse* and *In the Hold*), to a sense of mourning in the culture at large.

This may seem strange. Mourning and nostalgia in British culture are usually located in the 1920s and explained in terms of the traumatic impact of the First World War, which rendered the aspirations of earlier modernisms deeply problematic.⁴⁷ But I would argue that the war also gave particular form and prominence to anxieties widely present, if culturally unfocused, before 1914. In looking

at these particular paintings I have started in each case from something troubling in the work's affect. Biography might be called on here: John, Bell and Bomberg lost their mothers young, John was widowed, Lewis's father absconded, Bomberg and Gertler were the children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants. But the broader question is whether local, personal losses of this kind, shaping aesthetic form, came to articulate a structure of feeling in the culture at large: that form of nostalgia defined as 'a melancholic response to the alienation consequent on the experience of modernisation'.⁴⁸ Some such reference haunts all these images quite explicitly. The Camden Town Murder was unresolved and so, pointedly, is Sickert's picturing of it. *Lyric Fantasy* remains unfinished, a 15 foot palimpsest of John's struggles to create out of its fragmentary allusions a coherent and contemporary tribute to love and Ida. Lewis's *Kermesse*, true to the rhetoric of *Blast*, imbues its figures with a rhythmic, mechanical energy, but their robotic, puppet- or insect-like quality suggests a subjectivity made brittle and hollowed out by comparison with Marinetti's gleaming new Futurist masculinity. Bell's strict geometry, her turned and featureless figures, undermine the sense of the beach as a space of maternal reciprocity. Bomberg, opting for flatness like Bell, shatters his surface into kaleidoscopic shards. All of this could be construed as speaking in some way to the 'dark' side of modernity (with Lewis the most critical and the most ambivalent).

Together, these pictures engage with what is, in the present, most troubling in relation to the certainties of the past: urbanisation and the fragmentation of communities, the impact of new technologies, shifts in the relations between nature and culture, men and women, Europe and its others, together with the loss or exhaustion of traditional modes of figuring such themes in Victorian history-, orientalist-, nude-, genre- and moral narrative-painting. The works are more various than this, of course, but where they touch on such things they do so in ways that a rhetoric of 'pure form', or an account of the impetus towards modernity in terms of a machine aesthetic (or the development of either into pure abstraction), quite fails to accommodate.

'British' modernism

For some, British (or English) modernism is almost an oxymoron.⁴⁹ Harrison is uncompromising: from 1900 to 1930 there was 'no English contribution to this movement which a foreign observer would have regarded as central. To look for specifically English forms of modern art, then, is to examine the development of modernism within a provincial world'.⁵⁰

Of course there were powerful continental influences on British art and criticism in the period from 1910 to 1914 (and nothing comparable with the contribution of the Arts and Crafts movement and a diffuse Pre-Raphaelitism to European modernism and Symbolism around 1900). The cumulative impact of Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, of the Gauguins and Cézannes at the Stafford Gallery in 1911 and of the Futurist painters at the

Sackville Gallery in 1912 was decisive for the development of 'the new movement' in Britain.⁵¹ Fry was influenced not only by French painting but by the writings of Julius Meier-Graefe and Maurice Denis on modern art.⁵² The academic tradition and its hold on state patronage was stronger in France and reaction more radical. Industrialisation came early to Britain but late to Italy, where it helped to precipitate the Futurist response. (Lewis credited the modern world 'almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon genius' but acknowledged in *Blast* that 'busy with this LIFE-EFFORT', England had been 'the last to become conscious of the Art that is an organism of this new Order and Will of Man'.⁵³) Pound announced that London was the capital of the world and art 'a matter of capitals', but London had no equivalent to Haussmann's programme for the radical restructuring of Second Empire Paris as the paradigmatic modern city. Impressionism, Fauvism, Futurism and Cubism entered Britain second-hand.

That said, it is a mistake to view British art simply as a pallid reflection of developments elsewhere. The point is that local modernisms are different, despite their debts, because there are local inflections to the web of relations that makes up the cultural field. The 'causes of a picture being as it is' are not everywhere the same, even in the rapidly homogenising field of Western Europe.⁵⁴ A cluster of issues emerges from the commentary of the period which is also discernible in the art works themselves. One is a sense of 'the Englishness of English art', wrested from its basis in rural landscape and a medievalising aestheticism and rooted in the urban, the virile, the industrial and the 'primitive'.⁵⁵ A second is the association of avant-garde practices with radical social and sexual politics by supporters and detractors alike. (Vanessa Bell thought distortion was like sodomy: 'People are simply blindly prejudiced against it because they think it abnormal'.⁵⁶ Sir William Richmond was 'overcome with a fierce feeling of terror lest the youth of England... be contaminated' by the Post-Impressionists.⁵⁷) A third concerns the social constraints on (especially) women artists, together with the value attached to creativity as a guarantee of masculine authority in the political sphere. (Hence, threatened by the supposedly degenerative and anarchic influences of women and homosexuals, the demand for 'rough and masculine work' and 'an English Art that is strong, virile and anti-sentimental'.⁵⁸) Fourth – the list is not exhaustive – there are transformations in patronage, the market and the media leading to the fashionability of the avant-garde ('avant-garde' and 'fashion', like 'abstraction' and 'decoration', are terms between which there has to be a kind of *cordon sanitaire*). Lewis was unusual, and provocative, in admitting them into the same sentence: 'I might have been at the head of a social revolution, instead of merely being the prophet of a new fashion in art'.⁵⁹

A positive, revisionist account of British modernism has to avoid the trap of underplaying continental influence (Bell and Grant believed, after all, that there was no one in England 'even with whom it's worth discussing one's business'⁶⁰), but also of overplaying it (their collages of 1914 were in the forefront of early modernism: neither Picasso nor Braque made the same move to abstraction in their collages or adopted the vivid colouring of Omega's decorative aesthetic).

Omega, drawing on the native Arts and Crafts tradition, wedded a concern for democratic design to an interest in the French avant-garde, creating a compromise formation specific to the British context and 'emancipating' its artists from pattern into abstraction. Peter Wollen, who makes this case, suggests that Bloomsbury abstraction is taken only half seriously because of its link to pattern and décor, and because the artists continued with figurative work (ruling themselves out of a triumphalist narrative of abstraction as the hard-won outcome of a struggle for pure form).⁶¹ Although Lewis's work is more angular, dynamic and acerbic, Wollen rightly suggests that the differences between them have been exaggerated as a result of Lewis's personal animosity and his defection from Omega in 1913.⁶² The misapprehension or dilution of continental developments has also been overplayed. Sickert was a cosmopolitan figure, admired in Paris. Bell, Bomberg, and Lewis more than anyone, drew critically and reflexively on sources they turned to new account.

Recent work on modernism has been both interdisciplinary, and more interested in exploring the local formation of particular modernisms than in refining the definition of (a singular, hegemonic) 'modernism' as such. Recent work on British modernism has been similarly concerned to map a history of the resources, strategies and institutional networks of modernism in a specific context.⁶³ These have revealed the continuities behind variously trumpeted ruptures with the past – the links between Bloomsbury, the Arts and Crafts movement and such nineteenth-century social and sexual reformers as Edward Carpenter, for example, and between Lewis and Pound and the ideas of Laurence Binyon which they absorbed in the Vienna Café circle in 1909 – and the web of connections through which modernists found, or failed to find, allies, patrons, audiences, critics and publicity.⁶⁴

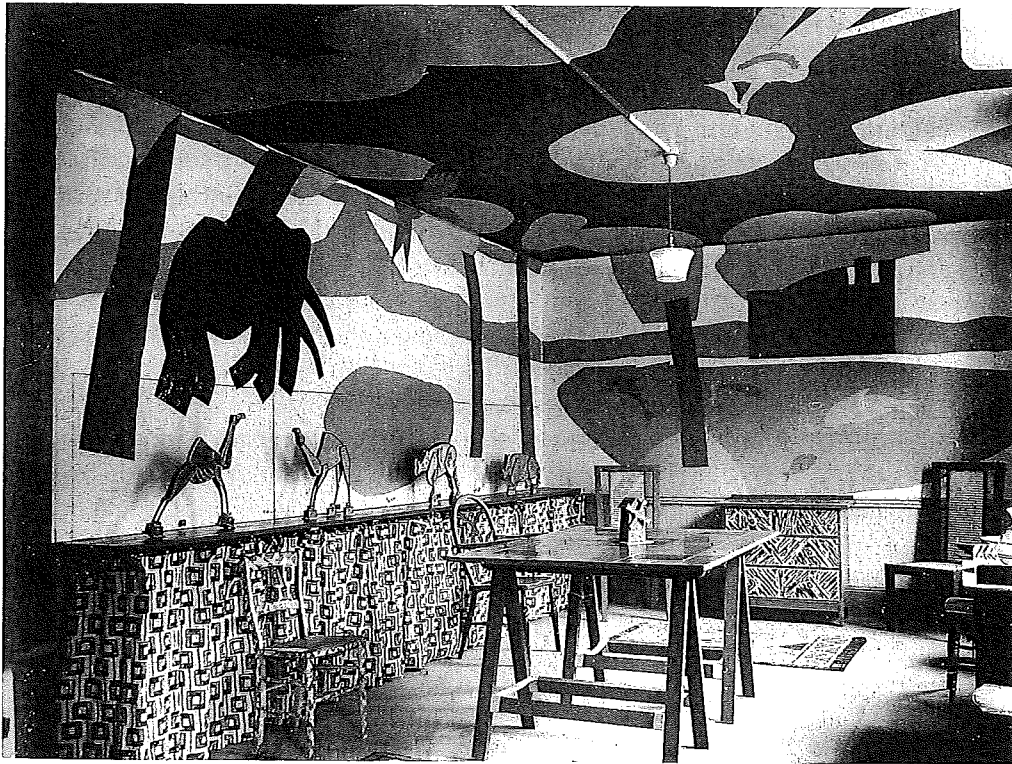
Internationally, there was a strong modernist interest in correspondences between the arts (including dance, as we have seen in the case of Lewis), along with various forms of mysticism and free thought (Dalcroze, Bergson, Mme Blavatsky and Gurdjieff were recurrent reference points). Wollen argues that modernism derived in part 'from a turbulent counter-culture of free-thinking theosophists, occultists, vegetarians, simple-lifers, pacifists, anarchists, sexual revolutionaries, feminists, nudists and so on, many of whom also assimilated Nietzsche and Freud after their own cranky fashion'. If it 'never quite took off in England, this was surely because the leaders of the avant-garde, such as Lewis and Pound, reacted so strongly against the counter-culture – with paranoid insistence, one might almost say, seeing it as effeminate and pathetic', while Bloomsbury 'though sharing many of the counter-culture's assumptions, was kept aloof by wealth and social position'.⁶⁵

'Bloomsbury' came to embody a domestic, decorative and Francophile 'traditional modernism' throwing into relief the 'radical' (and implicitly more 'virile') modernism of Lewis, Vorticism and the machine aesthetic.⁶⁶ But Bloomsbury's was partly an invisible modernism of social and sexual relations: Bell's creativity may have sprung directly from the productive encounter between a modernist painter in flight from the category 'woman artist' (what she called 'the usual



138 Roger Fry and colleagues working in the Omega Workshops, c. 1913. (Photograph courtesy of Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.)

139 (below) Vanessa Bell, Children's Nursery, Omega Workshops showroom, 1913. (Photograph courtesy of the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.)



female fate'), and a conversational community interested in women and unafraid of femininity (its female and homosexual membership, but also its lack of stridency and its interest in decoration and domestic subject matter were implicitly gendered by contrast with Vorticist machismo). Its homosexual component ironised hearty masculinity and, for all the intricacies of its sexual relationships, sexual conquest and a sense of virility did not permeate its work (which was, of course, precisely Lewis's complaint).

*Gender*⁶⁷

Modernisms are profoundly if ambiguously gendered, just as 'modernisation' and 'modernity' have different implications for different social groups. We need to account for the immense variability of gender as a social factor and in cultural forms, and here Michèle Barrett's distinction between three concepts of sexual difference is very helpful (they are, in fact, only hypothetically distinct).⁶⁸

'Experiential' difference assumes that masculinity and femininity are coherent identities rooted in biological destiny or social experience. 'Positional' difference assumes that the meanings of gender are always relational: that gender is, in part, a semiotic category, a product of representations. 'Psychoanalytic' understandings of sexual difference stress the Oedipal structuring of desire. 'Experiential' difference assumes that in any given context the categories of masculinity and femininity are relatively unproblematic. Concepts of sexual difference influenced by psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories of representation and the subject, on the other hand, assume that sexual identities are neither given nor secure, but the unstable and provisional outcome of a whole process of *differentiation* (a process both conscious and unconscious and constantly in play, both for the individual subject and across the various cultural practices through which meanings are produced). Looking at Sickert's Camden Town Murder paintings in terms of 'experiential' difference, one might ask about men and women as social beings in the spaces of the modern city, about their interrelations and how these furnish subjects for pictures, about whether the gender of the viewer inflects their response. In terms of 'positional' difference the emphasis is on systems of representation, on critical discourses saturated with gendered terms, on forms of painting that naturalise or disrupt the social attributes gathered up as 'femininity' or 'masculinity'. (A common vocabulary of 'hysteria', 'effeminacy' and 'degeneration' links discussion of socialism, anarchy, feminism and the avant-garde by their opponents, while the positive connotations of 'virility', 'revolution', 'evolution' and 'modernity' are mobilised by their supporters.) In terms derived from psychoanalysis one might look at pleasure, anxiety and desire, at voyeurism or fetishism for instance, or abjection, as these are mobilised by the painting in the structures of looking.

Classical social theory obscures the extent to which the consequences of modernisation, including the emergence of the modern family, the separation of domestic from factory production and the development of the modern state, were

all gendered processes. As Barbara Marshall has pointed out, the writings of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel, born out of a sense of social crisis, were concerned with the negative effects of industrialisation on social cohesion – with ‘alienation, anomie, rationalisation, disenchantment’.⁶⁹ But this overlooks the positive aspects of modernity in an Enlightenment commitment to reason, progress and social emancipation. The exclusion or marginalisation of gender in sociological accounts of modernity – so that woman becomes, ‘depending on the theorist, a moral regulator of, a reproducer of, or a haven for, the male individual’ – completely skews our picture of social life.⁷⁰

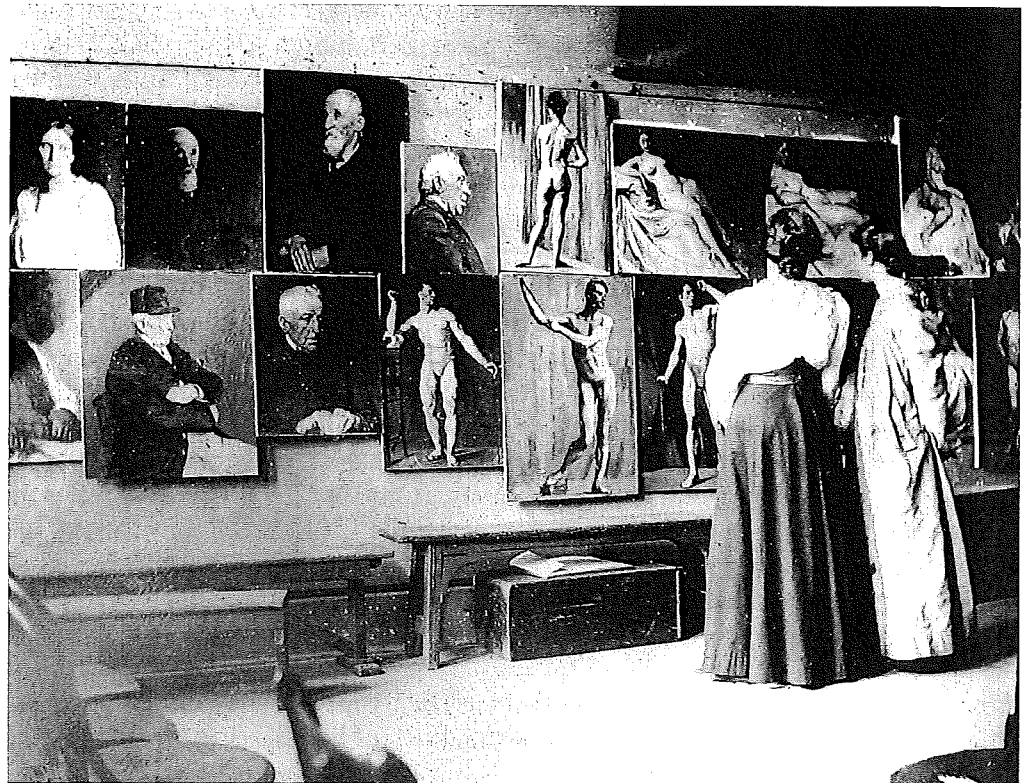
It also obscures what (largely middle-class) women stood to gain from modernisation. Women had been systematically squeezed out of the economic and political spheres by the processes of nineteenth-century industrialisation and the enfranchisement of increasing numbers of men in 1832, 1867 and 1884. But between about 1880 and 1920 significant changes took place in women’s professional, sexual and economic autonomy. Science, medicine and technology contributed to a better understanding of birth control, a lowering of the infant mortality rate, and a reduction in the physiological constraints on women’s equal participation in the workplace (at the same time as mounting a formidable opposition committed to naturalising women’s subordination in the home). New areas of work, particularly retailing and clerical work, expanded their opportunities for independence. (Central and local government employed 7000 women in 1881 and 76,000 in 1911; the number of ‘commercial and business clerks’ rose from 6000 to 146,000.⁷¹) Some women, with varying degrees of difficulty, became graduates and professionals: doctors, journalists, accountants, architects, factory inspectors and public officials; and with the expansion of education more women became teachers.⁷² Women’s acceptance of innovative technologies (electric light, typewriters, gas and electric cookers, electric irons, vacuum cleaners) made them a significant force in the development of a consumer economy, increasingly appealed to by advertisers and retailers. The social constraints on ‘ladies’ in the ‘spaces of modernity’ expanded beyond those mapped by Griselda Pollock for Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷³ Women took up tennis, cricket, golf and bicycling. They travelled unaccompanied across the city by bus and underground, went to matinées, sat in the better seats at music halls, and met each other in teashops or restaurants – often in department stores – set up to cater for female customers.⁷⁴ The suffrage campaign entered a new phase of mass demonstrations when women took to the streets in 1907, and of enhanced militancy from 1913.⁷⁵ (*Blast* blessed suffragettes, but asked them ‘to leave works of art alone’.⁷⁶) Social and technological shifts *together* changed the shape of the modern world. In 1914 the first issue of *Colour* magazine listed the telephone, the motor-car, the craze for dancing, the decline of the Season and formal invitations, and the fading of the chaperone as the key characteristics of modern life.⁷⁷ What Gertrude Stein called ‘life without father’ – ‘a very pleasant one’ – could begin.⁷⁸ For Vanessa Bell, beginning a new life with her siblings in Bloomsbury after the death of her father in the old family house in Hyde Park Gate, what mattered was that ‘at last we were free, had

rooms of our own and space in which to be alone or to work or to see our friends . . . it was as if one had stepped suddenly into daylight from darkness'.⁷⁹

You could say that women laid claim to the fruits of modernity – to social mobility, educational and professional opportunity, democratic citizenship, even 'rational dress' – and in spite of Darwinian counter-arguments that modernisation could not apply to women, that evolution favoured a high degree of specialisation between the sexes, and that social progress depended on 'womanliness' staying safe and unimpaired.⁸⁰ But modernity also laid claim to women who came to embody, in the 'New Woman' drama and fiction of the 1890s, and in popular illustration and advertising, the image and reach of modernity itself.

Such changes had local effects in the art world too. There was no bar on women practising as artists (as there was, or had been, in medicine, the army, the church, politics and the law). Drawing and watercolour painting were lady-like 'accomplishments'.⁸¹ The 'battle of the Royal Academy' was won in the 1860s.⁸² The Slade was open to women from its inception in 1871 (pl. 140). Vanessa Bell was part of a great upswell of women who studied in the ateliers and public art schools of Europe and might have gone to Paris too, where the life of 'lady art students' was vividly described in an article in *The Studio* in 1903,

140 Women at the Slade School of Fine Art, undated (before 1914) Slade Photographic Collection, University College, London.



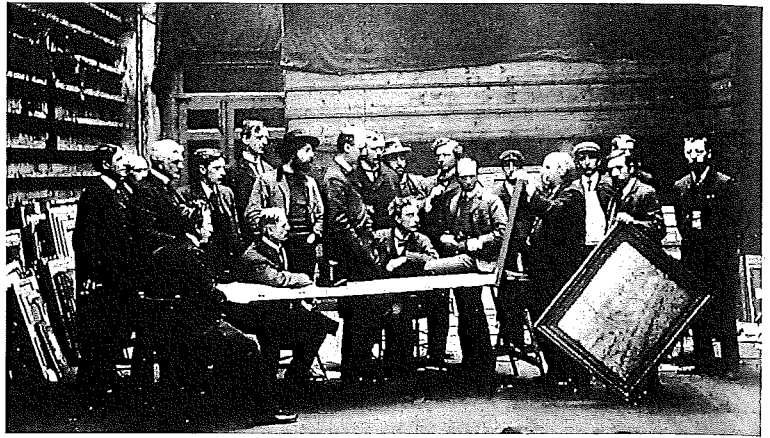
and where Grant in 1907 encountered Gwen John. Women were becoming artists with a new sense of ambition and self-consciousness. Societies of women artists were becoming less defensive and more vocal. The Women's International Art Club, open to all women who had studied in Paris and did 'strong work', had more than a hundred members from seventeen different countries by 1900, when its first London exhibition was held in the Grafton Galleries.⁸³ In 1910 the exhibition included work by women artists of the past. There is a real sense of women exploring their capacities and their heritage at this moment, in the face of those critical discourses which secured their work as 'feminine' and hence deficient. After 1910, an increasing interest in child, 'primitive' and folk art encouraged a tacit assumption that women too, as partial outsiders, could discover something distinctly theirs. Fry, reviewing the work of Ethel Sands and Nan Hudson in *The Nation* and finding it 'frankly feminine', added that: 'It is surely a hopeful sign that women artists are at last confessing to their sex'.⁸⁴

Of course there were limits. Women got into the Academies just as the men were getting out. Woolf wrote to their brother in 1901, when Bell was in the middle of her application to the Royal Academy Schools, that: 'Privately I don't think anyhow there can be much doubt. The Schools are very empty, so they will let in bad people'.⁸⁵ Bell was unhappy at the Slade, finding Tonks 'a most depressing master'. A photograph of the jury of the New English Art Club in 1908 includes Fry, John and Rothenstein in casual mode (pl. 141). They are all men, but they are the progressives of their moment, and they strike us more favourably than the forbidding and elderly members of *The Council of the Royal Academy*, painted by Hubert von Herkomer in 1907 (pl. 142). And yet Vanessa Bell felt that: 'all members of the NEAC seemed somehow to have the secret of the art universe within their grasp, a secret one was unworthy to learn, especially if one was that terrible low creature, a female painter'.⁸⁶

The impact of the changes associated with modernisation on men's sense of their masculinity is harder to gauge and impossible to generalise. One might speculate, however, that the encroachment by women on hitherto masculine areas (clerical work, local politics, medicine, the universities, certain kinds of sport) – however tentative – together with the spectacle of ferocious industrial muscle made for some uncertainty as to the nature of a *modern* masculinity.⁸⁷ A womanly woman was a woman with all the maternal and domestic virtues, but manliness was more obviously complicated by class and by the unresolved question of how the defining drives of masculinity (such as lust and aggression) were properly sublimated in civilised life. The numbers of women artists, their invasion of the art schools, their raised profile in the periodicals (first as 'surplus' women needing a discreet alternative to governessing, but then as 'new' women determined on independence and a career), their role as consumers of the new 'art' furnishings, 'art' needlework, 'art' everything: all this contributed to an uneasy sense that art as a predominantly masculine activity was being feminised and domesticated.⁸⁸

The note of self-conscious virility in the rebellion of an Augustus John or a Wyndham Lewis was intended to distance them from this bourgeois 'artiness', from the senility of the *arrière garde*, and from the 1890s dandyism of

141 Jury of the New English Art Club at the Dudley Gallery, 1904. (Photograph courtesy of Michael Holroyd.) Standing left to right: Walter Russell, David Muirhead, Alfred Rich, Ambrose McEvoy, Henry Tonks, Augustus John, D. S. MacColl, P. Wilson Steer, Muirhead Bone, Francis Bate; seated: Fred Winter, Fred Brown, Roger Fry, William Rothenstein.



142 Hubert von Herkomer, *The Council of the Royal Academy*, 1908, 297.2 × 622.3 cm. Tate Gallery, London. Presented by the artist, 1909. (Photograph courtesy of the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.)



Beardsley or Whistler. Dandyism as an aesthetic stance was compromised by the backlash from the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895 and by what Lewis called the bourgeoisification of bohemia. The exquisite pose and rapier wit of Whistler's 'Butterfly' would no longer serve.⁸⁹ A new, blunter, more modern, more brutal (more *masculine*) combatant was required to do battle with twentieth-century philistinism and the dead weight of tradition. (Pound complained that he was always having to tell young men to square their shoulders, wipe their feet, and *remember the date on the calendar*.⁹⁰)

Clothes were important, hats especially so. John had a battered but imposing broad-brimmed fedora, acquired from a gypsy, along with others that were purchases or gifts. In 1909 he thanked Ottoline Morrell: 'Carlyle's hat is stupendous. It reduces even the rudest street gamin to speechlessness. But it's not a hat for every day in the week'.⁹¹ Gaudier wrote to Kate Smith in 1910 with a sketch of his new hat 'in the shape of those the Cromwell puritans wore – half a foot in height with a brim 4 inches broad – and black as the raven's wing . . . in soft felt, and I must own that I am proud of it'.⁹² In 1911 Isaac Rosenberg swapped the black bowler he wore to work for 'a violently green broad-brimmed Tyrolean'




143 Isaac Rosenberg, *Self-Portrait*. National Portrait Gallery, London.

144 (below left) Wyndham Lewis, sketch from a letter to his mother, c. 1907. Wyndham Lewis Collection, Department of Rare Books, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

145 (below right) Henri Gaudier [not yet 'Gaudier-Brzeska'], detail from a letter to Katie Smith, 2 April 1910. Tate Gallery Archive, London.

It is everything is about as I wanted it & I have bought a wonderful new hat, which is look ever so much more handsome
My mother
will be the next winter. He better:
hat with fur collar to his coat
up him then down in winter. He better:
as to his hat

would like to see my hat now. I have got of those the Cromwell puritans a brim 4 inches broad - and black, this shape,  in soft felt, word of it - I am quite a baby by I want comforting from time. If your card is not put there ~~it~~ to make me write to you, are a cruel girlie I must think.

and embarked on a self-portrait for sending in to the Royal Academy (pl. 143). The painting was to 'demonstrate to the Jewish Education Aid Society that he is in thorough earnest about taking up art as a life-work', at the same time as it signalled his emancipation from the ghetto and his entry into the world of art.⁹³ Lewis wrote to his mother from Paris about 1907 (pl. 144): 'I have bought a wonderful new hat, which makes me look ever so much more handsome. I'm going to buy a fur collar as soon as I can see one cheap, probably next winter;

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like this: a long one, that buttons onto the coat. I let my hair down underneath the hat: the effect is astonishing'.⁹⁴ (When Ford Madox Ford met him not long afterwards he was wearing 'an immense steeple-crowned hat' and 'an ample black cape of the type that villains in transporting melodrama throw over their shoulders'.⁹⁵) Winifred Gill, resting one afternoon at the Omega Workshops, was unseen by Lewis when he entered in search of a mirror and drew out of a bag 'an outsize cloth cap, at least a foot across and made of a large black and white material':

He cocked it slightly to one side to his satisfaction, then, taking a few steps backward, raised his hand as though to shake hands with someone and approached the mirror with an ingratiating smile. He backed again and tried the effect of a sudden recognition with a look of surprised pleasure. Then cocking the cap at a more dashing angle his face froze and he turned and glanced over his shoulder as if at someone standing there with a look of scorn and disgust.⁹⁶

Too much could be made of this, but Corbett points out how widely before 1914 Lewis was suspected of striking a pose. I think there is here such a thing as 'masculinity as masquerade', not in any sense that would directly complement Joan Riviere's famous analysis of 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1929) but in two related ones.⁹⁷ First, identification can be generally defined as the means by which the personality is constituted and specified: 'All the world's a stage/and all the men and women merely players'. There is a powerful sense of charades about John's imagery and behaviour (and to Lewis's pirouette before the mirror) but the point is that he chose to produce himself as an artistic subject through a series of identifications with the attributes of a nomadic, liminal and acapitalist group. The process is particularly vivid with John because it is relatively transparent and impinges so directly on his work. But it illuminates the ways in which younger artists played with the appropriation of other, more mythic, and – mythically – more potent masculinities, out of context, as part of their opposition to the conventional codes of middle-class masculinity.

Second, one might deepen this first sense of masquerade as a kind of fantasy identification by exploring the operations of masquerade as a form of defence. This is the crux of Riviere's case study, which opens with a reference to Sandor Ferenczi's claim that homosexual men may perform an exaggerated heterosexuality as a defence. Her case is that of an intellectual woman who usurps the 'masculine' position of public speaker and in doing so finds herself putting on 'a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men'. With reference to both Riviere and Ferenczi, one might speculate that men moving into art – an area identified with 'feminine' sensibility and increasingly crowded with women art students – might feel the need with Nevinson and Marinetti to distinguish *Vital English Art* from the pastimes of women and schoolgirls and to adopt the mask of a heightened and aggressively heterosexual masculinity. The appropriation of bits of working-class clothing into a rougher masculinity than their families had fitted them for was characteristic of an attempt to modernise the tired particularities of artistic identity.⁹⁸

irritating seen from a
bird's eye point of view
Ziesko Kamumasa
uro Jamik -



Kamumasa me hat-bank's lid -
The most masterly little book !!!

Hotel St Pierre
Rue de l'École de Médecine
Paris -

Kamuo Raig!

Heartbroken over the
lost Cytzenberger - It must
have been a genuine one -
perhaps the only extant
example This, knowing
Henrietta must be found
and compelled to disgorge -
my love to the Kumley
Museum and best respects
to Miss Tutt - I am
about to send them some

146 Augustus John, undated letter to John Sampson from Paris (September/October 1905). Augustus John Papers.
(By permission of the National Library of Wales.)

A heightened masculine swagger marks the militant rhetoric of avant-garde politics and leaves its traces on the work. There is already a powerful undertow of sexual anxiety – as well as Utopian optimism – in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature, and something of this survives in the transformed imagery of pre-war modernism. Of course it would be foolish to take the polemics of Futurist rhetoric too literally. It is nevertheless clear that ‘women’ were made to signify, or ‘effeminacy’ to qualify, most of the things that avant-garde rhetoric was pitched against: nature (the raw material for aesthetic and technological transformation); sexual reproduction (the antithesis of originality and creativity); and both academic conservatism and commodity culture.⁹⁹

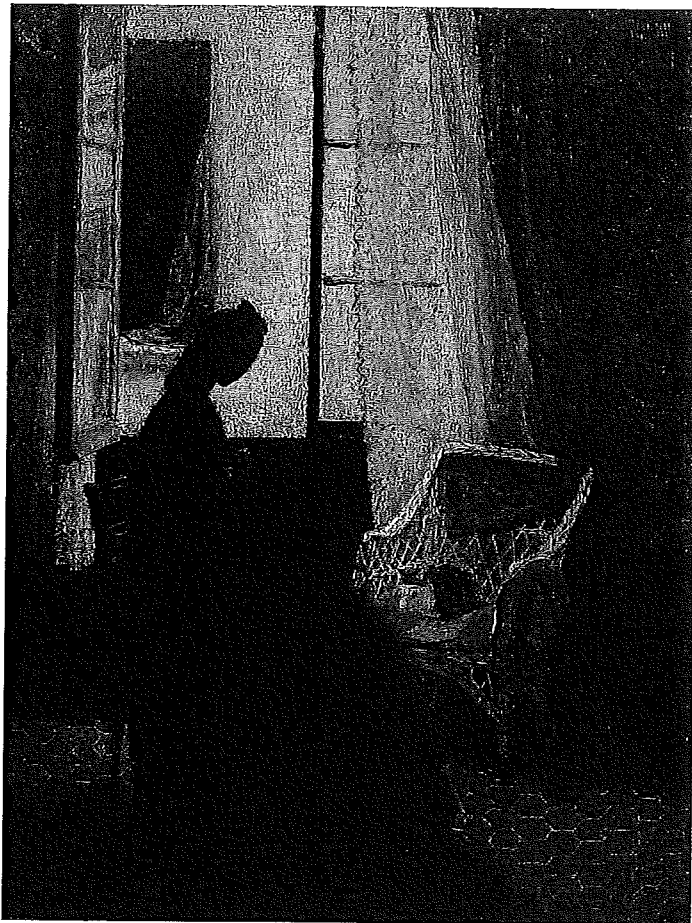
Groups such as the Futurists and the Vorticists saw themselves engaged in a Nietzschean struggle against the debilitating influence of mass culture, mass politics and the ‘feminisation’ of social life. Women constituted ‘a veritable plague

... a terrifying stream of mediocrity' in an increasingly competitive professional field; they were tired and depleted signs in the iconography of Symbolism and Art Nouveau; and they were associated via the department store and a burgeoning advertising industry with fashion and commodity culture (which the avant-garde set itself against, but with which it was inextricably bound up).¹⁰⁰

In Futurist and Vorticist rhetoric the 'feminine' was identified with the reactionary undertow of all these cross-currents of modernisation. It was what a radical and energetically *masculine* art had to escape (explicitly, in Marinetti's and Nevinson's manifesto of *Vital English Art*), at the point when a combination of factors made the assertion of a virile and creative masculinity both imperative and problematic. There is something pathological about the phallic narcissism of the new masculinity and what Naomi Segal has called its 'misogynistic loathing for the viscous'.¹⁰¹ Machinery was conceived as inherently, even violently masculine. (Lewis thought it 'a pity that there are not men so strong that they can lift a house up, and fling it across a river'.¹⁰²) Mechanical forms offered both a protective carapace and a means of transcendence: in Hulme's words: 'put man into some geometric shape which lifts him out of the transience of the organic'.¹⁰³ Certain modes of drawing – grids, blueprints, military plans – invoked modern (rational, masculine) ways of ordering an organic world.¹⁰⁴ Certain terms in avant-garde rhetoric ('phallic', 'virile', 'savage', 'barbaric') were intended to secure the virility of the avant-garde against contamination from the 'feminine', arising from its skirmishes with the rhythmic, intuitive, expressive or (in its applied arts ventures) the decorative and domestic.

Women, too, wanted out of effeminacy. Although Vorticism is notorious now for the bully-boy style of its polemics, in its rejection of sentiment, narrative, moralising and passivity, it also rejected much that was feeble and titillating in images of women. *Blast* blasted effeminacy, in women or men. It damned the Britannic aesthete, but it blessed the suffragettes. It blasted Otto Weininger, whose book on *Sex and Character* (1903) identified masculinity with genius and women with childbearing and the unconscious life.¹⁰⁵ It departed from Futurism on the question of women (though even Marinetti extolled the suffragette in his address to the Lyceum Club in 1910, exempting her from the Futurist 'contempt for woman', whose 'snake-like coils' had ever 'choked the noblest ideals of manhood').¹⁰⁶ If the suffrage campaign shifted from arguments based on equality to those based on difference around the turn of the century (from 'justice' to 'expediency'), women artists did the reverse. They needed to escape the debilitating attributes of femininity and chose 'art has no sex'.¹⁰⁷ The opportunity for a contribution to 'the painting of modern life' that was *at the same time* womanly, implicitly feminist and stylistically avant-garde had probably passed. The high profile of women artists in Russian constructivism was furthered by the rejection of romantic mythologies of the (masculine) genius in favour of socialist concepts of the productive worker, while the contribution of an artist such as Gwen John lay in a *refusal* of the radical modernisms of the 1910s and 1920s (pl. 147).

At the winter exhibition of the New English Art Club in 1911, Vanessa Bell



147 Gwen John, *La Chambre sur la Cour*, c. 1907–8, 31.8 × 21.6 cm. Paul Mellon Collection, Upperville, Virginia.

thought Gwen John ‘much more interesting than anyone’.¹⁰⁸ She was admired by her friends at the Slade, by her brother Augustus, by John Quinn who was a discerning and generous patron, and by Wyndham Lewis (who once thought of writing a book on her). She has always seemed a marginal figure but her reputation has risen steadily. There have been exhibitions and a catalogue raisonné, and she has attracted feminist interest as an independent woman painting female sitters. Now her relation to modernism is being tentatively reassessed as part of the reassessment of modernism itself. Alicia Foster has pointed out how her reputation as a recluse has obscured her familiarity with Paris as a modern city before 1914.¹⁰⁹ David Peters Corbett has described her as the artist ‘responsible for defining a poetics of the privatisation of modernity’ in pictures of contemplation ‘which the scrubby, dry quality of the paint surface images as a gentle dissolution of the physical fabric of the body and its sketchy context’. The inward turn of her sitters, and the gravitational pull exerted on our attention, is made possible by the renunciation of more overtly rhetorical modernist means. Corbett concludes an eloquent description by claiming that

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Bell

John's paintings of attentive women, removed from the centres of modernity and set down to contemplate the everydayness of letters, knitting, or ordinary articles within bleached-out interiors, distill the private experience of the modern in ways that the canon cannot do. John paints . . . the presence of the self within the world, and in doing so she returns to the centre of attention the category of the otherwise inexpressible.¹¹⁰

'Primitivism'

One of the apparent paradoxes of modernism is its recourse to the 'primitive' in pursuit of the new.¹¹¹ This was less marked in British painting than in sculpture and criticism. Hulme, Fry and Bell were enthusiasts for Byzantine art (after which they considered the European tradition to have gone into a long decline).¹¹² Gertler found a quaint stiffness and innocence in folk imagery, Epstein and Gaudier were strongly influenced by African and Oceanic carvings, and even Lewis, who could be sceptical, embraced, in *Blast*, the tribal and the machine in the dawning of a 'new Order and Will of Man'.¹¹³

Modernism was born in cosmopolitan cities with mixed populations and major ethnographic collections. Baudelaire's encounter with the range of artefacts in the Exposition Universelle of 1855 – from Chinese handicrafts to photographs suggestive of industrial processes – led him to celebrate the beauty in strangeness and diversity: the modern, like the exotic, was to be understood as holding 'its own peculiar aesthetic charm, as valuable as any effusion of classical culture'.¹¹⁴ Epstein had no regrets about moving to London in 1905 because 'a visit to the British Museum settled the matter for me'. (In Paris he had haunted the Louvre, but in London he was inspired first by the Elgin Marbles and then, around 1912, by 'the Egyptian rooms and the vast and wonderful collections from Polynesia and Africa'.¹¹⁵) So-called 'primitive' sources became the chief means of revising the *forms* of cultural practices whose technologies – writing, painting, carving, modelling, drama, small-scale publishing – were increasingly old-fashioned in a world of mass journalism, cinema and the large-scale reproduction of fine art and popular and commercial imagery.¹¹⁶

'Primitive' meant originally 'at an early stage', 'undeveloped' – an individual, group or society represented as socially, psychologically or technologically backward. Children were primitive because they had yet to develop into adults. Women were primitive (according to Social Darwinism), because evolution had favoured them with nurturing capacities but not with the rational intelligence of men. Peasants, or the *Lumpenproletariat*, were primitive, from defective breeding, criminal inclination or the constraining effects of habit and superstition. Above all and by definition, from the point of view of the newly modernised nation-states, non-Western, pre-industrial and (especially) 'tribal' societies were deemed not only less sophisticated technologically, but primitive in social organisation, psychological development and cultural expression, representing in evolutionary terms 'a necessary stage of development through which every race has passed'.¹¹⁷

But the negative connotations of 'primitive' had already been somewhat undermined by a Romantic interest in the 'noble savage' as a child of nature. By the early twentieth century, in advanced circles, the negative valency of the 'primitive' was reversed, and it became an indispensable reference point for the critique of modern civilisation (technologically advanced but spiritually exhausted), a resource for the exploration of expressive and quasi-abstract forms, and a correlative for all those (especially libidinal and unconscious) energies that civilisation was felt to repress. These various investments were bound up together in the new fascination for non-Western and especially tribal artefacts, collected by such artists as Picasso, Epstein and Gaudier, or studied by them in the British Museum or the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro between 1907 and 1914.¹¹⁸ The hieratic qualities of Byzantine art, the spontaneity of children's drawings, the quaint vernacular of a folk aesthetic, the formal inventiveness of African carving, together with elements of ancient Egyptian, Assyrian and Oceanic sculpture, were all borrowed for the modern, hybrid imageries of the avant-gardes. The repertoire of the modern artist was greatly expanded by this formal eclecticism, but what was perhaps more important was the contribution of exotic and 'primitive' elements to the messianic desire for a new beginning. As the artist Franz Marc put it, with reference to the Byzantine era: 'We are standing today at the turning point of two long epochs, similar to the state of the world fifteen hundred years ago . . . the first works of a new era are tremendously difficult to define . . . [but they are] signal fires for the pathfinders'.¹¹⁹ Modernist art began to look 'like the product of an entirely separate culture – a culture that did indeed appear intentionally primitive'.¹²⁰

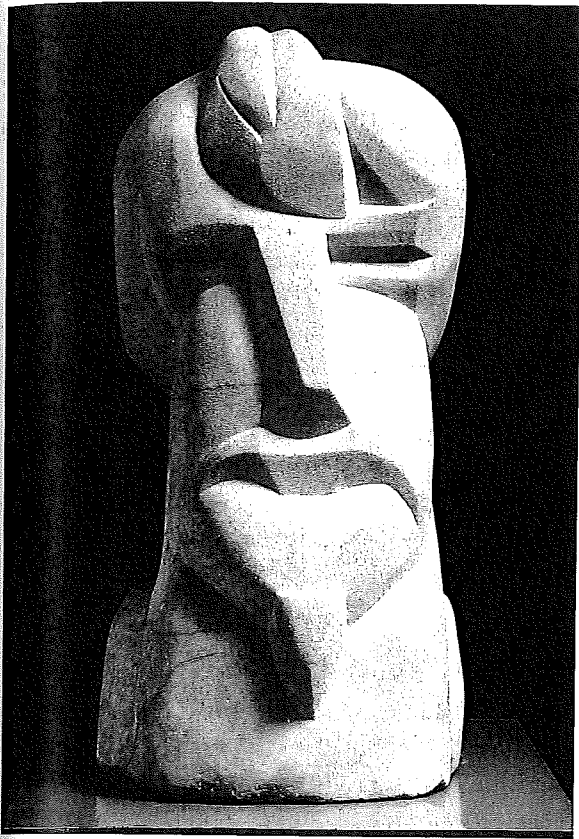
This was not just a matter of innovative form, of drawing resources for an art that seemed more 'primitive' – technically, formally and thematically – than its audience expected or knew its artists to be capable of. First, primitivism was bound up with subjectivity, with artists' self-perceptions as more directly in touch with an atavistic and virile masculinity. Gaudier, who revelled in his nickname of 'savage messiah', considered the modern sculptor heir 'to the tradition of the barbaric peoples of the earth (for whom we have sympathy and admiration)'.¹²¹ Naked women in elemental and 'bestial' conditions (copulating, giving birth, suckling) – as much as direct carving in 'Africanising' forms – are the badge of Epstein's modernity in 1913–14. Second, in combination with the cult of the machine (to which it might have seemed opposed), the 'primitive' acted as a talisman preserving precisely that heroic originality and autonomy that mechanisation and commerce seemed to threaten. Third, primitivism was associated with a particular concept of the artist as a visionary or shaman-like figure, and of art as a powerfully ritualistic force capable of re-enchanting a secular, industrial, scientific world.¹²²

The most influential argument for the congruity of the primitive and the modern was made by T. E. Hulme, borrowing from Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908).¹²³ Worringer was a cultural relativist who disputed 'the one-sidedness and European-Classical prejudice of our customary historical conception and valuation of art', and who provided a theoretical justification for the modernist interest in primitive art.¹²⁴ In his view abstract art and naturalistic

art had to be understood on their own terms as responses to radically different psychological needs. Naturalism depended on a sense of confidence and harmony with the external world and tended towards organic forms which mirror the spectator's vital sensations. Abstract art, on the other hand, was the product of peoples threatened by the complexity and instability of natural forces and seeking in hieratic or crystalline forms a compensatory closure and stability. The counter-pole to the need for empathy was this urge to abstraction, and the point of Worringer's thesis was 'to analyse this urge and to substantiate the importance it assumes within the evolution of art'. The most powerful urge of the primitive artist was to 'wrest the object out of . . . the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life . . . to render it necessary and irrefragable' and thus to produce a satisfaction that was the antithesis of that afforded by organic and vital form.¹²⁵ The implication for Hulme was that under the impact of modernisation man was again confronted with what Worringer described as a 'kind of spiritual agorophobia in the face of the motley disorder and caprice of the phenomenal world'.¹²⁶ Worringer's description became a blueprint. The 'artistic volition' of the modern epoch was to be understood as a turn away from the empathetic, vital and organic forms of the classical European tradition towards abstract, geometric and transcendent forms expressive in their own compensatory way of the alienation and dread induced by modernity.¹²⁷

Gaudier's *Head of Ezra Pound* (pls 148, 149), one of the few sculptures included in the Whitechapel Exhibition in 1914, offers a perfect instance of the conflation of gendered and primitivising moves in the production of a modernist work that projects a particular, atavistic and virile identity for artist and sitter.¹²⁸ The *Head* has been widely recognised as derived from the Easter Island cult statue *Hoa-Haka-Nana-Ia* (in the British Museum since 1869).¹²⁹ Its Vorticist credentials – as in Hulme's preference for 'lines which are clean, clear-cut and mechanical' like 'the hard clean surface of a piston-rod' – combine with primitivising forms and reference in a portrait of Pound as seer.¹³⁰ During the sittings Richard Aldington, as 'Auceps', ridiculed Pound's essay on 'The New Sculpture' in the *Egoist*. Both Pound and Gaudier replied. The draft of Gaudier's letter (published on 16 March 1914) has recently come to light.¹³¹ His main purpose was to locate the modern sculptor to one side of the classical tradition ('those *damn* Greeks') as heir 'to the tradition of the barbaric peoples of the earth (for whom we have sympathy and admiration)'. He defined a 'barbaric' people as 'a people to whom reason is secondary to instinct' (a distinction Fry also made in his article on 'The Art of the Bushmen').¹³² By contrast the 'pretty works of the great Hellenes' are the products of a people to whom instinct is secondary to reason. What is wrong with reason? Reason is unfeeling, sterile, dry, and – in lines excised from the published version – clearly connected to homosexuality. Greek sculpture evokes 'Greek love'. Modern sculpture is ithyphallic: potent, atavistic, heterosexual.¹³³

Gaudier advised Auceps to compare an Epstein flenite ('an intense feeling of tragedy which can only be expressed through form') with the Laocoön (anatomical perfection substituting for absolute psychic suffering).¹³⁴ It is partly an argument about the expressivity of form, as opposed to the mimetic transcription of expressive content. But it claims both a history – embracing in one generous move



148 (above left) Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*, 1914, 91.4 × 61 cm. Pentelic marble. Private Collection. (Photograph courtesy of the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.) Exhibited at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1914 as 'Bust of Mr Ezra Pound'.

149 (above right) Henri Gaudier-Brzeska sculpting the 'Head of Ezra Pound', 1914. Photograph by Walter Benington. Tate Gallery Archive, London.

'the tradition of the archaic Chinese, Khmer, Papuans, Polynesians, Negroes, Aztecs and Peruvians' – and a particular libidinal masculinity for that history. Carving was virile ('every inch of the surface is won at the point of the chisel'). The 'primitive' was virile. The phallic was virile. Abstraction (because it was concentrated and intense) was virile. And so the *Head* was virile ('Ezra in the form of a marble phallus', as Lewis described it¹³⁵). In this sense modernism claimed the symbolic status of primitive fetish as an antidote (a disavowal) of disempowerment. 'Hieratic' means sacred, 'of the priests'. The *Head* is a hieroglyph in the literal sense of a sacred carving or sign for an audience of initiates (a status available only metaphorically in the British art world in 1914). Pound, as the referent, and by extension Gaudier, as the artist, are cast as hierophants – shamans, expounders of mysteries: 'We turn back . . . to the powers of the air, to the djinns who were our allies aforesaid, to the spirits of our ancestors . . . we who are the heirs of the witchdoctor and the voodoo, we artists who have been so long the

despised are about to take over control'.¹³⁶ This is the paradoxically mystical strand submerged in the hard-nosed Vorticist rhetoric of primitive mercenaries in the iron jungle of the modern city.

Women stand for the dilettante and effete: for amateurism, as artists; and as imagery for the degeneration of sculpture into an agglomeration of 'large, identical, allegorical ladies in nightgowns holding up symbols of Empire or righteousness or Commerce' (in Pound's phrase) or a Rodin–Maillol amalgam 'with here and there someone trying to be naughty: curled nubileities and discrete slits' (in Gaudier's).¹³⁷ Perhaps the *Head* intends to advance the possibility of a masculine, specifically phallic, primitivising and identificatory imagery for men in a soft and civilised world in which women are invading the public sphere, the traditions of public and Academic sculpture have been compromised by a surplus of females in nightgowns, and Victorian Neoclassicism has degenerated into aesthetic – 'homosexual' – sterility. (For this it has to be seen from the right angle, literally and figuratively, as it is usually photographed, more or less frontally and slightly from below.)

Art and writing about art

How one writes about art depends extensively on what one thinks it is and does. This in turn is complicated by our understanding of history, interpretation, and our own investments in the past. Art is a social practice, variously defined and pursued in particular contexts. But it is a matter of debate how far those contexts are different from our own and, if different, recoverable, and, if recoverable, of real explanatory value in the analysis of particular works. The historian's task is to comprehend the work in the circumstances of its original production, but this may ultimately prove impossible. First, because social 'context' is limitless. There is no easy brake on the number of causes that might be adduced, or on the range of influences a work might be held to exert, except that provided by the historian's narrative.¹³⁸ And broadly social explanations tend to be limited to the referential materials of art, rather than addressing the complexity (the problems and opacities) of the work itself.¹³⁹ (As Charles Harrison put it, socio-historical exegesis has the capacity to render any work *apparently* vivid, while simultaneously dissolving it back into 'context' as the sum total of all the traces history left on it.¹⁴⁰) Second, because images are not words: they are embedded in discourse, they are not *anti*-words, but they cannot be translated into language without residue or loss. How to talk about art (or about music or dance) poses a particular challenge which is different from that of talking about drama, fiction or poetry. Third, because there is no final and fully 'objective' history (it is no easy matter: 'To see the object as in itself it really is'¹⁴¹). This is not to say that anything goes, that any account is equally *adequate*, but rather that art history is on some level an aggregate of all the (often conflicting) stories we have told ourselves about works of art.

Michael Baxandall once remarked that 'there is a limited but real case for sometimes writing history backwards'.¹⁴² Of course, in a limited but real sense

history is *always* written backwards. All history is a history of the present. And in the present we continue to have things to say about the art of the past. (If certain objects did not appear, for whatever reasons of theirs or ours, resonant and opaque to us, we should run out of things to say and be done with them.) We see this as a tribute to their richness and complexity, but it is also a symptom of the investment we have in 'art'.¹⁴³

Modernism is locatable partly in relation to modernity as a 'structure of feeling'.¹⁴⁴ Art belongs in a dense web of social and cultural detail, and modernism is peculiarly permeable to external forces, whether by accident or design. (Those who engage most vitally are not necessarily those who engage most obviously with the larger cultural forces of their time.) Running through the critical discussion of art and through art-world polemics, are easily discernible currents of ideas emanating from Social Darwinism, from scientific discoveries and technological developments, as well as from reactions against the perceived dominance of rationalist, empiricist and secular thought in various forms of transcendentalism. It was not a matter of systematic application, but of borrowing images, metaphors and vocabularies that might prove useful in forging new kinds of art at the beginning of a new century, even a new epoch. (Our press is now so diminished that it is easy to overlook the accessibility of these issues – the quantity and quality of attention paid to them – in the daily and periodical press before 1914.) This is important for recognising how what has now become 'context' – because we have to reach for it outside the frame – may once have been constitutive (of the artist's activities and the viewers' response).¹⁴⁵ But modernism is more than a reflection or refraction of social experience and developments in the human and natural sciences.

* * *

Implicit in Baudelaire's attitude to modernity was a sense that art might provide, if imperfectly, a meaningful alternative to the alienation and fragmentation of modern experience. Bloomsbury found it in the 'aesthetic emotion' provoked by 'significant form': that is, in reflection on, and emulation of, certain harmonious formal qualities discernible in all great art. Lewis and the Vorticists, more radically (more ironically and polemically), found it in the rhetorical mastery of modernity: 'The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest./ The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but it's [sic] Master./The Vorticist does not suck up to Life./He lets Life know its place in the Vorticist Universe!'¹⁴⁶

At its most ambitious and profound, and more than other commodities, art offers some kind of critical condensation of modern experience. There are various metaphors for this, none of them altogether satisfactory in pinning down the metaphorical and metonymic nature of art itself. Art is the knot, the vortex, the pattern in the carpet, Pound's 'luminous detail', the crystallisation of Joyce's epiphanies or Woolf's 'moments of being'. Any object might do this privately and contingently. Art aspires to do it publicly and deliberately. It fastens on some illuminating instance, or some unexpected combination of forms that precipitates 'a

sudden insight into circumjacent conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law'.¹⁴⁷ It bears witness. Of course it does these things imperfectly, shaped and fractured as it is by the pressures of ideology and narcissism. And of course it does them partly because these are the expectations we bring to it and this is the manner in which we write about it. (Arguably, with the development of cinema, art ceased to do these things so pointedly at all.)

In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe imagines her pictures hung in the servants' bedrooms or rolled up under the sofa. May Stevens has spoken of paintings hanging 'like unopened letters' on the wall. They wait their moment. Perhaps, over time, their qualities reveal themselves.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps – this seems to me more likely – hitherto unrealised aspects of their value and significance are discovered by new audiences with agendas and approaches of their own.¹⁴⁹ Modernist histories of modernism have stressed its aesthetic autonomy and radicalism (in which Vanessa Bell's reputation stands or falls by the abstract paintings of 1914 (pl. 150)). Other approaches (feminist, semiotic or psychoanalytic), in locating the repressed components in modernism's heroic account of itself, open it up to understanding as something richer but more ambiguous (and Bell as a modern, a figurative painter and a woman, can be rescued from the condescension of history: 'the usual female fate'). 'History' has a certain elasticity here. It alludes to that distant, misty, imperfectly recoverable but ultimately *manageable* moment of a work's inception: the past is another country, and historical effort is a matter of recrossing the clearly demarcated boundary between then and now. But it also refers to a continuity of interests, to a 'fusion of horizons' whereby the work reaches into the present and comes alive for us through our own investments in the past.¹⁵⁰

Forms of positivist and systematic study are traditionally seen as the proper route to knowledge in the humanities, and a necessary defence against wayward speculation or private prejudice. This is a sensitive issue for art historians, since the ambiguities of visual imagery appear to stimulate a high level of projection or 'readings in'. In psychoanalysis, however, terms like 'objective' and 'subjective' have specialist meanings and are not easily opposed. 'Facts' on their own are a necessary but insufficient condition for understanding how images have meaning and value for particular audiences. This transaction is the transference. There is an argument for *not* putting one's subjectivity on hold, but for identifying and investigating the work's affect and the nature of our interest in it.¹⁵¹ That is what I have tried to do.

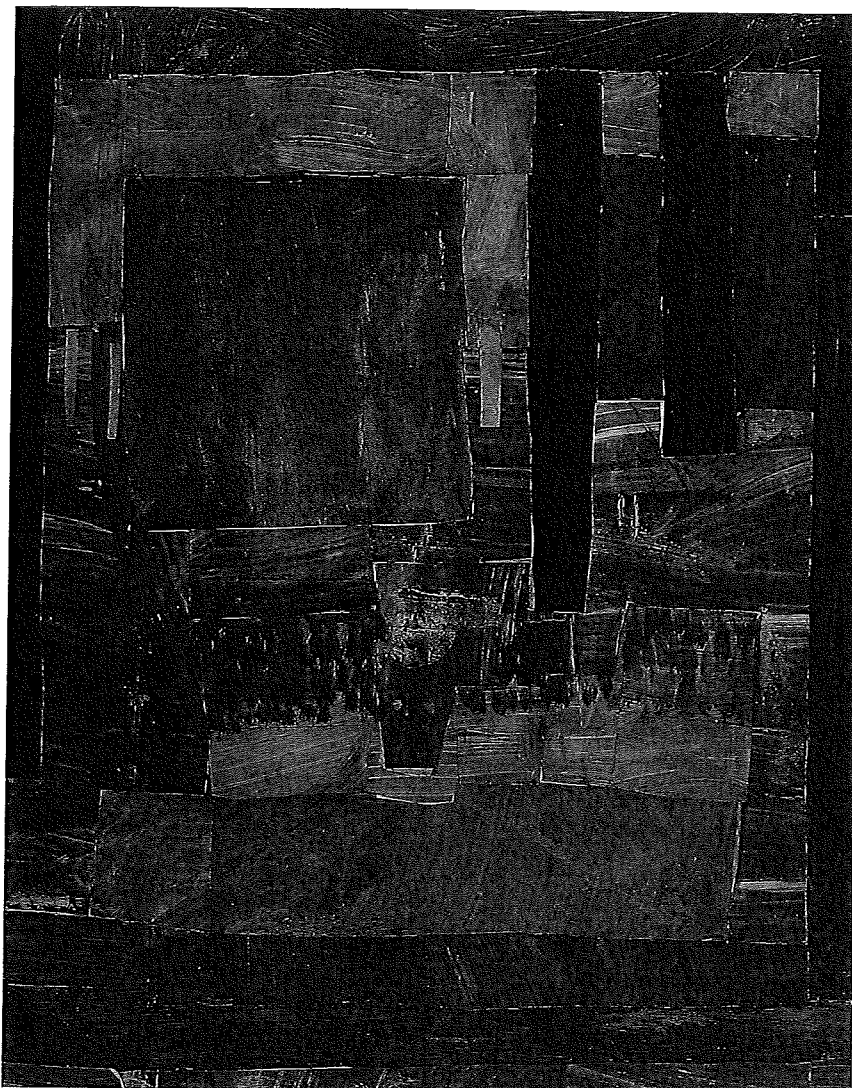
This has had certain consequences for my approach. I am interested in the local and particular rather than the general (in the specificities of British modernism, beyond the point at which it registers the impact of modernist developments emanating elsewhere); in visual culture rather than art history (insofar as 'art', conventionally understood, is not a sufficient grounding for comprehending the traffic in signs and values in which it is meshed); in the permeability of the work in the cultural field (rather than in the autonomous object of connoisseurship); in indeterminacy and reception (as much as determinacy and production); in interpretation, and interpretative disciplines such as semiotics and

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150 Vanessa Bell,
Composition, c. 1914,
55.1 × 43.7 cm. Oil,
gouache and pasted paper
on paper. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.
The Joan and Lester Avnet
Collection. (Photograph ©
1999 The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.)

psychoanalysis (as well as empirical study);¹⁵² in the 'positions and dispositions' of artists (that is, in agency as itself produced, rather than as given in the coherent, rational, creative subject); and in the transference of the historian, that is, in the productive incorporation of the position from which discourse takes place (rather than in the objectivity and neutrality of the commentator). But I would not wish to be misunderstood. I am not in favour of 'wild' analysis and we are not excused from the archive or from a reflexive, interpretative adequacy.¹⁵³ All these things are a matter of emphasis. What matters is the encounter with particular works of art which, if they remain of serious interest to us, are by definition escaping or prolonging our attempts to come to terms with them: 'in contemplating a work of art, we are continually asking *why*'.