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Hot Tub Time Machine



The entryway to "Altermodern," the 2009 Tate Triennial, with Matthew Darbyshire's *Palac* (2009), foreground, and Subodh Gupta's *Line of Control* (2008)



Svetlana Boym's "Phantasmagorias" at BKS Gallery of the Royal Academy of Arts, Copenhagen, Denmark, Oct.-Dec. 2009

THE AGE OF SEMI- POST-POSTMODERNISM

by Ben Davis

Do we still care about postmodernism?

Maybe not. Well, I see that the blog "Film School Rejects" recently published a [text](#) on the "postmodern dialectics" of *Hot Tub Time Machine*. But the conviction that the notion means anything serious is gone.

Thus, last year, relational esthetics guru Nicolas Bourriaud officially [declared](#) that we were now in a new era, "altermodernism." Svetlana Boym has [called](#) for a new movement, "off-modernism," to get around postmodernism's deadlocks.

Rosalind Krauss has officially abandoned the position, in favor of the "continuance of modernism." Hal Foster, introducing a recent issue of *October*, noted that postmodernism had "run into the sand."

I asked two friends of mine, both working curators, if the term mattered to their practice. The answer was an unambiguous no. "It makes you sound like an undergrad."

Still, it seems weird to abandon a concept that once seemed to orient and dominate so much of the art discussion. It's worth asking what happened.

1.

It seems to me part of the problem is that the term "postmodernism" was always so muddy and abstract. To different people, it meant (at least) two different things. First of all, for many, "postmodernism" stood as a certain critical paradigm for art and theory. This is the sense that both Krauss and Foster mean it. Postmodernism embodies the "critique of essentialism," a rejection of totality, liberated irony; it was defined by genre jumping, institutional critique, deconstruction, and so on.

The problem with this "theoretical" definition of postmodernism seems to me to be its lack of historical mooring -- it is essentially idealist, in the philosophical sense. Artistic motifs or even actual artworks have no philosophical or "critical" significance in themselves, outside of a historical context. I could go paint a horse in a cave tomorrow; the gesture would have a very different meaning than the cave-paintings at Lascaux.

Thus, [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#) was believed to embody all the good things about postmodernism. Now, you have [Joe Scanlan](#) penning a fretful essay in *Artforum*, noting that the utopian spirit of the candy stacks and poster piles looks a lot like the bogus interactivity of contemporary corporate advertising. But this should provoke disillusionment only if one previously believed that Gonzalez-Torres' works represented a battery of effects that had critical value in themselves, outside of any specific polemical context.



Cave painting at Lascaux



Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Untitled (Placebo) (installation process)
 1991
 Image courtesy of the Williams College
 Museum of Art; photo by Roman
 Iwasiwka



Urs Fischer's *You* at the Peter Brant
 Study Center in Greenwich, Conn.



Installation view of Chris Burden's
Exposing the Foundation of the Museum

Similarly, "institutional critique" was thought to be the good, political side of postmodern art. But **Urs Fischer** is like an encyclopedia of "institutional critique" themes, repurposed as spectacular bits of theater. How different is his excavation of Gavin Brown's gallery -- purchased by Peter Brant, and currently restaged at the Peter Brant Study Center -- from **Chris Burden's** excavation of L.A. MoCA in 1986, really? In the catalogue for his recent New Museum show, curator Massimiliano Gioni asked Fischer if there was a critical dimension to his quotation of junk culture in his mirror-box installation, *Service à la française*. Gioni got only a blank stare in return.

So, in this sense, the waning of postmodernism's cachet is just a kind of coming-to-consciousness of the flaws that were always there in its critical paradigm. It's the revenge of history.

2.

Which brings us to the second definition of "postmodernism," which is postmodernism as historical period. Fredric Jameson's formulation, first pronounced at a lecture at the Whitney Museum in 1982, is still the most famous: "postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism." In this definition, "postmodernism" is neither a good nor a bad thing; it is just a condition that everyone is responding to whether they like it or not.

This is an advance on the more thematic conception, pointing us to the material basis for the "postmodernism turn" in broader changes in society. But it is not really the last word. For one thing, what the hell is "late capitalism"? It is truly bizarre that the piece of Jameson's theory that is supposed to be its keystone is the least discussed part of it. Even Perry Anderson, in an adoring book about Jameson, *Origins of Postmodernism*, notes that he essentially adopts the idea of "late capitalism" as a readymade, without doing much with it.

The concept of "late capitalism" comes from Fourth Internationalist guru Ernest Mandel, designating a "third period" of capitalism dominated by multinational corporations. But in a famous critique, Paul Mattick **notes** that this is not really much of a theory, that it is eclectic, riddled with contradictions, and in many ways, historically false. (At any rate, unless you are prepared to debate the existence of Kondratiev "supercycles," you should not refer to "late capitalism" as if it were some self-evident condition.)

Personally, I like David Harvey's definition (in the *Condition of Postmodernity*) that the postmodern sensibility should be associated more narrowly with the changes that came out of last global economic crisis in the 1970s. The story goes something like this: The explosive economic growth in the post-WWII period was sustained under conditions of relatively closed economies, stable currencies and highly regulated labor markets. By the mid-'60s, the dramatic economic reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan was complete; internal markets were saturated, and everyone had to search for new export markets, driving down global profit rates. By the end of the '60s, in the face of mounting debts, the only way to sustain business as usual for the U.S. was through inflation.

Frightening stagnation set in through the 1970s. Harvey notes that the problem was widely perceived to be one of economic "rigidity" -- economies were too slow, too top-heavy to compete in the new situation. The response was a turn to more limber policies, what Harvey calls a doctrine of "flexible accumulation," what these days we call "neoliberalism." Currencies were allowed to float. Finance was deregulated. Derivatives were introduced. Labor was attacked. Government services were privatized and sold off. Globalization became the rule. John Maynard Keynes was out; Milton Friedman was in.

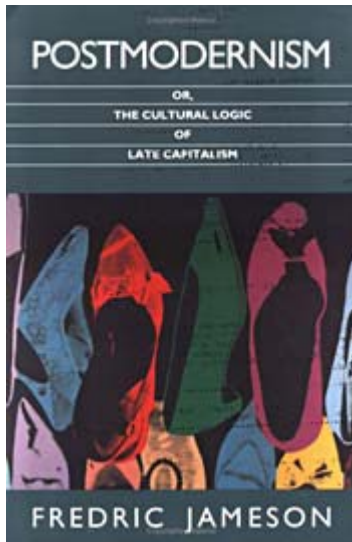
at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA (formerly The Temporary Contemporary) (1986)



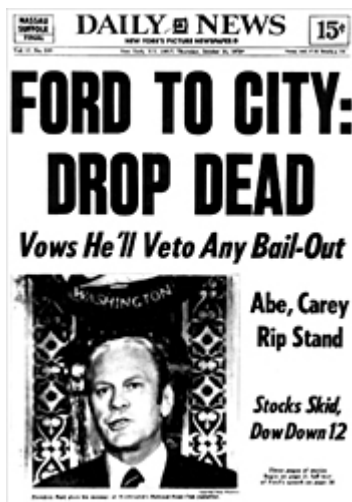
Urs Fischer

Service à la française (installation view) 2009

"Urs Fischer: Marguerite de Ponty" New Museum



Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991)



The New York Daily News, Oct. 30, 1975

All this provided a pretty coherent global pattern, yielding a new texture for daily life. It did indeed restart economic growth in the 1980s and create epic tidal waves of new wealth, albeit at the cost of a long-term stagnation in wages for ordinary people. Here, then, is a paradigm shift that provides the background for the theoretical and artistic rise of "postmodernism," which does indeed represent an acceptance of the flexible, the free-floating, and the mutable as all-embracing existential realities.

The emblematic figure of "postmodernity," in this sense -- the person who stands at the nexus of its political, economic and cultural aspects -- is neither an artist nor a philosopher, but Charles Saatchi. In the political field, the Iraqi expat got his start making the 1979 "Labour Isn't Working" campaign that brought Margaret Thatcher to power. On the economic plane, if the '60s saw the "Creative Revolution" in advertising, with the birth of rebel ad agencies forging hip new identities, the '70s was all about "global integration," and Saatchi & Saatchi was one of the **archetypal** faceless multinational conglomerates of the era. As for art, how Charles Saatchi's tastes and wealth have affected esthetics is well known.

Unprecedented new wealth, a more mercurial environment of speculation, the celebration of individualism brought on by the attack on the welfare state, demoralization and fragmentation -- all these form the background for the artistic vocabulary of "postmodernism." I mean, jeez louise, **Jeff Koons** actually started out as a commodities trader! Meanwhile, for art as well as for politics, the more radical energies survived principally in the academy, as street-level counterculture and political movements alike went into a long defensive period. Praxis correspondingly took an esoteric turn.

Does it seem improbable to link the themes of critical postmodernism to this background? If so, it's worth noting that the economic paradigm shift was actually the explicit correlate for the original articulation of theoretical postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard's vaguely technological-determinist 1979 **manifesto**, *The Postmodern Condition*, a big influence on art. Here is Lyotard, describing the background for the waning of "grand narratives":

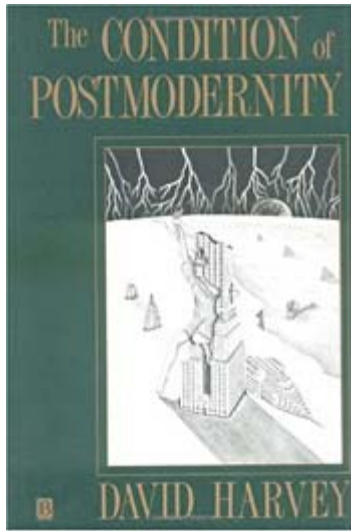
The reopening of the world market, a return to vigorous economic competition, the breakdown of the hegemony of American capitalism, the decline of the socialist alternative, a probable opening of the Chinese market -- these and many other factors are already, at the end of the 1970s, preparing States for a serious reappraisal of the role they have been accustomed to playing since the 1930s: that of guiding, or even directing investments.

For Lyotard, the upshot is clear: If states can't control investments, they can't control information, and no single narrative can command our attention. The intersection of the theoretical assumption -- "end of grand narratives" -- and actual historical events is clear here, even if this is covered up or turned into an abstract logic in other articulations.

3.

Still, some questions remain.

There is a "neoliberal period" in recent history, corresponding to real economic and social changes. The way governments and the global economy function has been objectively restructured since the 1970s. But "neoliberalism" is also an ideology that is used to sell all these changes -- that individual interest is all that matters, that we are in a new "post-industrial society" where unions are irrelevant or unnecessary, that class is an obsolete category, that we have reached the "end of history."



David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell Publishing, 1990)



Campaign poster for Margaret Thatcher



Charles Saatchi and Nigella Lawson at Sotheby's London, 2003

Consequently, in one respect at least, rather than saying that "postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism" it would be much better to say that "postmodernism is the cultural ideology of neoliberalism." It is not only a neutral descriptive category, as Jameson tends to describe it, but refers to a body of assumptions that have been used to naturalize a situation that is in fact a historical product. That means that, when addressing its objects, you have to move beyond just formal questions, and address how contemporary artworks are put to work ideologically.

Take the installations of [Josephine Meckseper](#). On the one hand, they do a good job of reflecting the main features of the contemporary economic and political landscape ("cognitively mapping" it, to use Jameson's terminology). They reflect a flattened subjectivity, defined by a series of ephemeral, degraded commodity objects and advertising images, floating in a kind of nowhere space, cut off from any meaningful history. They weave together objects from various disjointed contexts into a disorienting montage, suggesting how an awareness of global connectedness has interpenetrated every aspect of experience. And they allude to the underbelly of consumer culture, mixing in allusions to strikes, war, corporate machinations and political protest from far-flung locations (the installations are even "meant to trigger a resemblance to the way store windows appear just before they are smashed by demonstrators," Meckseper [told Interview](#)).

Yet at the same time, Meckseper's work has often lent itself to be read as a statement about the impossibility of any productive political consciousness today. Sylvère Lotringer [writes](#) approvingly of Meckseper that, "conflicting ideologies and opposing political parties are reduced to empty tags and merely consumed as ideas. . . . Presenting imagery of protest culture and revolutionary myths side by side with art installations, she exposes consumerist and counter-cultural discourses as if they belonged together." That you might as well play X-Box as organize against Arizona's recent disgraceful anti-Latino initiatives -- that kind of cynicism may be highly useful to preserving the status quo, but it is not really a truth to be "exposed."

4.

Which brings us back to the initial question, the starting point and destination of all this: Where do we stand today in relationship to the theme of "postmodernism"?

Well, on the theoretical plane, the cachet of postmodernism has been dwindling for a long time. Jacques Derrida himself spent the latter half of his life in a tortured attempt to come up with some ethical application of deconstruction, arriving at an idea of ethics as infinite, crippling guilt that is not of much practical use.

These days, the art world's trendy philosophies all suggest an interest in politics: the dilettantish political mysticism of Giorgio Agamben; the Maoist mathematics of Alain Badiou; the orotund autonomism of Antonio Negri; the gentleman's anarchism of Jacques Rancière; the fitfully incisive musings of Slavoj Žižek. I take this as a hopeful sign of a hunger for some alternative to the more cartoonishly relativist theoretical "postmodernisms."

And yet, do any of these figures offer anything resembling a clear, historically rooted response to today's problems, any graspable alternative vision of social organization or political strategy? I would say no. They are eccentric stars in the theoretical galaxy of postmodernism, but they are not outside of it.



Jeff Koons



Catalogue for "*Les Immatériaux*"
curated by Jean-Francois Lyotard at the
Pompidou Center in 1985



Josephine Meckseper
Tout va bien
2005
Elizabeth Dee Gallery

As for art theory proper, so far, dissatisfaction with the term "postmodernism" reigns, but not much in the way of a convincing alternative is on offer. Bourriaud's "altermodernism" depends on contrasting itself to a definition of "postmodernism" that is so quirky that it does not seem to make much sense: He seems to think that "postmodernism" corresponds to "multiculturalism," meant as some naïve celebration of fixed identities, and that "altermodernism" represents a new reality of "creolization."

In Bourriaud's scheme, the architecture of **Robert Venturi**, which helped crystallize the entire idea of cultural "postmodernism" in the first place, would be quintessentially "altermodern." Wasn't Venturi's practice about a populist mix-and-match esthetic of historical and cultural pastiche?

Similarly, from *October's* Fall 2009 issue on the concept of "Contemporary Art," I note that the dominant academic reaction to the "crisis of postmodernism" debate is a kind of haughty nominalism: The problem with "postmodernism," we are told, is that it was a theory that actually tried to characterize the situation; we should just celebrate the actual diversity of art and cultural practices. The funny thing is, in its hostility to explanatory narratives and implicit celebration of untotizable micro-narratives, this program actually sounds a lot like what people used to call "postmodern."

What about the economic and political situation? It has been much noted that the Great Recession represents a crisis of neoliberal ideology. This is true. The crisis grows out of the systematic structural imbalances that derive from globalization and the excesses of unregulated speculation -- in effect, the very strategies that were used to resolve the 1970s crisis. And yet, have we seen any reorientation of governing logic on the level of the transition from paternalistic Keynesianism to party-hardy Milton Friedman market fundamentalism in the '70s?

There was certainly a lot of talk about a "return to Keynesianism" in 2008-09 (just as there was a brief vogue for a "return to content" and a "return to sincerity" in art). But in fact, what we witnessed at the height of the post-Lehman Brothers financial plunge was an emergency banking rescue done by the government, but on the terms of superstitious respect for the "free market," leaving the power of private finance essentially untouched.

As of this writing at least, what we have looks like a minor inflection in the dominant ideology, not any full-blown change of direction. Glance again at the factors Lyotard lists above as providing the correlate for "postmodernism," and ask yourself, how many of these things have actually been reversed? None. If anything, for the moment, there seems to be a radicalization with regard to all of them -- the instability brought on by "vigorous" economic competition, the erosion of U.S. hegemony, the lack of a political alternative that anyone can believe in, etc.

So, where, finally, are we at? On the level of theory, you have the waning of something, but an inability to articulate anything that actually sounds like an alternative. On the political and economic plane, you have the discrediting of the old ruling logic, but nothing new to do the job, so neoliberal notions continue to be the default wisdom. At every level you have something like "semi-post-postmodernism," a deliberately ugly term for an ugly period.

In a recent **lecture** to the London School of Economics, David Harvey chided his audience: "Actually, we have to think about what the macro problem is, and confront and deal with the macro problem as it is." The question today, he said, is "are we going to get out of this



Poster by Robert Loza, from the www.altoarizona.com



Alain Badiou addresses the crowd at Deitch Projects, with Josefina Ayerza, 2005



Astra Taylor's documentary *Zizek!*



Cartoon introducing the concept of the "altermodern" for the Tate Triennial, from tate.org

crisis the same way we were?" His answer: "If academics continue the way they are, the answer is yes."

Harvey was talking about economic theory, but you could say the same about art theory: If the art world continues to recycle the same old anti-historic academic bullshit and chirpy gossip then it is going to continue to be a place of intellectual irrelevance and triviality that no one takes seriously besides the people who inhabit it.

We are at the beginning -- not the end -- of a long period of global economic restructuring that will be very painful. The brutality of massive budget cuts has only begun to be felt. According to whose interests this restructuring will be done is not yet set, and what new paradigm will emerge from the chaos is anyone's guess. Partly, it depends on what we actually do now.

If art and art theory are to play a positive role in this process, they need to ditch the platitudes of "my art is my activism" and "my theory is my practice." Moving beyond "postmodernism" has to mean a shift away from the myopia and cynicism that has characterized our recent past, if it is to mean anything at all.

Unless and until such a shift occurs, simply giving up the term or changing it out for a new one is not going to do much good. Swapping word games for a meaningful relationship to political reality was part of the problem in the first place.

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Robert Venturi

Eclectic House Series

1977

Photo Courtesy Venturi, Scott Brown
and Associates



Parody cover of *The Economist*, 2008



David Harvey addresses the London
School of Economics