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## Seminar

This conversation with James Elkins was recorded March 3, 2004, and edited March 22, 2004. The participants, all from University College Cork, were Francis Halsall, History of Art; Paul Hegarty, Department of French; Gert Hofmann, Department of German; Julia Jansen, Department of Philosophy; and Arpad Szakolczai, Department of Sociology.

FH: Why do you concentrate on painting?

JE: The most interesting historically informed discourse on modernism tends to center on painting, so the challenge in understanding the historical or critical values that have been accorded to other media is to see how they have been relocated from their places in the discourse on painting. The emerging discourses on individual media (and the general or totalizing discourse on media “itself”) can be read as second-order phenomena, ones dependent — perhaps at several removes — on an identifiable original.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For example, W.J.T. Mitchell's writing on media and the Chicago School of Media Theory initiative, [www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net/home.htm](http://www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net/home.htm); also Rosalind Krauss's mediation on media, *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

- FH: Although, in postmodernism, what comes up for grabs is painting itself. What is implicated in postmodern theoretical practice, for instance, in *Formless*, is the specificity of media. Postmodernism and painting, in some respects, are mutually exclusive.
- JE: From my point of view, *Formless* is still fairly media specific, even though the concepts are not: their examples circle back to painting even when their “dictionary” ranges into places where painting, I assume, would not be taken to be able to follow. Certainly it is true that many postmodernisms are predicated on the dissolution of painting, but here I would take my cue from Stephen Melville, who has interesting things to say about how painting exists in a phantom fashion following minimalism: it has to learn — I am paraphrasing him — to “count.”<sup>2</sup> Meaning that there can no longer be much sense to the idea of an individual painting that stands for the sum total of whatever painting can be at a given historical moment. The concept of the multiple, therefore, has to be taken onboard as part of a fundamental rethinking of painting that nevertheless does not occur separately from concepts of painting. Melville’s account, as I read it, is compatible with T.J. Clark’s sense of “contingency,” meaning at least that painting has to

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2. Phillip Armstrong, Stephen Melville, and Laura Lisbon, eds., *As Painting: Division and Displacement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

consider itself in continuous need of reinvention, in a more radical sense than Clark intended when he was writing about contingency in the *Death of Marat*. In this particular sense what orients the magnetic field of painting, what supplies its Magnetic North, is still what used to be called painting, no matter how distant, abstract, or attenuated it seems.

FH: What seems to me to be important in postmodernity is that in modernism's own terms, it cannot go beyond Louis or Stella: after that, what happens is beyond painting. The most significant things that happen in postmodernity are no longer concerned with painting. If we see Polke as the most important moment in current art, we end up with an uneasy relation to tradition.

JE: If you're talking about modernism in Greenberg and all that, then I have to agree because modernism defines itself as a closed system. This would be one of the places where the project I am exemplifying with *Formless* would have something at stake. But the discourse of modernism can be altered in such a way that what appears to be a wholly different way of talking — a postmodernist way — becomes unintelligible without the discourse of painting.

PH: Couldn't it be seen the other way around? If modernism is over for painting, then that is exactly where you look for postmodernism: in rubbishy kitsch painting, painting

that knows it shouldn't be doing painting. The fact that no one has done modernism in, say, video, means they are still rummaging around in very dated bits of modernism. Maybe the "overness" of something, the "you shouldn't be doing this," makes it more interesting. There is less striving, more "there you go."

JE: It is certainly much easier to make an acceptable piece of video art than it is to make an acceptable painting, and if you put on your Greenberg hat, the reason for the relative ease of video art is that painting has a longer history: more strictures, more limitations, fewer possibilities, a much denser lexicon of critical terms. Therefore — to make this a little more serious — if you're talking about a historical discourse, which is what is at stake here, the ease of video is a reason to keep considering painting especially when it's a place where things seem to keep going wrong, or where the artists are deliberately misbehaving themselves, piling kitsch on camp on kitsch without end.

FH: I would be keen to look at modernism "in an expanded field": to see it not only as painting practice but as artistic self-reflection and self-determination — in which case you can allow for a definition of modernism that does include Duchamp or video art. Postmodern practices would then need to be seen not as a break from modernism but as a

new type of modernism. But once again that does move us away from painting as a model.<sup>3</sup>

JE: Certainly the divisions in my lecture are changeable, and one way they might change would be to have postmodernism swallowed by a newly expanded modernism. But then I think you risk losing sight of the self-descriptions of some of the theorists whose work is predicated on the break between modernity and postmodernity. My lecture is meant not to stray too far from the range of understandings that theorists have of their own projects.

AS: May I ask something from a different angle? If we are talking about distinguishing practices in terms of chronology, rather than the many other criteria that are available, then I find your third category the most interesting but the least elaborated. You call it “political” but you include within it something that is ethical, something that is social, so you enter into various branches of social theory or social philosophy. The central issue is then how these hang together. In antiquity, as we know, they formed a whole, and especially in the Greek ideal of *charis*, ethics and politics were not separate.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Paul Hegarty, “As Above, So Below: Informel/Abject/Sublime,” in *La Bataille De Cent Ans — Cent Ans De Bataille*.

4. Michel Foucault, “The Care of the Self,” in *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

Somehow, on the other hand, through the development of modernity, images gain a new power, while at the same time art becomes separated from the power of images. (I am thinking here of Edgar Wind's famous lectures, in which he argues the simultaneous decline of the dangerousness and thus the relevance of art, and the rise in power accorded to other types of images.)<sup>5</sup> At the same time, these bindings which somehow hold together politics, ethics, and aesthetics are displaced, and we end up with an art practice desperately trying to regain a power that it formerly possessed. Artists use all kinds of tricks, without success, to regain the "magical" power art has apparently lost.

JE: Perhaps we could talk about this piece by piece. First I would want to know: Do you think the genealogy that might unify the third portion of my lecture, tying the political to the moral and social, could be relevant to the project of this series?

AS: Sure, and it's not even a question of its relevance: the central problem would be the minute, meticulous, "gray" reconstruction of this process of power or, if you like, disempowerment. Rivera is an example of the kind of desperate effort I alluded to: an effort, somehow beyond art, to recapture some degree of relevance.

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5. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

JE: This is interesting to me, because I ended up with that third category, “Politics,” through a series of negative criteria: in practical terms, texts that get called “social art history” can be identifiable as such partly by a relative absence of concerns that could be called formal or aesthetic. The third category is a grab bag of a particular sort, whose shape is determined by what presses in around it. What you say makes me think the category might have unity in a Foucauldian sense — I mean in light of his studies of the Greek origins of the concepts that animate the category.<sup>6</sup>

AS: Very much so: the last four or five years of Foucault’s work are tightly focused on the interlinking of aesthetics and ethics, and even politics: first an aestheticization of existence, but more centrally an “art of life” as being partly ethical and partly aesthetic. This was done in the context of a return to certain issues of Greek political philosophy.

JE: If this Greek, or Foucauldian, genealogy might give the third category a certain unity that I hadn’t suspected, then that coherence raises another kind of question that I would ask in reply: the problem of the coherence of my lecture as a whole. Specifically this raises the possibility that I would

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6. Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1997); Foucault, *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al., vol. 1 (New York: New Press, 1997); Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther Martin et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

have different kinds of categories: this one, on “Politics,” would be justified in a completely different way.

AS: That could be so if one were to stress the way you begin the opening section on modernism by speaking of the Renaissance, because the Renaissance is the site of the contestation of exactly this kind of unity. In Ficino, especially.<sup>7</sup>

JE: I can't tell whether this conversation is about the texts that posit forms of modernism or postmodernisms, or the writing that might be used to shore them up. If it were a question of the Renaissance, I could imagine starting the lecture with Ficino or Pico, but then I would be afraid, for example, that the second category — postmodernisms considered as a group — would appear as if it were seen through the wrong end of a telescope. It would seem very tiny, and that would be counterintuitive in relation to the current art scene. So to me the question is the pertinence of this historical genealogy, or of genealogy per se, whether it is Foucault's or someone else's.

PH: Taking Arpad's point, but from a different angle: making art political or ethical is one of the aspirations of theorized postmodernism anyway, and a lot of good and very awful art, of the kind we might see next year in this very city [when Cork is European Capitol of Culture] ...

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7. *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Olga Zorzi Pugliese (Ottawa, Canada: Dovehouse Editions Canada, 1986).

JE: ... we might very well!

PH: ... when the city has taken on the role of art producer, even when what it produces doesn't really matter, as long as it represents the community. That's the other end of Foucault's telescope, and it could work to balance things out.

So, how do you go back and theorize how these things have been theorized? Another part of this issue is the historical dimension of thinking about when modernism began. In other words, modernism might start in the Renaissance, but did anyone think of going back to the Renaissance before, say, 1850 (to take a notional point in the nineteenth century)? My answer is, fairly strongly, no. Then you have a telling of modernism which asks whether it began with the *Olympia*, the French Revolution, and so forth, but that telling of the story has its own story, and it travels around in France, and then to America. The capital of modernism is Paris at a certain moment, Vienna for a couple of days, and then New York. We don't have to decide whether that's true or not, but it shows the history of the telling of modernism's origins. Somewhere in that the telling of postmodernism fits, but I do not know how: postmodernism is in a position to reflect on itself and on modernism's telling of itself.

JE: From my point of view the most intriguing example of that problem is that there are strains within postmodernism's

telling of itself that would begin from the notion that postmodernism is not structured like a period. There is no reason in the logic of *Formless* why the story of postmodernism might not be extended back before Manet. That is a truly radical possibility — that postmodernism might be seen in any period that is minimally, retrospectively, modernist — and I don't know how seriously that could be taken in a conversation that also turns on modernism's stories of itself.

PH: Terry Eagleton mentions the notion that Tristram Shandy has been said to be postmodern, that Rabelais is postmodern ... but they weren't postmodern before the 1980s.

JE: You don't even have to go back that far to run into postmodernism's allegedly nonperiodic structure. In Ireland, there's the enormous problem of *Finnegans Wake*, which is still nobody's principal book by Joyce (it's always *Ulysses*), and yet you can trawl that text for every generative concept of postmodernism.<sup>8</sup>

But what we're talking about is a logical difficulty in positing a certain kind of history that depends on the notion of periods. A larger problem is whether or not this entire lecture series, which is posited on topographic metaphors — the “shape” of the twentieth century, the “structure” of

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8. “What Have We Inherited? [on the place of Joyce in contemporary art]” in Christa-Mia Lerm Hayes, *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2004), 325-29.

essential movements — implies that one's principal interest is diachronics, genealogy. The problem is what has to be left out.

GH: I was wondering whether the whole modern–postmodern terminology doesn't refer to the theoretical, philosophical, social discourse on art rather than to the history of art in terms of its objects and practices. When you say that the postmodern approach may not have a location in time and space, that has to do more with the subjects of criticism rather than the objects of art: more to do with the phenomenology of art than with the phenomenon. I wonder if that may apply to modernism as well as postmodernism, so that whether or not things appear modernist may be a matter of the theoretical–critical approach.

JE: Immanence is one of modernism's inescapable terms, so at every moment when an object is considered as a modernist object, something is foreclosed: one is not allowed to escape from that presence.<sup>9</sup>

I wonder if we could find a way to continue talking about the limits of the historicizing approach, because they do not become visible in any even way, especially within modernism. If we were to take only, say, a later text of

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9. The question of the possibility of a history of art "in terms of its objects and practices" became a central issue in the second lecture in the series, given by Richard Shiff. See Shiff, *Doubt* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

Greenberg's, then we would have problems going forward in any of these directions because we would be compelled to comply with a philosophy of presence that cannot have recourse to any historical truths except after the fact, when it comes to assessing one's own "unwelcome judgments" (as Greenberg would say).<sup>10</sup> But outside of those texts there are all sorts of competing historical claims. If there is one idea that I have to swear allegiance to in this project, it is that considering topographies is not limiting in one category, one subject, any more than it is limiting in another. Genealogy constrains modernisms analogously to the way it constrains theories of skill. And so forth.

FH: And art history is itself a product of modernism; it can be traced to the birth of the modern museum, and the desire to classify objects and to separate them out for consideration. Either we regenerate the project of modernism in relation to artistic practice, something I would be interested in doing, or else art history must evaporate, as Craig Owens has argued.

JE: That and other evaporations will certainly become a theme in this series of books. One of the future speakers in the series has already objected to my inclusion of skill as a category; there will be questions of disciplinary allegiances

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10. This is expanded in Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2004).

throughout the series. But as a starting point, I would ask, What would be lost by positing these genealogies? Or perhaps, What choice do we have?

FH: Where do you stand on that, given that this genealogy is a modernist project?

JE: Well, it is modernist in some senses but not in others. My text is American-style sociology in some respects: the final section on skill is wholly outside modernism, and the terms the journalists whom I quote tend to use could be found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourses on art. There is also material in the section on politics that is outside modernism, as Arpad has pointed out. But I also take your point: the motive for arranging history this way, and the value I am putting on the project, could be seen as modernist, but even then I am not convinced it is adequate to call it modernist. Classification is an academic pursuit, but it is shared by medieval theology and by Linnaeus, for example.

FH: Yet you did make a claim for neutrality, and so I am wondering how one might achieve that.

JE: Well, the lecture is not meant to be neutral in the way that an anthropologist from Mars would be neutral; however, I do pay attention to the quantity of literature that is produced in support of the different theories, and in that sense

I'm trying to be neutral the way an American quantitative sociologist might be. I was also trying not to say too much about what I think optimal genealogies might be.

FH: But that neutrality does make it feel like a modernist project.

JE: Perhaps. I think this exchange raises the most interesting problem of all: given that we're partly inside the problem we wish to describe, how can we tell that our investigation is compromised? Say I am partly impelled by modernism to think about history through genealogies: is it enough to just state that fact in order to cast doubt on the project? Maybe it's a dogma in the humanities that the demonstration of the double bind is sufficient to cast doubt on an inquiry — but I would note that not every attempt to explain something from the inside is ruined by that fact alone. Some speakers who are coming later in this series may not want to play the topographic game (I would prefer that to the genealogical game) at all; but if that is because they see this lecture as tainted by modernism, it will be necessary to ask if, in their own work, the stain of topography is wholly absent.

PH: Just to return to something that was said earlier: there is another possible story of stories, which is the institutional approach. Where is the center of the art world? That is a set of stories which is a possible category that does not fit with

the ones you are positing. It is a boring, pragmatic kind of story, one that Serge Guilbaut has built a career on. But that argument is a kind of postmodernist argument: that it's not all about formalism, or the aesthetic aspirations of art, but about how the art was received, how the institutional critique happened ...

JE: I would like to think, though, that to support a storytelling of that sort it would be necessary to refer to the systems of value that formed the consensus in any given case, and those systems would lead you back to the sorts of questions we have been discussing.

PH: Can I ask about skill? There are other things going on in skill than the ones you mention: there's modernist skill, conceptual skill ...

JE: I think that's definitely true. Because I am writing to some degree as a sociologist, I would need to know whether there is a broad enough use of those other senses of skill so that they could be heard above the millions who praise "skill" in the sense of realism. If the subject were skill per se, outside this occasion, then the various kinds of skill would certainly all be relevant. That is a live issue in art pedagogy, where people wonder whether conceptual skill (or skill at using a digital video editing software, or skill at managing a collaborative event) can be analogous to,

and even supplant, skill in the more popular or traditional sense of a toolbox of mimetic strategies.<sup>11</sup>

JJ: I was thinking about how the different distinctions you make in the first part of the paper can be matched to different philosophical innovations. The scholar who says modernism started with the Renaissance could be correlated with rationalism (so a philosopher might say); the claim that modernism started a hundred years later could be explained similarly; the phenomenological claim about modernism associated with Michael Fried could be correlated with empiricism.

JE: Just after the lecture, Tony O'Connor suggested that what I was calling "skill" could be explained best by recourse to R.G. Collingwood. I'd forgotten that connection, but I think he is right, and I am adding a note in the text. Still, Tony's comment and the parallels you've just made have me wondering about the limits of the utility of philosophic explanations. Collingwood is only connected by a thin thread to contemporary talk about skill: it's a pragmatic problem, and also a problem of discerning substantive differences between discourses.

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11. Thus Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), wondered how he could have obtained an M.F.A. degree in sculpture without learning the fundamental techniques of sculptural media.

- JJ: What is the motivation to call these innovations “births of modernism”? From the outside, speaking as a philosopher, I would say that modernism is made to stand for certain senses of innovation, and those senses can be assigned to philosophic moments. Modernism seems to be dependent on what one thinks the most significant innovation may have been.
- JE: There is a difference between wanting to understand how modernism has been taken, and making a decision about it, based on an intellectual history that comes, at least nominally, from the outside. From a philosophic standpoint you have a series of problems that can perhaps be solved. But from a historical standpoint you have a series of misunderstandings that have histories. To me this is a problem that will shadow the entire series: everything having to do with modernism can be redescribed as a philosophic issue ... what needs to be raised is what an account of these historical phenomena that came from a philosophic standpoint could be used to do, and for whom they might be useful or apposite. Imagine a text in this lecture series, written by an aesthetician, with aesthetic categories, with historical examples appended to them. For whom is that the narrative of their experience, their place in history? That is the way I think I would resist the notion that this is a philosophic enterprise.

