Goals and Limits of Formalism (Berlin, 28 Nov 14)

JFK Institute for North American Studies, Freie Universitat, Berlin, Germany, Nov 28, 2014

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Symposium: Goals and Limits of Formalism in the Interpretation of American Art

Presently, there is a renewed interest in formalism as a self-critical theory, one that is not only attentive to its own historical development (going back further than 1940), but also alert to its possible methodological restrictions.

The years spanning the publication of Clement Greenberg's "Towards a Newer Laocoon" in 1940 to Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" in 1967 witnessed the consolidation of formalist criticism as the most intellectually exacting - and institutionally powerful - framework for understanding modernist art in the United States. At the same time, those years are characterized by various challenges to the authority of formalist criticism. For some post-Abstract Expressionist artists, the modernism endorsed by Greenberg and Fried seemed limited and limiting. Unable to acknowledge its entrenched assumptions and dogmatic protocols, formalism appeared by 1960 to have become a regulative, strictly codified set of technical procedures built upon a teleological view of artistic development. Consequently there emerged various artistic practices and theoretical frameworks--fueled by a transformation of the cultural landscape in the years after the World War II--aimed at rehabilitating the seemingly lost criticality of art, first by rejecting formalist autonomy and second by reconnecting artistic practice to the social and political dimensions of "everyday life".

But have not the typical complaints against formalism in turn become entrenched as uncontested foundations for the narrative of mid-century American art? Has the postmodern critique of formalist criticism obscured its gains? Arguably, advocates of postmodernism misconstrued or even denied certain issues fundamental to the interpretation of art around mid-century, such as intention, autonomy, and expression. In this regard, the perceived problems of formalism remain inadequately addressed by its critics. In particular, the apparent contradiction in formalist criticism between aesthetic autonomy and political commitment merits reconsideration. Insofar as the autonomy of the work of art stood for the independence of art's meaning from the viewer's experience, it provided a significant counterweight to the growing tendency, during the 1960s, to regard the meaning of the work of art as open to the contingent contexts of its reception, rather than fixed and determined by an agent's intention. If modernism can be defined by its preoccupation with the relation between the work of art and its beholders, such that the independence of the one from the other generates and sustains both communication and the interpretation of meaning, then formalism can be seen to provide the most compelling account of that relation.

Sponsored by the Terra Foundation for American Art, this symposium features papers that present formalist accounts of particular works of art and that reveal the gains and limits of what formalism can accomplish with regard to the disciplines of historical and cultural analysis.

Schedule of Presentations

10:00-10:25
Gregor Stemmrich (Freie UniversitÃ¤t)
"Modernism/Literalism/Postmodernism: Regarding Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953)"

10:30-10:55
Winfried Fluck (Freie UniversitÃ¤t)
"Art and Narrative"

11:00-11:25
Graham Bader (Rice University and Humboldt UniversitÃ¤t)
"Lichtenstein's Touch"

11:30-11:55
Eva Ehninger (Bern University)
"Continuous Project: Formalism and the Issue of Painting"

13:45-14:10
Regine Prange (Goethe-UniversitÃ¤t)
"Andy Warhol's 'Flatness': In Defense of a Materialist Formalism"

14:15-14:35
Ralph Ubl (University of Basel)
"Good Objecthood: Michael Fried in 1966"

14:40-15:05
Michael Schreyach (Trinity University and Freie UniversitÃ¤t)
"Perceiving and Interpreting Abstract Expressionist Paintings"

15:10-15:35
Magdalena Nieslony (University of Heidelberg)
"Perspective as Form

Reference:
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