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走近现代艺术

Modern Art

A Very Short Introduction

David Cottington 著

朱扬明 译

外语教学与研究出版社

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

H319.4/1504
:17
2008

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北京 BEIJING

京权图字: 01 - 2006 - 6848

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

走近现代艺术 = VSI: Modern Art / 科廷顿(Cottington, D.)著; 朱扬明译. — 北京: 外语教学与研究出版社, 2008.10
(斑斓阅读·外研社英汉双语百科书系)
ISBN 978-7-5600-7859-5

I. 走… II. ①科… ②朱… III. ①英语—汉语—对照读物 ②艺术—研究—现代 IV. H319.4: J

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2008) 第 154777 号

出 版 人: 于春迟
项目负责: 姚 虹 周渝毅
责任编辑: 刘 旭 周子平
美术编辑: 牛茜茜
版式设计: 袁 璐
出版发行: 外语教学与研究出版社
社 址: 北京市西三环北路 19 号 (100089)
网 址: <http://www.fltrp.com>
印 刷: 中国农业出版社印刷厂
开 本: 787×980 1/32
印 张: 9.5
版 次: 2008 年 10 月第 1 版 2008 年 10 月第 1 次印刷
书 号: ISBN 978-7-5600-7859-5
定 价: 18.00 元

* * *
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版权保护办公室举报电话: (010)88817519
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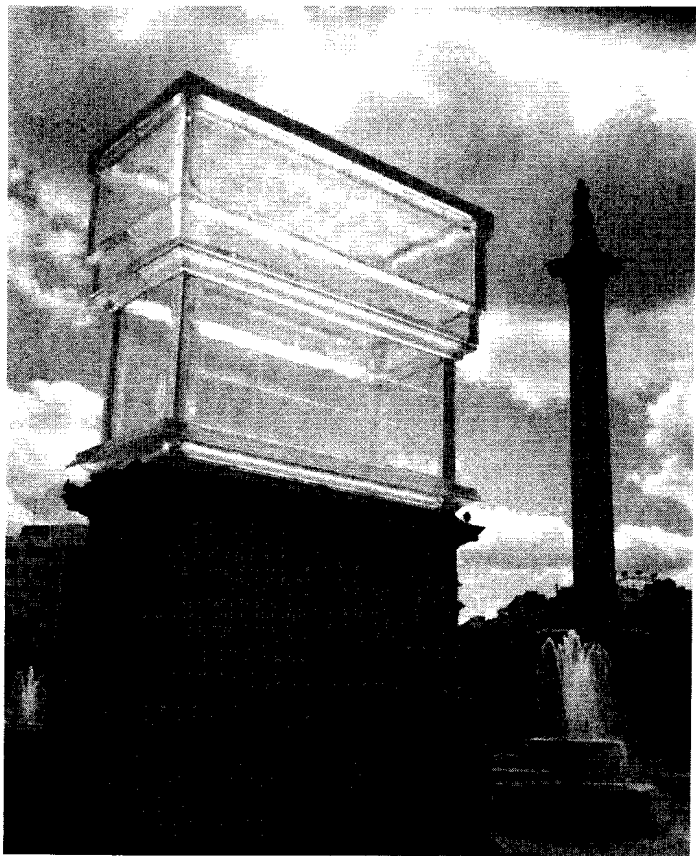
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Kemper Jr., through the Crosby
Kemper Foundation, The Arthur
and Helen Baer Charitable
Foundation, Mr. and Mrs.
Van-Lear Black III, Anabeth
Calkins and John Weil, Mr. and
Mrs. Gary Wolff, the Honorable
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Museum Purchase, Dr. and
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Introduction: modern art – monument or mockery?

When Rachel Whiteread's sculpture *Monument* (Plate I) was installed on the empty fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square on 4 June 2001, the response reported in, and offered by, British national newspapers the next day was entirely predictable. Like the two previous temporary incumbents of this site (works by contemporary artists Mark Wallinger and Bill Woodrow), *Monument* – a clear resin cast of the plinth itself, inverted and set on top of it – was immediately pilloried: condemned as 'banal', 'gimmicky', and 'meaningless' by the *Daily Mail*, and disparagingly likened to a fishtank and a bathroom cubicle by members of the public, according to the *Times*. Some newspapers also quoted the supportive – but also vague and defensive – comments of members of the cultural establishment. The then Culture Secretary Chris Smith, Director of Tate Modern Lars Nittve, and the Tate's Director of Programmes Sandy Nairne praised *Monument* variously as 'beautiful', 'intelligent', and 'dazzling' in its simplicity and conceptual clarity. They made no effort, though, to answer the condemnations. Nor did they point to the meanings about monuments and their purposes that Whiteread's piece had provocatively suggested by echoing and inverting the plinth itself.

Such a mismatch between the public's language of ridicule and establishment apologetics has, of course, been characteristic of the relation between modern art and its popular audience for longer

now than anyone can remember. Recent instances such as Tracey Emin's *My Bed* and Gavin Turk's bin bags merely reprise the 'scandals' of previous generations, of which the fuss over the Tate's purchase in 1976 of Carl André's stack of firebricks entitled *Equivalent VIII* (1966) – or, to go further back, Marcel Duchamp's submission of a urinal to a New York sculpture exhibition in 1918 – are perhaps the most notorious. Yet judging by the growth in the number of visitors to exhibitions and museums of modern art, its popularity has never been greater. Between 1996 and 2000 the number of visitors to the Tate's annual Turner Prize exhibition, for instance, more than doubled, while a recent Matisse-Picasso exhibition broke Tate's records, and the opening of Tate Modern itself in May 2000 was the big success story of the millennium year. New art museums and galleries are opening everywhere to much acclaim, and with equally impressive visitor numbers.

Modern Art Why this contradiction? Why on the one hand is there such bewilderment at, even contempt for, every latest publicly unveiled example of 'modern art', and on the other such a growing interest in the subject and the experience of it? These questions are central to this book, the primary purpose of which is to interrogate the *idea* of modern art – to explore why this art was made, what it means, and what makes it modern. And they lead on to others. Not *all* art that's been made in the last hundred years or so is accepted as modern. We need to explore the complex question of how the art that *is* selected as such, and that has until the late 20th century been defined as 'modernist', relates to the dynamic cultural, social, economic, and political changes in the Western world that have been experienced as 'modernity' for the last 150 years. What has made a work of art *qualify* as modernist (or fail to)? According to whom, and just how has this selection been made? Does it continue to be so (what's the relation between modern and contemporary art)? And *whose* modernity does it represent, or respond to? Finally, the buzzword 'postmodernism': what does this mean for art? Is 'postmodernist' art no longer modern, or just no longer

modernist – in either case, why, and what does this claim mean, both for art and for the idea of ‘the modern’?

As soon as we begin to explore this set of questions, one thing immediately becomes clear: the public’s bewilderment at modern art has been a constant throughout the last 150 years – ever since ‘avant-garde’ artists started to challenge traditional art practices in a self-conscious and radical way. *Indeed the two terms are almost interchangeable: ‘modern art’ is, by definition, ‘avant-garde’ in its qualities, aspirations, and associations, while what ‘the avant-garde’ makes is, necessarily, ‘modern art’.* This connection, then, is crucial, and it is therefore worth taking, as our starting point for this exploration, the question of the origins and meaning of ‘the avant-garde’. The first aspect of this term that we might notice is the way, in common usage, it slips between adjective and noun – as in the italicized sentence above, in which the adjective ‘avant-garde’ refers to qualities, and the noun ‘the avant-garde’ to a notional community of self-consciously aesthetically radical artists.

Distinguishing between these two will help us to understand the term better, because historically (to put it most simply) the adjective preceded the noun. That is to say, the qualities and aspirations of art that we call ‘avant-garde’ – art that sought to say something new in its time, to acknowledge the implications of new visual media, to stake a claim for aesthetic autonomy, or to challenge prevailing values – emerged, in the mid-19th century, before there were enough aesthetically radical artists to make up a community. That community itself emerged around the turn of the 20th century, and this is the moment when the word ‘avant-garde’ first became associated with new art, by its critics and supporters alike. The community quickly became a frame of reference for that art, its very existence influencing, in ways we shall examine, the forms that it took and what its meanings were taken to be.

The reasons why some artists began to have ‘avant-garde’ aspirations in the mid-19th century are complex. Summarizing broadly, we can say that the development of capitalism in modern

Western societies over the course of that century, and the steady encroachment of commercial values upon all aspects of the cultural practices of those societies, provoked some artists to seek to escape the conventions, the commodification, and the complacencies of an 'establishment' art in which those values were inscribed. Writers such as Baudelaire and Flaubert, and painters such as Manet, found their very existence as members of a materialistic, status-seeking bourgeoisie problematic – their distaste for such values not only isolating them from existing social and artistic institutions but also generating a deeply felt sense of psychic alienation. This double alienation, it has been argued, was the well-spring of avant-gardism. Yet there were other factors. It is no coincidence that these three individuals were French, for while France was not the only rapidly modernizing Western society, Paris was regarded as the cultural capital of Europe, with an unrivalled cultural bureaucracy, art schools, and career structure. Aspirant artists and writers flocked to the city from all over the world in the hope of grasping the glittering prizes it promised. Most were unsuccessful, finding their paths to fame choked by their own numbers and obstructed by protocols of privilege. So they sought alternative channels of advancement, exhibiting together in informal groupings, networking between their multiplying café-based milieux to promote, compare, and contest new ideas and practices, about which they wrote in a proliferating range of ephemeral little magazines, with consequences that we shall explore in Chapter 1, for this hive of activity was where both avant-garde art and the avant-garde community – and thus, 'modern art' – had their origin.

Yet the alienation the avant-garde felt was not a one-way experience. Fundamental to the bewilderment that underpins much public response to modern art is a suspicion of its sincerity, of the viewer being 'conned' or being found wanting – of this art being made by artists hungry for notoriety and sold through dealers whose main interest is in making money – a suspicion that is only heightened by revelations of the role of conspicuous art dealers and/or collectors such as Charles Saatchi in its promotion and