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By Gary Pearson, Associate Professor, Department of Creative Studies, UBC Okanagan Campus, Kelowna BC, Canada

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PRELUDE

More than any other art form sculpture deserves the historical distinction of being the most adaptive and experimental of artistic disciplines. If sculpture at the present time seems set on redefining itself again it is in keeping with long standing traditions. Of late it appears artists are doing so in the context of many key formal and stylistic tropes of 20th century European/North American Modernism. That early-mid Modernist avant-garde art experiments were inflected by the cultural appropriation of non-Western art and cultural forms and expression is to rightly acknowledge their cultural subordination to ‘modernist totalization’¹ but it is also to recognize the enduring significance of how these forms, that is to say how alternative ways of working and ways of thinking promoted the expansion and pluralization of mainstream Modern art. And now in the 21st century contemporary art is ‘restless’, has ‘unfixed boundaries’, ‘multiplicities’, is in the state of ‘permanent transition’, and the way ‘[...] it is practiced and communicated, contemporary art tends to be much more resistant to global totalization.’² Art in the 21st century is indeed restless. It was restless in the 20th century too, and earlier. Artists have a lot to account for in the production of their work but fortunately they’re not on that journey alone.

BACKGROUND

A lot has changed in the last 100 years. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) is without a doubt the most frequently cited artist who early in his career, was not only influenced by his early modernist predecessors, but freely appropriated artistic motifs from ancient European, and non-European cultures. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, 1907, in its early “Iberian” state (Picasso had bought two pre-Roman Iberian sculpted heads from Géry-Piéret in March 1907) demonstrates a raw, stylized figure group, now excluding the sailor who was scripted into earlier designs.³ In May or June that year he visited the

¹ Enwezor, Okwui, “The Postcolonial Constellation”, p. 222

² Ibid, p. 222.

³ *Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective*, Edited by William Rubin, New York, The Museum of Modern Art Publishers, 1980, p. 86, Chronology.

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ethnographic museum at Palais du Trocadéro, 'where he has a "revelation" about African sculpture'.⁴ After numerous re-workings *Les Femmes d'Alger* was completed in July 1907, and remarkably, was not exhibited publicly until 1916. While Picasso has denied it, it is fairly evident this stylistically disjunctive composition openly borrowed from African art tradition (Babangi, French Congo).⁵

Less well known is that Picasso was also actively producing carved wooden sculptures at this time; working in Gósol, a village in Catalonia, in the Pyrenees, for a few months in 1906, he created numerous pieces variously resembling votive and totemic objects. Catalan writer and art historian Josep Palau i Fabre posits that the influence for these sculptures may very well have been the totem poles of 'Canadian Indians' (Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations), suggesting that Picasso might have seen, '[...] the great Canadian totem poles which were exhibited in Barcelona in 1892 on the occasion of the third centenary of Columbus's discovery of America'.⁶ Apparently these totem poles remained on view for quite a long time, and as Paulau i Fabre also informs us: '[Joaquín] Torres García (1874–1949) also saw them and on returning to Uruguay intended to lay the foundations of an autochthonous American art, so he built elementary structured figures on analogous principles'.⁷ Torres Garcia didn't actually make that trip back to Uruguay until 1934, at the age of sixty, however he did establish the "Taller Torres Garcia" in Montevideo in 1943, a school modelled in part on the Bauhaus, which proved to be a game changer for future generations of art students. In a December 4, 1992 New York Times article art critic Holland Cotter is quoted as saying that:

"It must have been an amazing place to study. The pages from Torres-García's notebooks, with their collages of Egyptian, Greek, Indian, pre-Columbian and European art, indicate the invigorating breadth of his interests, and his call for a Latin American art to be

⁴ Ibid, p. 87.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Palau i Fabre, Josep, *Picasso Cubism, 1907 – 1917*, Barcelona, Ediciones Polígrafa, S.A., 1990; reprinted 1996, Könemann Publishers. P. 57.

⁷ Ibid, p. 57.

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"created from the bottom to the top" surely quickened the pulse of the young people who came to him." ⁸

That the 19th c. European artistic fascination with the "Orient" was later expanded to include the "Dark Continent" Africa is well documented. Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) travelled to North Africa in 1832,

and is said to have produced over 100 paintings and drawings from his experiences there. His "romance with the Orient" alone has probably produced more dissertations, book chapters, exhibitions, and academic lectures than most artists, successful ones too, would even dare dream about. Consider also that Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) lived in Harar, Ethiopia from 1880 until his hospitalization and death in Marseille in 1891. Moreover, by the time "Les Demoiselles" was completed even artists André Derain (1880-1954) and Henri Matisse (1869-1954) for example, were already collecting African sculpture. Examples of European and non-European cultural correspondences abound. We know of the influence of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and the Symbolist aesthetic of the Nabis on the art of Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), however it was the example of Japanese art that had the biggest impact on his work. Helen Giambruni writes that, 'In Bonnard's case, Japanese woodblock prints provided him with the model he needed for an art at once decorative in the Nabis sense and – equally important – grounded in reality [...]. He explained later of Japanese prints that "Gauguin and Sérusier referred in reality to the past. But there what I had before me was something fully alive and also extremely skillful." ⁹

Japanese goods had been exported to France since the 16th century, and by 1862 there were three shops selling Japanese objects in Paris. Japanese prints were particularly prized and influential, so much so that, 'A group of printmakers and painters formed the *Société Jinglar* which met monthly at the house of M. L. Solon in Sèvres, with the object of furthering the knowledge of Japanese art. The members wore *kimono* and ate with *hashi* (chopsticks) off a specially made service decorated with designs of animals by Bracquemond largely copied from Hokusai."¹⁰ The exchange of knowledge and the intersection of culture between East and West can quite accurately be traced back to the 6th and 7th centuries BC when the Scythians, in search of gold, journeyed to the Eastern shores of the Black Sea. Although they didn't reach India they were

⁸ <http://www.ceciliadetorres.com/taller>

⁹ Giambruni, Helen, "Domestic Scenes", in *Pierre Bonnard, The Graphic Art*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989. P. 46.

¹⁰ Impey, Oliver, *Chinoiserie, The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, p. 189.

close enough to the Asian empire to establish trading contacts which by the 2nd century BC had produced the trading routes of the Great Silk Road.

But to return to Picasso. By the time he settled in Paris in 1904 he had visited the city on three other occasions, to see the huge Daumier exhibition at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1901, Cezanne at the Salon d'Automne, exhibitions by Redon and Gauguin, and the work by other giants of the late-19th century avant-garde such as Van Gogh and Seurat. He was particularly struck by Gauguin's drawings of Tahitian women, and the large allegorical painting *Who are we, where have we come from, where are we going?* from 1898. And later, in the spring of 1906 Picasso saw the large exhibition of Iberian sculpture at the Louvre, which had a profound effect on him. In her essay "Picasso and Frenhofer: The Idea of Modern Art" art historian Dore Ashton writes:

'But everything in his [Picasso] previous development had prepared him for the impact. The rounded volumes of the simplified heads and the stylized features were the common characteristics of primitive art that had already been extolled by Gauguin. Picasso himself had vaguely worked the year before in linear simplification of the human body. The venturing forth in 1906 grew out of the fusion of a painter's need to push forward with formal inventions and his desire to make a fresh start. All painters know this experience. What happened in the decisive adventure, which was to become *Les Femmes d'Alger*, was probably much as Rilke had said: "Balzac sensed long ahead that in painting, something so tremendous can suddenly present itself, which no one can handle..." The fact that Picasso considered the *Femmes d'Alger* unresolved attests to the tremendousness of the adventure.

This initial break with his own conventions was aided by Picasso's increasing interest in African and Oceanic sculptures and masks. Two aspects of them were valuable to Picasso. On the one hand, they helped him to understand the plastic value of abstraction – of forms compiled with a sense of their own interior congruence. On the other, they were redolent of a fierce primitive truth that he had always sought out."¹¹

Dore Ashton goes on to describe Picasso's engagement with the peasants in the Catalan village of Gósol in 1906, his fascination with the 'magical' overtones of the Ivory Coast masks, and says that, 'The fusion of paradoxical interests the *Femmes d'Alger* represents is a profound reflection of Picasso's complexity. At its most intense, the painting speaks both of his longing for classical serenity and his desire for eruptive, clashing values that would assail complacent eyes.'¹²

¹¹ Ashton, Dore, "Picasso and Frenhofer: The Idea of Modern Art", *artscanada*, No. 236/237, September/October, 1980, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 6.

If all of this sounds resonant of art in the 21st century, 100 years since *Les Demoiselles* had its first public exhibition, it should come as no surprise. Artists have always been open to influence and in the Modern period, in the rise of the avant-garde, were exceptionally active in their search for incentives and artistic models that supported their desire to shed the dominate conventions of the time. Individual artistic sensibilities in part dictated and continues to dictate the orientation of that search, and for Picasso, and for others of his generation in France, Germany, Holland, the US, Russia and elsewhere, the common orientation was toward increasing creative liberties in addressing subject matter and toward abstraction and, as we know, sought inspiration from a diverse range of artists and other sources. With the exception of his late watercolors Cezanne was, like Picasso, a sculptural-minded painter. That is to say Cezanne's work is reliant on line contours, positive and negative volumes, hatching lines and flat chisel-like brush strokes. For these characteristics and for his concentrated fixation on the details of his subject matter Picasso recognized in Cezanne an artistic value that the option of going beyond actual experience didn't offer. Picasso's aesthetic and artistic temperament led him toward certain influences and grounded his art in drawing and sculptural values; thus the simplification of form, the emphasis on contour, the carving out of planar surfaces and volumes of *Les Demoiselles*.

ARTISTIC MODELS and CULTURAL CODES

The history of modernism is infinitely complex and full of contradictions. Mainstream modernist visual art originated in the post-Beaux-Arts avant-garde of the late 19th century largely in opposition to the Salon jury, which basically had the power to determine which artists had professional entrance to a career, and then effectively maintained control of those careers throughout the artists lives. Naturally it's more complicated than this, however in the late-19th century the time was ripe for the collapse of the Beaux-Arts system and for the birth of modern art.¹³ This momentous shift in art in the Western industrialized world was representative of artists looking outward rather than inward, replacing the prescriptive for the innovative and speculative. Modern arts increasing internationalization very quickly became more culturally reciprocal and cross-referenced, with traffic in ideas, models of production, aesthetics, and cultural expressions being exported from European cultural hubs such as Paris, Berlin, and Munich to far-flung locations around the world. These cultural intersections have, from a Western standpoint, been articulated by the philosophical origins of Modern art, which rest primarily with Immanuel Kant, representative of a stream of thought emphasizing the autonomy of art; and Friedrich Hegel, representing a symbolic expression, an expression that connects art to social history. The Kantian model represented an aesthetic of production, to include objective formal, material, and technical criteria leading to anticipated and measurable outcomes. A Hegelian model speaks to an aesthetic of reception, connecting it to subjectivity and the role of experience which, when attached to the influence of Marcel Duchamp, forged ties to conceptual

¹³ For more on the collapse of the Beaux-Art system and the birth of modern art read the 6-part series by Thierry de Duve, in Artforum Magazine, beginning in October 2013.

and minimalist art, and later to collaborative ventures, community based arts and social process. As Hal Foster points out:

‘Obviously both operations were crucial to the new discipline [art history] – the Kantian to distinguish art from other kinds of expression, the Hegelian to historicize it – but just as obviously the two operations were in tension, and this tension has run through the discipline like a fault line. On this fault-line art history seems contradictory, even oxymoronic: how can art be both autonomous in form and imbricated in social history? In *Principles of Art History* (1915) Wolfflin simply split the opposition: style has a “double root,” he claimed; an extrinsic one determined by individual and national character, and an intrinsic one driven by perceptual and formal pressures. Thereafter formalist critics like Greenberg tended to fold the extrinsic root into the intrinsic one, and to argue that, in the first instance, art constituted its own history.’¹⁴

There are other discourses that have contributed to this supposed contradiction, and, other fault lines. In his essay “The Postcolonial Constellation” Okwui Enwezor explains that:

‘The confrontation with African and Oceanic sculptures by European artists was a striking example from the “contact zone” of cultures. This encounter transformed the pictorial and plastic language of modern European painting and sculpture, hence deeply affecting its tradition. What is astonishing is the degree to which the artistic challenges posed by so-called primitive art to twentieth century European Modernism have subsequently been assimilated and subordinated to modernist totalization. Therein lies the fault line between imperial and postcolonial discourse, for to admit to the paradigmatic breach produced by the encounter between African sculptures and European artists would also be to question the narrative of modern art history. Nor should we forget that the non-Western objects in question were required to shed their utilitarian function and undergo a conversion from ritual objects of magic into reified objects of art. The remarkable import of this conversion is that the historical repercussion of the encounter has remained mostly confined to formal effects and thus formal analysis.’¹⁵

Enwezor presents a strong and well-founded argument, for the evidence of subordination of culturally specific meanings in the appropriation and adaptation of aboriginal and non-European forms and motifs in Modern art is easy to trace. The Surrealist Max Ernst (1891-1976) for example, who is credited for bringing frottage into the lexicon of modern art, was in addition to

¹⁴ Foster, Hal, *Design and Crime, And Other Diatribes*, New York, Verso Pub., 2002, pp. 85, 86.

¹⁵ Enwezor, Okwui, “The Postcolonial Constellation”, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 2008, pp. 211, 212

being a painter, a prolific sculptor and collector of aboriginal art and ethnological artifacts, including ‘[...]Hopi Kachina dolls, Northwest Coast crest and tourist poles, Papuan yam masks and a spirit figure, African masks and a pre-Columbian Peruvian textile.’¹⁶ Ernst’s sculptures, while evidencing a Surrealist juxtaposition of disparate forms and images, are clearly derivative of his collection of non-European tribal art and cultural artifacts. “Primitive art” as it was widely referred to right up until about 1980, was widely collected by the Surrealists and, as in the case of Max Ernst, exploited for its foreign, mysterious, magical appearance. Art historians and critics are also remiss in their failure to properly address cultural signifiers, often resorting to ambiguous and hyperbolic descriptions in accounting for symbolic figuration as built into for example, near abstract sculpture or painting. One would be hard pressed to find a stronger example of language that subordinates an appropriation (of appearances) of aboriginal art to modernist totalization than that found in art historian Dr. A. M. Hammacher’s description of *Figure*, 1926 – 30, a bronze sculpture (Coll. MoMA) about 38 inches in diameter and standing approximately 85 inches high, by Lithuanian born artist Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973).

‘Then, between the earlier liberating rhythm and these swelling volumes with a new dramatic element, there stands the strange and magical *Figure*, in which the open and closed are in equilibrium, and two equal components have been woven, at right angles, one into the other. The right angle and the cylindrical base combine the frontal with the all-sided. It culminates in the elliptical mask with the two pipe-like eyes. Nowhere in the sculpture of that period is there anything that can rival the clarity of this all-revealing, lucidly analyzed skeleton, the magic of this inscrutable intermediate being. Here, in this grandiose final figure of 1930, we see what has developed from the maquettes and finished versions of works like *Ploumanach* of 1926, inspired by the rocky coast of Brittany, and the 1921 maquette *Study for Garden Sculpture*.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, *Figure* is the only monument Lipchitz conceived on a cylindrical or circular base. Wholly symmetrical, it reminds one of a human being without being one – rather, it is some intermediate creature with a magical gaze. As a result, it seems to cast a spell, to have something of the repellent and demonic. There is a psychological association with the world of the totem and taboo, and accordingly the figure is often referred to as Lipchitz’s *Totem*. However, in view of his work before and after, we may ask whether it is not going too far to look upon it as such.’¹⁷

Dr. Hammacher, to his credit, quite earnestly wove a captivating, albeit adjective heavy descriptive passage on Lipchitz’s sculptural monument, cleverly evoking a “primitive”

¹⁶ Tousley, Nancy, “The Sculpture of Max Ernst”, *artscanada*, No. 238/239, December 1980/January 1981, p. 34.

¹⁷ Hammacher, A. M., *Jacques Lipchitz*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1975, p. 66.

dimension without ever directly acknowledging the artist's indebtedness to his source material. But what one might ask, was his source material? Is it possible that Lipchitz "invented" the 'elliptical mask with the two pipe-like eyes', that in its appearance the mask represented or stood for 'some intermediate creature with a magical gaze'? And by extension, to suggest that the look of the "primitive" may have become, by 1930, so assimilated in the popular cultural imagination that 'it' had been reduced to the level of the cliché; a stock subject type that artists who aspired to be seen to be conversant with the exotic and otherworldly might use, with their requisite stylistic adaptations, at their own leisure.

Today an activity like this seems grossly inappropriate, unethical even, but image culture is cannibalistic; once consumed, images are easily subsumed back into that very culture, by and for reasons such as transformation, exploitation, inspiration, assimilation, and innovation. There are, for all the right reasons, things that are deemed to be culturally specific, and sacred in the world, and being respectful of those determinations is a collective social responsibility. Understanding and engaging trans-historical and trans-cultural exchange is quite different in 2016 than it was say in 1876 or 1916. In an essay titled "Transculturality – The Form of Cultures Today", Wolfgang Welsch, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Magdeburg writes:

'The [traditional] concept [of single cultures] is characterized by three elements: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. Firstly, every culture is supposed to mold the whole life of the people concerned and all its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture. The concept is *unifactory*. Secondly, culture is always to be the "*culture of a folk*". It represents, as Herder says, "the flower" of a folk's existence. Thirdly, a decided *delimitation* towards the outside issues: Every culture is, as the culture of one folk, to be and to remain distinguished and separated from other folk's cultures. All three elements of this traditional concept have become untenable today.'¹⁸

In his essay Professor Welsch distinguishes the differences between transcultural (characterized by cultural hybridization), intercultural (cultures constituted as spheres), and multicultural (different cultures living together within one society). All of these categories could be said to exist today, but trans-culturality as Welsch argues 'is on the agenda', and exists through the process of the 'inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures', and that 'cultures today are extremely entangled with and penetrate one another.'¹⁹ Welsch explains that trans-culturality

¹⁸ Welsch, Wolfgang, "Transculturality – The Form of Cultures Today", *Le Shuttle, Tunnelrealitäten Paris – London – Berlin*, Berlin, Künstlerhaus Bethanien GmbH Publisher, 1995, pp. 15, 16. Professor Welsch makes reference to Johann Gottfried Herder's multi-volume book *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, the first volume of which was published in Riga and Leipzig in 1784. The first English edition appeared as *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, New York, Bergman Publishers, 1966.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.

does not mean homogenization or cultural uniformity, but rather that the ‘mode’ of diversity is altered, and that ‘The mechanics of differentiation no longer follow geographical or national stipulations, but processes of cultural interchange.’²⁰ In his concept of “altermodernity” Nicolas Bourriaud echoed and expanded on Welsch’s arguments in effort to define a condition of art and culture in the context of globalization. He said that:

‘If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterized by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomenon in origins and identities. [...] The artist becomes ‘homo viator (sic)’, the prototype of the contemporary traveller whose passage through signs and formats refers to a contemporary experience of mobility, travel and transpassing (sic). This evolution can be seen in the way works are made: a new type of form is appearing, the journey-form, made of lines drawn in both space and time, materializing trajectories rather than destinations. The form of the work expresses a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time. Altermodern art is thus read as a hypertext; artists translate and transcode information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history.’²¹

Bourriaud further argues that ‘Multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolization: artists are now starting from a globalized state of culture [...]’ and that ‘This new universalism is based on translations, subtitled and generalized dubbing.’²² Global interconnectedness across time and space is facilitated today through travel and migration, the internet and media communication technologies. But to cast our glance back: artists who were instrumental in founding different avant-gardes of the past, such as Cubism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop art, weren’t naive enough to think they were creating new artistic orders that would displace or make irrelevant previous avant-garde movements. They were quite aware of the layers of history and cultural expressions underlying their influences, and further how their adventures might provide timely reference points for future generations of artists. This is not an attempt to historicize art through the avant-garde but rather to restate that in the main artists were not trying to “start over”, or consumed by subtracting or eliminating, or necessarily even radicalizing art of

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 25, 26.

²¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, “Altermodern explained: manifesto”, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto> The manifesto functioned as a press release for the 2009 Tate Triennial, for which Bourriaud was the invited curator. His book *Radicant*, published in 2009 by Sternberg Press, describes in full his concept of altermodernity.

²² Ibid., “Altermodern explained: manifesto”.

the past; it was in principle about taking something, doing something to it, and then doing something to it again (qua Rauschenberg). Radicalization is a relative term so to be sure there were radical moments in modernism. History has proven that artists are able and have been willing to push boundaries, even before the collapse of the Beaux-Arts Academy. Artists will forge new paradigms, but paradigms originate and exist within fields and they can, and indeed have in turn become new fields themselves, as for example land art, or installation art, eco-arts, performance art, or relational arts. All for the most part derivations of sculpture. This is to say that the work artists produce is always produced in context, in the context of past and present art and culture, and in the context of political, economic and other realities that may impact on the ideas that form arts production and attendant meanings. Bourriaud says as much in his Preface to *Radicant*: ‘Finally, during the writing of this book, I have tried never to lose sight of an avid obsession: to look at the world through that optical tool that is art. In order to sketch a worldly and worldwide art criticism in which works are in dialogue with the contexts in which they are produced.’²³

ARTISTS

In 1967-68 Richard Serra compiled a long list of transitive verbs, a working notation as it was described, which included identifying specific actions such as “to roll”, “to fold”, “to bend”, “to twist”, “to cut”, “to crumble”, and so on. As Rosalind Krauss points out one would normally expect to find an inventory of forms in a sculptor’s notebook, not a list of ‘behavioural attitudes’.²⁴ The actions Serra listed corresponded to his, and other sculptors working and/or production methodologies in the engagement of materials, whether something is actually fabricated or not. Sculpture has been and still is, properly speaking, object based. A sculptural object’s identity is articulated by its form-space relationship, its material composition, its production process, size and internal scale, its optical import, its connections to paradigms in and out of the field, its cultural and authorial context, and by its reflexive signifiers and meanings.

Sculpture is the most experimental and adaptive of the arts. It has, as has been pointed out spawned numerous experimental avenues of inquiry, many of which have expanded to become artistic fields themselves; the play on words (the expanded field) is intentional for its important to recognize that sculptures off-shoots such as installation art or relational arts are frequently referenced for their genre-breaking hybridity and interdisciplinarity. Contemporary sculpture as object is also often characterized by its mixed-genre and multiple reference points, founded in

²³ Bourriaud, Nicolas, “Preface”, *Radicant*, Introductory excerpts available at: <http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1224&bookId=119&l=en>

²⁴ Krauss, Rosalind, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, MASS., The MIT Press, 1981, 2nd printing, p. 276. A partial list is included in Krauss’s book, the full list was originally published in Gregoire Müller, *The New Avant-Garde*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1973.

areas of research, form, and meaning. The work of contemporary artist Dora Economou, who lives in Athens, is testimony to this fact. Economou is one of contemporary arts leading sculptors, who did her BFA at the Athens School of Fine Arts, and an MFA at Pratt Institute, NY. In a conversation with her a few years ago she described her undergraduate education as being quite formal, and that there was an emphasis on working with a variety of materials and fabrication techniques. The program at Pratt Institute also has a reputation for formalist and materialist oriented pedagogy. Of note, Dora Economou was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 2000 enabling her to study in the US. These are not insignificant instances in this artist's development, for her artistic practice diverse as it is, to involve sculptural objects, installation, drawing based arts, costumes, set design, fashion arts, and poetry, are united by her lively imagination, narrative constructs, her facility in working with diverse materials in singular or combined applications, and in her unparalleled compositional skill in the design of single object and multiple-unit sculptures. Economou's education did not turn her into a formalist, on the contrary; however, it did contribute to her very informed sensibility and knowledge of combining sculptural elements, often of great diversity, into an integrated whole. The emphasis on self-referentiality as a historical cornerstone of formalist doctrine, is for Economou simply another mechanism in the system of dialogical negotiations that produce an art work. In an interview with Maria Villa for the catalogue accompanying her exhibition "Dora Economou, Naturalist", at Ribot Arte Contemporanea, in Milan, 2015-16, the artist said, in reply to a question about the 'particular rhythm' evidenced in the text she wrote for the catalogue, and in certain objects in the composition of the exhibition:

'I like building the modules that will eventually build the object. In the end each object can work separately, but its parts can work separately too and it's the combination and the punctuation of the parts and objects that every time makes the piece. It's very much like preparing a fine dinner. First you decide on a set of ingredients. And you have endless possibilities. But so as to end up with something that makes sense and challenges the senses, you have to concentrate, combine and compose the colors, the textures, the flavors, the temperatures, the positions. And edit. This is always the hardest part. Sometimes less is more but it hurts to leave objects out of the show.'²⁵

In the studio installation *A Modern Hug*, Athens, 2013, a number of sculptures in singular and combined materials are grouped in close proximity and are floor bound and folded, stacked, wall suspended, leaning and assembled. This studio installation presented an eclectic ensemble of objects whose collective identity was by appearance alone anchored by the color white and the material paper. Other materials included: silicone, pins, putty, plexiglass, synthetic wadding, and KAPA mount – a light weight foam board with aluminum reinforced liners. The installation is titled after one of the individual sculptures, a piece modelled after a guitar body sans neck. It is 3-unit free standing sculpture fully formed from paper measuring 43x30x10 cm. There are no

²⁵ <http://www.en-ribotgallery.com/#!/dora-economou/j5h1s>

embellishments in this exquisitely crafted form. Paper has been cut, folded, and pressed into 3-dimensional volumes that, in the transformation from flat 2-dimensional sheets into sculptural objects have retained the paper's fundamental material and tensile identity. The sculpture *A Modern Hug* has in a peculiar way a resonance of intimacy that is not unlike Brancusi's many variations of *The Kiss*. A piece titled *The Prairies*, from the same exhibition and also constructed entirely from paper, is a horizontal floor-bound object measuring 185x80x11 cm.



A Modern Hug, 2013, Studio Installation, Athens.

Photograph courtesy of the Artist

The Prairies consists of two elongated and overlaid rectangles of paper that have been pressed to form a topographical surface of multiple modules of convex and concave undulations. Most interesting is Economou's use of two sheets, as if to denote that there is something else beneath the surface of "the prairies", another layer that warrants reference, and our attention. Aside from the horizontality of landscape this work, in reference to the language of sculpture represents the "anti-monument", the inversion not only of sculpture's historic tradition of verticality, but also in reference to the use of scale and the analogical role of materials. The artist has acknowledged the influence of 1970's art on her practice, post-minimalist practitioners who worked in mixed-material and hand-crafted approaches, and one senses that sculpture's "nomadic state", as Rosalind Krauss has described it, backgrounds Dora Economou's inventiveness and fluency in

addressing materials, scale, and spatial orientation in the visualization and physical translation of the subject and its expressive propositions.



The Prairies, 2013

Photograph courtesy of the Artist

Sculptures nomadic state has been liberating for many artists, including painters. Katherine Pickering, who lives in Vernon, British Columbia, is a painter. She has a BFA from the University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, and an MFA from Concordia University in Montreal. Throughout her art education she has been preoccupied with the art of painting, and in particular abstract painting and its capacity to address phenomenological experience. Even today the concept of abstraction remains liberating, but like sculptures nomadic state requires an investigative approach and knowledge of the preferred paradigmatic locus and the of field. Originally her focus was on the landscape subject as sites in which transitory conditions of climate, color and light provided tactile and optical basis for the exploration of painted abstractions. It should be noted that in recent years we've seen a return to abstraction in contemporary painting, much of it market driven and much of it with mixed results. In spite of abstract arts relatively short history there is evidence that the level of interrogation of key models and standard bearers of the form is not strong. The net result with certainly many exceptions is abstract art that appears prescriptive and generic.

Not so with Pickering, as she continues to pursue her research into abstraction and now alternating between the flat picture plane and the sculptural object. Her investigations into perception and light deprivation, specifically through observation of the phenomenal world under night time conditions continues. In an artist statement she explains that in a recent series of work '[...] there is an emphasis on dark places: underground settings and cosmic landscapes –

spaces where depiction is loosened from its referential exactitude as a result of the failure of vision brought about by darkness.²⁶ These works often start out as paintings on stretched canvas.

Based on recalled instances of perceptual experience she improvises applications of acrylic color by pouring, scraping, and brushing; then, when the results offer up a dominant and suggestive design the artist then cuts this shape out, soaks it in water and models the wet canvas painting into a sculptural object.



Untitled, 2015

Photograph courtesy of the Artist

A painted canvas sculpture such as the one illustrated above nominally represent objects perceived in a visually deprived environment (at night). The artist has explained that under varying conditions of nighttime light and as one's sight adjusts to light deprivation, objects and shapes take on quite abstract qualities and that color in these circumstances often appear as unusual highlights as one's visual focus and level of concentration is adjusted. It might sound ironic but these investigations and their material outcomes are closely aligned with formalist modernism's emphasis on abstract paintings optical and material specificity. In Pickering's objects 2-dimensionality or flatness, which is the remaining point in the formalist triad of abstract painting and its autonomy, was enacted but later transformed into an object modelled

²⁶ Pickering, Katherine, Statement of Research (2016), unpublished

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after the experiential moment of the sensory encounter. Does the artwork compromise, even sacrifice its abstraction when it metaphorically returns to its phenomenal origins – to its referents in the real world? It would be tempting to say yes however abstraction, being one field in the arts of painting and sculpture, and housing multiple paradigmatic models and inventory of histories has an in-built encyclopedia of references, which renders contemporary abstract contextually representational even before one examines other sources of the works abstraction (of something). This then is to say that there can be nothing that is wholly abstract. Katherine Pickering's abstractions, apart from their extra-artistic influences and origins, are a product of abstractions histories, which can be traced back at least as far as Impressionism, which valued the transitional nature of the objective world and the opportunities it provided for personalization, that is to say abstraction, of qualities of light, color and space.



Untitled, 2015

Photograph courtesy of the Artist

Emphasis on the retinal sensory apparatus and its liberation from material substance and the subject were integral in the evolution of color field abstraction. Even the picture plane with its delimiting of the retinal field, was in many artists work in the 1960's and 70's physically expanded to reach near mural scale so that even peripheral vision was sometimes inadequate to fully encompass a work. The mission behind the expansion in scale was two-fold: firstly, to distance painting from the historic logic of the frame, and destabilize the attendant fixity of that which was contained within the frame; and secondly, in doing so, to push painting in its abstraction closer to an autonomous state. These objectives were largely achieved and they remain in place as legacies of a modernist avant-garde. They remain as models for the representation of abstraction, and if they are re-enacted in art of the contemporary moment, then this art is back-grounded by these historical referents. When artists working today engage these "high-modernist" tropes of painting, of abstraction, they utilize them as vehicles, often in concert with companion vehicles, to move painting and abstraction in different and occasionally uncharted directions.

Katherine Pickering's *Untitled*, illustrated above, reduces the retinal experience from a spectacle to a close-up study, changing the color field to a colored form. *Untitled* is a plinth presented or "table piece" work, and the artists articulation of the sculptural reference to external scale, as understood in reference to the human scale, is evident in the way she has articulated the sculptural form to the site of its presentation; that is in the forming of the descending and frontal plane down to and over the edge of the surface of the plinth. This articulation of the "table top" in the form structure of a piece is intended to draw attention to the (human) hand, as an index of scale relationship and as a statement of the works tactility. This modernist innovation in small scale sculpture can be traced back to Constantine Brancusi (1876-1957); Julio Gonzalez (1976-1942); Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) in particular the piece titled *Woman With Her Throat Cut*, 1932; Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) small cast objects from the early 50's based on human genitalia, such as *Wedge of Chastity*, 1954; and later to include the American sculptor David Smith (1906-1965); and finally, to perhaps the most adventurous and innovative sculptor of the postwar period Sir Anthony Caro (1924-2013). The 21st century artist's will to originate is in principle no different than that of the early 20th century artist in that the transformation, even radicalization of the form, of the genre, of the paradigm, is done in context.

This context is, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stamm point out in their essay "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics", a '[...] dialogical, and relational analysis of visual cultures existing in relation to one another.' They go on to say that in their theorizing of the intersections of different cultures over different time periods they have:

'[...] tried to project one set of histories across another set of histories, in such a way as to make diverse cultural experiences concurrent and relatable within a logic of co-implication. Within a polycentric approach, the world of visual culture has many dynamic locations, many possible vantage points. The emphasis in 'polycentrism' is not

on spatial or primary points of origin or on a finite list of centres but rather on a systematic principle of differentiation, relationality, and linkage.²⁷

In their essay Shohat and Stamm are quite right in drawing attention to the fact that conventional writing on modernist art history is apt to focus on European art centres over their counterparts in other centres of the globe. They insist that cities such as Havana, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City, just to focus on Latin America, had modernist movements similar to that of Europe. The authors don't mince words when confronting what they refer to as 'the dominant literature of modernism', the appropriation and colonization of "third world" cultures, and are insistent that the industrialized and "advanced" West has, in the interest of cultural hegemony, both ignored and denigrated third world and Minoritarian cultures as being 'less developed', 'still evolving'; and in this light propose that:

- A more adequate formulation, in our view, would see temporality as scrambled and palimpsestic in all the worlds, with the pre-modern, the modern, the postmodern coexisting globally, although the 'dominant' might vary from region to region. Thus the Pennsylvanian Dutch, who eschew all modern technology, and the cybernetic technocrats of Silicon Valley, both live in 'postmodern' America, while the 'stone-Age' Kayapo and sophisticated urban Euro-Brazilians both live in Brazil, yet the Kayapo use camcorders while the sophisticates adhere to supposedly 'archaic' Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus all cultures, and the texts generated by these cultures, we assume, are multiple, hybrid, heteroglossic, unevenly developed, characterized by multiple historical trajectories, rhythms and temporalities'.²⁸

Valérie Blass, an artist who received her MFA from the Université du Québec à Montréal, and who lives in Montreal, is a mixed-genre sculptor whose work encompasses performance-art photography, mold-casting, welding, found objects, and related materials and fabrication processes, and yet, in spite of her works overriding unorthodoxy, there is a very strong case to be made that her conversancy with sculptures histories, certainly in a Euro-North American axis is integral to her working vocabulary: in its references and its contradictions. The artist however sees this as a challenge her audience must address, as she insists that, 'I want to upset our ability to identify, or rather I want the tendency to automatically link a work to a pre-established set of references to be submerged by a simultaneous sense of loss and surplus of meaning.'²⁹ Her position is not unique, as no artist that I'm aware of post

²⁷ Shohat, Ella, and Stamm, Robert, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics", New York, Routledge Publishers, 2001 2nd Edition, Edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, p. 56.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁹ Bock, Anja, "Valérie Blass, Musée d'art contemporain", *Art Papers*, May-June, 2012, p.1. See: <https://anjabock.com/2012/06/11/valerie-blass-musee-dart-contemporain-4/>

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Sherrie Levine devises a work that is intrinsically tied to another artist's work. That being said, Blass's work is indeed complex and difficult to deconstruct. That isn't to suggest that a deconstruction of her work, and the tracking of her sculptural vocabulary's genealogy is a prerequisite for establishing meanings or for engaging with the sheer challenges and visual and intellectual rewards her works will present. Valérie Blass's recent exhibition at Catriona Jeffries, in Vancouver, titled "To Only Ever Say One Thing Forever the Same Thing" presented an intriguing intersection of sculpture and performance art photography. The choreography of her studio actors' performance activities were limited to static and slightly absurdist poses that, once transcribed photographically, became instrumental to the orientation of the various sculptural assemblage, tableau, and objects. As noted earlier sculptures origins are in the object and in pan-historical, pan-cultural terms may embody, in the address of the object/subject a myriad of materials, surfaces, and appearance.



High-up, dignitary, panjandrum, high muckamuck, 2015
Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Photograph courtesy of

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The artist appears to relish in the interplay among multiple iterations of visual and often fragmented representations of the subject: as in the three-dimensional objects, photographic transfers, large format photography, line drawing, and flat planar surfaces in the particularly ambitious piece illustrated above. The cubist-referenced stacking of planes of representation and subsequent meanings, while not always telescoped in the classic formalist sense, does provide an open structure for analysis, reading front to/and back; and also promotes a localized version of the *dérive*, whereby the spectator might chart their own direction in tracking various planes of reference amid the unfolding of the imagination. The fragmented torso for example evokes pre-Hellenistic Greek sculpture, replete with a structural support that indexes its “placement” full-figure in a likely setting such as a frieze or pediment. Behind the photo-transfer covered form we see a black silhouette, a shadow and an absence of form.



The failure of it all, 2015 Photograph courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

“The failure of it all” is a vaguely Cubo-Futurist/Machine Age (think early Léger) piece standing 56 inches high and about 16 inches in diameter and constructed of Gypsum cement, sculpting epoxy dough, and acrylic paint. It is a conically formed and mold-cast two-part stacked hollow

object with photographically transferred abstract brush line motifs articulating multiple surfaces. The piece is a well-crafted object that can only be fully appreciated in the round, and one whose overall artistry in fabrication also includes a surface treatment masquerading as the craft of sculptural modeling. Specifically, the artist has carefully and somewhat exaggeratingly hand applied sculpting dough to the interior surface areas giving the outward impression of a hand formed object. Yet it's very evident from the mold seams that the objects were cast, making this clever and gently covert surface coverage an indexical simulation of the historic connection between malleable materials and sculptural process.³⁰

Our knowledge and perception of sculpture is today largely based on photographic mediation and received information. The internet has facilitated our access to a mind-boggling wealth of data and images, and that is among its great contributions to information and knowledge acquisition. Well before the internet print publications circulated reproductions, articles and reviews on art works and cultural objects, through which the bulk of society received their first introduction to new and historic art works. So the question might be: what is the relationship between the sculptural object and its photographic representation in the construction of meaning and in our aesthetic response? This is a question that has been posed by Erin Shirreff, an artist who did her BFA at the University of Victoria, and MFA at the Yale University School of Art, and currently lives in New York.

Like most of us Erin Shirreff has grappled with the spectator's relationship with sculpture in mediated encounters and in engaging with sculpture first-hand. As she has described,

‘It left me wondering whether the encounter, sharing the same material space as the object, was somehow more difficult, perhaps more intimidating, complicated, or somehow overwhelming, and that I didn't equal it. What was clear was that I wasn't able to let myself be as absorbed into the physical encounter as I was by the experience of the image. That remove offered by the reproduction opened up this contemplative space.’³¹

Interestingly, the reproduction of the sculpture (*New Piece*, by Tony Smith), afforded Shirreff a space for contemplation that the encounter with the actual piece denied. While it is true that meaning is most often arrived at or made upon reflection, comprehension on the other hand is best attained in the circumstances of the actual encounter. Early 20th century modernists such as Brancusi, and Medardo Rosso were intensely engaged with the photography of their sculptures. In Brancusi's late career his inclination was to disassemble and reassemble his sculptures, photographing each variation as if he conceived of them as independent works. The photographs of these variations form an archival record of Brancusi's interest in hybridization and provide our only access to many of the experimental form and material groupings of his sculptural aesthetic. Rosso, as we know desired surface over form and aspired to have his sculptures compete with the retinal import of painting, and for this reason turned to photographing his work as a conceptual and pictorial extension of his sculptural practice.

³⁰ Pearson, Gary, “Valérie Blass”, *Sculpture Magazine*, Vol. 35, No. 4, May 2016, pp. 77,78.

³¹ Shirreff, Erin, as quoted in the press release for her exhibition *Erin Shirreff: Pictures*, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, April 19-June 16, 2013.

In her looped color video still titled “Medardo Rosso, Madam X, 1896”, 2013. Erin Shirreff revisits Rosso’s infatuation with the photographic recording of his work, through her own photographic reworking of an internet obtained image of a Rosso sculpted head. This printed image was subjected to an exhaustive list of probing lighting and color changes during video recording, at times ranging from subtle shifts of grey to sepia, then all greys in a grainy silvery light that transformed the sculpted volume into something like a flattened head on a medallion or coin.



Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896, 2013, Colour video still, silent, Loop
Photograph by Scott Massey, courtesy of the artist.

Knowing of Medardo Rosso’s photographic and sculptural practice is not necessary to a visual and intellectual engagement with Shirreff’s piece, but it does help in bringing historical, conceptual and aesthetic sense to the experience. Similarly, Shirreff’s interrogation of the reception of sculpture in real space and in reproduction creates a trans-historical loop between Rosso, say in 1884, and Shirreff and the audience for her work in 2013. In our virtual/actual cultural journey in this temporal and artistic loop we must be mindful of historically bounded meanings and their possible transferability across these boundaries, and still enjoy the journey.