

Metamodernism

& Contemporary Art

The arts have changed. The art of the 1990's is mainly characterized by irony, deconstruction, and cynicism. In stark contrast, many contemporary art practices can be best explained in terms of affection, hopefulness and sincerity¹. These social and aesthetic changes can be understood as a reaction to developments in our current times and two Dutch, cultural-philosophers called this dominant structure of feeling of the early 21st century *metamodernism*².

From postmodernism to metamodernism

Postmodernism rejected the grand narrative and, by extension, all transcendent narratives and mythic systems. This process, where the grand narratives lost their value, appears to have begun with the modern critique of religion. The process culminated within postmodernism, which shunned not just religion, but all grand narratives, transcendent truths, myths, ideologies and archetypes. As a result postmodernism saw a radical narrowing of focus and a loss of dimensionality; without anything deeper, there is only surface. Baudrillard claimed this distinctly postmodern development has led to a philosophical preoccupation with *simulacra and simulations* of superficiality, shallowness and levelling³. Where modernist like Picasso and Cézanne focused on design, hierarchy, and mastery; the postmodernist like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Willem de Kooning were more concerned with chance, anarchy, collage, repetition and appropriation. A modernist

like Virginia Woolf enjoyed depth and metaphysics, however, a postmodernist like Martin Amis preferred surface and irony. For many postmodern artists their artistic practice takes the form of pastiche (rather than of quotation, as the modernists would have). However, since early 2000, there's an emerging of an art that re-appropriates older aesthetic and cultural forms to revisit their substance and redirect their *meaning* elsewhere⁴.

As postmodernism gives way to metamodernism, the transcendent and archetypal urge is seeing a resurgence. Grand narratives and myth are receiving a second look, interests in the timeless and universal are finding new expression. The new generation of artists is reacting against the unfulfilling shallowness and existential disorientation caused by postmodernism. However, precisely because we know the transcendent and grand narratives can't be unequivocally asserted, on the contrary, its entertainment as an idea is of an essentially different sort than the modern naivety. Instead it is a metamodern *informed naivety*⁵.



Rob Voerman, *Incinerator*, 2014

century philosophy. Both Rob Voerman and David Thorpe re-appropriate conventions and techniques associated with

Artists like Rob Voerman and David Thorpe reuse anything from scrap metal and cardboard to plastic, paper and wood. They also draw on numerous aesthetic and political strategies, such as science fiction, hippie culture and 19th

postmodernism, however they redirect and re-signify them towards new meanings⁶. They create an impossible unity and imagine a harmony that cannot be.

Something similar applies to Mark Bradford. This American artist examines class-, race-, and gender-based economies that structure urban society in the United States. He uses fragments of found posters, billboards and newsprints to simultaneously engage with and advance the formal traditions of abstract painting⁷. In this process he makes a connection with the social world through his materials.

Where postmodernism feeds on distances and our feeling of being alienated from one another, metamodernism collapses distances by combining opposites to recreate a sense of wholeness. It helps us to take stock of our experience of the world and in doing so, gives us the chance to *transcend* our present experience by removing it temporarily to a partly aesthetic and partly real-world sphere⁸.

New Sincerity

One of the most prominent movements in America at the moment is the *New Sincerity*⁹. If modern artists were to be characterized as an earnest group and the postmodernists go into history as jokers, the current generation of artists can be best described as earnest and ironic in equal measures¹⁰. These artists are both sincere and ironic and the emphasis lies within the oscillation between the two opposing elements. In the New Sincerity this oscillation occurs between the work and the viewer. Which essentially means that New Sincerity art is so sincere that it can't actually be perceived as sincere by its sceptical, heavily postmodern-influenced viewer¹¹. It's a *new* type of sincerity, because the viewer has changed so much since the late 19th century that we can't accept sincerity anymore, and therefore receive it as ironic. Nonetheless, the

metamodern artist looks for a sincere and total collapse of distances, whatever the risk to her reputation. Metamodernism isn't ironic or deconstructive. Metamodernism is *reconstructive*; it acknowledges that distances exist and tries to collapse those distances. And then it uses the, sometimes problematic, collapse of those distances as a way for all of us to begin reconstructing our sense of self and our sense of one another and our communities¹².

In response to the postmodern obsession with decline, rupture and decay, metamodernism seem to say: *Let's say you're right. We still have to live and try to be happy. We still have to create and be part of a community.* The optimism metamodernism offers is so out of fashion, it's radical and even absurd to some. Nevertheless metamodernism offers the kind of philosophy that allows us to strive for a reconstruction of ourselves and our culture, however problematic or illusionary that may be¹³.

Contemporary artists have returned humanist values such as empathy, mercifulness and hopefulness to the forefront of their practices.

*"I'm noticing a new approach to art making in recent museum and gallery shows. ...It's an attitude that says, I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind"*¹⁴

In the above citation it becomes clear that Jerry Saltz, the leading American art critic, also senses a new approach to artmaking. Jerry Saltz writes exclusively about American tendencies in art, but similar sentiments can be observed in Europe.

In November 2010, Gallery Tanja Wagner in Berlin opened an exhibition called *Die Tür geht nach Innen auf*. The gallery explained:

The works convey enthusiasm as well as irony. They play with hope and melancholy, oscillate between knowledge and naivety, empathy and apathy, wholeness and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity...looking for a truth without expecting to find it¹⁵.

In January 2015 the Krannert Museum organized a traveling show called *MetaModern*. The curators found:

...after extensive studio visits, that many artists were using elements of mid-century style, such as moulded plywood and bent aluminium tubing, combining them in unique ways to create sculptures, paintings, furniture and other works¹⁶.

A good example of a recent exhibition that's clearly in the spirit of metamodernism is *Change the System* (2017)¹⁷, on show in Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. In this exhibition five artists and designers show their solutions for global contemporary threats such as conflicts, political tensions, climate change and pollution. One artist temporarily has a production site in the museum, where things are more focused on creating momentum and community. These artists clearly look beyond postmodern deconstruction and instead in

their work they focus on reconstruction, to re-establish hope and idealism; they dare to look into the future again.

According to Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), artists increasingly abandon the aesthetics precepts of deconstruction, parataxis and pastiche in favour of aesth-ethical notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis¹⁸. More and more young artists nowadays have begun working with entirely new pictorial mythologies. If contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman and Damien Hirst represent the postmodern years of plenty and pastiche, when capitalism found expression in materialism and consumerism, then metamodern artists such as Adam Miller, Martin Wittfooth, Uwe Henneken, Peter Doig, Koen Vermeule, Mark Bradford and Rob Voerman, are actively contributing to the breakdown of that old system with constructive (re)visions.

Adam Miller and Martin Wittfooth for example, both employ in their paintings traditional mythic iconography to frame their critiques on the ecological crises. For many metamodern artists, symbol and rigors of traditional craft become strategies



of aesthetic rebuke and rebellion against postmodern kitsch and commodity, offering in their stead a demonstration of metamodern *New Romanticism*.

Martin Wittfooth, *Rainsong*, 2015

Conclusion

The arts are changing and metamodernism seems to capture this change quite accurately. The fluid nature of metamodernism may sound like a philosophical elude, but it seems in accordance with contemporary art's conception of its own power and impotence. The early 20th century wars and revolutions are too far away from us to still believe that art can truly be an instigator of change, but at the same time we recognize that it must be something more than a hollow commentary. This is expressed in a new longing for sincerity, authenticity, affection and renewed interest in the mystical and the transcended. Metamodern art is about reconstruction, to re-establish hope, optimism and (pragmatic) idealism in search for a better future. As a result, many contemporary artists are sincere in their attempt to search for new meanings elsewhere. And in this search they keep an open mind towards all possibilities, however conflicting these possibilities may seem.

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