

“Subjective Deformation”: Expressionism and the Modernist Child

by Timothy Vincent

In a June, 1917, article for *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Roger Fry touts and provides aesthetic support for his exhibition of children’s art at the Omega Workshops. While pointing out that “almost all children’s drawings have some merit,” Fry distinguishes between children’s art that is the product of formal instruction and that which is created by children who “had received no regular instruction.” Not surprisingly from a modernist standpoint, Fry sees the untrained art as superior, explaining that “ordinary teaching destroyed completely the children’s peculiar gifts of representation and design, replacing them with feeble imitations of some contemporary convention.” Fry’s equation of children’s art with authentic expression can be traced to the peculiarly modernist interest in the expressive power of the “primitive,” which is largely responsible for the joining of the primordial and prepubescent that can be heard in statements such as August Strindberg’s 1895 description of Gauguin’s Tahiti project: “What is he then? He is Gauguin, the savage, who hates a whimpering civilization, a sort of Titan [. . .] the child who takes his toys to pieces to make others from them” (1036). A decade earlier, as the visual and literary arts were merging under the banner of symbolism, the notion of the savage and the child as possessing the unique ability to objectify the subjective through what Jean Moréas called “subjective deformation” (1016) emerged as a central—perhaps *the* central—foundation of modernism itself. It is probably no coincidence, then, that Roger Fry’s friend and sometime lover Vanessa Bell encouraged her three children to run around naked and to submit artwork to Fry’s exhibition. In this essay I will explore 1) the special role of childhood subjectivity in the expressionism that underscored much of the visual and literary artistic production of modernism; 2) the failure, partly due to its association with childhood subjective experience, of expressionism to be taken seriously as the moral and spiritual center of socialism after World War I; and 3) the continued reductive view of expressionism following Georg Lukács’s polemicized dismissal of it as “childish nonsense.” Finally, I look at recent views of expressionism and the possible resurgence of its social-criticism side, which would restore its originally intended balance between subjective experience and social justice.

Objectifying the Subjective

Fry’s enjoyment of the art of children is rooted in what he sees as their ability to express “with a delightful freedom and sincerity, the mental images which make up their own imaginative lives” (*Vision and Design* 20). This view all but defines the early modernist rebellion against naturalism that was brewing by the late 1860s among a younger generation of artists and critics—such as the Goncourt brothers and Edouard Manet in Paris, Robert Zimmermann and Robert Vischer in Munich, and Pater, Wilde, Swinburne, and Burne-Jones in London—who would ultimately reject strictly representational art and change the nature of the subject/object relationship, establishing what Henri Dorra describes as “a deeply personal empathy with the external world” (155). The prevailing mid-century view, most clearly espoused by England’s widely-known nineteenth-century critic, John Ruskin, that a deep love of, and appreciation for, empirical fact established a

correct moral, ethical, and instructive relationship between humans and the natural world was giving way to the view that the object world was inherently meaningless, and that “reality” was the product of psychological projection *onto* the exterior rather than one of a profound imaginative sympathy *with* it. Art Berman characterizes this shift in perception as the notion that “life can no longer have meaning; it can only produce meaning” (46).

This profound shift can clearly be seen in the poetry and criticism of Charles Baudelaire, who is often called the father of modernism for his relocation of the source of perception to the psychology of the subject. Baudelairean aesthetics, which emphasized “correspondences,” or the free play of associations, underscored the new psychological relationship between the subject and the object world by foregrounding the role of the subject in creating harmonious connections between disparate sensations, connections that establish the subject as the origin of the resulting new pattern. In perhaps his most central philosophical poem, “Correspondences,” it is significant that the image of children is included in a group of associations that are intended both as explanation and example of his aesthetic theory:

Some perfumes are as fresh as the flesh of children,
Sweet as the sound of oboes, green as pastures
And others corrupt, rich, and triumphant. . . . (11)

This blend of sensations, in true symbolist form of suggesting rather than naming, falls short of saying outright that odors, sounds, and colors find new relations with one another in the fertile “green pastures” of the natural lives of children, which Baudelaire spells out more directly in his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” arguably the most influential aesthetic essay of early modernism:

The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and colour. (495, emphasis in text)

In this essay, Baudelaire describes further the expressive “genius of childhood,” distinguishing its nature from that of the “man of genius.” The latter over time has acquired a certain level of reason, while the former is driven almost entirely by sensibility alone. True genius, then, is the combination of the two in which the adult has the ability to re-enter the “green pastures” of childhood sensibilities and use adult reason to properly direct it:

Genius is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will—a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood’s capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated. It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new, whatever it be, whether a face or a landscape, gilding, colours, shimmering

stuffs, or the magic of physical beauty assisted by the cosmetic art. (496, emphasis in text)

Baudelaire's dual-consciousness—the child's immediacy and the adult's critical awareness—lies at the heart of his famous definition of beauty, and, by extension, modernity itself. The present age provides the “relative, circumstantial element” without which we could have no understanding or appreciation for the “eternal, invariable element” of beauty.

For Baudelaire, this doubling is realized in the “passionate spectator,” the urban wanderer or *flâneur*, the “dandy,” whom he describes as “a man-child [. . .] a man who is never for a moment without the genius of childhood—a genius for which no aspect of life has become stale” (496). The function that Baudelaire assigns this man-child—“to distill the eternal from the transitory” (497)—has far-reaching implications for modernism, most notably its essentialism, which can be heard in many confident statements such as Theo von Doesburg's in 1919:

The aim of the formative artist is simply this: to give form to his aesthetic experience of reality or, one might say, his creative experience of the fundamental essence of things. (282)

Complications of the relationship between the eternal and the transitory aside, Baudelaire's man-child re-appears frequently in the “school of Baudelaire,” as he amusedly described his young followers in a letter to his mother in 1866. Ann Ardis has recently pointed out that the “quarreling as well as the voracious borrowing of ideas” calls for “a much more detached and nuanced topographical mapping of the period” (10); nevertheless, the so-called “expressive turn” that by the mid-1880s had joined literary and visual art under the banner of symbolism relied heavily on what Jean Moréas (whose 1886 essay “Symbolism—a Manifesto” succeeded in changing the movement's name from decadence) called “subjective deformation” (1016). Naturalist objectivity is rejected in favor of a post-Baudelairean forest of illusions in which “a single character struggles in an environment deformed by his own hallucinations and his temperament: in this deformation lies the sole *reality*” (1015, emphasis in text). The same year, in his own statement of the symbolist project, Gustave Kahn develops this expressionism further by declaring that the object world consists solely and entirely of representations, and that symbolist art has established a new creative approach in response to it:

We want to substitute the struggle of sensations and ideas for the struggle of individualities, and for the centre of action, instead of the well-exploited décor of squares and streets, we want the totality of a part of the brain. The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective (the externalization of the Idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through the eyes of a temperament). (1017)

This symbolist goal of objectifying the subjective joins the valorization of “the expressive genius of childhood” in the same momentous year of 1886 in Paul Verlaine's publication

of what he believed was Arthur Rimbaud's posthumous book of poetry, *Illuminations* (Rimbaud actually died in 1891 after years of self-exile). In his prose-poem, "Youth," Rimbaud offers what amounts to a poetic celebration of the subjective deformation that characterizes childhood perception:

O child days; the body, a treasure to squander;--O to love the peril or the power of the Psyche? The earth had slopes fertile in princes and artists, and lineage and race incited you to crimes and mournings: the world your fortune and your peril. But at present, that labour crowned, you and your impatiences—are nothing but your dance and your voice, not fixed and never forced, although of a double consequence of invention and achievement. . . (216).

Rimbaud's allusion to the myth of Cupid and Psyche, in which Psyche's desire to know her nightly lover alienates her from him and subjects her to the cruelties of Venus until she is ultimately reunited with him, reflects a longing for the unconscious connection between childhood and its natural impulses of "lineage and race." The price of the crowning labor of overcoming such unconsciousness is the mixed blessing of the closed system of "invention and achievement" that requires the "calculations" of subjectifying the objective rather than the "fertile slopes" of objectifying the subjective, which produces princes and artists alike, who possess what Rimbaud describes later in the poem as "the infinite egoism of adolescence" (216). Clive Scott points out that Rimbaud's prose poems are primarily concerned with "a coming to life, a taking or changing shape," and, as on the fertile slopes with their crops of new princes and artists, "gestation made visible, the often awkward attempt to be and to be uniquely" (354). This search for the unique, the original, the genuine, the authentic, helps to explain another element of the modernist interest in the "genius of childhood"—its connection to what was seen as the unspoiled expressivity of the visual art of so-called primitive cultures.

As the public streamed into Farmer and Roger's Oriental Warehouse in London or Siegfried Bing's Oriental Crafts in Paris (*Art in Theory, 1815-1900* 876), the West came in contact with the exotic objects made available by imperialism. For the avant-garde—many of whom shared Rimbaud's distaste for Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme, Henri Monnier's satirical bourgeois character who represented the philistine smugness of the middle class—primitive art provided a clear connection between the growing interest in expressive formalism following the final impressionist exhibition, again in our banner year of 1886, and the authenticity of naïve consciousness, both of which can be heard in August Macke's 1912 essay "Masks," along with the racism that we now understand accompanied much of the modernist interest in the primitive:

To create forms means: to live. Are not children more creative in drawing directly from the secret of their sensations than the imitator of Greek forms? Are not savages artists who have forms of their own powerful as the form of thunder? (95)

There are many statements such as Macke's, which Hermann Bahr's 1916 essay "Expressionism" groups under a common interest in two notions that Charles Harrison and Paul Wood describe as 1) the "association of modernity with dehumanization," and

2) the “recovery of a form of ‘presocial’ state [as] the precondition for recovery of critical virtue and authenticity” (116-117). Bahr’s essay both explains and defends expressionism, placing such diverse artists as Matisse, Picasso, Pechstein, Kokoschka, Kandinsky, and Marc within a symbolist framework by saying that “a man views the world according to his attitude towards it” (117). By now, however, Baudelaire’s man-child has moved from possessing a “joyful curiosity” as he wanders through the modern urban landscape to a kind of neo-primitive hero, whose subjective deformations are the antidote for modernity’s destruction of the individual spirit:

People little know how near the truth they are when they jeer at these pictures and say they might be painted by savages. The bourgeois rule has turned us into savages.[. . .] We ourselves have to become barbarians to save the future from mankind as it now is. As primitive man, driven by fear of nature, sought refuge within himself, so we too have to adopt flight from ‘civilization’ which is out to devour our souls. (120)

For many modernists like Bahr, primitive art represented the unity between the individual and the world that was perceived to be lost to the bourgeois world of mass culture and alienated labor. The “discovery” of primitive art by Vlaminck, Derain, Matisse, Picasso, and many other modernists seemed to recapture the totality of experience that Roger Fry celebrated in the children’s art that he exhibited and wrote about.

Such totality of experience could also be found in Yeats’s Celtic Ireland, Pound’s Provence in the twelfth century, Lawrence’s New Mexico, Gauguin’s Tahiti, and other peoples and places of the past in which the fusion of expression and unique individual and collective experiences, as Jack Flam points out, “appeared to confirm widely held beliefs about the immutability and universality of great art” (4). As late as the abstract expressionists in the 1940s and Jean Dubuffet’s *art brut* (“raw art”) in the 1950s, influential critics and aestheticians were still making statements such as John D. Graham’s in his 1937 study of Picasso that “among primitive people, children, and geniuses [. . .] free access to the power of the unconscious still exists in a greater or lesser degree” (249). For Graham, Picasso’s work represents the perfect blend of “ease of access to the unconscious [. . .] plus a conscious intelligence” (250). Baudelaire’s view of genius as “childhood recovered at will” had a long shelf life in the modernist era and underscored much of its inventiveness, even though many of its assumptions about language, society, and individual consciousness have been altered or overturned in recent years.

Deformation and Utopia

Of course an idealistic view of the creative genius of children is one thing, and actually rearing a bunch of junior expressionist/neo-primitives is another. Vanessa Bell’s snapshots of her two sons, Julian and Quentin, romping around the garden in their birthday suits, or her daughter, Angelica, seated between Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, wearing nothing but an impish grin and a pair of shoes, are rather embarrassing—and

even a little suspect—by today’s standards. And Bell’s attitude of non-interference in the lives of her children is captured in Quentin’s memory of a favorite childhood activity:

When I was about eleven or twelve I used to bicycle into Lewes [. . .] and purchase gunpowder from a shop which still had a few customers who used the old muzzle-loaders. The grown-ups must have noticed the occasional explosions which startled the birds in the garden and were sometimes accompanied by flying metal, but I can remember no enquiry, and certainly no reprimand. (Quoted in Nicholson 72)

Such benign neglect was shared by other modernist parents, most notably Augustus John, his wife Ida, and his mistress Dorelia, whose shared brood of progeny is described by Virginia Nicholson, Vanessa Bell’s grand-daughter:

The children were dressed like gypsies, their bedrooms were full of uncontrolled frogs and grasshoppers, and on one occasion they only escaped drowning en masse because they were rescued by a local fisherman. (68)

The neglect wasn’t always benign. Wyndham Lewis, for instance, disowned or abandoned all five of his children. (Years later, when a daughter was presented with one of his paintings, she tore it in half.) And Ezra Pound’s only biological daughter (he had a stepson from his first wife) was sent out at birth to be raised by Tirolean farmers until the age of ten. Still, the main idea was that children were creative beings who should be given as much freedom from restraint as possible. Only in such childlike freedom was it possible to “see everything in a state of newness,” Baudelaire’s exhortation that modernists took very, very seriously as a possible way of changing life itself.

It was such utopianism that underscored much of the international thrust of expressionism and, as demonstrated above in Bahr’s view of the expressionist rejection of naturalism, much of modernism itself. Like “primitive man, driven by fear of nature,” modernist sensibilities turned inward once again to create a humanized nature that could serve to offset the onslaught of industrialization and its attendant social ills of commercialization and mass culture:

This is the vital point. All that we experience is but the strenuous battle between the soul and the machine for the possession of man. We no longer live, we are lived; we have no freedom left, we may not decide for ourselves, we are finished, man is unsouled, nature is unmanned. [. . .] Unless a miracle happens! That is the vital point—whether a miracle can still rescue the soulless, sunken, buried humanity. (119)

“Expressionism” was Bahr’s most successful essay, with two more editions between 1916 and 1920; its basic premise concerning the expressionist connection to primitive man’s “fear of nature” is derived largely from Wilhelm Worringer’s widely read 1908 book *Abstraction and Empathy*, which was in its ninth edition by 1920. Along with Worringer, Bahr also draws heavily on Alois Riegle’s concept of *Kunstwollen* (urge to

form), which places a higher value on what Riegler describes as “an immanent, artistic, creative drive” than on the obsession with technique that accompanied the shift from “ancient stylization to modern realism” (734). Rather than being a radical departure from naturalism, expressionism represents a return to the “constant use of traditional stylized forms” (735). Such forms derive from an empathetic psychological projection and have a longer and deeper relationship with artistic production than do the methodologies developed by “experts” during what Riegler calls the “brief interlude” (735) of naturalism.

Bahr acknowledges the influence of Worringer and Riegler on his view of expressionism as what he calls elsewhere in the essay “the symbol of the unknown in us in which we confide, hoping that it will save us” (120). In addition to Worringer’s “empathy” and Riegler’s “urge to form,” Kandinsky’s notion of “inner necessity” completes Bahr’s confidence in the power of the “unknown” to which the expressionist artist and writer develop the ability to return, and in doing so restore “the imprisoned spirit” (121). Like Worringer and Riegler, Kandinsky places authentic art within the innate psychological make-up of the individual artist, and the resulting form is the product of a journey to this mysterious region. For Kandinsky, the child lives in this region by virtue of not having lived long enough for objects and experiences to lose their novelty:

A child, for whom every object is new, experiences the world in this way: it sees light, is attracted to it, wants to grasp it, burns its finger in the process, and thus learns fear and respect for the flame. And then it learns that light has not only an unfriendly, but also a friendly side [. . .]. Gradually, in this way, the world loses its magic. One knows that trees provide shade, that horses gallop quickly, and that cars go even faster, that dogs bite, that the moon is far away, and that the man one sees in the mirror is not real. (88)

As the child learns more about the world outside of itself, therefore, repeated encounters with a growing list of the familiar begins to dull its sense of wonder. Recapturing this wonder requires a means of escape from what Kandinsky calls the “soulless content of modern life” (87), which has been taken over by the “known” or materialistic, leaving the “unknown” or spiritual to “struggle toward the nonnaturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature” (87).

Help for this struggle had come in the form of intellectuals who had “cast doubt” upon matter itself” (86), providing a deep sense of confusion about the known, for which the inner unknown can serve as refuge and remedy:

When religion, science, and morality are shaken (the last by the mighty hand of away from the external toward himself. (87)

Here is where art takes on a dual role, according to Kandinsky, of revealing both what he describes as the “dark and murky” character of modernity and the “nonmaterial strivings of the thirsty soul” (87). Rose-Carol Washton Long points out that this complex tension between social criticism and spiritualism characterized expressionism until after the First World War, when the spiritual side of the duality, with its connection to the inner unknown, began to take on negative connotations:

Since the mid-twenties interpretations of Expressionism increasingly failed to convey many of its complex and multilayered implications. Where Expressionism was once equated with avant-garde modernism and experimentalism, with utopianism and internationalism, and with anarchism and socialism, it became characterized instead as apolitical, romantic, subjective, narcissistic, formless, and wildly irrational. Supporters of Expressionism, discouraged when their exalted vision of art did not bring about the radical cultural and social changes they envisioned, attacked the very rubric they had once championed. (xix)

More recently, Fredric Jameson has argued that aesthetic politics of the kind that Long assigns to expressionism flourish when there is a widespread feeling that “there is no alternative to the system” (231-232). Taking Long’s view of expressionism beginning as a form of insurrection against “not only the conventions of art but also of a society they found materialistic and dehumanizing” (xxi), following the November Revolution many believed that the alternative to the system had arrived and that the role of the avant-garde should be one of forming a bond between expressionism and socialism. Ida Katherine Rigby explains the new feeling of enthusiasm for the possibility of a society based on what the expressionists saw as a shared interest in the creation of a non-materialistic way of life:

When on November 9, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated and the German Republic was proclaimed, Expressionists saw the opportunity to help design the future. They saw themselves as the spiritual vanguard of the revolution and its prophets. With the workers they found common ground in shared poverty and the desire for freedom; they believed in a bond between artists who desired creative freedom and workers who sought freedom from economic exploitation. (173)

Perhaps if the proletariat truly was seeking a new society based on “shared poverty and the desire for freedom,” such idealism could have found room for leadership from the artistic “spiritual vanguard.”

Two key elements of the expressionism that underscored modernism itself—its emphasis on individual creativity and its distaste for middle-class mentality—complicated the relationship between the avant-garde and the socialist revolution nearly from the start. Non-materialism as a way of life held little appeal for workers who were hungry to participate in the bounty of industrial productivity from which they had previously been excluded as alienated labor. Modernists from Munich to Paris to London were faced with choosing between maintaining artistic freedom and propagandizing for workers who had little interest either in their art or in their vision of the spiritual. Georg Tappert, whose Berlin art school mirrored Roger Fry’s view of how and why to encourage expressive freedom in the art of children, voices his frustration with the proletariat’s anti-intellectualism in a letter to Franz Pfemfert, editor of the expressionist journal *Die Aktion*, in 1918:

What we strive for is alien to them. They have no desire to understand it, it is a matter of indifference to them, and it will still be so 10 to 15 years from now! The proletarian youth of 1900 would have been a much more suitable object for *Die Aktion* and its efforts. There was an eagerness for literature, for art, for education in it! These young people lined up 2 hours before the theaters opened in order to be received on spiritual and intellectual Olympus. The young proletarian of today does this no more.[. . .] In the last two years, nevertheless, he and the war profiteers sat there, equally devoid of understanding, merely to demonstrate that he, like every fat bourgeois, could afford it. (182)

Tappert's bitterness over the materialism he sees emerging after the War was shared by the dadaists and surrealists in Paris, whose anarchy and anti-patriotism came into conflict with the increasing authoritarianism of the *rappel à l'ordre* (call to order) among the avant-garde and the bourgeois consumerism of the French middle-class as represented by its absorption of cubism and its offshoots into the cultural mainstream. Likewise, in London, pre-war vorticism gave way to post-war preoccupation with Diaghilev's ballet, Bloomsbury and the Sitwells, American popular culture, and what Jamie Wood has recently described as "Britain's role as the supreme center of politics, economics, and culture [. . .] ending in the late 1920s" (396). For Tappert, the dadaists, the surrealists, and others who otherwise could locate points of contention between themselves, the notion of expressive authenticity—so central to modernism itself—continued to be seen as the antidote to materialism that was now threatening to undermine even the socialists, who had largely rejected the thrill of "shared poverty" for a chance at a piece of the industrialized pie, much to the disappointment of the avant-garde (regardless of classification), whose dreams of a new order were still based squarely on the long-standing modernist project of valorizing intuition. As Robert Short points out, "this means regaining the use of powers we once possessed before they were emasculated by a materialistic civilization; powers which children, primitive peoples and the insane seem to be the last among us to retain" (302).

After Lukács

The shift that takes place from an earlier emphasis on expressive authenticity as a means of achieving individual liberation from the societal effects of industrialism (e.g., Kandinsky's "soulless content of modern life") to expressive authenticity as a means of achieving a deeper and more genuine socialism is striking when one considers Georg Lukács's famous 1934 attack on what he called expressionism's "critique of middle-classness" (314), calling subjective deformation and interest in abstract essences "childish nonsense" (316) that can just as easily be enlisted to support fascism as well as socialism:

Expressionism stands on an irrational and mythological foundation: its creative method leads in the direction of the emotive yet empty declamatory manifesto, the proclamation of a sham activism. It has therefore a whole series of essential features that fascist literary theory could accept without having to force them into its mould. (316)

Lukács's dismissal of expressionism as more of a style (and a dangerous one at that) than as a serious political movement was refuted by a number of his contemporaries, including Herwarth Walden, editor of the expressionist journal *Der Sturm*, who viewed expressionism as "the artistic means of expression which signify the common will of progressive humanity (322), and Ernst Bloch, Marxist philosopher and former friend and collaborator of Lukács (Long 323), who criticized Lukács for possessing a narrow, partisan conception of the political nature of experimental art:

Since Lukács operates with a closed, objectivistic conception of reality, when he comes to examine Expressionism he resolutely rejects any attempt on the part of artists who shatter any image of the world, even that of capitalism. Any art which strives to exploit the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices, appears in his eyes merely as a willful act of destruction. (325)

Walden and Bloch both participated in a widely-read series of essays in *Das Wort* from 1937 to 1938 in which Lukács's condemnation of formalism as counter-revolutionary found critics and supporters; and, given the international interest throughout much of the 1930s in social realism as the proper underpinning provided by art, Bloch's view that Lukács's vastly oversimplified characterization was a disservice to the power of expressionism to disrupt the entrenched "inter-relations" of bourgeois capitalism did not prevail. In fact, as Long points out, "by the 1950s critics no longer focused on the communal and utopian interests nor on the political and reforming implications of Expressionism. Instead, they primarily interpreted Expressionism as a powerful conduit of individual emotions and subjective feelings" (313). This view was adopted once again in the late 1970s in the neo-expressionist art that captured the international market for a number of years. Julian Schnabel and David Salle in America, Sandro Chia and Francesco Clemente in Italy, and Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz in Germany revived expressionist painting in reaction to the minimalism and conceptual art that had dominated the market in the late 1960s and much of the 1970s.

For Baselitz, however, a middle ground between the socialist realism of his early training and the social expressionism of distorted figuration that avoided the neutrality of abstract expressionism resulted in a tension between the personal and political in his attempt to reconnect with earlier German expressionists who were suppressed as "degenerates" under Hitler, especially Oskar Kokoschka, Paul Klee, and Max Ernst. As Benjamin Buchloh points out, the recovery of such an identity is highly problematic in its creation of a "'new' painterly aesthetic that not only privileged the continuity of the artisanal production of representations as the primordial definition of art, but also argued for the persistence of a local, regional, and national grounding of artistic practice" (477). Given this combination of a preference for unique individual expression and specific cultural identity, along with the influence of Dubuffet's *art brut*, Hanz Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922), and primitivism, neo-expressionism appears to lend some credence to Lukács's accusation that expressionism's "childish" approach can just as easily serve right-wing reactionism as it can serve left-wing progressivism. And it

doesn't help that, despite its high market value in the 1980s and its establishment of some major stars such as Baselitz, Schnabel, and Salle, neo-expressionism's return to spontaneity recalled the privileging of emotion over intellect that marginalized expressionism during the 1920s; and its violent imagery and exclusion of women from some of its exhibitions (such as London's "New Spirit in Painting" exhibition in 1881) recalled the misogyny that was a prominent element of the earlier expressionism.

Rediscovering Social Content

There is another period of social expressionism, largely forgotten today, that avoids these issues and, according to Bram Dijkstra's recent argument for greater artistic relevancy, effectively employs subjective deformation and social criticism in the service of social justice. In *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change 1920-1950* (1983), Dijkstra clarifies the difference between socialist realism and social realism, two movements that he argues were conflated following World War II in the American shift toward abstraction:

Determined, long-term political propaganda has succeeded in making us habitually associate the expressionist art of the socially conscious painters of the thirties with the official art of the Nazis and the Soviet Union. Much of this was due to the deliberate post-World War II manipulation of the term "social realism" to designate a movement that was never designated as such during its heyday. For [. . .] the habitual linking of these two words (rather than the until then common designations "socially conscious art" or "social content art") was not used. (51)

In returning to the preferred depression-era terms for American expressionism before the term was appropriated by the New York art scene of the 1940s and 1950s, Dijkstra broadens the entire definition of expressionism as art that "seeks to engage the passions that move us individually by making us recognize the power of emotions *we all share*, but have learned to repress to make our perceptions fit within the prevailing norms of group thought" (12, emphasis mine). Dijkstra shifts attention to shared emotions, rather than the subjective deformations of individual emotional expressions of the artist in the definition that characterizes the *Neue Wilden* (New Wild Ones) view of neo-expressionism and the wild child half of expressionism that goes all the way back through Bahr to Baudelaire. The social criticism half of expressionism suggested by the demarcation "socially conscious" or "social content" defines it more as service to the larger community than as Bahr's "symbol of the unknown" or Kandinsky's "inner necessity."

Nikos Papastergiadis has recently pointed out that "for over a century now, artists and writers have realized that art and life do not exist in separate domains" (364). For Papastergiadis, Dijkstra, and other critics such as Mckensie Wark and Okwui Enwezor, contemporary art is exploring ways of presenting "a challenge to the old avant-gardist rhetoric of detachment" [. . .] (Papastergiadis 376). More than perhaps any other modernist preoccupation, its emphasis on *individual* expression has been most thoroughly critiqued, from Barthes to Lyotard and beyond. But the current interest in connecting art

to what Papastergiadis describes as “new political strategies of expressive resistance” (364) can certainly benefit from a re-examination of the modernist aesthetic of childhood in which deformation was not only seen as a way of projecting a unique subjectivity on the world but (when used in the service of social justice) as a way of discovering larger truths.

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