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## ***The Continuity of Realism and the Everyday***

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Nineteenth century realism, and the subsequent unstoppable impressionist march, was an unequivocal repudiation of romanticism and academicism in art. It exemplified a sort of aesthetic agnosticism and, at the same time, an increased belief in the significance of experience beyond the confines of a self-conscious art world. Conventional figures in imaginary landscapes gave way to a here-and-now-ness, to depicted events that one might actually have seen, involving individuals that were all-too-human. In short, the everyday was asserted as necessary and sufficient.

A similar paradigm shift has occurred at the end of the twentieth century. To some extent, this is in reaction to the excesses of early post-modernism, its theatricality, its esoteric and symbolic tendencies, and what now, in retrospect, seems an absurd deference to post-structuralist theory. The liberation supposed to be intrinsic to the advent of post-modernism rapidly became a *cul-de-sac* of nostalgia and gratuitous mediation compromising artistic gestures with a tendency always to qualify and cross-reference. The recent artistic revival of interest in the everyday, in correspondence with the nineteenth century realist movement, constitutes an antidote of directness and economy.

This exhibition, *Quotidiana*, is especially valuable as it juxtaposes contemporary visions of the everyday with modernist antecedents. Although it would be misleading to suggest that realism was always predominant throughout the sequential history of modernism, clearly it featured as an unbroken thread. Previously its incidences were isolated, making Goya and seventeenth century Dutch painting, for example, so remarkable. In its nineteenth century manifestations, realism eventually became undermined by a romanticist backlash, in the forms of art for art's sake and other aestheticisms, and then waited in obscurity until the stirrings of the First World War. Not only recovered, but hardened and set by this unprecedented cataclysm, realism was then effectively propelled through the following modernist decades.

The continuity in the history of realism is analogous to the continuities by which realism is itself defined, and these came into focus clearly with the war. It is almost a truism that the most radical modernism happened at the beginning of the modern movement, and the exact form it took, to a significant extent, was determined by the aestheticist dogma it superseded. In their various ways, artists such as Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Marcel Duchamp were emphatically denying the conventional distinctions between art and life - based on notions of inherent and transcendental artistic quality - between artists and philistines, between hallowed places for art and the vulgar world beyond. Realism aspires to the erasure of the lines drawn between these assumed opposites.

The Italian futurists, including Balla, Boccioni and Severini, espoused a hyper-modernism which was particularly aggressive in its dismissal of artistic tradition. They called for the demolition of museums as their work at once absorbed the everyday in terms of subject matter - energetic scenes of urban life - and embodied the impulse to extend futurism into non-high art realms such as everyday dress, street furniture and cookery. Politically located somewhere between immature

megalomania and sympathetic idealism, these artists were historically vital not because of their will to power, but rather because they insisted that art needed a chance to start again and have ordinary human relevance. In many ways they were forerunners of contemporary artists exhibited here such as Andrea Zittel and Daniel Buren.

Duchamp's dadaist gestures were ostensibly less extravagant, but in terms of modern art practice, directly much more influential. His readymades, such as *Porte-Bouteille (Bottle Rack)*, 1914, subverted any idea that works of art were the result of artistic intention, sensibility and touch, thereby throwing the gates of the art world open. The everyday flooded in. As a subject, it was fused with the means of its representation - in other words, the everyday and the means of its representation became one and the same thing - and consequently artistic medium was apprehended as continuous with the stuff of everything else, not precious and apart.

The readymade has become commonplace, featuring here also in the work of Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Sarah Lucas, Ceal Floyer and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and essential particularly to our understanding of the work of Richard Artschwager, Andy Warhol, Robert Gober, Jorge Pardo, Charles Ray and Fischli and Weiss. As with the proposition of futurism, Duchamp's introduction of the readymade engendered a realism involving two-way traffic between art and non-art, but it was more far reaching, having implications for every conceivable artistic experience. A work of art thus is to be understood fundamentally as a human invention which takes its place alongside all other terrestrial phenomena, to be appreciated on the same terms. "Concrete" abstraction, since the Second War and perhaps culminating in the work of Carl Andre, epitomizes this inescapable fact.

It was no coincidence that collage, with its incorporation of readymade objects, pointing up the material nature of the work overall, made its debut during the development of futurism and dada. The title and medium of Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, oil on canvas with chair caning, eloquently summarizes the revolution that was occurring, as do the catalogue details for other works by him and Georges Braque around this time. That artist Udomsak Krisanamis, now working in New York, uses collage with the same implications and also to communicate his everyday experience as a recent immigrant. Cut-up pages from newspapers and magazines, meticulously covered with paint - except for the voids of the letter "o" - suggest the painstaking process of learning to live in an alien culture.

Collage functions virtually in the same way as appropriated imagery - appropriated imagery is virtually collage, virtually readymade - and both feature in pop art. Dada's challenge to conventional notions of artistic authorship was embodied in this movement as, at the same time, it recast the relationship between high art and popular culture. At once a celebration and critique of the latter, pop paradoxically asserted artificiality and superficiality, the real disguises of other realities, again reflecting a philosophical skepticism at the heart of realism. Images of soup cans, car crashes, electric chairs, celebrity portraits, for example, all get essentially the same treatment from Warhol, and reiterate the fact that the everyday is not necessarily on the street, abject or mundane.

Richard Hamilton's pop was more clearly ironic and less deadpan than Warhol's, revealing ultimately an unambiguous social commitment. This tendency, together with the use of collage and other pop strategies, reached a climax in the "counter-cultural" work of other artists during the late Sixties and Seventies, perhaps most notably Martha Rosler. Owing something also to the anti-Nazi imagery of John Heartfield, and at a time when Marxism still had currency, Rosler addressed issues of war and patriotism, sexual politics, class difference, homelessness and consumerism. Concerned to maximize the accessibility of her work, appealing as much as possible to a non-specialist audience, Rosler subscribed to a realism which counterbalanced its everyday media with messages of political radicalism - in an effort to actually change everyday life.

Rosler and many artists of her generation not only used photography but also were responsible for

pushing it into the artistic mainstream. Here, in this exhibition, photographic work - as opposed to the work derived from photography - the earliest example dates from 1966, being Dan Graham's series of *Tract Houses*. Also from this time, with the exception of the (unpainterly) work by Udomsak Krisanamis and On Kawara, painting disappears from the selection, suggesting that, within the history of artistic realism, painting was usurped by photography. This is of course an oversimplification, particularly as process painting and painting within the concrete tradition now thrives, but indubitably an important conclusion has been reached lately in art practice, and this probably has more to do with the requirements of realism rather than the redundancy of painting.

Realism has been quickened by the continuity of imagery automatically achieved through photography, and similarly through film and video - again the imagery itself is readymade - and a reversal of this development is surely inconceivable. The role of painting has been adjusted accordingly through various phases and movements, the most reactionary of which perhaps was neo-expressionism - once seemingly the inevitable style of post-modernism and the antithesis of realism - an extreme form of romanticism. The rhetoric that accompanied neo-expressionism stressed individualism through a "return" to painting, the general impression it created being one of tortured and profound (male) solipsism.

Early post-modernism was also characterized by a cut-and-paste aesthetic which was quite distinct from modernist collage and pop appropriation - even perhaps in counter-distinction, as it was informed by a conviction, courtesy of current aesthetic philosophy, that artistic innovation was no longer possible, and that western culture was doomed to a future full of its own past. Thus it conformed with the neo-expressionist tendency to be inward looking and disconnected. The appropriation of imagery from art history was pervasive, as much in painting as it was in computer-generated photo-montage, so that artistic gestures were explicitly confused with gestures previously made by others - it was an academic post-modernism, very free within narrow limits. It was a *fin de siècle* post-modernism, finished by 1990.

Painting now is considerably less hidebound. Minimalism and abstraction, almost outlawed not so long ago, fit naturally within a more authentic post-modern diversity, and, generally speaking, there is room for work which is more direct and less overtly theory-based. In the case of photography, this is signified particularly by the recent prevalence of single-shot images, in color, of unposed subjects. Nan Goldin, Fischli and Weiss, Richard Billingham, Wolfgang Tillmans and Beat Streuli particularly are exponents of this kind of realism. Other recent photographic work here, by Maria Hedlund, Sam Taylor-Wood, Hannah Starkey, Sarah Jones, Thomas Struth and Gillian Wearing, is more contrived but equally concerned to engage the viewer with its familiarity.

Photography, video and film lends itself obviously to such representation. Considered on its own perhaps it would encourage a too literal idea of contemporary realism, as if we were looking simply for people like us in pictures. The value and challenge of realism resides rather in the continuity which it asserts at a number of levels, including the pictorial, towards an authentic integration of art with the everyday. The work in this exhibition suggests that it is possible.