

**John Knight** <jknight@pnca.edu>  
to me

Nov 22 ⭐ ↶ ↷

Current thinking on art is as paralyzed as it is because, amongst other things, art is incapable of recovering from the idealist dream of the Other, of the negative, of the non-relational, of the social, whether in its politicized or its dandified form, or of recovering from the failure of that dream. We have realized that, for the present, there is nothing outside the system, at least as far as visual and plastic arts are concerned, that can possibly hope to exercise any influence whatsoever; and it is their historical fate that they have only enjoyed any development – becoming the most official and representative of all state arts through the concatenation of pacific historical circumstances and their own self-induced impotence – to the extent that art has merely absorbed the advances that derived from this essentially conservative function. All of this has led contemporary artists to waver between the desperate attempt to salvage negativity (though we should not despise the heroic aspects of this project which is hopelessly idealistic as a totality) and a kind of cynicism which simply abandons itself to the futility of state art at its utterly museal function and seems quite prepared to fulfill that role, if in a slightly melancholic tone, without much further ado. But it is precisely here, where it has been so markedly instrumentalized and exploited by the powers that be, that the arts are capable of unfolding a multiplicity of functions, of disclosing unexplored areas not yet put up for sale, areas which invite further reflection and different kinds of discourse and which cannot present themselves so easily elsewhere and in other cultural domains.

Art today finds itself in a position which can be compared with that of the hard sciences. The artist is like the physicist who cannot promote his work if he is not prepared to co-operate with the most finical sponsors. On the other hand, he must also understand their intentions and attempt to counteract them, not by pursuing the bathetic strategy of the 'March through the Institutions' but by being that good artist who knows his own interests. This is still based on the ultimately idealist thought, which can never be verified, that in the final analysis all good art must serve the people, must express what is happening in the topical struggles of the present. In areas like rock music and the comic strip messages concerning these contemporary struggles are passed within an almost hermetic circle from one 'combatant' to another in the relevant coded form. But visual and plastic art finds itself in a very different position today, when it is largely a servant of the state of Deutsche Bank, an instrument for promoting politicians or corporations, an immediate expression of the ultimate form of war and exploitation that is perpetrated against human beings and the planet itself. It simply has the choice between being the golden watch-chain of Lothar Spath or the hairspray of Gloria von Thum und Taxis. Art clings to the powers that brand is also simultaneously the furthest removed from them. It is further removed from the people than any other medium and is therefore also the furthest removed and the most remote from the havoc which power wreaks upon the people in particular (precisely in so far as it stifles in the people the very kind of self-realizing aspirations that it desires for the artist). Art is also thereby freed to establish contact with the new, correct and uncoded energies of the people themselves, those from which, as Mao says, 'the right ideas of human beings arise.' If the visual and plastic arts could acquire an appropriate consciousness of this condition of their own existence, an awareness that was not simply consumed by the emotions and resentments with which we are all familiar, but would preserve that contradiction in their paintings and exhibits as a great and unmissable joke, that would be a considerable achievement.

John - thank you for sending this text. Interested in how it might converse with this:

Svetlana Boym - the off-modern mirror

The twentieth century began with futuristic utopias and dreams of unending development and ended with nostalgia and quests for restoration. The twenty-first century cannot seek refuge in either. There is something preposterous in our contemporary moment of postindustrial economic crisis and preindustrial cultural conflict. I see in it not a conflict between modern and anti-modern, or a pure "clash of civilizations," but rather as a clash of eccentric modernities that are out of synch and out of phase with each other both temporally and spatially. Multiple projects of globalizations and glocalizations overlap but don't coincide. In this context of conflicting and intertwined pluralities, the prefix "post" becomes itself passé. By the end of the last century various thinkers had mourned or celebrated the "ends" of history and of art, of the book and of humanity as we knew it. While the various "posts" succeeded one another, many premodern myths also claimed their share of the intellectual and spiritual territory.

Instead of fast-changing prefixes—"post," "anti," "neo," "trans," and "sub"—that suggest an implacable movement forward, against or beyond, and try desperately to be "in," I propose to go off: "off" as in "off kilter," "off Broadway," "off the map," or "way off," "off-brand," "off the wall," and occasionally "off-color." "Off modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. Critic and writer Viktor Shklovsky proposes the figure of the knight's move in chess that follows "the tortured road of the brave," preferring it to the master-slave dialectics of "dutiful pawns and kings."<sup>1</sup> Oblique, diagonal, and zigzag moves reveal the play of human freedom vis-à-vis political teleologies and ideologies that follow suprahuman laws of the invisible hand of the market or of the march of progress. As we veer off the beaten track of dominant constructions of history, we have to proceed laterally, not literally, and discover the missed opportunities and roads not taken. These lie buried in modern memory like the routes of public transportation in the American landscape traversed by decaying highways and superhighways, surveyed by multitasking traffic controllers.

Off modern is not a lost "ism" from the ruined archive of the avant-garde. Neither is it merely a new brand in the fast-paced market of current artistic derivatives. Off modern is a contemporary worldview that took shape in the "zero" decade of the twenty-first century that allows us to recapture different, often eccentric aspects of earlier modernities, to "brush history against the grain"—to use Walter Benjamin's expression—in order to understand the preposterous aspects of our present. In other words, off modern is not an "ism" but a prism of vision and a mode of acting and creating in the world that tries to remap the contemporary landscape filled with the ruins of spectacular real estate development and the construction sites of the newly rediscovered national heritage. The off-modern project is still off-brand; it is a performance-in-progress, a rehearsal of possible forms and common places. In this sense off modern is at once con-temporary and off-beat vis-à-vis the present moment. It explores interstices, disjunctures, and gaps in the present in order to co-create the future.

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Additionally:

The off-modern perspective invites us to rethink the opposition between development and preservation and proposes a nonlinear conception of cultural evolution through trial and error. The off-modern artist finds an interesting comrade-in-arms in contemporary science, in particular in Stephen J. Gould's subversive theory of exaptation that unsettles evolutionary biologists and proponents of intelligent design, techno-visionaries and postmodernists. Exaptation can be seen as a redemption of the eccentric and unforeseen in natural history, a theory that could only have been developed by an imaginative scientist who sometimes thinks like an artist.

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I feel as if Svetlana is providing another route where as Diedrich is unable to foresee any sort of passage way that is past toeing a crisp and radical line between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic movement. Svetlana proposes beyond Master-Slave movement and beyond the chess board—since a prism doesn't exist merely on a ground.

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I wonder if this route is a contemplation in technology, and in acknowledgement of its current complications; in an age where information travels vertically as much as laterally, for one; where the politics are less sequenced and partitioned, as you mentioned, for two. Their intellectual effort seems to overlap in terms of institutionalized legitimacy, when they both acknowledge the parallel with scientific fact-checking and peer review. Also, the era of radicalized opposition that DD is referring to has been, like many aspects of modernism and early conceptualism, been aesthetically subsumed and I daresay leveled by capitalism's pressures, increasing alienation, and marginalizing of the artist's ability to engage in more experimental forms of radical discourse within institutions. I wonder if this is because of the globalizing aspects of conceptualism? The form of these gestures has historically opened up a place of critique but obviously, as these mechanisms become repeated and normalized, they situate themselves within a certain frame of history that has not reconciled with its role in the core of the original critique. It's important not to neglect the appearance and sentiments of the original gestures, and likewise to let them polarize with, for example, political game-changers like drone wars and religious radicalism. What do you think?

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