Chapter 1

The rise of postmodernism

Carl Andre’s rectangular pile of bricks, *Equivalent* VIII (1966), annoyed lots of people when shown at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1976. It is a typically postmodernist object. Now re-enshrined in the Tate Modern, it doesn’t resemble much in the canon of modernist sculpture. It is not formally complex or expressive, or particularly engaging to look at, indeed it can soon be boring. It is easy to repeat. Lacking any features to sustain interest in itself (except perhaps to Pythagorean number mystics) it inspires us to ask questions about its context rather than its content: ‘What is the point of this?’, or ‘Why is this displayed in a museum?’ Some theory about the work has to be brought in to fill the vacuum of interest, and this is also fairly typical. It might inspire the question ‘Is it really art, or just a heap of bricks pretending to be art?’ But this is not a question that makes much sense in the postmodernist era, in which it seems to be generally accepted that it is *the institution* of the gallery, rather than anything else, which has made it, *de facto*, a ‘work of art’. The visual arts just are what museum curators show us, from Picasso to sliced-up cows, and it is up to us to keep up with the ideas surrounding these works.

Many postmodernists (and of course their museum director allies) would like us to entertain such thoughts about the ideas which might surround this ‘minimalist’ art. A pile of bricks is designedly elementary; it confronts and denies the emotionally expressive
qualities of previous (modernist) art. Like Duchamp’s famous *Urinal* or his bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, it tests our intellectual responses and our tolerance of the works that the art gallery can bring to the attention of its public. It makes some essentially critical points, which add up to some quite self-denying assumptions about art. Andre says: ‘What I try to find are sets of particles and the rules which combine them in the simplest way’, and claims that his equivalents are ‘communistic because the form is equally accessible to all men’.

This sculpture, however politically correct it may be interpreted to be, isn’t nearly as enjoyable as Rodin’s *Kiss*, or the far more intricate abstract structures of a sculptor like Anthony Caro. Andre’s theoretical avant-gardism, which tests our intellectual responses, suggests that the pleasures taken in earlier art are a bit suspect. Puritanism, ‘calling into question’, and making an audience feel guilty or disturbed, are all intimately linked by objects like this. They are attitudes which are typical of much postmodernist art, and they often have a political dimension. The artwork for which Martin Creed won the Turner Prize in 2001 continues this tradition. It is an empty room, in which the electric lights go on and off.

I will be writing about postmodernist artists, intellectual gurus, academic critics, philosophers, and social scientists in what follows, as if they were all members of a loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party. This party is by and large internationalist and ‘progressive’. It is on the left rather than the right, and it tends to see everything, from abstract painting to personal relationships, as political undertakings. It is not particularly unified in doctrine, and even those who have most significantly contributed ideas to its manifestos sometimes indignantly deny membership – and yet the postmodernist party tends to believe that its time has come. It is certain of its uncertainty, and often claims that it has seen through the sustaining illusions of others, and so has grasped the ‘real’ nature of the cultural and political institutions which surround us. In doing this, postmodernists often follow Marx. They claim to be
peculiarly aware of the unique state of contemporary society, immured as it is in what they call ‘the postmodern condition’.

Postmodernists therefore do not simply support aesthetic ‘isms’, or avant-garde movements, such as minimalism or conceptualism (from which work like Andre’s bricks emerged). They have a distinct way of seeing the world as a whole, and use a set of philosophical ideas that not only support an aesthetic but also analyse a ‘late capitalist’ cultural condition of ‘postmodernity’. This condition is supposed to affect us all, not just through avant-garde art, but also at a more fundamental level, through the influence of that huge growth in media communication by electronic means which Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s called the ‘electronic village’. And yet in our new ‘information society’, paradoxically enough, most information is apparently to be distrusted, as being more of a contribution to the manipulative image-making of those in power than to the advancement of knowledge. The postmodernist attitude is therefore one of a suspicion which can border on paranoia (as seen, for example, in the conspiracy-theory novels of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, and the films of Oliver Stone).

A major Marxist commentator on postmodernism, Frederic Jameson, sees Jon Portman’s Westin Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles as entirely symptomatic of this condition. Its extraordinary complexities of entranceways, its aspiration towards being ‘a complete world, a kind of miniature city’, and its perpetually moving elevators, make it a ‘mutation’ into a ‘postmodernist hyperspace’ which transcends the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to find its own position in a mappable world. This ‘milling confusion’, says Jameson, is a dilemma, a ‘symbol and analogue’ of the ‘incapacity of our minds . . . to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’. Many of us have felt something like this in London’s Barbican Centre.

This ‘lost in a big hotel’ view of our condition shows postmodernism
1. Interior of Westin Bonaventure Hotel by Portman. 'Postmodernist hyperspace'.
to be a doctrine for the metropolis, within which a new climate of ideas has arisen and brought with it a new sensibility. But these ideas and attitudes have always been very much open to debate, and in what follows I shall combat postmodernist scepticism with some of my own. Indeed, I will deny that its philosophical and political views and art forms are nearly as dominant as a confident proclamation of a new ‘postmodernist’ era might suggest.

It is nevertheless obvious by now that even if we restrict ourselves to the ideas current within the artistic avant-garde since 1945, we can sense a break with those of the modernist period. The work of James Joyce is very different from that of Alain Robbe-Grillet, that of Igor Stravinsky from that of Karlheinz Stockhausen, that of Henri Matisse from that of Robert Rauschenberg, of Jean Renoir from that of Jean-Luc Godard, of Jacob Epstein from that of Carl Andre, and of Mies van der Rohe from that of Robert Venturi. What one makes of this contrast between the modern and the postmodern in the arts largely depends on the values one embraces. There is no single line of development to be found here.

Many of these differences arose from the sensitivity of artists to changes in the climate of ideas. By the mid-1960s, critics like Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan had begun to point out some of the characteristics, in Europe and in the United States, of what we now call postmodernism. They argued that the work of postmodernists was deliberately less unified, less obviously ‘masterful’, more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together, and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it. We will look at some examples of this later on.

The rise of theory

Somewhat later than the period in which the artists mentioned above established themselves, a further postmodernist
development took place: ‘the rise of theory’ among intellectuals and academics. Workers in all sorts of fields developed an excessively critical self-consciousness. Postmodernists reproached modernists (and their supposedly ‘naive’ liberal humanist readers or spectators or listeners) for their belief that a work of art could somehow appeal to all humanity, and so be free of divisive political implications.

The rise of the great post-war innovatory artists – Stockhausen, Boulez, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Coover, Rauschenberg, and Beuys – was succeeded (and many would say supplemented and explained) by the huge growth in the influence of a number of French intellectuals, notably the Marxist social theorist Louis Althusser, the cultural critic Roland Barthes, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the historian Michel Foucault, all of whom in fact began their work by thinking about the implications of modernism, and rarely had any very extended relationship to the contemporary avant-garde. Althusser was concerned with Brecht; Barthes with Flaubert and Proust; Derrida with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Mallarmé; and Foucault with Nietzsche and Bataille. By the mid-1970s it becomes difficult to know what matters most to postmodernists – the fashioning of a particular kind of (disturbing) experience within art, or the new philosophical and political interpretative opportunities which it offered. Many would now say that for committed postmodernists, interpretative implications were always (and disastrously) ‘privileged’ over the enjoyable artistic embodiment and formal sophistication which so many had learned to appreciate in modernist art.

This startlingly new framework of ideas was exported from the France of the late 1960s and early 1970s into England, Germany, and the United States. By the time of the student uprisings of 1968, the most advanced philosophical thought had moved away from the strongly ethical and individualist existentialism that was typical of the immediately post-war period (of which Sartre and Camus were the best-publicized exponents) towards far more sceptical and anti-humanist attitudes. These new beliefs were expressed in what came
to be known as deconstructive and poststructuralist theory, to be discussed below. The ‘new novelists’ in France also moved away from an interest in the philosophico-emotional states of angst and absurdity, and a commitment to the mimetic engagements of a traditionally narrated novel, such as Sartre’s *La Nausée* or Camus’s *La Peste* and *L’Étranger*, towards a far colder, contradiction-filled anti-narrative method in the texts of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, and others, who were not so much interested in individual character, or coherent narrative suspense and interest, as in the play of their own authorial language.

The new ideas, although they came to inspire some literature, and to dominate its interpretation in academic circles, were actually rooted outside the arts. Barthes was mainly interested in the application of linguistic models to the interpretation of text, Derrida’s philosophical work began as a critique of linguistics, and Foucault’s base was in the social sciences and history. They were also all guided to a greater or lesser degree by the re-reading or redemption of Marx (whose dominance in places like the Soviet Union was, before 1989, rather airily explained away as due to a misapplied ‘bureaucratic socialism’). Most of the French intellectuals responsible for the theoretical inspiration of postmodernism worked within a broadly Marxist paradigm.

Postmodernist doctrines thus drew upon a great deal of philosophical, political, and sociological thought, which disseminated itself into the artistic avant-garde (particularly in the visual arts) and into the humanities departments of universities in Europe and the United States as ‘theory’. The postmodernist period is one of the extraordinary dominance of the work of academics over that of artists.

This was not ‘theory’ as it might be understood in the philosophy of science (in which theories are tested, and so verifiable or falsifiable) or in Anglo-American, broadly empiricist philosophy. It was a far more self-involved, sceptical type of discourse which adapted
general concepts derived from traditional philosophy to literary, sociological, or other material, which was thereby given a postmodernist twist.

Lost in translation?

Many academic proponents of postmodernist theory in England and the United States therefore concentrated on the inward translation of Continental thought. This led to a number of interestingly transplanted cultural concerns, and a sharp break with previous traditions. For example, postmodernist theory inherited a concern for the functions of language from structuralism, but when Jacques Derrida turned his attention to the problem of reference (of language to external non-linguistic reality) he went back to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Derrida struggled with him (in *De la grammatologie*) apparently in blissful ignorance of the fact that many of the problems which concerned him, and the (very slippery) position he himself came to, had, in the opinion of many in the philosophical community (even in France), been far better stated and more rigorously analysed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. But Derrida does not mention Wittgenstein in his early work. Many Derridean literary theorists were therefore seriously ignorant of the history of philosophical problems, and were unaware of some of the standard solutions to them in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. This led to intellectual division, mutual incomprehension, and splits in many university departments that persist to this day.

Postmodernists, who were rightly enthusiasts for ‘liberating’ ethical and political doctrines, were at the same time immensely dependent on the extraordinary prestige of these new intellectual authorities, whose influence was not a little sustained by their heavy reliance upon a neologizing jargon, which imparted a tremendous air of difficulty and profundity to their deliberations and caused great difficulties to their translators. According to the American philosopher John Searle:
Chapter 4
The culture of postmodernism

The relationship between the climate of ideas outlined in previous chapters and the making of art is a complex one. Not surprisingly, many (but not all) who saw their work as innovatory or avant-garde were attracted to the new critical challenge of postmodernist themes. But it has to be borne in mind that creative people may not need any deep philosophical or academic understanding of such matters. They can also get their ‘new ideas’ from the conversation and journalism which so often mediate them – and they will sometimes get them wrong, or semi-digested, or exaggerated. But that is the way in which important ideas, like viruses, can catch on in society.

Conversely, postmodernist thinkers and critics have often wished to coopt the artistic avant-garde as exemplars of the importance and influence of their ideas. Lyotard not surprisingly saw it as the job of contemporary artists to question the role of the metanarrative of modernism, which was used to legitimize certain kinds of work. He asks artists to

question the rules of painting or of narrative as they have learned them from their predecessors. Soon those rules must appear to them as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure, which makes it impossible for them to be ‘true’.

Language, theory, the object, and art. Is this a paint brush?
Indeed, it is typical of many postmodernist commentators (such as Andreas Huyssen) that they see the ‘true’ function of the avant-garde as being critical in the postmodernist sense – it should attack the bourgeois institutions of art and therefore be directed to a (better?) future. Of course, this is far from true of all the avant-garde movements in our period, or before it. It is a political prescription, which would hardly capture, for example, what Charles Jencks and his colleagues (whose view of postmodernism is highly eccentric to that sketched here) would understand by postmodernism, in defending a conservative return to an admittedly parodic neo-Classicist realism in painting and in architecture.

Postmodernist art therefore echoes in very various and often indirect ways the doctrines we have discussed above; it resists the master narrative of modernism, and the authority of high art which modernism itself takes from the past, and it worries about its own language. It is often simply unconcerned by the relationship between the formerly ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres, for example as expressed in the two symphonies Low (1992) and Heroes (1997) by Philip Glass based on the work of David Bowie and Brian Eno, and it can often look quite trivial and popular and tacky. An alliance with popular culture is seen as anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical, and dissenting. It disrupts narrative – as can be seen, for example, in the figurative painting of Eric Fischl and David Salle – because a coherent narrative too easily allies itself to a grand one. (That is why painters like Anselm Kiefer, who devote themselves to grandiose works with a ‘deep’ relation to history and myth, so significantly lie outside the postmodernist mainstream.) Much postmodernist art pays attention to hitherto marginalized forms of identity and behaviour. This runs from the serious feminist work of Mary Kelly, who documented her relationship to her baby son in Post Partum Document (1973–9) (‘document’ here reveals the nature of the work as a politically significant text, rather than as a formally organized image designed to give visual pleasure) to Madonna’s stage performances and her book Sex (1992), in which the relationship to
pleasure is entirely different, and which shocked so many feminists for her apparent ‘theatrical’ submission to sadomasochistic practices, as the ‘victim’ of men.

This critical attitude, as we shall see, often issues in pastiche, parody, and irony. Hence, for example, Jeff Koons's kitschy *New Hoover Convertible* (1980), which is indeed just a commercially available cleaning machine, floats over fluorescent lights in a plexiglass case. It is a parody of the Duchampian ready-made, because it is indeed a ‘desirable’ consumerist object (rather than a mere urinal or bicycle wheel). But its economic desirability is loosely confused with, or ironized by, its aesthetic pseudo-admirability, now that it has become a ‘work of art’ displayed in a museum case rather than packed in a cardboard box to take home. And his *New Hoover Quadraflex* multiplies this by four.

The aim of many working in the avant-garde arts was very often the traditional modernist one, of defamiliarization, now guided by a more radical postmodernist epistemology. The aim, post Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes – whose ideas in variously garbled forms swarm over the pronouncements of artists since the 1970s – was to prevent the consumer-as-subject from feeling ‘at home’ in the world, for that would lead to a merely conservative pragmatic accommodation to it.
But works like Reich’s *Drumming* (1971) and *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974–6), Adams’s opera *Nixon in China* (1987) and his orchestral *Harmonielehre* (1985), changed this. The last of these is a marvellous example of the combination of minimalist technique with a kind of postmodern ‘retro’ style. This is obvious in the use of allusion to Wagner in the second movement, entitled ‘The Amfortas Wound’. This has a chromatic lyricism reminiscent of Schoenberg, and a huge emotional force (which is one of the many things Adams added to the minimalist style). Indeed, Adams’s works can build up from essentially simple premises into immensely complex and satisfying structures, which exploit a traditional rhetoric, particularly of stretto and climax, to excite their audiences. Most outrageously so in his *Grand Pianola Music* (1981–2), which produces all that unselfconscious or uncondescending mixture of high and low that the stylistic eclecticism of postmodernism can manage, particularly when in this work Adams introduces ‘The Tune’, a banal melody that is whipped up into increasingly perverse, grandiose climaxes. All the while, unrelated musical clichés, ‘thumping marches, heroic Beethovenian piano arpeggios, ecstatic gospel harmonies – rub shoulders with delirious glee’.

Robert Schwarz, whom I cite, goes on to quote Adams as saying that:

> Duelling pianos, cooing female sirens, Valhalla brass, thwacking brass drums, gospel triads and a Niagara of cascading flat keys all learned to cohabit as I wrote the piece.


It’s as funny as any other work mentioned in this book.

**Coming after – and exhaustion?**

Many of the innovatory techniques of postmodernist art therefore asked, through artists and the critical establishment, for interpretations that relied on such leading theoretical notions as reflexivity, which arises from the artist’s self-consciousness.
concerning artistic method and ideology, including making the work a critique of previous generic restraints and therefore, in the eyes of many postmodernist critics, of political ones also. An elegant example of an awareness of this ‘post’ relationship to modernism is to be found in Jeff Wall’s *Picture for Women* of 1979, which is a subtle echo of the indirect perspectives of Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. Wall, with the release button of his camera in one hand, is staring at the reflection in a mirror of a girl who is posed like Manet’s barmaid. This not only makes for an intriguingly complex relationship between the two figures, but is also a witty variation on the indirectness of the ‘male gaze’ as analysed by feminist critics in this period.

This immense self-awareness also led to the thought that, given the burden of past history (let alone its now suspect mimetic, moral, and political commitments), and the new doctrines concerning intertextuality discussed above, the postmodernist visual artist truly comes ‘after’ modernism. His or her work is as

Who looks at whom, at what angle, and why?
much condemned to being a repetition (or ‘reinscription’, or ‘citation’) as is the writer’s. It is inevitably an intertextual tissue of quotations and adaptations from the past, referring to other works, rather than to any external reality. And so the previously prized, highly individualist, and typically avant-gardist notions of creativity and originality came under attack. Much postmodernist visual art is an apparently easily repeatable, deliberately depthless art of the surface, as we can readily see if we compare, as Jameson does, Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* with the peasants’ boots depicted by Van Gogh and seen (by Heidegger) as giving a deep revelatory insight into the world from which they come. For many, postmodernist work can only be hybrid, stylistically mixed, and indebted by resemblance to its predecessors.

One response was to openly affirm one’s lack of originality. Douglas Crimp had developed by 1980 a notion of postmodernist photography, based on the work of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince, who were praised for:

showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen. Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, *stolen*. In their work, the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy.


Sherrie Levine thus made photo-reproductions of famous art photos by her male predecessors, like Edward Weston, whose work is thus ‘appropriated’, in order to ‘contest the cult of originality’, in the words of Linda Hutcheon. The ‘canonic’ ‘male point of view’ is ‘put in question’ by being reproduced, and so to speak re-framed, within a female artist’s discourse. Rosalind Krauss believes that Levine thus ‘radically’ questions ‘the concept of origin and with it the concept of originality’ – in ‘violating copyright’ by ‘pirating’

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Walker Evan’s photographs of share croppers and Edward Weston’s pictures of his son Neil (which, says Krauss, in any case go back, intertextually, to Greek kouroi). Levine’s work thus ‘explicitly deconstructs the notions of origin’ and is ‘acting now [it was 1981] to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition’. For Krauss, Levine’s ‘act’ of voiding and liquidating has to be ‘located’ within a typically postmodern ‘discourse of the copy’. But this is another misleading mystification – these images are ‘original’ only in the manner of bad fakes. To the theoretically unprejudiced eye, they are tatty versions of something better. Just mildly disconcerting. The doubtful morality of such a relationship between artists is nevertheless reassuringly pushed to one side by Krauss’s endorsement of Roland Barthes’s view that all art is copying anyway. For Barthes has told us that even the painstaking realist only copies copies:

To depict is to . . . refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy . . . Through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy.


The political motivation for this sort of view further emerges when we are told that

Levine’s work may also be seen as a fundamental attack on capitalist notions of ownership and property, along with the patriarchal identification of authorship with the assertion of self-sufficient maleness.

Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture (1989)

But what justifies the word ‘fundamental’ here? ‘Allegorical’ or ‘pseudo-philosophical’ or ‘cod profound’ may be better expressions.

The attack on originality, and the tendency to think of art as a form
of re-presentation of something that is already there, in a recycling of discourse, helped to reinforce the thought of those sceptical about postmodernism, that its art has all too much of a ‘post everything’ air. May not its intertextuality be the symptom of cultural exhaustion, brought on by the failure to meet the avant-gardist challenge of doing something creatively different after the heroic era of experimental modernism? Or might it even be a moral and political failure to engage with the real in society?

Postmodern architecture

All this promiscuous adaptation can perhaps be seen most clearly in the relationship of postmodernist architecture to the heroic modernism that preceded it. A citational hybridity is typical of much postmodernist work. So much so that in the immensely influential *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) by Robert Venturi, his wife Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Las Vegas architecture and the Strip is praised for its different levels, its use of popular material, and its indifference to unity. Venturi is thinking of the process of looking at the Strip as you drive by it, so that ‘the moving eye in the moving body must work to pick out and interpret a variety of changing, juxtaposed orders’. Jencks, in his similarly influential *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977), also argues that the ‘codes’ in a building (Jencks uses the language of semiotics) should be allowed to come into an ironic conflict of ‘double coding’ rather like the music by John Adams discussed above.

Much of this happens in Brown and Venturi’s Sainsbury Wing (1991) for the National Gallery in London. The architects make allusions to the Corinthian pilasters of the main building, bundling them and then further on spacing them out, so that:

Although classical elements dominate, they break rules of classical composition in overdetermined ways, with mannerist handling of
the pilasters, for example, or thoroughly unclassical garage-door-type openings hacked out of the elevation for the entries, windows and loading docks, at once undermining the classical sensibility and contradicting the tectonic logic otherwise so emphatically registered. Each classical detail or abundantly redundant element stands in counterpoint to another that undermines or contradicts classical verities. For Venturi and Scott Brown, contemporary cultural and social diversity calls for an architecture of richness and ambiguity rather than clarity and purity.


Architects like Venturi thought that the form-following-function language of modernist architecture was far too puritanical and should allow for the vitality, and no doubt the provocation, to be
gained from disunity and contradiction. Work like this happily deconstructs itself.

However, such double-coding effects can be, not so much the stimulating and ultimately satisfying combination of stylistic procedures, seen in the National Gallery and Stirling’s Neue Staatsgallerie in Stuttgart, as a far less sophisticated pop vulgarity. This, at any rate, is what I see in work like Ricardo Bofill’s pastiche classical ‘Versailles for the Masses’ in his Les Espaces d’Abraxas in Marne la Vallée (1978–82).

The whole thing is grotesquely inflated. The almost surreal facades here, with their massive columns, conceal modern apartment complexes which are hugely over-burdened with baroque adornment in concrete. It’s a kind of pastiche fascist monumental architecture, and it is surprising (or may be not) how much Bofill’s work has appealed to local authorities in France. The binary oppositions here are fairly obvious, but human scale and human dignity and convenience are as little cared for here as they
were at the opposite pole, in the austerely subordinating modernist work of Le Corbusier.