

DOMESTIC MODERNE

Or: (I'm Having A) Cookie Cutter Reaction



An installation about Domesticity and Modernism

by Margaret Morgan

Reception: 7:30 - 9:00pm

Tuesday, 20th April, 1993

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What is the relation between modern art and modern life?

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The pieces that comprise the installation, *Domestic Moderne*, variously address the intersection of modernist formalism and the aesthetics of an idealized domestic space.

It has been said that *Modernism is modernity in trouble* and that modernism exists precisely as the intrinsic disjuncture between western capitalist industrial life, modernity, and its representation in and as *culture*, modernism. This separation of spheres will make a culture that's 'looking modern' *moderne*, faster than the time it takes for Superman to leap a tall building. Now if modernity is in *trouble*, the modernist art history that purports to represent it must also be in trouble. Yet this trouble that modernity's in, is a kind of phantom pregnancy, in as much as the relation between modernism and modernity has never really been consummated: the relation between the two is too distanced for any actual exchange of bodily fluids. A bride without her bachelors even, the conventional role for domesticity in all of this is as a metaphor against which, among others, modernism valorized itself.

In art history how is it that when the surrealists radicalized cultural practice, they did so by invoking a monstrous maternal? And, from another perspective, when anyone wants to criticize the bourgeoisie, how is it that it is the bourgeois *home* that gets the brunt of the critic's wrath? I'm thinking here of anyone from such figures as Walter Benjamin to the formalist art critic Clement Greenberg to the dadaists. For instance, the encoding of the *objet trouvé* of Duchamp or Man Ray is conventionally eclipsed in the name of the celebratory privileging of the ready-made as radical effect. The objects *selected* are neither neutral nor universal signs of unfettered artistic innovation but are for the most part, gendered as masculine: from urinals to suit coat hangers.

In a more colloquial context, when someone wants to malign something, anything, because it's repetitious, cut from a standardized mold or mass produced, how is it that the thing, whatever it is, is equated not with modernity, not with those grand masters of repetition, Fordism and Taylorism, but rather with that most humble of kitchen utensils, the cookie cutter. What does it mean when the invocation of ire is at the expense of something domestic, something to do with home cooking, something 'feminine', housewifely, even? What does it mean when even our First Lady has been known to quickly reassure her audience that she wouldn't just stay home and bake cookies? What does it mean when in a culture being called a girl can be an insult? Why in the visual arts is mere decoration so much disparaged? How is it that the 'sphere of the feminine' is that place from which metaphors with negative connotations are drawn? In the piece, *(I'm having a) Cookie Cutter Reaction*, the return of the repressed is literalized: A wall of cookie cutters a la that zenith, endpoint and demise of modernist radicality, minimalism.

What does it mean to only be consigned the status of metaphor? Cubism, say, is characterized as modern because it has been said to proffer a simultaneous display of the fractured present of modern life; dada stripped bare its bride ostensibly *to find the object* of modern life; and Frank Stella's Black Paintings are said to invoke but never be tied to, perish the thought, social connotations of blackness. These representations of fine art nominate a relation to modern life, to the contemporary, to the social, that is metaphoric and for the most part never actually engaged with any of it. Does Picasso come first, as in conventional art histories, because he's got his finger on the pulse of modern life or because his finger's actually on the pulse of something else; because, perhaps, he *dares* to do pictures of prostitutes wearing African masks? What does it mean to do pictures of prostitutes wearing African masks at the height of a syphilis epidemic, for which there was then no cure, and about which it was said that it came from Africa and from, to paraphrase another fellow born of the Victorian era, Sigmund Freud, that other Dark Continent, the prostitute? Is it a mere coincidence that those works of art distinguished as great invoke the taboo underside of a dominant culture and its anxieties? What does it mean, coming up to the very recent past, when I, as a viewer, am expected not to see the consistent use of conventionally sexist imagery in the work of David Salle because he's doing it in the name of a post-modern flattening out of meaning, the erasure of difference? Yeah right. And I'm meant to ^{not} get upset by the decentering of the subject, too. The decentering of the subject comes as no surprise for those who have always been characterized as marginal.

The formalist art critic, Clement Greenberg has quipped, 'The decorative is the spectre that haunts Modernism.' I would argue, in an asymmetrical inversion of this notion, that it is Modernism that is the spectre that haunts domesticity. Moreover, I would argue, Clement Greenberg is, in keeping with the notion that modernity reveals the repressions of its practitioners, the spectre that haunts Clement Greenberg.

In the twilight of Modernism's hay-day, the ghost of this formerly dominant machination of capital can be traced in the marking out of domestic space as obsessively clean: clean looks, clean finishes, clean design, clean commodities, all keeping women, as housewives, mothers and domestic workers, busy. And these, as a mere wisp of the former glory of the good clean, clean-cut industrialism of modern architecture, ship-building, the automotive industry and newspaper empires, and their concomitant Efficiency, Rationalism and assembly lines. Of course, these industrial bases were never as clean-cut, efficient and untrammled as their representations might have us think. A glance at labor histories or environmental impact studies will only too clearly tell those stories. However, within the realm of modernist art history, that's how industrialism usually looked. The totalizing colonialist fantasy of an Ikea-fied universe (It's a big country, someone's gotta furnish it) in which everyone has clean white walls, designs and lives (and in which everyone wears Benetton clothes), ostensibly transcending class, culture and gender difference, is the flip side of this recording.

In the piece, *Cleaning Agents*, household cleaners are conflated with philosophic cleaners of houses from a history of modernism. The labels of those supermarket products upon which would otherwise appear a brawny but pink and Disney-smiling Genie have been altered: The character whose folded arms are meant to signify the strength with which to shore up Cleanness (women couldn't do it alone?) against the dirtiness of domestic life is given multiple new visages as the big-boy advocates of clean modern aesthetics, Adolf Loos, Josef Albers and Clement Greenberg whose projects variously advocated a kind of reductivism which, while looking good on paper, would be a bastard to maintain in the *real world*.

Domestic Moderne is an on-going project that is positioned in relation to current cultural debates about identity and the construction of history. My rationale is that, while much is being dismantled or circumvented from without the dominant discourses of history and culture, it is also crucial to analyze the dominant representations of history so as to denature them and open their immutable canons up to scrutiny.

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Checklist:

(I'm Having a) Cookie Cutter Reaction

16 x 9'; cookie cutters, chalk

Cleaning Agents

6' in diameter; household cleaning products, dirt

Hair Piece: Portrait of Sigmund Freud as Feminine Sexuality

8" x 8"; pubic hair and head hair on linen

Hong