Reconsidering Modern Art Theory: Reading Richard Shiff’s “Digital Experience in Modern Art”

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Preface

Richard Shiff’s “Digital Experience in Modern Art” first appeared in Les Cahiers (No. 66, Winter 1998) as the text of a lecture he delivered in Paris$: Later, he was invited to Japan by the Japan Foundation and delivered a similar talk at the Kyoto Institute of Technology on September 22, 2001. The text I refer to below is a different version that was rewritten for a Japanese audience. Along with the Japanese translation, I have included a series of related notes on the topic.

In short, Shiff’s text is a theory of modern art for the post-post-modern era. In it, he touches on several of the basic disputes related to modern art that have arisen between the end of WWII and today. To a few of Shiff’s main points, I have supplemented my own comments, tried to place them in a context and attempted to provide additional thoughts on modern art theory.

The Hand and the Machine

Is the act of creation something to be performed with the hand or with the machine? This is an extremely important issue that arose in art following the emergence of post-Industrial Revolution design and the invention of the camera. It is no exaggeration to say that the ideological conflict of the 20th century has been the alternating assertion that either negated mechanical production and favored the manual or negated manual production and favored the mechanical.

Shiff sets out to reevaluate the place of “the hand” in modern art, or more precisely, “the digits” (fingers) in the digital experience. The importance of the hand in art and design has been extensively argued by the 19th-century designer William Morris, Henri Focillon in the 20th century and has continued to be championed by critics and art historians in this century. On the other hand, a number of arguments against it have also been put forward.

Shiff’s own argument is in itself not a new one, but rather aims to revive several of the more criticized points of the theory. Why exactly has he decided to take up the topic now? Before answering that question, it is first necessary to review the major aesthetic positions regarding the hand and the machine.

In 1955, Henri Focillon discussed the role of “the hand” in art in a chapter entitled “The Praise of the Hand” in his book Vies des Formes (The Life of Forms in Art). On the making of art, Focillon states that the creativity of the fingers and the hand leads to a synthesis of all of the senses, in particular feeling, thinking with the entire body, a heightened awareness and a
reworking of an artist's materials. According to Focillon, the praise of the hand is based on French vitalist thought of the late 19th century. In one sense, the idea was meant to act as an anti-thesis against academic art, photography and the mechanical age and to advance the notion of the special privileges of art. In Focillon's words:

As soon as he attempts to intervene in the agenda to which he is subject, he begins to thrust a spear into an opaque nature — with a blade that gives him shape, the primitive industry holds in itself all of its future development. The resident of the cave, who sharpens flint arrowheads with tiny, careful sparks and makes needles from bones, surprises me much more than the erudite manufacturer of machines.

The artist who cuts his wood, forges his metal, kneads his clay and carves his block of stone conveys to us the past of ancient man, without whom we would not exist. Wonderful, isn't it, to see the rise, in this machine age, of this dogged survivor from the age of manual labor?

In response, in 1956, Pierre Francastel questioned the significance of traditional criticism regarding mechanical production. In considering technological innovations and artistic revolutions based on tools and machines to be a field of academic research that supersedes the borders of aesthetics and art history, he attempts to decipher the change in sensibilities in modern art that emerged out of the mechanical age. The analysis provides a wealth of suggestions that are just as applicable to the present day.

In 1970, in his book, *Clefs pour l'Esthetique*, the French aesthetician Etienne Souriau deals with the hand in art and the problem of the machine without specifically naming Focillon. Criticizing the praise of the hand that followed Morris, he points out the necessity of mechanization in art, or more precisely, the mechanical opportunity which is inherent in creation. In this way, Souriau demonstrates that the aesthetics which had been used to support modern art since romanticism have been biased both in the present (1970) and in the past.

As is widely known, with the drift away from manual production, the theory that authorized artistry through mechanical production came to be an important subject in modern design. The theory became a reality with the advent of Purism, Russian constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus and post-WWII product design. This process was made perfectly clear by Reyner Banham. The value in traces of the hand or the marks of great labor (that is, the ethical value that these are presumably based on), was erased from the design industry. Design, a field indissociable from technological innovation, had undergone a clear shift away from art that was the work of the hand toward the concepts of the head.

Similarly, in modern art, a field that is indivisible from developments in modern design, through the rules and geometry of tools and machines, the chance events of manual work were eliminated. Artists began to pursue an aesthetic value that was difficult to realize through manual techniques, leading eventually to a rise in abstract art. Art differs from design in that it is a creative act that is not regulated by a specific set of realistic conditions. Today, in light of various innovations in scientific technology, it has become increasingly difficult to deny the effect on the technical side of art. Without picking up a chisel, sculptors can sketch out a plan, select the materials and place an order with an iron foundry to produce a work. In the same
way, without a single finger every touching a keyboard or the strings of a musical instrument, music can be created simply by programming a computer. Without ever applying a brush to paint or a canvas, readymade pictures can be produced at will using a computer and other such devices. Furthermore, with the emergence of media art that employs combinations of sounds and other techniques, “modern art theory based on the praise of the hand,” which evolved to establish a firm foundation for art following the hand-praising tenets of romanticism and the invention of the reproductive device called the camera, began to look very old indeed. As with design, it appeared as though art had found a new dwelling divorced from physical labor and inseparable from the world of ideas and concepts resident in the head.

In the 80s, Rosalind Krauss tried to drive another nail in the coffin of modern art. Krauss argued that “originality,” an essential part of manual labor in traditional modern art theory, was in fact a myth, and that conversely, modern art was also based on the principles of reproduction, duplication and repetition, and that, at the core of modern art lay a system based on the statements of art historians and museum exhibitions that defined originality and suppressed the principles of reproduction and duplication as being anti-original.

Behind Krauss’s assertions stood the art that had begun with pop artists such as Andy Warhol who had started their careers as designers and introduced long-running design principles (repetition, the use of readymade forms, borrowing, quotation, etc.) to the field of art. More importantly, there is no doubt that this had a great effect on the development of post-modern design as a reassessment of the old modern art theory through post-modern art theory.

On the other hand, though he doesn’t court controversy by outwardly criticizing Krauss, in another essay, Shiff carefully scrutinizes the notion of originality and suggests that even in post-modern art, it has not been extinguished, but rather that originality has survived by changing its form within this altered network. In Shiff’s “Digital Experience in Modern Art,” he discovers examples of the existence of originality in the form of the free-hand drawing and playful nature of the brushwork of Seurat (who among 19th century artists was excluded from post-romantic modern art theory because of his mechanical technique, but was later rescued by 20th century mechanical aesthetic positions such as purism) and the mechanical repetition of impersonal structural units seen in Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

Meyer Shapiro made an analogy between Seurat’s paintings and production by engineers that were developed at the time, but Shiff offers an unspoken criticism of Shapiro’s view on Seurat. Further, in his analysis of Warhol and other pop artists, Shiff uses modern art theory to suggest an alternative reading of post-pop art which seems to transcend modern art due to the introduction of design principles. This view serves as a counterattack against post-modern art theory by way of modern art theory.

What exactly is the logic behind this attack? For one thing, to borrow an expression from Banham, it is clear that we are yearning to rush into “The Second Mechanical Age: The Age of Electronic Technology.” The American soldiers who fought in the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s, accomplished their attacks through the use of a computer, which it is said appeared very much like a game on the screen. In this process, the fundamental relationship between touching and feeling has ceased — without a direct connection between the touch of a finger and the act
of destruction. As the actual feeling of destruction was lost, the act became a virtual experience. To express this in (Marshall) McLuhanesque terms, the more weapons, which by rights should be an extension of our hands and legs, and teeth, have been transformed through the development of thought in the central nervous system, the less they seem to be connected to the body. Or to give another example, it is essential that at least for those people directly involved in producing visual images with a computer or film equipment that can be controlled by a finger and guided by vision. In this, along with physical labor, there is a concomitant sense of mental development that arises. Yet the result of moving one's finger has clearly lost the immediacy it once had with paints and canvas, strings and keyboards. The situation that has arisen out of the electronic age is one in which, even more than the first mechanical age, a huge distance lies between the body and the effect.

Yet, as to how the electronic age will proceed in the future and whether the distance will increase or otherwise altered, since we are forever fated to be nothing more than a single living organism, there will be no change in the fact that human beings will continue to live by adjusting the balance between mind and body and yearning for direct contact with the environment through our five senses. This being the case, the value lies in the fact that Shiff has dared to support works not only as a form of resistance against the act of systematizing human beings as if they were machines, but also to suggest that the practice of modern art is one of "the most fundamental daily activities to recover human scale and feeling." As it is still highly effective, does this in fact explain why it has resurfaced along with advances into the second mechanical age?

At a symposium to celebrate the opening of a Cézanne exhibition at the Orsay Museum in 1995, Shiff concluded his remarks with the following words on the painter's contemporary significance:

Artists who do such things assume special meaning within a society that worries over the influence of technologies, the simulation of identities, and the loss of sensory and bodily integrity — a society anxious over its increasing alienation from nature and from organic physicality. The case of Cézanne inspires not only thinking and theorizing on this issue, but perhaps also some attempt at immediate action - an attempt at making.

Today, modern art has come to occupy a classical position in Western art history. This has resulted in a reductive movement to treat modern art as a thing of the past, and without any hint of appreciation or experience, modern art has merely become a subject of positivist research to be dealt with in a monotonous amassing of factual content disguised as academic pursuit. But according to Shiff, less than 200 years since its birth, modern art is by no means over. His statement regarding the contemporary significance of modern art as something that continues to live on in the present day is of great value.

Seeing and Feeling

The preference given to the hand over the machine contains an interest in the sense of touch in modern art. Above all, the sense of touch is important in the contact made with the
brush and the canvas which results in the physicality of the paint as the picture takes shape. Further, innovations involving touch are one of the most important aspects in modern art. In this sense, the \textit{paragone} that sculpture is the province of touch and painting the province of vision no longer holds true.

The artistic method of not first assembling a closed form, deciding the structure and space, and adding color, but simultaneously determining the color, shape, space and structure through brush touch and small units of paint was naturally not an invention of modern art. There are, however, numerous styles cited as the origin of modern art, including the Venice School, Dutch painting of the 17th century, rococo art and the Barbizon School, so many in fact that tracing them has become one of the traditions in Western art history. With the rise of the French neoclassicist aesthetic, brush touch vanished, but later made a comeback with romanticism, resulting in the emergence of ideological issues related to the two methods in traditional painting.

It is impossible to deal comprehensively with all the writings on brush touch in French books on technique, art theory, criticism and aesthetics by people such as André Félibien, Roger de Pile, Jean-Etienne Liotard, Charles Blanc and Eugène Véron. Suffice to say that critics who prized early modern art in the era in which it was being made focused on the appearance and effects of brush touch and paint specks, and the buildup of paint on the canvas. Among these critics were Charles Baudelaire, on Eugène Delacroix and Emile Zola, on Édouard Manet.

As Philippe Junod has accurately stated in his extensive surveys and analyses of 19th century critics' word choice in their writings on modern art, the peculiarity of modern art lay in the transition from scenes viewed through a transparent window, which had existed since the Renaissance, to scenes in which this transparency from the past coexists with an opacity created by the paint's materiality. The antagonism between a representation that negated materiality and a materiality that negated representation gave modern art its distinct character. Descriptions and analyses of this materiality continued on in the modern art theories of Henri Focillon and Hubert Damisch, etc.

In another paper on Cézanne, Shiff once again deals with the obvious problems in French criticism and art history perspectives and the special character of modern art as seen in Junod's linguistic analysis. Why?

The reason seems to be related to the preponderance of visual theories in recent years, in which one group of art historians have tended to make special concessions to the visual element in 19th century modern art. Shiff see things differently and takes the other side of the argument.

As McLuhan pointed out, the culture of the printed word gave precedence to vision over all other functions of the various human organs. The technological innovations of the modern era have led us outside of the Gutenberg Galaxy. It is obvious that to keep up with these developments, it was the intention of 19th century modern art to restore feeling and hearing.

The problem remains that the media which brought widespread popularity to modern art is limited to the visual when it comes to communications concerning modern art. The reason for this is the need for growth in the culture of reproduction with the visual as an intermediary.
Art appreciation through books of paintings and exhibition catalogues, explanations of artworks using slides in university lectures and museum talks, and the introduction of art through television and video imagery took away the materiality of the modern art. In addition, museums exhibit even those works of sculpture, industrial art or design that should have functioned to stimulate the entire body, including the sense of touch, as something that is merely visual. Feeling the weight of a painting, touching the surface of the canvas and smelling the aroma of the paint are actions that are forbidden to the general viewer and restricted only to special individuals such as the owner, the curator and the restorer of art. As a result, a situation arises in which the fact that the painting consists of materials recedes or is concealed, creating an awareness only as a purely retinal image.

In this context, these two aspects of modern art, the image and the materiality, must be repeatedly identified by the viewer. This point in Shiff’s argument is of particular significance.

**Academism and the Avant-Garde**

The 1980s were filled with criticism of art history, primarily modern art. It is fresh in our memory that questions had been leveled at the antagonistic relationship between modern art and academicism. Already, in the 1970s, Albert Boime had proposed that the origins of modern art could be found in academic sketching techniques, calling attention to what he saw as the compromised style of both parties. Bruno Fautart portrayed the 19th century art world as being a quarrel between tradition and innovation, with tradition constantly giving way to innovation in the avant-garde. Both writers protested against purism in modern art history, which dealt with modern art in isolation.

With the opening of the Orsay Museum in 1986 came a revival of the salon and academic painters, who were shown in the same spaces as avant-garde painters of the past. Thus, they tried to reconstruct the site of the birth of modern art. In addition, many exhibitions of the salon and academic painters were held, research dealing with them went forward and the previous historical perspective that centered on modern art was revised. It was in the 1980s that so-called revisionist or post-modernist art history started to cause controversy.

Looking back on that period, some 20 years later, the motive seems to have been rooted both in restoring French classicism along with a resurgence of French ideology, as has happened time and again in history, as well as influencing the art market; i.e., the speculative value of academic painting, which had previously been relegated to a corner of the storage with the rise of modern art, was discovered.

However, as Jean-Claude Lebensztejn sounded the alarm upon the initial appearance of post-modernist art history, many facts concerning academic art may have been revealed, but it still must be admitted that up until the present day academic art has never been found to rival modern art in terms of artistic value.

There is after all a huge gap between academic artists like William Bouguereau and Alexandre Cabanel who imitated the precise reproductive ability of the photograph and modern artists like Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, who dispensed with the
mechanical reproductions of the camera and post-Renaissance representational techniques. Wasn’t it in fact post-modernist art history and the museum exhibitions that were organized as a result of it that gave people a clear awareness of the differences between the two?

Since the demise of post-modernist art history, Shiff has once again pointed out the gap between the two groups. Cézanne’s worry that his work could not be completed was related to the “gap” between his feelings and “the cultural construction that provided a context for his work.” (Shiff) In other words, this concern arose out of the “gap” between the traditional, classical vision, technique, and the vision and technique of Cézanne. Further, the “gap” — born out of the drawbacks and limitations of the paint medium — that lies between the things Cézanne sees and feels and the things that are realized on the canvas is the very thing that indicates Cézanne’s uneasiness and evolved into his unique theory of incompletion. Yet, by using Cézanne’s era as a cultural standard, Shiff is in no way saying that Cézanne’s way of leaving what he has painted is a mark of incompleteness. Cézanne was responsible for creating an entirely new standard, but as he lamented in his later years, it was never recognized as such.

**Modern Art and Society**

Attempts to interpret modern art in a contemporaneous social context were proposed by Meyer Schapiro, whose ideas were further developed by T. J. Clark and Robert Herbert. The attempt to understand modern art as a social product rather than a problem of pure forms and systems has been foregrounded in today’s circumstance in which formalist criticism and modernist history have been relativized as products of history and culture. In addition, since modern artists also lived and worked in a certain era and society, we can certainly no longer ignore these problems regarding the lineage of modern art theory.

Needless to say, however, a certain kind of iconography, which points out that objects like a new landscape and mechanical products that evolved out of technological innovations and urban development following the Industrial Revolution are depicted in modern art, is inadequate as the sociological approach. The same is true with regard to the perspective that sees the projection of social structure and the interpretation of an artist’s society in the way that subjects are depicted in the paintings.

Regarding this, one French art historian, Pierre Francastel, embarked on a sociological study of modern art quite early on, but his work came to an end when leading students such as Hubert Damisch failed to carry on the effort, stating that Francastel’s argument was lacking in rigor and divergent.

Francastel discovered that revolutionary use of space held the key to unlocking the sociological meaning of modern art. He tried to see a certain relationship between modern art and society in its formal aspect. Shiff’s focus is also on the abstraction and autonomy rather than the iconography as Francastel’s theory. In this way, Shiff makes a unique contribution to the issue.

In Shiff’s theory on Cézanne, of the two aspects that make up Cézanne’s pictures — representation and materiality — he prefers the latter, stating that it reveals the painter’s
spirituality. This is also exactly the place where one finds Cézanne's resistance to materialism, which was rooted in the growing commodification and standardization that came with the Industrial Revolution. If "The art of the painter is all the more intimate in the hearts of man because it looks more tangible"9, then modern art, which emerged and was developed along with advances in modernization, can be seen from the outset to include a critical stance toward the same era through artistic creation, whether it worships or negates the product of modernization. And isn't this exactly what Shiff is trying to reclaim as the contemporary significance of modern art?

**Conclusion**

In a word, Shiff's theory of modern art is of a piece with French formalism. However, it is by no means an attempt to consciously go beyond American formalism and quote French thought in the context of American art history to be fashionable. From the beginning of his academic career, Shiff, while analyzing 19th century criticism and reviving the context of modern-art thought and philosophy, has established his own unique method of interpreting modern art over many years.

Thus, it is inevitable that he has assumed the language of French art history and criticism. Although as long as Shiff is living in a certain era and society as an interpreter, his viewpoint seems on the one hand to share something with the magnetic field of statements that gave value to the formation of post-war art in America.

If we limit our scope to his research on Cézanne, Shiff's method is an attempt to stand clear of the psychoanalytical interpretations developed chiefly in the U.S. beginning in the 1960s following Schapiro and Reff that have continued on into the present9. Concentrating on representational elements in Cézanne, the psychoanalytic viewpoint ignored the materiality in the paintings and preferred to grasp the imagery, which has continued to result in the production of a whole host of "Cézanne stories." To borrow Rosalind Krauss's phrase, this could be thought of as an example of the "paraliterary"9, but isn't it necessary at this point for psychoanalytical interpretations to be psychoanalysed?

It is my belief that Shiff's modern art theory, whether in regard to the French element (in his continuing belief in the special privilege of modern art in contrast academic painting) or to the American (in his continuing view of modern art not as the site of logic and excessive meaning but as the site of experience), indicates a new direction in an era following the demise of post-modern art history and the lack of appearance of a salient modern art theory.

**Notes**


(10) Meyer Schapiro, New Light on Seurat, in *Art News*, LVII, April, 1958, pp. 23–24, 44–45, 52.


(12) Richard Shiff, La touche de Cézanne: entre vision impressionniste et vision symboliste, *Cézanne aujourd'hui* (Actes de colloque organisé par musée d’Orsay, 29 et 30 novembre 1995). Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1997, p. 124. (I would like to express my gratitude to Shiff for providing me with the English text I have quoted here.)


(16) Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, 1962. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, The Mit Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1964, pp. 308–337. In this work, McLuhan pointed out that in the pictures of Cézanne, Seurat and Georges-Henri Rouault, which dismantle representational painting as products of the scientific laws of perspective giving priority to the visual, and consist of small units of paint on the canvas, there exists a mosaic-like construction, which acts as the basis for television and emphasizing the sense of touch. But in fact there is nothing that links the invention of television to the work of the three, and McLuhan did not make any mention about the differences in each of the painters’ brushwork. To explore the topic further, a more thorough study is needed.

1971.


See Note 4.


