

Visual Subversion: The Purism Strategy of Western Modern Art

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Abstract: In the early 20th century, the modernist revolution in the Western world had reached its peak, along with twice world-war, the world capital of art has been moved from Europe to America. In such a complex and unpredictable period, many artistic strategies were taken up, the purism strategy is one of the most radical and influential strategies, it marked the impeccable achievement of Western idealism. The practice of such a strategy initially happened in Europe and later was developed in the United States. However, in these two places, the strategy was practiced with different approaches, within the construction of Panofsky's mechanism of vision, one focuses on visual identification and another focuses on visual perception. The two approaches not only mean different ways of seeing art but also imply different sensible orders, which need to be reflected and reexamined in a political dimension that has been settled between the United States and Europe after the 20th century.

Keywords: purism strategy, visual perception, visual identification, visual recognition, sublime

1. Introduction

Since Plato declared that art was only the copy of a copy of ideas, a power system was constructed, which not only assigned art a subservient position opposed to the ideas but also started a competition between one art form and the other art forms. Jacques Rancière called this the ethical regime of images, opposed to which is the representative regime of art, where art was extricated from the legislative reign of ideas, however, it was confined within a pragmatic principle that associated not only with the material properties of art medium but also with the cultural and historical convention [1]. The power of the ideas was reassigned to conventions. Art, therefore, was measured by two kinds of knowledge: the universal knowledge and the collective knowledge. After entering the modern time, the legitimacy of these two kinds of knowledge was challenged. Clement Greenburg argued that under a “dominant art form”, the “subservient art” would try to deny its own nature in an effort to sustain the “imitation” of that dominant art. He pointed out an established art market where the invisible hand manipulated the circulation of art to a homogeneous ending — the Kitsch. Thus the “Purists make extravagant claims for art” [2].

The modernist revolution bears the aim to store the autonomy of art, the purism strategy is one of the modern strategies to pursue such a goal, and the western abstract painting is its most acknowledged achievement. However, in order to better display and examine the purism strategy in

the modernism revolution, it is necessary to configure the revolution within a real-life fight. And one of the most typical fights is the one between Erwin Panofsky, the prestigious European art historian, and Barnett Newman, the provocative American artist. The fight as many intellects have examined, could be taken as a shift in the discourse of Iconology and art history, however, the fighting ground can be further expanded, within the theoretical ground, the iconology and art history shift could be reexamined as the fight between image and text; in the cultural ground, it implies the correlation between Europe and America; in the political ground, it can also be a reflected with the western totalitarianism and the post-war situation.

2. Panofsky: Three Different Visual Modes

“A different mode of disjunction is the key process evident in the arts today, Instead of matching actual significance to ancient models, we are hopefully engaged in the discovery of new expressive combination, meant to be disjoined from any trace of connection with the past.” [3]

The fight was inaugurated by the essay *Disjunction and Mutatioanl Energy*, where George Kubler criticized Panofsky’s “law of disjunction”, which verified a linear mutation of content-related values in image. In Panofsky’s elaboration, the law of disjunction is “wherever a sculptor or painter borrows a figure or a group from a classical work of art he almost invariably invests it with a non-classical, viz, Christian meaning.” [4] However, a different mode of disjunction proposed by Kubler was meant to cut off once and for all the historical linkage, by which he welcomed a new Renaissance of art in America---abstract expressionism art.

Panofsky deliberately avoided a serious academic discussion and turned his sword towards Newman. The whole fight between Panofsky and Newman unfolded around a misspelled “Sublimus” in the title of an abstract painting by Newman, “Vir Heroicus Sublimis”. In a rhetorical sense, one can say it was a fight associated with both text and image.

Panofsky, the art historian, who writes art and is attributed with the authority to speak art, can be identified with text. “The law of disjunction” revealed the *Différance of image*, which manifested that the formal continuum of the image brought only differences, and these differences could only be explained by texts. But what do these texts stand for? Panofsky’s study on the image is a threefold methodology: pre-iconography, iconography, and iconology, which correspond to three different functions: visual perception, the innate function of the eyes, the purely seeing; visual identification, the appropriation of visual attention that separates object from its background; and visual recognition, the cultural construction of the object associating with certain cultural and historical convention. The text which aims to explain the difference and the connection between the differences is located in the function of visual recognition and stands for the specific cultural and historical convention. Therefore, no wonder that Panofsky’s art history studies always incline to sociology, anthropology, and even philosophy. The text projects the value of art in many other disciplines, but it also surrounds art and eventually obscures it, the Hegelian prophecy about the end of art will happen in the guise of the substitution of the value of language.

The purism strategy is to thwart the domination of the text in order to store the autonomy of art, however, the attack is not on visual recognition but on visual identification, because if it concerns only about cultural and historical recognition, a disruption could also be achieved by a conflict contextualization, such as surrealism painting. Therefore the purism strategy is at the same time a purification of the image and a reduction of the image to pure visual perception.

3. The European Pattern-visual Limbo

“In looking at a zip we are solicited by another one farther away, hence are constantly in the process of adjusting and readjusting the fundamental figure/ground opposition, never finding a moment of

repose when this structure could coalesce, then the only factual certitude that we will be able to grasp will be the lateral expanse of the canvas, the pictorial field as such.”[5]

Yve-Alain Bois illustrated the estranged experience when he encountered Newman’s work, this “process of adjusting” is in fact an endless distribution of visual attention, the figure-ground relation in the constant disentanglement resuscitates visual perception, the image is caught in the act of seeing. The frustration of visual identification achieved the detachment of the interference by the cultural and historical convention, but if there is only the frustration of visual identification, then how should one justify that the experience he had with the abstract work is about art rather than a visual limbo? One can argue that an experience with a visual limbo is an empirical experience but the experience with an artwork is an aesthetic experience, these are two kinds of experience that would require aesthetic subjectivization to transform from one to another. Here the question becomes: What has triggered aesthetic subjectivization which eventually leads the seeing from a red canvas to the majestic modernist revolution?

Before answering the question, another question needs to be asked: “Does visual limbo have a form?” In the work of Newman, the visual limbo trapped the seeing action in a constant movement, there isn’t any moment of repose for the eyes to identify the figure, then one can’t identify the form of visual limbo. However, based on such a conclusion, should one say that there is no form of “Vir, Heroicus Sublimis”? It is obviously madness because anyone capable of seeing can easily describe that the work is composed of a big red canvas and several lines.

The form has always been a central question in artistic practice, especially in the field of painting. The purism strategy, however, takes the issue of form in a rather indecisive way, on the one hand, it has to avoid any identifiable form to prevent the interference of text, on the other hand, to achieve the autonomy of painting, the painting must find itself a stable form. Newman in his essay *The Sublime is Now* justified this paradoxical wish:

“The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty. However, in discarding Renaissance notions of beauty, and without an adequate substitute for a sublime message...so strong is the grip of the rhetorical of exaltation as an attitude in the large context of the European culture pattern that the elements of sublimity in the revolution we know as modern art, exist in its effort and energy to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience...Even Mondrian...succeeded only in raising the white plane and the right angle into a realm of sublimity...The geometry (perfection) swallowed up his metaphysics (his exaltation).” [6]

Newman criticized the European cultural pattern for being the restatements of the position and transformations of value on the general question of beauty. Opposed to which, for Newman, is the question of sublimity. In aesthetic discourse, *Beauty* and *Sublimity* are two important and distinctive categories, in Edmund Burke’s psychological and physiological account, beauty and sublimity are divided into a sensation of pleasure and pain, and the visual counterparts, clarity and obscurity. In Kant’s configuration, the distinction is made in people’s cognitive faculty, beauty has the properties such as disinterestedness, while a sublime state of mind is when two absolutes (one about imagination, another about reason) are presented simultaneously, which leads the mind to its limit, but at the same time offers the mind the critical weapon to reflect on itself, it is through the failure of sensible representation that people are able to appreciate “the idea of humanity”. Now if one were to follow this trend of conceptualization, then beauty has to be something clear, innocent, in sync with his inner needs, something containable within the self, therefore, it is possible to see the form of beauty. Opposed to which, sublimity is something obscure, unexpected, something out of one’s capability to grasp, it arouses the self-awareness and the awareness of something that is beyond the self. The sublime is formless and invisible. The invisibility of the sublime should be specified in several aspects. In the physiological aspect, the invisibility means that the sublime object is only partly visible, something that is completely invisible is either a concept or a religious belief such as divinity; In the

psychological aspect, the sublime experience suspends people's visual perception at the moment in an effort to detach themselves from the subjectivization in the process of seeing and thinking, and elevates them into the state of being; In the cognitive aspect, something is visible means that viewer as a system of measurement could define the object, but the sublime experience as illustrated by Kant, can't be achieved by the measurement with oneself for oneself, it depends on the other. It is not that we see the sublime object, but instead, we realize that the sublime object is seeing us.

By specifying beauty as formal and visible, sublime as formless and invisible, one should notice the interrelation between beauty and sublime, and it is tempting to ask if it is possible for the sublimity of beauty (or the beauty of sublimity)? The European abstract painting certainly offered us a perspective to look into the question.

For a sublimity of beauty, it would require that form adds up to a point where there is no longer recognizable form and visible adds up to a certain point where it becomes invisible. Mondrian's famous series of tree painting verified this presumption. The forms of the tree are contingently in a reduction and eventually become lines and squares on a canvas. The visibility of the tree in the later works of this series is also no longer identifiable. But in order to maintain a sublimity of beauty, rather than a replacement of beauty with sublimity, the properties of beauty have to be maintainable. Then the issue is what is the form of these reduced paintings? Here one can return back to the figure/ground opposition, in Mondrian's early work of the series, people could easily notice that he paid lots of attention not only to the form of the tree but also to its negative form---the sky. Normally, the tree is the figure which should stand before the ground, but in Mondrian's work, it is not unusual to find that the sky is constantly leaking into the tree, this implies the dynamic distribution of Mondrian's visual attention while he was working. This tendency of the ground leaking into the figure gets stronger in his later works, on the one hand, it is a transformation of the form of the tree into the form of the sky, the visibility of the figure into the visibility of the ground, it manifests an action of seeing-through; on the other hand, this transformation attests to a shift between the figure and the ground, it interferes the distribution of viewer's visual attention. In the middle stage of these works, even if the work maintains the impression of there is a tree, but the tree was dissolved into homogeneous brush strokes, what remains identifiable is the line of the tree and the plane of the sky. The form of the tree and sky are dissipated, but immediately, a new form arises, it is the meta-form, a form that addresses itself, reflects on itself, and theorizes itself. The perfection in Mondrian's work mentioned by Newman doesn't reside in its material properties, instead resides in this meta-form, which echoes the romanticism of the platonic ideas. The meta-form set up a visual field where the distribution of visual attention is no longer functional because all the visible forms are at the same time a part of this meta-form and a projection of it, they all share the same formal values and all amount to the construction of the body of meta-form. The meta-form thus is both visible and invisible, present and absent.

The sublime, since being stated by Longinus as a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse, has been regarded as the privilege of language, the contribution of Mondrian's sublimity for the purism strategy is that it revoked such a claim, and proved the equality between image and text. However, the sublime evoked by Mondrian's work follows precisely the very logic of the sublime of language, the meta-form is a conceptualization of an ideal vision, and it is based on a presumption that such an ideal vision exists. But the fact is that we can only see its projection, and this projection was based on an unconditional faith that not only does the ideal vision exist, but also it has epiphanized in front of our eyes. The unconditional faith reveals what Lyotard would take as the "infinite respect for otherness", it is under the justification of the otherness, that we give in our own right in the distribution of visual attention, leaving our bare life to be measured by the otherness.

It should be explicit enough that there is the connection between the western modern political state with the western modern art movement. And if one looks back at Panofsky, his position should be understandable in a new way. Panofsky once defended the Italian Renaissance for its unique value to

have resuscitated “human nature” from the middle age. Opposed to which was the belief for a general continuity of history. “It was for the Italian Renaissance to reintegrate classical form with classical content, and it was by this reintegration that the classical images—first salvaged, then split asunder and finally recomposed — were really reborn.” [7]The “reborn” of Italian renaissance for Panofsky, holds the legitimacy in its blood shared with ancient classical art. As a German-Jewish, Panofsky was born and educated in German, after the Nazi power arose in German, he was forced to leave. The annihilation of Jews is the common historical background for the western world, it was under a false belief in purism, a blind wish for the ultimate and eternal perfection, that an unprecedented holocaust was justified. For Mondrian, his solution is to aestheticize the presumption, For Panofsky, the solution is to respect history. The former is doomed to be an illusion for the future, and the latter is the reminiscence of the past. The problem with the European pattern is while it aims to store the autonomy of itself, it is being trapped by the standard of the other. Thus the purism strategy actually proceeds in a form of exclusionism. This problem can also be reflected with the European methodology—the frustration of visual identification. The visual identification centers on the object, it is already in the norm of the other that the artist seeks to destroy its power. Now it should be understandable for the ambivalent state of the question “Does visual limbo have a form?”, If there has to be an answer, then it would be “Yes, a sublime form”. However, what is truly at stake is not to find an answer to the question, but to overcome the question.

4. The American Pattern-body Measurement

In order to overcome the ambivalent state of visual limbo, the European pattern reconciled it with an ideal presumption, Newman, on the other hand, took a more radical plan. In order to completely reject the power of the other, Newman pushed the purism strategy to another level, the level of visual perception. Opposed to visual identification which centered on the other, visual perception settled a ground that concerns the self, in Newman’s words, it is the experience. To answer the question: what has triggered the aesthetic subjectivization which leads the seeing of Newman’s work from a red canvas to a majestic modernism revolution? One simply need to present the experience itself that Newman has offered to the viewer.

Hans Belting once pointed out the difference between “image” and “picture”, the “image” is the subject of our quest and the “picture” in which that image may reside. Image resides in painting as a picture, it needs to be identified and recognized by our visual perception. The function of the image requires cooperation with a “media” and a “body”. But the body exists in a certain space and time, itself is already a part of the construction of the cultural and historical convention. Then in order to detach the cultural and historical convention, it must be returned to a state of awareness of its own existence and its relation with the cultural and historical convention. In American abstract painting, body engagement is one of its most typical features. The dimension of “Vir Heroicus Sublimis” is 242.2cm in height and 513.6cm in length, The massiveness means to thwart the traditional way of seeing painting as an object, and encourage the viewers to confront the painting not only with their eyes but with their whole body. The visual identification was canceled in a sense that not only it is impossible to identify an object from the background in the work, but also the action of mere seeing which was sustainable for the European abstract painting is no longer enough for the grasping of an American work, thus the mechanism of the whole procedure of seeing has to be readjusted, the visual perception is no longer just about the eyes, but those eyes have to function as the inseparable part of a whole body.

If this is enough to justify self-awareness during the visual perception, then one final step would be to take control of the self. The body is deeply connected with cultural and historical convention, it is a mixture of the self and other, thus to take control of the self would require the awareness not only of the self but also of the relation between the self and other. Here the other has to be reinvited in the

discourse, the same goes for the comparison between the European abstract and the American abstract. In the European abstract painting, if we were to summarize its elements, normally they would be points, lines, planes, and colors; However, in American abstract painting, other than what has been mentioned, there are also dimension, light, and gesture. If dimension by wrapping around the body readjusted the viewer's visual perception into the bodily seeing, then light by stimulating their physical or psychological reaction marked their bodily position of being. In "Vir, Heroicus, Sublimis", it's the massive red hue that attests to viewer's body with emptiness, firstly it denied their judgment for the physical direction and position, then reinstated it with stimulated emotion and sensation, which aroused the awareness of their own lively being. The bodily position in Lyotard's words would be the "Instant" in Newman's own words are "Man is present" [8], which counters the body in the formation of the cultural and historical convention. In the classical sublime, the power of the other is attributed by the presumption, which is the power of the invisible future, man feels sublime because he believes that he is capable to overcome that invisible future. But for Newman, the sublime is now, it is the suspension of the regime of time, man feels sublime because he eventually realizes the impossibility to escape time, yet through which, he can stop time, returns to the present, and takes back his right from the other. In Newman's description of the experience of the present, he said: "Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, here...and out beyond there (beyond the limits of the site) there is chaos, nature, river, landscapes...but here you get a sense of your own presence." [9]

One thing was left to be clarified, in the American strategy, since it is more about the readjustment of visual perception, then visual identification in a second level, how should one take it? Is it still functional or is it simply being canceled automatically? The question could also go to the third level, how should one take the visual recognition in both patterns? To answer the later question, it's not necessary that the visual recognition has to be canceled, but it simply no longer posits the crucial position when one tries to appreciate an abstract painting work, however, to interpret an abstract work, there are many ways to do it, and visual recognition doubtlessly can still contribute aesthetic values. The article *The Abstract Sublime* by Robert Rosenblum where Panofsky first found out the misspelled "sublimus" and started the fight is the one that uses visual recognition to make the visual connection between American abstract paintings and classical landscape paintings. However, when the question goes to visual identification in the American abstract painting, the situation is a little different, because while the European pattern emphasized seeing-through the works, the American pattern has changed the foundation of the visual perception, its visual identification is seeing-in. Here the gesture becomes the object of visual identification, and in a way, calls for visual recognition to replay the working experience of the artist. But of course, this kind of visual recognition would require the viewer to have certain knowledge and experience about the painting practice.

5. Conclusion

To evaluate a strategy, one simply needs to examine whether the strategy has fulfilled its aim. The aim of the purism strategy is to store the autonomy of art, and in such a way to guarantee its unique value and position in the construction of human civilization, to prevent the corruption of modern capitalism. The latter, in actual practice, was transformed into a rejection of the power of discourse, through which, it set up the division between image and text. And it is by this division, that painting has finally assured its position as an image that has been reduced to its primal state of seeing. However, this division happens only at a superficial level, as the article has pointed out that in both European and American patterns, the detachment from the historical and cultural convention led the work to a sublime state, which is beyond the power of discourse, but at the same time it is also beyond the power of image. The power of image in the European pattern was given to a presumed other; in the American pattern, it was retrieved by the self, but only in a passive form, the nature of which to the extent is what Camus would say, the "absurdity" of the modern man. Here one should notice a double

identity of image, one of the other and another of the self, the duality unveiled the mystery of image which is heterogeneity. The same can go as well with text, which is the cultural and historical convention but also can be the self-evolving theory. The division between image and text thus is doomed to be unrealistic or simply egoistic. The simple fact is, as much as modern purism strives to maintain the absolute simplicity of painting/art, that “The wall erected against language and literature by the grid of abstraction only kept out a certain kind of verbal contamination, but it absolutely depended, at the same time, on the collaboration of painting with another kind of discourse, what we may call, for lack of a better term, the discourse of theory.” [10]

However, this is not to be understood that the purism strategy has failed completely, because it is exactly this impossibility of the disentanglement between image and text that has guaranteed the overturn of the sensible order in the modernism revolution. The text after the oblivion grew back in the field of painting where it was no longer the rules of knowing but seeing that held the power center, now the text manifests the self-reflection and self-building of the painting, everything that the texts write has to start from painting. In a further step, let's back to the fight between Panofsky and Newman, the authority of the upper-class intellects is also dismissed, the discourse of art is no longer centered on professional critics or even artists, but opens to all the people who are in that suspended present.

The western purism strategy is the product of western modern ideology, and doubtlessly it has proved its historical necessity as well as numerous contributions to modern art diversity. By reexamining such a strategy, this article doesn't bear intention to belittle its significance for modern art history, on the contrary, it is because it has manifested the modernism revolution, that a study of it will help to replay the modernism movement both for its problems and the ways that have been taken to deal these problems. Many modern questions are still unsolved questions, and in many ways, they still influence our current life. Of course, with this brief study, one can't expect some once for all solutions (if there are any at all), but the least, by reviewing one of the most typical strategies of the western modernism revolution, one should have a new perspective not only of the appreciation for those magnificent modernism artworks but also of reflecting its cultural and political implication.

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