Non-Objective Art History: How MoMA's "Inventing Abstraction" Fails Its Subject

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28/03/13 9:23 AM EDT

An installation view of "Inventing Abstraction" at the MoMA
(Photo by Jonathan Muzikar)

Imagine yourself cracking open one of those terrible essays about “how young people talk today.” The author makes a big deal about how the kids are tossing around slangy abbreviations like “LOL” and “OMG.” But you are baffled to discover that in explaining the origins of this linguistic phenomenon, the text completely avoids talking about the rise of Internet culture or text messaging, instead setting out to trace the personal connections that link the first guy to say “LOL” to the unheralded genius who invented “OMG.” This, more or less, is how the Museum of Modern Art's current show, “Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925” (on view through April 15), treats its subject matter. As a piece of superficial intellectual entertainment, the results are probably fine; as a serious exercise, the show falls short of the challenge posed by its subject matter, leaving out most of the history that gave this art its drama and import.

The exhibition surveys the panoply of early 20th-century modernism in Europe and the United States, looking at the manifestations of what was variously called "non-objective," "concrete," and "abstract" art, from Pablo Picasso's muddy proto-abstract canvasses, to Wassily Kandinsky's magniloquent color storms, to Georgia O'Keeffe's enigmatic watercolor vortexes. So far, "Inventing Abstraction" has been greeted by mainly favorable reviews — though it has inspired at least one savage polemic, from critic G. Roger Denson, who accuses curators Leah Dickerman and Masha Chlenova of promulgating a Eurocentric vision by claiming that these artists "invented abstraction." What about Japanese "flung ink" painting, Denson asks? What about the various forms of African carving and Oceanic art that the modernists themselves claimed to be influenced by? What about Islamic art, with its prohibition on representation altogether?

I find this critique thought-provoking, but maybe a little overstated. *Something* was invented in the early years of the 20th century, a style of art-making that has proved both an inspiration and challenge to people around the world. I don't think that it inherently reflects a neo-colonial impulse to focus in on this particular scene (especially not when it was presented opposite MoMA's great survey of postwar Japanese art). However, you have to admit that "Inventing Abstraction" does leave itself open to this attack. "What was invented between 1910-25 was a new context for abstraction, not abstraction itself," Denson writes — and the bottom line is that MoMA's account of this context is weak.

It is weak by design. A wall-filling diagram greets visitors outside the show's galleries (an interactive version can be found online). This matrix maps the relationships between all the figures featured in the show. The exercise is not for nothing; in particular, it highlights the vital connecting role played by figures who have received mainly second-tier status in the history books, like Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. Mainly, however, it serves to pound home the show's core thesis: "Abstraction was not the inspiration of a solitary genius but the product of network thinking — of ideas moving through a nexus of artists and intellectuals."

The graph happens to be an homage to MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr and his famous flow chart of modernism, an invention that graphically illustrated the links between various modernist avant-garde movements. As a device, then, "Inventing Abstraction"'s Matrix of Influence suggests that the show is above all an

excuse to reconsider the simple greatness of MoMA's foundational hits. Yet Barr's account of modernism has been widely criticized for its formalist bias. He elevated experimental art to a religion in sophisticated American circles — but he did so by presenting its story as a neat, self-contained dialogue of art with other art, bracketing out more worldy concerns. (At Barr's MoMA, works were to be shown "isolated," he once mandated, with "no effort… made to suggest a period atmosphere.")

For the art lover, the pleasure of walking through "Inventing Abstraction," with its piquant mixture of classic works and lesser-known greats, is indisputable. However, it seems worth noting that some of the artists here were themselves critical of the Band of Brothers version of art history put forward by the show. Marcel Duchamp features as a pioneer of visual abstraction — a semi-daring curatorial move, since the dandyish Frenchman famously distanced himself from "retinal" art. Yet this mild incongruity is less interesting than the fact that Duchamp specifically thought that crediting what he was doing to his relationships with his peers was reductive. Here is what he had to say about the subject in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney in 1946:

> No, I do not feel there was any connection between the *Nude Descending a Staircase* and futurism. The futurists held their exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in January 1912. I was painting the *Nude* at the same time. The oil sketch for it, however, had already been done in 1911. It is true I knew Severini. But I was working quite by myself at the time — or rather with my brothers. And I was not a café frequenter.

Similarly, one of the more intriguing discoveries of "Inventing Abstraction" is Polish artist Wac?aw Szpakowski, whose wonderfully mysterious maze-like drawings read as revelations of a radically different type of abstraction rather than part of any smooth narrative of influence. Szpakowski has just two connections on the Matrix of Influence, and the entry about him in the show's own catalogue (written by Jaroslaw Suchan) specifically positions him as an outlier:

> In reality… he developed his work not just in isolation from the Polish avant-garde but in complete indifference to the art of his time… Szpalpowski was drawn to abstraction by his fascination with the

> mathematical laws observable in nature... [He] began to sketch these linear arrangement in 1900, codifying most of them by 1913.

The exception here should be taken to disprove the rule: The hypothesis that Euro-American abstraction was the result of "network thinking," while interesting, is not really sufficient to account for the advent of this type of art. In fact, *modern art* has to be explained, first of all, in relationship to *modernity*, a premise so commonplace that it shouldn't have to be restated. Still, since it is given short shrift in MoMA's galleries, perhaps it's worth going back over the basics.

The years in question were an unmatched period of societal change, on all fronts. In communications, radio appeared at the beginning of the century and became ubiquitous in the '20s, welding together public consciousness as never before. In fashion, the brassiere, a German invention, put an end to the corset. In politics, a tidal wave of measures empowering women's sufferage overtook Europe and America. In science, quantum mechanics and relativity were changing the fundamental conception of the universe. In industry, the Ford Motor Company started up assembly line production. And, of course, the period was bisected by the high-tech carnage of the First World War, which introduced such modern niceties as the tank and chemical weapons to the world. The conditions of total war would also touch off the galvanizing attempts at social reconstruction of the 1917 Russian Revolution, a reference point not just for the Constructivists and other Russians, but for artists trying to survive the turbulence of post-WWI Germany and, a continent away, for the Dutch group around De Stijl.

Had art continued in its old academic grooves in such wildly changing conditions, it likely would have lost relevance to intelligent contemporary audiences. The evangelical zeal that informed the various flavors of modern art had everything to do with its felt relationship to modern life. Sometimes the connection was to a new sense of human potential in general, as when Piet Mondrian explained his artistic outlook in 1919: "The cultivated man of today is gradually turning away from natural things, and his life is becoming more and more abstract." Sometimes the reference was to technological change, as when Kazimir Malevich argued, "The environment corresponding to this new culture has been produced by the latest achievements of technology, and especially of aviation, so that one could also refer to Suprematism as 'aeronautical.'" And sometimes the inspiration was political, as when Laszlo Moholy-

Nagy, in crisis-wracked Weimar Germany, declared that “constructivism is the socialism of vision.” But in general, the context of changes undermining old certainties about society was at least as important as intra-artistic debates.

“The mere desire for novelty plays a relatively small part in the alternation of styles,” the art historian Arnold Hauser once wrote, explaining the dynamics of “invention” in art, “and the older and the more developed a tradition of taste is, the less liking for change it shows of its own accord. Hence a new style can make its way only with difficulty, if it does not address itself to a new public.” Duchamp could have been offering a case study in this perspective when he emphasized that despite Parisian artists’ “amateurish” understanding of new scientific topics like “the fourth dimension and non-Euclidian geometry,” an awareness of this new intellectual milieu was key in motivating their experimentation: “For all our misunderstandings… through these new ideas we were helped to get away from the conventional way of speaking — from our café and studio platitudes.”

Telling the tale of modern art in Europe and America as a story of friendships and rivalries is not totally wrong — but it is a half-story, expressing a half-truth. If this message was all contemporary audiences took away from “Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925,” then they might leave MoMA thinking that the best thing today's artists could do would be to hole themselves up together within their own present-day “café and studio platitudes,” rather than trying to think through how their work might respond to the questions of their day. But I think that is a recipe for sapping art of its vitality. At any rate, to those who want to promote art history without the history, there is only one real answer: WTF.